Introduction to the Third Edition: History, Real Presence, and the Refusal to be Purified

The world—the time has come to say it, though the news will not be welcome to everyone—has no intention of abandoning enchantment altogether . . .
—Roberto Calasso, *Literature and the Gods*

And might it not be, continued Austerlitz, that we also have appointments to keep in the past, in what has gone before and is for the most part extinguished, and must go there in search of places and people who have some connection with us on the far side of time, so to speak?
—W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

The letter, posted from an old industrial city in the northeast, is undated, but the letter writer includes her home address and phone number on the upper right-hand corner of the first page. The handwriting is scrawled and shaky, and the letters are very large, suggesting that the writer is an older woman. The text runs to five pages. There is no salutation. The letter opens in the middle of the story.

> My mother had an answer to a Novena Prayer she made to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. My Mother and Father were married 4 years before my sister, P., now Mrs. [she gives her sister's married name and address in a New England town] was born. When my mother and father were first married, the doctor told them that they could not have children and then my mother started making the Novena to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Both my mother and Father went to the

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> Madonna of Mount Carmel of 115th Street for 4 years. The Summer before my sister was born, my mother brought a "*wax-shaped*" baby to the altar at the Church on 115th Street, as was the custom for a couple who wanted children, and my mother said that [she] had felt an unusual sensation throughout her entire body as she brought the "*wax-shaped*" baby to the altar before the service that night. That day was July 16, 1926.

This is the feast day of the Madonna of 115th Street.

Ever since this book was first published, twenty-five years ago, I have received several letters like this one each year from people who are clearly outside the world of the university. The letter writers tell me that someone, often a grandchild in college who was assigned this book in a class, gave them a copy as a gift. The writers go on to describe their experiences with the Madonna of 115th Street. At the beginning or the end of these letters, the writers usually say something like, "You described my life!" Another experience I have had many times over the past twenty-five years is of students coming up after lectures to tell me, "My grandmother [or grandfather—recognition is not gender specific] says you wrote the story of her life!" Sometimes they bring their relatives to meet me so they can say this for themselves.

So I have discovered over the years that among the ways people may respond to a work of history is by recognizing themselves in it. People find themselves and the others in their lives in this description of Italian Harlem and of the devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel. I have saved all the letters because I have discovered something about myself in what people have written to me too, the historian's counterpart of the reader's self-recognition, as I will explain later. The letter writers are always careful to identify themselves, giving me their full names, addresses, and phone numbers, and very often those of family members too (particularly if these others appear in the stories the writers tell me), and their stories include precise details as well, with carefully specified dates, times, and locations: "That day was July 16, 1926." These details mark the moment of the Madonna's intervention in their lives and her ongoing presence to them. Together with the full contact information the writers provide, these particulars give the letters the feel of somehow being official and authenticated documents or eyewitness reports.

The letters also describe the joy of the moment of discovery and recognition in reading *The Madonna of 115th Street.* People are clearly thrilled to recognize themselves and their lives in these pages, and they

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are surprised, too, as if this was the last thing they expected when they opened this book, perhaps any book. (In one case, recognition was literal: a man wrote to say that he was certain he was one of the children sitting among the group of mothers in the picture of the summer street scene in Jefferson Park on page 80.) What I have found especially striking about this experience of historical recognition is that it provokes people not just to write but also to tell me a story in return about how they have known the Madonna in their own lives and what she has done for them. Recognition moves them to storytelling. By telling their stories, the writers blur the line between the past and present and transform themselves from the objects of history into its subjects and narrators.

The letters show me that the Madonna lives in the writers' memories, in their relationships with younger kin (who then become part of the stories too, like the children keeping parents' and grandparents' vows at the *festa*), and in their contemporary devotional practices. Among other things, the letters are expressions of the writers' loyalty and gratitude to the Madonna and of their faithfulness in telling others about what she has done for them. Remembering is a devotional act, and the letters are a form of literary ex-voto, like the wax baby itself or like the small metal images of body parts left at Catholic shrines. These objects make real and visible what hurts or preoccupies the petitioners by putting into material form their hopes for healing and expressions of gratitude for the Madonna's intercession. So do the letters to me. "History is not simply a science," Walter Benjamin wrote, "but also and not least a form of remembrance," and what science has determined, Benjamin adds, "remembrance can modify." The letter writers add to the sum of the past, enlarging the record of what the Madonna has done. The letter writers also add themselves into the story, which they let me know is not over. I think of these letters both as a gift to me and as a contribution to the work.[1]

The letter continues:

> On April 5, 1927, my sister was born. On the following July 16, 1927, my mother and father brought my sister . . . [I have taken out the name here], back to our Lady of Mount Carmel of 115th St. as an answer to their prayers. When they (my parents) were waiting in line to get into the service, it seemed as if they were going to wait for such a long time, but one of the foot patrolmen came up to them and said that they could go into Church without waiting. My sister was a 9 lb.

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3 oz. baby when she was born and by the time she was brought to New York in July, she may have weighed quite a bit more, or so it seemed because they had to wait for such a long time.

The most immediate and important influence on me when I was writing this book many years ago was what was called at the time the "new social history," which directed me to the study of people in the past going about their lives in the particular political, social, economic, and religious circumstances in which they found themselves. (That "the past" is not the correct temporal location for the devotion to the Madonna of 115th Street, I discovered only slowly. I describe this realization—and what was keeping me from it—in the introduction to the second edition of this book, included in this volume.) My closest friends and conversation partners in graduate school at Yale in the mid-1970s, many of them from history and American studies (I was in religious studies), shared an interest in working-class cultures, with a distinct Marxist orientation to our methods and theories. (Most of us belonged to the Mid-Atlantic Radical Historians' Organization, founded in 1973.) The social historians I most admired and associated with were concerned with working-class entertainments, sports, and the culture of saloons, and most paid little attention to religion (there were exceptions). Nonetheless, social history pointed me to the streets of East Harlem. (For a full discussion of the intellectual context in which this book took shape, see the introduction to the second edition.)

But a colder wind was blowing through the academy. By the time I was revising the manuscript in the early 1980s, when I was teaching at Fordham University at Lincoln Center in midtown Manhattan, a radically critical—some might even say caustic and corrosive— theoretical discourse was ascendant in the university across the disciplines. Ethnography was in the midst of an anxious season of self-doubt and suspicion; history was being recast as a literary and ideological enterprise with only the most attenuated relationship to anything like a past that had really happened; authorial intentionality and even identity had disappeared from the text, which took on a life of its own. The notion that scholars who studied other cultures or other times were representing in their writing the actual lived experience of the people in these other times and places had become risible and self-delusional, if not a corrupt alignment with power.

Critic and philosopher George Steiner characterizes the major issue of this critical moment as the struggle between "the concept of a 'pres-

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ence'" in Western thought and practice and what Steiner calls "the postulate of absence." The new critical theory, Steiner writes, dissolved "any naively cosmological sense of a meaningful continuum, of a legible 'text of the world' in which grammar, logic and the implicit theorems of causality inherent in grammar and in logic provide safe bridges between word and object, between past and present, between speaker and writer and receiver." The new theorists danced in front of an Ark that was empty, says Steiner, with ambivalent admiration. (He goes on to challenge the ascendency of absence for aesthetic reasons, concluding with D. H. Lawrence's dictum that "one has to be so terribly religious to be an artist.") I never completely signed on to this new academic agenda, but neither was I as angry at and dismissive of it as some were (including some of my own intellectual heroes, among them, most famously or most infamously, E. P. Thompson). I had my own chastening season of deepened and anxious questioning about the nature and limits of representation, about the multiplicity of the past, about the unstable line between past and present, and above all about the relationship between the experiences, desires, and fears of the scholar and the worlds he or she studies. After this time I certainly would not have thought to say, simply and boldly, "That's their lives!" to describe what I have written here.[2]

But for twenty-five years I have been most deeply moved by the readers who tell me that they recognize themselves in the pages of this book.

The letter closes:

> My sister was married in March, 1951, and her first-born was a girl, [she names her], born on July 16, 1952. When she was about 6 years old, my sister and her husband, [*sic*] moved to [she names the town in New England] and when she was a teenager, she met a boy, a neighbor, who lived a few doors away on the same street; He was also born on July 16, 1952. They had grown up together and dated each other and were married on July 16, 1976.

The writer ends with the addresses and phone numbers of her sister and her niece.

In the introduction to the second edition I describe how devotional practices such as those associated with the Madonna of 115th Street—"my mother brought a '*wax-shaped*' baby to the altar"—were framed by

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the reigning theories in religious studies at the time in terms of the magical, superstitious, cultic, and primitive. Such theories, I argue there, served to authorize and substantiate boundaries fundamental to modern culture and modern being: boundaries between the real and the imaginary, between the material and the spiritual, between this world and the other world, between the living and the dead, and between past and present. Religious theory played a key role in defining and policing the borders between acceptable and unacceptable religion and thus in shaping the inner worlds of modern persons.

Above all, modern religion did not include an orientation to the world in which supernatural figures were really, actually, literally present to people's bodies and senses in their everyday lives. Literary critic Roberto Calasso observes that the Greek word for god, *theós,* has no vocative case: "*Theós* has a predicative function: it designates *something that happens.*" "There was a time," says Calasso, "when the gods were not just a literary cliché, but an event, a sudden apparition." But that was then and this is now. The modern world is *disenchanted,* in Max Weber's famous phrase, or *disincarnated,* in Jesuit theorist Walter Ong's word. Of all the dichotomies central to the making of the modern world, the most important is presence/absence.

The roots of the process of disenchanting reality go back to the early modern period, when the notion first took hold in Western civilization that there were "two entirely distinct ontological zones," as theorist Bruno Latour puts it: "that of human beings on the one hand; that of non-humans on the other." This fissure is often associated with the theologies of the Protestant Reformation, but sacred presences in human space and time disappeared slowly. Modern theologians, philosophers, and scientists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries still understood God to be present in history—for example, in God's plans for human destiny, or in nature as its artificer. By the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, however, the idea that the supernatural was present in things (relics, holy cards, and statues, for instance) or in places (shrines, for example) or during certain times (on July 16, 1926; July 16, 1927; July 16, 1952; July 16, 1976), so that sacred figures were involved in the everyday lives of men and women, was marked as premodern and above all as Catholic. Philosopher Charles Taylor refers to this aspect of the Catholic imagination that endured into modernity as presence "in the way that belonged to the enchanted world" or "the old model of presence." In this way, those of us working in religious studies in the

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1970s and 1980s labored under a doubly authorized insistence on absence. It was there in the new theoretical spirit of the time, and it came to us also in the inheritances of modern religion and religious studies, which preceded and informed the later theoretical moment.[3]

The sorts of things that people have done and still do at the shrine on 115th Street have occupied absolutely the lowest rungs of normative modern hierarchies of religion. The practice of presenting a wax baby to a plaster statue that is taken to be the real presence of the mother of God in the hope that she will grant fertility is so far outside the modern world as to be nearly unthinkable. Or it is thinkable only in terms that guaranteed that such practices were tagged as fragments of a premodern world that had otherwise disappeared. The degree to which this normative and teleological way of thinking about religion masked as theory had been taken for granted in the 1960s and 1970s is evident in the era's popular and enormously influential psychological models of individual religious development that posited a graded hierarchy of ascending stages of faith from one through five. The lesser forms of religious life in such schema are characterized by, among other things, the orientation to the sacred in anthropomorphic, literal, and materialistic forms (meaning the sacred as present to be bargained with, cajoled, and scolded). Devotion to the Madonna of 115th Street would not make it above a ranking of 2.5 on such scales. For Catholics to climb higher they would need to say that the image of the Madonna of 115th Street was a "symbol," a term that can mean many things, most of which assume that a symbol is the sign for something that is not there. This is where the study of religion was when I arrived in graduate school, and this is where the intellectual challenge of writing about the Madonna of 115th Street and her devout began.[4]

Things have changed since then. The unsatisfactory term "popular religion," which was premised on the sharp division of the premodern and modern, has been supplanted by new terms, among them "lived religion," that are critical of the inevitability of the from-to historical vision of religious modernity. The singular modern has given way, in any case, to the notion of multiple and alternative moderns. The West has been reframed from the perspective of the rest of the world, where what goes on at the Madonna's shrine is more common and familiar than are the sanctioned practices of "modern" Western religion. We scholars of religion have trained ourselves to approach devotional practices like the wax baby not as atavistic survivals (on the level of culture and history) or as infantile and regressive impulses (on the

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level of the psychological) among powerless and desperate people (on the level of the political) but as media of engagement with the many different challenges and opportunities of modern society. The notion of lived religion got us this far.

The letter writers themselves propose a standard against which to measure and assess changes in religious scholarship generally, and American religious history in particular, over the past quarter century. Do our accounts of particular religious worlds and practices faithfully represent the actual lived religious experiences of men, women, and children? Is recognition one of the ways, among others, that readers may respond to our descriptions and discussions of their religious worlds? Do they find themselves in what we write about them, even if they are not completely happy with what we say?

I was in East Harlem for the July procession on the occasion of the church's centenary celebration. (The one hundredth anniversary of the festa, which is older than the church, as the first chapter of this book explains, went locally unmarked.) Most years a colorful replica of the church's primary statue of the Madonna, which resides in a niche over the main altar, is used for the outdoor processions, although by the distinctive devotional logic of presence, the replica is taken by the devout as being really the Madonna herself too. (The "replica" looks nothing like the main statue.) But on this very special occasion the Madonna herself, as the people explained to me, was coming out of the church into the streets, because by the distinctive devotional logic of presence, the Madonna was understood to be present in a special way in this statue. Some of the people there that day remembered when the Madonna was brought out of the church to celebrate the end of the Second World War.

I stood in the dense press of people on the narrow street in front of the church among Italian Americans who still lived in the neighborhood, old-timers who returned for this important day, Puerto Ricans from the surrounding projects and apartment buildings, and Haitian Vodou practitioners dressed all in white, to whom Mount Carmel is also Ezili Dantò. We were crowded in among the big aluminum food stalls, completely shuttered now, although the searing hot air in the crowded space retained the smell of the cooked food from the night before. A great, still Ferris wheel rose up into the summer sky at the corner of the street. There was a tremendous charge in the crowd, a

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sense of intense expectancy. Then the people closest to the open doors of the church began to shout. "Here she comes!" The crowd seemed to ripple backward and forward, toward the statue emerging from the church and then away from it, and this was how I first felt the Madonna's arrival, in the bodies of her devout. A group of Haitian women standing near me raised their rosaries into the air, weeping. Some of the older Italians knelt down on the asphalt, to their children's dismay.

Now I could see the Madonna above the heads of the crowd as she made her way out the door. She rose up on a wooden platform borne on the shoulders of a group of six neighborhood men dressed for this occasion in wedding tuxedos, tan and blue, with ruffled shirtfronts. The crowd moaned and shouted. The Haitian women began singing an old Marian hymn in Latin, *Salve Regina.* The Madonna's hair, which on this statue is actual human hair, black, long, and curly, swung gently back and forth with the rocking of the platform. Her devout reached out to the Madonna, struggling to touch her robes, and people were laughing and crying.

Another letter to me, dated the eve of the feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, July 15, 2005, begins by saying that *The Madonna of 115th Street* recalled the writer's "childhood memories" of similar devotions in the Little Italy in Cleveland, Ohio. This writer, who appears to be about my age, identifies herself as a nun. She goes on to say that *The Madonna of 115th Street* "helped me understand that I didn't have to be ashamed of this type of devotion." She recalls correcting her mother after the Second Vatican Council for praying the rosary in church. "Only *Mary* understands," her mother snapped back at her in irritation. After the murder of the four churchwomen in El Salvador on December 2, 1980, she found her faith deeply challenged, and she remains "searching for understandings that make sense to me."

I was brought up short by the word "ashamed" here. Many readers have found the religious world described in this book attractive. The crowds at the annual festa today include a number of people who discovered the Madonna of 115th Street by reading this account and decided to make the midsummer procession part of their own lives. I have also been criticized by some scholars for offering an overly positive account of the devotion to Our Lady of Mount Carmel among Italians (which is a serious misreading of the book, I believe, especially of the chapters on women and family life). But this letter writer issues a

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sharp reminder that the modern prohibition against the kind of human behavior and imagination characteristic of the devotion to the Madonna of 115th Street runs deep and long in our culture. It is no longer simply a Protestant/Catholic division either. Rather, it has to do with what is the acceptable range of imagination and experience and what is not. But what is shameful about the devotion to the Madonna of 115th Street? What is the root of this shame?

One answer is that the feelings expressed in this letter belong to the trajectory of modern Catholicism in the United States after the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), when many Catholics became critical and dismissive of such expressions of devotionalism. The reasons for this shift in religious practice and evaluation had to do with particular theological, liturgical, and psychological arguments of the mid-twentieth century. But what gave the criticism of popular devotions in the 1960s and 1970s its urgency and edge was the perception that this way of being religious belonged to a distant age of American Catholic history. It belonged to the immigrant period and had a connection with the darkest antimodern impulses of the universal church in the era of European liberal revolutions, and it exemplified a childish, even infantile, religiosity out of place in the modern world. As this letter writer says, she had come to view her Italian Catholic upbringing as "immature." When Catholic commentators in the 1960s wrote that the Church after the Council had "come of age," a favorite expression of the time, they meant it had outgrown practices like bringing a wax baby on a special day to a statue decked out with real hair in hopes that the bringer would get pregnant. Catholic religious educators enthusiastically adopted the stages-of-faith model for their classrooms. Catholics had become moderns at last.

I think more is at stake here than an internecine Catholic quarrel, however, as my references to Steiner and Calasso indicate. These authors are exploring the nature and limits of contemporary imagination, knowledge, and consciousness, and they direct us to the point where the Madonna of 115th Street comes most provocatively up against these boundaries. We scholars of religion have become better over the past twenty-five years at approaching the density of practices, objects, gestures, and so on, that constitute religious worlds. We have taken the point of the embodiment of the religious practitioner. But the essential reality of the shrine on 115th Street in the experience of practitioners is that the Madonna is really there, in that church, in her

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image, on that street; that she and her devout are present to each other; and that she listens and responds to their needs. Her presence moves outward along the routes that go from 115th Street, in objects blessed there and taken away, in photographs, in memories, in vows made to the Madonna and then kept for years and years, in statues and holy cards, in the stories told about the Madonna, and in letters to a historian. The second letter writer's shame is the sign of the enduring power of what Steiner called "the postulate of absence" in the modern world and in modern theory.

By the persistent logic of modern ways of understanding religion, culture, and history, the Madonna is a symbol, a medium of engagement, and a tool in the hands of people working on their cultural environments. But she is not a real presence. "Signs do not transport presences," says Steiner in the discussion quoted above, and he goes on to reference Gertrude Stein's oft-repeated aphorism "there is no there there." He is speaking again of the normative modern, in all its various theoretical and aesthetic instances. Absence remains the dominant assumption of modern theory and historiography, as it does of modern religiosity too. The second letter writer says that she found herself caught between the religious inheritance of her childhood, exemplified by her mother's devotion to *Mary* (she underlined the word in the text, reproducing her mother's vocal emphasis), and her life as a modern woman in the church with a graduate degree in religious studies. Hers was the shame of someone ambivalently caught by the authority of absence. Shame in this way is yet another route of the Madonna's real presence. There is a caution here not to be too confident about evolving methodologies and more empirically grounded theoretical approaches when they run up against the problem of real presences.

The men and women who have written letters to me about recognizing themselves in this book are unconcerned with the boundaries Steiner enumerates as fundamental to modern consciousness (word and object, past and present, writer and reader). Their letters are practices of presence in response to the Madonna's presence to them. Everything about the letters is characterized by "conspicuousness," Calasso's word for relations between the ancient Greeks and their gods. The letter writers make me conspicuous to them and themselves to me, and the reason they do so is because the Madonna has made her presence conspicuous to them, not once (on July 16, 1926, when "my mother said she felt an unusual sensation throughout her entire body"), but again

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(on July 16, 1927, "one of the patrolmen came up to them and said that they could go into Church without waiting") and again (on July 16, 1952, "her first-born was a girl") and again (on July 16, 1952, "she met a boy, a neighbor, who lived a few doors away on the same street; He was also born on July 16, 1952") and again ("they . . . were married on July 16, 1976"). This writer did not date her letter, but I am certain she wrote it on July 16. The Madonna is excessively, abundantly present to this woman and her family and in the letter sent to me.[5]

So signs do transport presences (among them signs such as "*Mary*") and not only for Catholics. "One empirically knows of no society," writes Dipesh Chakrabarty, a professor of South Asian history and an important contributor to subaltern and postcolonial theory, "in which humans have existed without gods and spirits accompanying them." Chakrabarty continues, "Although the God of monotheism may have taken a few knocks—if not actually 'died'—in the nineteenth-century European story of 'the disenchantment of the world,' the gods and other agents inhabiting practices of so-called 'superstition' have never died anywhere." From India to contemporary China, the cities of Asia, and the market stalls in Bangkok and Taiwan; among Muslims in Europe, Indonesia, and the Middle East; in taxis driven by Muslim newcomers in Copenhagen, Paris, and New York; and in basement shrines in Brooklyn, the relationships of people and communities to the real presences of their gods and spirits and what follows from these relationships for everyday life, including civic life, constitute a powerful alternative experience of the modern—not in reaction to the modern, not as atavism or survival, but as another way of being in the world. Chakrabarty concludes, "I take gods and spirits to be essentially coeval with the human, and think from the assumption that the question of being human involves the question of being with the gods and spirits."[6]

The question now is what it means to think from the assumption of real presences. This is the issue that reading *The Madonna of 115th Street* raises for me now, after all these years. Presence has begun to emerge over the past decade or so as a theoretical and historical question in religious studies, in part as a way of understanding the inheritances of the Enlightenment for the discipline. It has become clear that this is not solely about how Catholics have lived in the modern Western world. Leigh Eric Schmidt's *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (2000), was a major contribution to this de-

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veloping inquiry into religious presence/absence and what Schmidt calls "the religious complexity of modernity itself." Scholarship in religious studies may draw on work in aesthetic theory, psychology, psychoanalytic theory, and literary criticism, as I have done here, to develop research into presence as a phenomenological and historical reality. My description of the devotion in the lives of people in Italian Harlem offers resources for thinking from this assumption, but the matter of real presences was not as fully in view twenty-five years ago as it is today. Its arrival now marks for me the next stage in a theoretical development that has been unfolding through this past quarter century, from "popular religion" to lived religion to what I am now thinking of as "abundant history." I mean by this an empiricism open to the realness of the gods in the company of men, women, and children, in the circumstances of their times.[7]

Once we begin to address this question—once we say that we will think with the assumption of the realness of the Madonna of 115th Street, of Guan Yin, of the dead and elevated Chairman Mao, of a Sufi saint, or of the Holy Spirit in Pentecostal experience, as real entities in history and experience not simply or sufficiently identifiable with social structures, origins, or functions, and certainly not as "symbols," but as having a presence that becomes autonomous within particular life worlds—new questions open up for the study of lived religion. How do such presences become real in the experience of persons and communities (which brings us deep into the making of social and religious imaginaries, especially in relations among children, adults, and sacred figures)? With what fears, desires, hopes, and denials are such sacred beings charged (which raises the difficult question of the interplay between the conscious and unconscious in history and culture)? What role do presences play in the networks of relationships that go to make up a social and religious world (between husbands and wives, for example, or parents and children)? How do such presences orient—and how are they inflected by—civic participation and political life? How do such presences act in the world? Whether we explore Pentecostal storefronts, Muslim saint shrines, or Asian marketplaces, we need a more robust theoretical language and a more confident historical sensibility to approach the realness of real presences.

What does this mean in practice for the study of religious imagination and observance in the modern and contemporary world and for understanding modernity itself? I can suggest four broad areas of fun-

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Second Edition</i>, Yale University Press, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/swarthmore/de
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damental importance to modern life where scholarship would be more faithful to the experience of the men and women caught up in them if these times and places were approached from the assumption that supernatural figures and human beings are really present to each other. One is modern warfare. Supernatural figures have appeared to soldiers and civilians in combat zones and to their kin on the home front in the many wars of the past two centuries. These wartime relationships between heaven and earth, entered into in circumstances of unimaginable terror and violence, contributed to how modern wars have been made for and by the people living through them, to how wars are imagined, endured, lived, and remembered. A second area is medicine, physical pain, and healing. People of all religious inheritances have entered the spaces and times of modern health care in the company of their gods, saints, and spirits, who have stood beside them in operating rooms, at hospital bedsides, and in waiting rooms. It has been through these relationships that many modern people around the world have experienced the manifold realities of pain and healing and contended with medical authority, with unfamiliar technologies, with the alienated times and spaces of institutional medicine, and with the necessary company of the many strangers that make up modern medical environments (nurses, orderlies, dieticians, technicians, and so on). Medical professionals have never been the only authorities in modern hospitals. Alongside them have been supernatural figures of many different pantheons. A third area is marriage and the family. For many modern Christians (to take this one religion as example), Jesus is a partner in the living of their marriages, for better and worse. He chooses sides, voices opinions, and endorses some behaviors and prohibits others, generally contributing to the shape of the relationship between husbands and wives, parents and children. Finally, there is the civic realm itself, the domain of modernity said to be most free of real presences. Historians commonly translate religiously motivated social action into the language of the social. But a Pentecostal prison minister, for example, who understands Jesus to be present with him in his work among prisoners, is not a social worker by another name but a social worker in Jesus' name and in Jesus' presence.

Modern cities, rapidly changing technologies that come with moral and existential implications, industrial and postindustrial workplaces, and processes of birth and death as they are organized now have all been experienced by large numbers of moderns in the company of

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supernatural figures. None of these domains has ever been secular (or as Schmidt writes, "modernity has turned out to be not so modern after all"). Moderns have not only known the presence of the gods but have also engaged and transformed their modern realities in the company of gods, and the gods, who do not remain unaffected by their many contemporary commitments and entanglements, changed too.

How can we leave these supernatural figures of out of our accounts of these worlds, then, when they have been so essential for how these urgent and challenging domains of modern life have been imagined and constituted? In the past decade, historians of religion have done important and innovative work in all of the areas of modern and contemporary experience cited as examples here. We are just at the beginning of rethinking modern history from the assumption of real presence, but we are a lot further along than we were when I first wrote this book.

Historians of modern Western culture say that forgetting is a fundamental requirement of being modern, for persons and for nations. "One of the most important consequences of modernity," writes historian David Gross, "has been the precipitous decline of memory as a value." Many forces converged to make this so, including the development of the modern study of history itself, which seeks to replace subjective memory with verifiable, documentable, and thus more "accurate" historical knowledge. Historian of memory Pierre Nora speaks of the "eradication of memory by history." To be modern is to be liberated from the dead hand of the past. "That's history," we say when we want to dismiss some experience or idea as irrelevant to our contemporary lives. Modern liberal democracies forget the violence and religious exclusion of their origins. But of all the things that must be forgotten, the most essential is that once upon a time and not that long ago, the gods, spirits, saints, ancestors, and demons were familiar and recognizable members of the social world, in miracles, apparitions, and devotions, amid the relationships of everyday life. Forgetting this allows us to overlook or dismiss the fact that for most of the world, as well as on 115th Street, they have not gone away. Bruno Latour, whom I have cited earlier, refers to this particular instance of modern forgetting as "purification."[8]

By the mid-1970s and 1980s, another purification was under way. The men and women of the Catholic working class, the men and women

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on their knees before the Madonna with wax body parts in their hands, were transformed in these years into "hardhats" and the "silent majority" (urban "rednecks" in a recent memoir of New York City at the time), and they disappeared from cultural and religious theory. Catholic "blue-collarites value ritual, dogma, and tradition," according to a major 1969 sociological study of "blue-collar life," which translates as meaning that Catholic blue-collarites belong to the world of memory, of "tradition" and "dogma," not to the living and breathing present. Class fell away as a significant category in religious analysis. Within Catholicism this criticism of the ethnic working class (almost all of them were Catholics) coincided with Vatican II–era changes, as well as with greater prosperity, professionalization, and higher levels of education among American Catholics in the later 1960s and 1970s.[9]

I have always seen a connection between this double effacement, of real presences on the one hand, and of industrial workers (very many of whom were Catholics in American labor history) on the other. The sweaty bodies of workers and the things they make, and the real presence of supernatural figures—both trouble the authoritative surface of modern and contemporary American society and confound its most insistent denials and exclusions. I am talking specifically here about Catholic "blue-collarites," but the same is true for workers of other denominations and of other religions, in the United States and around the world.

The people who have written to me over the years to say "that's my life" about this account of the devotion to the Madonna of 115th Street refuse to be purified. They muscle past the hesitations of modern historiography, with its insistence on the tentative nature of our accounts of the past and these accounts' fundamentally imaginary and fictive qualities, and they startle even me with their frank insistence on this account of the devotion to the Madonna of 115th Street as being literally true to their lives. This may be, but with all due respect to my correspondents, I tried to get as close to the experiences of the Madonna's devout as possible, but in the end, all such efforts are flawed and incomplete, for many different reasons. But I have come to see the phrase "that's my life" as the expression of the letter writers' determination not to be written out of history and contemporary culture. Not just for themselves, either, but for the supernatural figures present to them too.

I have appreciated the implicit caution the letter writers deliver. If the fundamental charge of physicians is to do no harm, perhaps the

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fundamental imperative of scholars of religion ought to be not to make ourselves parties to the pervasive disciplinary practices of purification that serve to translate the experiences of the people we write about into the comfortable categories of modern scholarship. We need to pay attention to real presences, not because they are good (often they do awful things to people and communities), but because they are real, as the letter writers confirm. How do these figures act in history, in the networks of relationships in which are implicated, and in the lives of their devout? How in turn do they disrupt our theories and methods? Scholars of religion must refuse to be purified too.

One of the first letters I received when this book was published twenty-five years ago came from Father Andrew Greeley, the prominent sociologist of American Catholicism. I was touched that someone so well known, whose work I admired and relied on, would take time to write such a warm and supportive letter to a young scholar. Over the years we became friends. This summer Andy was grievously injured in a car accident in Chicago, and he remains in serious condition. This edition of *The Madonna of 115th Street* is dedicated to him.

NOTES

Epigraphs: Roberto Calasso, *Literature and the Gods,* trans. Tim Parks (New York: Vintage Books, 2001), 23; W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz,* trans. Anthea Bell (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 258.

1. Eric L. Santner discusses Benjamin's understanding of the relationship between history and remembrance in *On Creaturely Life: Rilke, Benjamin, Sebald* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 137–38; the quotation in the text is on p. 137.

2. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 121, 123, and 228. I am referring in the parenthetical comment here to Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978).

3. Calasso, *Literature and the Gods,* 5, 4. On "disincarnation," see Walter Ong, SJ, *The Presence of the Word* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967). Bruno Latour discusses the ontological mapping of modernity in *We Have Never Been Modern,* trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 10–11. Charles Taylor's parsing of the kinds of sacred presence in the modern world may be found in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 447–48.

4. The authoritative source for the developmental model of religious faith is

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James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

5. Calasso, *Literature and the Gods,* 5.

6. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 16.

7. Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); the quotation in the text is on p. 30.

8. David Gross, *Lost Time: On Remembering and Forgetting in Late Modern Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 31. Gross cites Nora on p. 107. On purification, as Latour means the word, see *We Have Never Been Modern,* 10–11, and passim; on forgetting and the making of the modern Western nation-state, see Anthony Marx, *Faith in Nation: Exclusionary Origins of Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

9. The description of ethnic New Yorkers as the city's "rednecks" is by Edmund White, *City Boy: My Life in New York During the 1960s and 1970s* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2009), 165. White says, "One of the curious aspects of New York was that at that time its most illustrious citizens were all imports from the hinterlands or from Europe or Asia, where the natives were the rednecks." Needless to say, he was one of the imports. The comments about Catholic "bluecollarites" is from Arthur B. Shostak, *Blue-Collar Life* (New York: Random House, 1969), 262.

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