

Sacred Presence and Lived Religion: Robert Orsi's Methodological Contribution to Contemporary Religious Studies and Islamic Studies

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Abstract

*The lived religion paradigm has significantly transformed contemporary religious studies by shifting scholarly attention from religious doctrines and institutions toward the everyday experiences through which believers understand, negotiate, and embody their faith. Among the leading scholars within this tradition, Robert A. Orsi has made a distinctive contribution through his concept of sacred presence, which understands religion as a network of relationships between human beings and sacred realities actively experienced in everyday life. This article examines Orsi's concept of sacred presence within the broader development of lived religion scholarship and explores its methodological relevance for contemporary Islamic studies. Employing a qualitative library research method, the study analyzes Orsi's *Between Heaven and Earth* alongside major works on lived religion, material religion, digital religion, and contemporary Islamic studies. The analysis demonstrates that sacred presence extends the lived religion paradigm by providing an interpretive framework capable of explaining how believers experience the sacred through relationships, memory, ritual, material culture, and ordinary social practices. Furthermore, the article argues that Orsi's framework offers valuable methodological contributions to Islamic studies by complementing conventional textual, legal, and theological approaches with greater attention to lived religious experience. Rather than replacing established Islamic disciplines, sacred presence broadens their analytical scope by illuminating how Muslims encounter, interpret, and embody religious meaning within diverse social, cultural, and digital contexts. The study concludes that Orsi's concept of sacred presence constitutes a productive methodological framework that enriches both contemporary religious studies and the ongoing development of interdisciplinary approaches within Islamic studies.*

Keywords: Robert A. Orsi; Sacred Presence; Lived Religion; Contemporary Religious Studies; Islamic Studies; Religious Experience.

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1. Introduction

Over the past several decades, the academic study of religion has undergone a significant methodological transformation. While earlier scholarship primarily approached religion through doctrine, sacred texts, theology, and institutional structures, more recent scholarship has increasingly turned its attention to religion as it is lived and experienced in everyday life. This development, commonly referred to as the lived religion approach, argues that religious life cannot be adequately understood solely through official teachings or institutional authority. Recent scholarship further demonstrates that the lived religion approach has developed into a mature theoretical and methodological field, expanding beyond its original emphasis on everyday religious practice to address broader questions of theory, materiality, embodiment, and the conceptualization of religion itself. Within this perspective, religion is continuously enacted through ordinary practices, interpersonal relationships, material culture, memory, ritual, and the lived experiences of believers within their social and cultural environments.

The emergence of lived religion has profoundly expanded the scope of religious studies by challenging the assumption that official doctrine alone represents religious reality. Meredith B. McGuire defines lived religion as "the actual experience of religious persons from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices," thereby shifting scholarly attention from official religious institutions toward the everyday ways individuals interpret, negotiate, and embody their faith. She argues that scholars must move beyond institutional affiliation and doctrinal prescriptions to examine religion as it is actually practiced in daily life. Similarly, Nancy T. Ammerman demonstrates that religion is embedded within the routines of everyday life: in families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and local communities, making ordinary social contexts essential sites for understanding religious practice. Rather than viewing religion as a fixed doctrinal system, these scholars conceptualize it as a dynamic, socially embedded, and continually negotiated aspect of human experience. Among the leading figures within this intellectual tradition, Robert A. Orsi offers one of the most influential and distinctive theoretical contributions through his concept of sacred presence. Orsi defines religion as "a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together." This definition signals his departure from doctrine-centered approaches by locating religion within lived relationships rather than institutional structures. In *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, Orsi argues that religion should be understood as a network of relationships between human beings and sacred figures who are experienced as active participants in everyday life. Rather than reducing saints, divine beings, sacred objects, and religious memories to symbolic or psychological phenomena, Orsi insists that scholars must take seriously the religious worlds believers themselves inhabit. His relational understanding of religion moves beyond doctrinal definitions and directs scholarly attention toward the lived interactions through which individuals experience the sacred in ordinary life.

The continuing development of lived religion scholarship has also extended beyond traditional religious settings into contemporary social and technological contexts. As Heidi A. Campbell argues, digital media have transformed the ways religious authority, ritual, identity, authenticity, and community are negotiated, giving rise to new forms of religious practice that transcend conventional institutional boundaries. Religion is increasingly experienced through interconnected online and offline spaces, requiring scholars to reconsider how religious meaning is produced, communicated, and embodied within rapidly changing social environments. Building upon Campbell's foundational work, more recent scholarship suggests that digital environments have become integral to the production and negotiation of religious meaning, transforming not only how religion is communicated but also how authority, belonging, and religious practice are experienced in everyday life. This expansion demonstrates that lived religion remains an evolving methodological framework capable of addressing new forms of religious experience in contemporary society.

At the same time, important critical perspectives remind scholars that lived religious experience cannot be examined independently of broader historical and social structures. Talal Asad challenges essentialist understandings of religion by arguing that "there cannot be a

universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes." This perspective demonstrates that religious practices and experiences are inseparable from relations of power, institutional authority, and the historical processes through which religion itself is defined. His critique serves as an important reminder that everyday religious experience is never entirely autonomous but is continually negotiated within larger historical, political, and institutional contexts. Consequently, a comprehensive study of lived religion requires attention not only to individual experience but also to the structures that shape and regulate religious life.

Although lived religion has become an established field within contemporary religious studies, relatively little attention has been devoted to examining how Robert Orsi's concept of sacred presence may contribute methodologically to contemporary Islamic studies. Much of Islamic studies continues to emphasize textual interpretation, jurisprudence, theology, and institutional religious authority as its principal analytical frameworks. While these approaches remain indispensable, they often provide limited insight into the everyday religious experiences through which Muslims encounter, negotiate, and embody their faith within diverse cultural and social settings. Consequently, the potential contribution of Orsi's relational understanding of religion for the study of contemporary Muslim religious life remains insufficiently explored.

This article argues that Robert Orsi's concept of sacred presence represents a significant methodological contribution to the lived religion paradigm and offers valuable analytical tools for expanding contemporary Islamic studies beyond exclusively doctrinal and legal approaches. By situating Orsi's work within the broader tradition of lived religion scholarship developed by Meredith McGuire, Nancy T. Ammerman, Heidi A. Campbell, and others, this article examines how his relational understanding of religion enriches contemporary religious studies while providing a productive framework for investigating everyday religious life within Islamic contexts. Through qualitative library research based on Orsi's *Between Heaven and Earth* and relevant scholarship on lived religion, the article seeks to demonstrate the continuing relevance of sacred presence as a conceptual lens for understanding religion as a lived social reality.

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design based on library research. The study aims to examine Robert A. Orsi's concept of sacred presence within the broader framework of lived religion and to explore its methodological relevance for contemporary religious studies and Islamic studies. Rather than collecting empirical field data, this research analyzes scholarly literature to develop a conceptual understanding of Orsi's theoretical contribution and its broader academic implications.

The primary source of this study is Robert A. Orsi's *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (2005), which serves as the principal theoretical foundation for the analysis. To contextualize Orsi's arguments within the development of lived religion scholarship, the study also examines major works by Meredith B. McGuire, Nancy T. Ammerman, Heidi A. Campbell, Susan Crawford Sullivan, and Talal Asad, together with recent scholarly publications on lived religion, everyday religion, digital religion, and contemporary religious studies.

Data were collected through a systematic review of books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and other relevant academic publications. The collected literature was analyzed using a descriptive-analytical approach to identify the major concepts, theoretical assumptions, and methodological contributions developed within the lived religion paradigm. Particular attention was given to the concepts of sacred presence, relational religion, everyday religious practice, religious authority, memory, ritual, and religious experience.

The analysis was conducted through three stages. First, the study identifies the principal characteristics of the lived religion approach as developed by leading scholars in the field. Second, it examines Orsi's concept of sacred presence and evaluates its distinctive contribution to contemporary religious studies. Third, it analyzes the relevance of Orsi's

theoretical framework for contemporary Islamic studies by considering its potential to complement conventional textual and legal approaches through greater attention to everyday religious experience.

Through this qualitative and interpretive approach, the study seeks to demonstrate that Orsi's concept of sacred presence constitutes not only an important contribution to lived religion scholarship but also a productive methodological framework for expanding the study of religion within contemporary Islamic contexts

3. Results and Discussion

Lived Religion as a Paradigm Shift in Contemporary Religious Studies

The emergence of lived religion represents one of the most significant methodological transformations in contemporary religious studies. Rather than simply introducing a new object of inquiry, the lived religion paradigm fundamentally reorients how religion is conceptualized and studied. Earlier approaches generally privileged doctrine, theology, sacred texts, and institutional authority as the primary expressions of religion. Within this framework, religious traditions were largely understood through their official teachings and normative structures, while the everyday experiences of ordinary believers occupied a secondary position. Although these approaches remain indispensable for understanding the historical and intellectual development of religious traditions, they often provide only a partial account of religious life as it is actually experienced.

The lived religion paradigm challenges this epistemological orientation by arguing that religion cannot be reduced to official doctrines or institutional prescriptions. Instead, religion is understood as a dynamic social reality continuously produced through everyday practices, interpersonal relationships, material culture, embodied rituals, memory, and ordinary experiences. Accordingly, the central object of analysis shifts from religious institutions to religious actors, from normative systems to lived practices, and from theological abstraction to everyday experience. This transformation represents not merely a change in research focus but a fundamental reconsideration of what constitutes religion as an academic object of inquiry.

Meredith B. McGuire played a foundational role in articulating this paradigm by demonstrating that religion as practiced frequently differs from religion as prescribed. Rather than viewing believers as passive recipients of institutional teachings, McGuire emphasizes their active role in interpreting, adapting, negotiating, and embodying religious traditions within the complexities of everyday life. Religious identity therefore emerges not as a fixed doctrinal category but as an ongoing social process shaped by individual experience and cultural context. This perspective significantly broadened the methodological horizon of religious studies by legitimizing everyday religious experience as a central object of scholarly investigation.

Nancy T. Ammerman further expanded this perspective by relocating religion from institutional settings to the ordinary spaces of social life. In *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, Ammerman further demonstrates that religious meaning emerges through the narratives, relationships, and ordinary practices that shape everyday life, revealing how faith is continually constructed within families, workplaces, neighborhoods, and local communities rather than only within formal religious institutions. Everyday practices that may appear religiously insignificant from an institutional perspective frequently constitute the primary means through which believers experience and reproduce their faith. Religion therefore becomes inseparable from the routines and relationships that shape daily existence, dissolving the traditional distinction between the sacred and the ordinary that has characterized much of modern religious scholarship.

Subsequent developments have continued to expand the lived religion paradigm beyond conventional social settings. Susan Crawford Sullivan similarly argues that the study of everyday religion requires attention to "how people actually practice religion in their daily lives," emphasizing that religious meaning becomes visible only when examined within the ordinary experiences of everyday life. This perspective demonstrates that faith is negotiated through experiences of suffering, poverty, caregiving, family responsibility, and everyday moral decision-making rather than solely through formal religious institutions. Likewise, Heidi A.

Campbell argues that "digital religion does not simply refer to religion as it is performed and articulated online, but points to how digital media and spaces are shaping and being shaped by religious practice." This perspective highlights that digital technologies do not merely provide new platforms for religious expression but actively reshape the ways religious authority, authenticity, ritual participation, and communal identity are negotiated across online and offline contexts. Accordingly, religious authority, authenticity, ritual participation, and communal identity increasingly emerge through the interaction between offline and online spaces, suggesting that lived religion must now be understood within hybrid social environments rather than exclusively within physical communities. Taken together, these developments demonstrate that the lived religion paradigm has therefore evolved into a flexible methodological framework capable of explaining religious practice across rapidly changing cultural and technological contexts.

Despite these significant contributions, an important theoretical limitation remains within much of the lived religion literature. Existing scholarship convincingly demonstrates where religion is lived and how believers negotiate their religious identities, yet it provides comparatively less attention to the ontological question that lies at the center of religious experience itself: How do believers understand and experience the presence of the sacred within everyday life? While lived religion successfully relocates scholarly attention from institutions to lived experience, it often leaves insufficiently developed the nature of the relationship between believers and the sacred realities that give those experiences religious meaning.

It is precisely at this point that Robert A. Orsi offers his most significant theoretical contribution. Rather than merely extending the lived religion paradigm, Orsi deepens it by introducing the concept of sacred presence, a framework that explains how believers experience sacred figures not as symbolic representations but as active participants within their everyday worlds. Sacred presence therefore provides the missing conceptual link between lived religious practice and lived religious meaning. This article argues that Orsi's contribution should be understood not simply as another perspective within lived religion scholarship but as one of its most important methodological developments, offering a more comprehensive framework for understanding religion as an ongoing relationship between human beings and the sacred.

Sacred Presence as Robert Orsi's Distinctive Methodological Contribution

Robert A. Orsi's most important contribution to contemporary religious studies lies not simply in introducing the concept of sacred presence, but in fundamentally redefining the relationship between religious experience and scholarly inquiry. While previous lived religion scholars successfully shifted attention toward everyday religious practices, Orsi advances the paradigm by asking a more fundamental question: What makes these everyday practices religious in the first place? His answer is that religion is best understood as "a network of relationships between heaven and earth involving humans of all ages and many different sacred figures together." Rather than treating religion primarily as a system of beliefs or doctrines, this definition places relationships with sacred beings at the center of religious life. Accordingly, religious experience is understood as fundamentally relational rather than primarily grounded in doctrine or institutional affiliation. Consequently, sacred presence is not merely another object of study but a methodological principle that reshapes how religion itself should be investigated.

In *Between Heaven and Earth*, Orsi rejects approaches that reduce religious phenomena to symbolic systems, psychological projections, or social functions. Such explanations, although analytically valuable, often reinterpret believers' experiences through external theoretical categories while overlooking the realities that believers themselves understand to be central to their religious lives. For Orsi, the task of the scholar is not to determine whether miracles, saints, angels, or divine intervention are objectively real, but to understand how these realities function within the religious worlds inhabited by believers. Sacred figures are therefore approached not as metaphors or cultural symbols but as relational actors whose presence shapes moral decisions, emotional life, communal identity, and

everyday religious practice. Orsi therefore urges scholars to take seriously "the religious worlds people make and the scholars who study them," emphasizing that the academic task is to understand these worlds before explaining them through external theoretical categories.

This relational understanding represents a significant methodological departure from earlier approaches within the study of religion. Rather than defining religion primarily through belief, doctrine, or institutional affiliation, Orsi conceptualizes religion as an ongoing network of relationships connecting human beings with sacred persons, places, memories, objects, and communities. Religious life is therefore constituted less by abstract theological propositions than by continuous interactions through which believers experience guidance, comfort, obligation, protection, hope, and accountability. The analytical focus consequently shifts from examining what believers profess to investigating how they inhabit religious worlds structured by these relationships.

The concept of sacred presence also challenges one of the enduring assumptions of modern religious scholarship: the separation between the sacred and ordinary life. Classical theories often distinguish religious experience from everyday social existence by locating religion primarily within formal rituals, sacred institutions, or exceptional spiritual events. Orsi instead demonstrates that sacred presence is experienced precisely within ordinary existence. Family relationships, illness, grief, domestic rituals, childhood memories, neighborhood devotions, and material objects become locations where the boundaries between heaven and earth are continually negotiated. Religion is therefore not suspended outside everyday life but embedded within it, transforming ordinary human experience into a space of ongoing encounter with the sacred. As Orsi explains, "sacral presence, the literal presence of the holy in things and places, migrates into Catholic memory." Although his discussion emerges from Catholic devotional life, the broader methodological insight is that sacred presence is experienced through memory, objects, and everyday relationships rather than being confined to institutional ritual.

This perspective significantly deepens the lived religion paradigm established by Meredith McGuire and Nancy T. Ammerman. Whereas McGuire demonstrates that religion is lived differently from official prescriptions and Ammerman shows that religion is embedded within everyday social practices, Orsi explains why these practices possess religious significance. Sacred presence supplies the ontological dimension that connects everyday actions to transcendent meaning. In this sense, Orsi does not replace earlier lived religion scholarship but completes it by providing a conceptual explanation of how religious actors themselves understand the sacred realities that animate their daily lives.

The methodological implications of this framework extend beyond the study of Catholic devotionalism, which forms the primary context of Orsi's work. By encouraging scholars to suspend premature reductionist explanations and to take believers' religious worlds seriously on their own terms, sacred presence offers a methodological orientation applicable across diverse religious traditions. This approach resonates with Saba Mahmood's argument that "the meaning of agency cannot be fixed in advance, but must emerge through an analysis of the particular concepts that enable specific modes of being, responsibility, and effectivity." Rather than imposing external theoretical categories upon religious experience, both Orsi and Mahmood argue that scholarly analysis should begin from the conceptual worlds through which believers themselves understand and inhabit religious life. It invites researchers to examine not merely what religious communities believe but how those beliefs are embodied through relationships, practices, emotions, memories, and experiences that constitute everyday religious life. Rather than asking whether sacred presence is objectively verifiable, the scholar asks how the experience of sacred presence structures religious meaning, shapes moral action, and sustains communal life.

Viewed from this perspective, sacred presence should be understood not simply as one concept among many within lived religion scholarship but as one of its most significant methodological innovations. It provides an interpretive framework capable of integrating belief, practice, material culture, memory, ritual, and religious experience into a coherent analytical model. More importantly, it enables scholars to investigate religion without reducing it either to abstract theological systems or to purely sociological explanations. This methodological

balance explains why Orsi's work continues to occupy a distinctive position within contemporary religious studies and why it possesses considerable potential for expanding the analytical horizons of other disciplines, including Islamic studies.

Sacred Presence as a Methodological Framework for Contemporary Religious Studies

The significance of Robert Orsi's concept of sacred presence extends beyond its contribution to lived religion scholarship. This study proposes that sacred presence is best contemporary religious studies. Rather than functioning solely as a descriptive concept for explaining devotional practices, sacred presence provides researchers with an interpretive lens through which religious experience can be examined without reducing it either to theological truth claims or to sociological determinism. In this respect, Orsi's work offers a methodological position that bridges the longstanding divide between confessional and reductionist approaches to the study of religion.

One of the persistent challenges within religious studies concerns the relationship between explanation and understanding. Since the emergence of modern social scientific approaches to religion, scholars have frequently interpreted religious beliefs through external explanatory frameworks such as psychology, sociology, economics, or political theory. While these perspectives have generated valuable insights into the social functions of religion, they have often treated believers' experiences of the sacred as phenomena requiring explanation rather than realities requiring interpretation. Consequently, the religious dimensions that believers themselves regard as central to their lives frequently disappear beneath layers of sociological or psychological analysis.

Orsi does not reject these disciplinary perspectives; instead, he questions their methodological exclusivity. His approach proposes that scholars should first seek to understand the internal logic through which religious actors construct their worlds before translating those experiences into external analytical categories. Sacred presence therefore requires methodological empathy rather than methodological skepticism. This does not require scholars to affirm the objective existence of sacred realities, nor does it suspend critical analysis. Instead, it encourages researchers to investigate how experiences of divine presence, saints, ancestors, sacred objects, or spiritual intervention generate systems of meaning that organize everyday religious life. The question shifts from whether sacred realities exist to how the experience of their presence shapes human action, identity, memory, morality, and community.

This methodological orientation complements, while simultaneously extending, the broader lived religion paradigm. Meredith McGuire emphasizes that religion must be studied as it is practiced rather than merely as it is prescribed, thereby legitimizing everyday religious experience as a primary object of inquiry. Nancy Ammerman further demonstrates that religious meaning emerges within ordinary social relationships and daily routines. Heidi Campbell expands these insights into digitally mediated environments, illustrating how religious authority, authenticity, identity, and ritual continue to be negotiated through new technological spaces. Collectively, these scholars broaden the empirical scope of religious studies by relocating religion within the complexities of everyday life.

Nevertheless, sacred presence contributes an additional analytical dimension by addressing the religious significance of these lived practices. Everyday actions become religious not simply because they occur within religious communities but because they are experienced as encounters with sacred realities. Sacred presence therefore explains how ordinary practices acquire transcendent meaning without requiring scholars to adjudicate the metaphysical truth of religious claims. This methodological distinction enables researchers to take believers' experiences seriously while maintaining the critical distance expected within academic inquiry.

The methodological implications of this perspective are particularly significant for contemporary interdisciplinary research. Current scholarship increasingly investigates religion through themes such as embodiment, materiality, emotion, memory, space, media, and everyday practice. As Manuel A. Vásquez argues, religion cannot be understood solely as a system of beliefs but must also be examined through the material, embodied, and spatial

relationships that shape religious life. This perspective reinforces Orsi's argument that the sacred is encountered through concrete practices and relationships rather than existing only at the level of doctrine or abstract belief. Birgit Meyer similarly argues that "a material approach takes as its starting point the understanding that religion becomes concrete and palpable through people, their practices and use of things," thereby shifting scholarly attention from abstract belief toward the concrete processes through which religious presence is mediated and experienced. Sacred presence provides a conceptual framework capable of integrating these diverse analytical categories into a coherent understanding of lived religion. Material objects become meaningful because they mediate relationships with the sacred; rituals become significant because they sustain these relationships; memories become religious because they preserve experiences of sacred encounter; and communities become enduring because they are organized around shared perceptions of divine presence. David Morgan further demonstrates that religious experience is also mediated through visual culture and embodied perception, arguing that religious images, objects, and sensory practices participate in forming the emotional and affective dimensions of religious life. This perspective complements Orsi's understanding of sacred presence by emphasizing that encounters with the sacred are mediated not only through belief but also through embodied ways of seeing, feeling, and inhabiting religious worlds. Rather than treating these elements as isolated dimensions of religious life, sacred presence reveals their underlying relational coherence. As David Morgan argues, religious objects should not be understood merely as symbolic representations but as media through which religious worlds are perceived, inhabited, and experienced. This perspective further reinforces Orsi's argument that material culture participates in shaping believers' encounters with the sacred rather than simply reflecting pre-existing religious beliefs.

This methodological framework also offers an important corrective to polarized approaches that either privilege theological normativity or reduce religion to social construction. By refusing both confessional affirmation and reductionist dismissal, Orsi establishes a productive middle position in which religious worlds can be investigated according to the meanings they possess for those who inhabit them. Such a position strengthens the methodological foundations of contemporary religious studies by encouraging scholars to move beyond binary debates concerning belief and skepticism toward richer analyses of religious experience itself.

For these reasons, sacred presence should be recognized as more than a conceptual contribution within lived religion scholarship. It represents a methodological orientation capable of reshaping how religion is studied across diverse religious traditions and cultural settings. By integrating everyday practice, material culture, memory, ritual, and relational experience within a single analytical framework, sacred presence expands the capacity of religious studies to investigate religion as a lived and meaningful human reality. It is precisely this methodological potential that makes Orsi's work especially relevant for contemporary Islamic studies, where textual and legal analyses have historically occupied a dominant place within much of the scholarly literature.

Reimagining Contemporary Islamic Studies through Sacred Presence

The methodological significance of Robert Orsi's concept of sacred presence extends beyond the field of lived religion and offers important possibilities for contemporary Islamic studies. Although Islamic studies has developed sophisticated traditions of textual criticism, Qur'anic studies, Hadith scholarship, Islamic jurisprudence, theology, and intellectual history, these approaches have generally concentrated on the production, interpretation, and transmission of religious knowledge. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to examining how Muslims experience the sacred as an active reality within the ordinary circumstances of everyday life. Consequently, important dimensions of Muslim religious experience often remain analytically underdeveloped.

This observation should not be understood as a criticism of traditional Islamic scholarship. Textual, legal, and theological approaches remain indispensable for understanding Islam as a religious tradition. However, contemporary religious life cannot be

fully understood through normative texts alone. As Shahab Ahmed argues, any adequate conceptualization of Islam must account for the diversity of meanings, practices, and forms of life through which Muslims have historically understood and expressed their faith. From this perspective, examining lived religious experience is not a departure from Islamic studies but an expansion of its analytical scope. The relationship between Islamic teachings and Muslim lived experience is mediated through family life, memory, ritual practice, material culture, local traditions, digital media, and personal encounters with the sacred. As Samuli Schielke has observed, the study of Islam must also account for the ambiguities, inconsistencies, and practical realities that characterize Muslims' everyday lives, rather than assuming that religious traditions alone can fully explain lived religious experience. These dimensions do not exist outside Islamic doctrine; rather, they represent the ways in which doctrine becomes embodied, interpreted, and lived within diverse historical and cultural contexts.

From this perspective, Orsi's concept of sacred presence provides a valuable methodological framework for examining how Muslims experience their relationship with God, the Prophet Muhammad, the Qur'an, sacred spaces, and other forms of religious meaning that shape everyday life. The analytical emphasis shifts from asking what Islam teaches about a particular practice to examining how believers understand, experience, and negotiate that practice within their daily religious worlds. This perspective also resonates with recent anthropological studies of Islam that emphasize believers' experience of divine action rather than viewing religious life solely through the lens of ethical self-cultivation. Mittermaier's work, for example, illustrates how Muslims understand dreams, prayer, and divine guidance as encounters initiated by God, reminding scholars that religious experience involves not only what believers do but also how they understand themselves to be acted upon by the sacred. This shift is particularly significant in light of contemporary debates on Islamic authority, where religious knowledge is increasingly shaped through diverse scholarly, social, and digital networks rather than exclusively through traditional institutions. As Bano argues, changing patterns of religious authority require analytical approaches capable of explaining not only how religious knowledge is transmitted, but also how it is received, interpreted, and embodied by believers in everyday life. Such an approach broadens the scope of Islamic studies without replacing its established textual and legal methodologies.

This methodological orientation is particularly relevant for examining devotional practices that cannot be adequately understood through jurisprudential analysis alone. Religious gatherings for Qur'anic recitation, commemorations of the Prophet's life, visits to the graves of respected scholars and saints, collective supplication, practices associated with barakah, and everyday acts of remembrance all involve dimensions of religious experience that extend beyond legal classification. Whether such practices are debated, accepted, or contested within different Islamic traditions is itself an important object of study. Equally important, however, is understanding how participants themselves experience these practices as encounters with divine mercy, blessing, spiritual continuity, communal belonging, or sacred presence. Orsi's framework enables scholars to investigate these lived realities without reducing them either to doctrinal correctness or to sociological function alone.

The relevance of sacred presence becomes even more apparent within contemporary digital environments. Increasingly, Muslims engage religious knowledge through social media platforms, online sermons, digital Qur'an applications, virtual study circles, and religious influencers whose authority often extends beyond traditional institutional structures. Digital spaces have therefore become important arenas in which religious identity, authority, authenticity, and communal belonging are negotiated. As Gary R. Bunt has consistently demonstrated, digital environments have transformed the ways religious authority is established, contested, and disseminated within Muslim communities, enabling new forms of religious participation that increasingly extend beyond traditional institutional structures. This transformation illustrates that digital media have become integral to the everyday production and negotiation of Muslim religious life. While existing scholarship has significantly advanced our understanding of digital religious authority and online Muslim communities, considerably less attention has been devoted to examining how digital mediation reshapes believers' experiences of sacred presence itself. The question is no longer limited to who possesses

religious authority online but extends to how digital mediation transforms religious presence, spiritual intimacy, devotional practice, and perceptions of divine nearness within everyday Muslim life.

Adopting sacred presence as a methodological framework also contributes to ongoing efforts to bridge the long-standing distinction between normative and descriptive approaches within Islamic studies. Rather than positioning textual scholarship and lived experience as competing perspectives, Orsi's framework suggests that they should be understood as complementary dimensions of religious inquiry. Recent discussions within the anthropology of Islam likewise argue that the longstanding distinction between normative Islamic traditions and everyday Muslim life is analytically unhelpful, since religious texts, ethical commitments, and lived practices continually shape one another. Rather than treating doctrine and experience as separate domains, this perspective emphasizes that Islam is understood through the dynamic relationship between scriptural interpretation, embodied practice, and everyday social life. Ahmed likewise insists that "we need a new language for the conceptualization of Islam that serves as a means to a more accurate and meaningful understanding of Islam in the human experience." This methodological aspiration closely parallels Orsi's attempt to develop a conceptual vocabulary capable of accounting for lived religious experience without reducing it either to doctrinal abstraction or sociological explanation. This broader understanding allows lived religious experience to be examined alongside jurisprudence, theology, and textual interpretation rather than being treated as secondary to them. Normative scholarship explains how religious traditions articulate belief and practice, whereas lived religion investigates how those teachings are interpreted, embodied, and experienced by believers within particular social and historical contexts. Bringing these perspectives into dialogue allows scholars to develop a more comprehensive understanding of Islam as both a textual tradition and a lived religious reality.

Accordingly, this article proposes that sacred presence should be incorporated into the methodological repertoire of contemporary Islamic studies, not as a substitute for established disciplines such as tafsīr, Hadith studies, theology, or Islamic law, but as a complementary analytical framework that expands their capacity to investigate everyday religious life. Such an approach encourages scholars to move beyond the exclusive study of texts and institutions toward a richer understanding of how Muslims construct meaningful relationships with the sacred across changing social, cultural, and digital environments. In doing so, sacred presence contributes not only to the study of lived religion but also to the continuing methodological development of contemporary Islamic studies.

The methodological significance of sacred presence becomes even more important in contemporary Muslim societies characterized by religious pluralism, globalization, migration, and digital communication. As Islamic authority increasingly circulates beyond traditional institutions, scholars require analytical frameworks capable of explaining not only how religious knowledge is transmitted but also how sacred meaning is experienced, negotiated, and embodied within everyday life. This shift has encouraged scholars to move beyond treating Islamic texts and Muslim practice as separate objects of inquiry. Instead, increasing attention is being given to the ways religious meaning is produced through the continuous interaction between scriptural interpretation, social context, and everyday religious practice. Sacred presence therefore provides an important bridge between normative Islamic scholarship and the empirical study of Muslim religious experience, opening new possibilities for interdisciplinary research in Islamic studies.

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

This article has argued that Robert A. Orsi's concept of sacred presence represents one of the most significant methodological developments within the lived religion paradigm. While earlier lived religion scholarship successfully redirected scholarly attention from institutional religion toward everyday religious practice, Orsi extends this paradigm by explaining how believers experience the sacred as an active and relational presence within ordinary life. In doing so, sacred presence provides a conceptual framework that connects religious belief, ritual, material culture, memory, emotion, and social practice into a coherent analytical model.

Rather than reducing religion to doctrine, institutional authority, or social function, Orsi demonstrates that religion is fundamentally constituted through relationships between believers and the sacred realities they inhabit.

Building upon this insight, the article has proposed that sacred presence should be understood not merely as a theoretical concept but as a methodological framework for the study of religion. Its principal contribution lies in offering scholars an interpretive approach that avoids the limitations of both confessional and reductionist methodologies. By encouraging researchers to investigate religious worlds according to the meanings they possess for believers themselves, sacred presence enables a more comprehensive analysis of lived religious experience without requiring either theological affirmation or skeptical dismissal. This methodological orientation expands the analytical scope of contemporary religious studies and provides new possibilities for interdisciplinary research concerned with embodiment, materiality, ritual, memory, digital religion, and everyday religious practice.

The article further argues that this methodological framework has particular significance for contemporary Islamic studies. Although Islamic scholarship has made substantial contributions to the study of Qur'anic interpretation, Hadith, Islamic law, theology, and intellectual history, the lived dimensions of Muslim religious experience remain comparatively underexplored within many mainstream methodological approaches. Sacred presence offers a productive analytical lens through which scholars may investigate how Muslims encounter, interpret, and embody the sacred within everyday social, cultural, and digital contexts. Rather than replacing established textual and normative methodologies, this framework complements them by illuminating dimensions of religious life that are often overlooked when analysis is confined primarily to doctrine and institutional authority.

Accordingly, this study proposes that incorporating sacred presence into the methodological repertoire of contemporary Islamic studies can contribute to a more integrated understanding of Islam as both a textual tradition and a lived religious reality. Such an approach encourages future scholarship to move beyond the traditional dichotomy between normative and descriptive studies by examining the dynamic relationships through which believers construct religious meaning in everyday life. In this sense, Orsi's contribution extends beyond lived religion scholarship and offers a valuable methodological foundation for future interdisciplinary research across religious studies, Islamic studies, anthropology, sociology of religion, and digital religion.

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