

Beyond Memory: Italian Protestants in Italy and America.

By Dennis Barone.

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175 pages.

This book's focus is on the Italian Protestant experience from the late nineteenth century onward in both Italy and the United States (though mainly in the United States). The author acknowledges that the number of Italian Protestants was always relatively low in both countries but argues that in studying Italian and Italian American Protestantism we can gain insights into aspects of the lived experience of Italian American immigrants that have been overlooked in previous studies. Recovering those insights is especially important, he argues, given that the Italian American Protestant experience is now "beyond memory" (hence the title of the book) because of the popular belief that all Italians are Catholic and the fact that Italian American Protestant churches have long since disappeared.

Two caveats should be kept in mind when reading this book. The first is that the author self-identifies as a "literary historian, not a historian of religion or a sociologist" (11). What this means in practical terms is that Barone often relies heavily on the careful exegesis of literary texts in reaching his conclusions. This makes sense given his status as a professor of English and American Studies, but it does mean that, despite the claim that the book is concerned with the "lived experience" of Italian immigrants, the voices we hear most often are literary re-creations, not the voices of immigrants themselves. The second caveat is that, literary sources aside, the author's focus is not Protestant congregations but is instead weighted heavily toward the experience and writings of Italian Protestant ministers, including Alfredo Barone (1869–1950), the author's great-grandfather.

Chapter 1 is mainly concerned with the Italian Protestant experience in America. Barone's central conclusion here is an interesting and unfamiliar one. He documents convincingly the idea that Protestantism entailed a cost for immigrants in that it generally led to rejection by their Catholic families and friends and also attracted disdain from Anglo Protestants. So why become, and stay, Protestant? Barone suggests that the obvious answer—that doing so aided in assimilation—is only partly right. Rather, he argues, the main value of a Protestant identity was that it helped in the negotiation of two worlds, one American and one Italian, by allowing an immigrant to adopt American ways while simultaneously retaining a strong sense of attachment to Italy and *italianità* through, for example, services in Italian and church-sponsored Italian festivals.

Chapter 2 is a descriptive account of the struggles faced by a number of Protestant ministers in Italy around the turn of the twentieth century. The relevance of the chapter to the rest of the book is unclear. Also disappointing

is that the author tends not to move beyond his descriptive focus to examine patterns that cry out for explanation. For instance, it seems evident (45) that the Protestant ministry in Italy attracted many men who turned out to be untrustworthy. Why? The issue is noted but not explained.

Chapter 3 builds upon chapter 1 by identifying in more detail the reasons why Protestantism could serve as a way of negotiating two worlds. Central to Barone's argument here is that Protestantism distanced people from Italian Catholicism and papal power while simultaneously aligning them with an emphasis on literacy and the modernizing forces of the post-Risorgimento Italian state—all of which were valuable resources in an America dominated by Anglo Protestants.

The ways in which Italian Protestants and Italian Catholics grappled with the Roman Question and how the adopted positions changed over time is the subject of chapter 4. This is a chapter where the author's reliance on literary sources, mainly novels, is especially strong. He provides some commentary on each of the novels and the other materials he considers, but there is no internal summary in the chapter to help the reader understand how the different commentaries fit together, let alone how they are related to the concerns of other chapters in the book.

In chapter 5, Barone focuses on the ministry of his great-grandfather, Alfredo Barone, as the basis for a descriptive account of the evangelical outreach to Italians in Italy and, after 1899 (the year Alfredo emigrated), to Italian Americans in the United States. Though the descriptive material here is valuable, there are some patterns that might have been explored further. For example, in a parenthetical comment we are told that "Italian Protestants were somewhat fluid in their affiliations, and so a Baptist pastor or congregant could easily switch to Congregationalism in another town or vice versa" (87). It would have been useful to know, for example, if this fluidity was also characteristic of Anglo Protestants and, if not, if it was somehow tied to the ways in which immigrants found Protestant congregations to be useful quite independent of particular belief systems.

Chapter 6 explores the attitude of Anglo American Protestants toward Italian American Protestants by looking carefully at Congregational churches and their leaders in one particular American city: Hartford, Connecticut (Barone is a professor at the University of Saint Joseph in West Hartford). Finding himself unable to locate the materials he had identified in libraries in Great Britain and Italy, he "moved on to something closer to home" (99) and to articles on the Italian Congregational Church in the *Hartford Courant*.

Chapter 7 examines the main themes emerging from these materials, principally sermons written by Italian American Protestant ministers. Although at one point Barone implies that he will be assessing how these themes and

concerns were similar to or different from those found in materials written by Anglo American Protestant ministers, he does not really follow through on this.

The book's epilogue tells us that "this brief book can be considered l'antipasto at the table for the study of Italian Protestants in Italy and America" (151), which Barone hopes will be a catalyst for further research, especially on those Protestant groups, like the Pentecostals, that he did not cover.

The overall organization of this book has one major weakness, which the author himself anticipates early on: When he presented his book to a conference in Rome, he characterized it as "a series of case studies" (13). Subsequently, however, he realized that this was inaccurate for two reasons—first because "[t]he chapters may not be strictly linear but they are tightly interwoven" and second because "there is also a narrative thrust in this book as it moves from the late nineteenth century to the early twenty-first century" (13).

The author's second remark, about a "narrative thrust," is difficult to assess, partly because it is not always clear what the temporal context is. In discussing particular novels, for example, he rarely indicates when the novel was published (though, of course, a reader could look that up in the bibliography) and, more importantly, does not indicate the time period being described in the novel. Chapters 1 to 5 deal mainly with events and personalities from the late 1800s and early 1900s, and it is difficult to perceive any forward temporal movement across these chapters. If anything, there seems to be more emphasis on the late 1800s in chapter 3. Chapters 5 and 7 and the epilogue do move things forward a bit by incorporating material from the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, with a smattering of more recent material, but much of what is found in these chapters is still from earlier decades.

Barone's first remark is easier to assess: As I have already hinted, there are not a lot of interconnections between the different chapters (apart from the already-mentioned links between chapters 1 and 3). Barone was right in saying that most chapters could easily be read as stand-alone essays, which evidently is how they were initially developed.

Still, the author is correct that the Italian American Protestant experience has been little studied, and so there is no denying that this book makes a solid contribution to an underexamined area of the Italian American experience. And in doing so it does indeed help recover the memory of something largely forgotten. He is also correct in suggesting that his work can serve as a useful foundation for the next step in the study of Italian American Protestantism, which would necessarily involve a deeper investigation into what Italian American Protestants who were not ministers were doing in their communities.

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