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On the Profit of Protestant Wives

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An Essay

This brief essay I wrote during our shared recent time of stay-at-home. Here in Connecticut, as elsewhere, libraries were long closed and also suffered budget cuts that made some research inquiries impossible to fulfill. This note can be considered an addendum to my study *Beyond Memory: Italian Protestants in Italy and America* (2016). I wrote this note solely with materials in my file cabinet and on my bookshelf at home. If it may be considered an addendum, then it comprises the second such foray. The first – “Praying Toward Acceptance: Aspects of African, Anglo, and Italian American Cooperation” (2019) used Baptist churches in early twentieth-century Hartford, Connecticut as a test case. I found lots of documentation, but, alas, and to my disappointment, little evidence of cooperation between the churches. In the present instance, Italian Protestant preachers’ wives, I know of no autobiographical work by a minister’s wife and so even if our libraries had been open during recent months, I do not think that I would have been rewarded with a trove of research materials. Furthermore, though a pastor might write hundreds of pages in his spiritual autobiography, of his spouse he would invariably say just a few words of thanks.

What did it mean to be the wife of an Italian American Protestant minister? What was the role of a pastor’s spouse? How did wives Italian born differ from Anglo-American ones? In her recent study *The Preacher’s Wife: The Precarious Power of Evangelical Women Celebrities* (2019), Kate Bowler says that “during most of the twentieth century . . . it was usually assumed that the role of the minister was a two-person career. He was the man of God and she must learn to be a ‘minister’s wife.’ It was a decidedly middle-class profession, and, like the wives of professors, lawyers, army officers, politicians, the job came with a few perquisites” (2019, 79). For the most part, this is true of the husbands and wives in the early twentieth-century Italian

American Protestant church. Bowler also describes five roles for the evangelical celebrity wife of more recent years: preacher, homemakers, talent, counselor, and beauty. Except for homemaker, the wives of Italian American preachers do not fit Bowler's schema.

The two for the price of one expectation could be found both in Italy and America. A Baptist Mission Report from 1901 notes a missionary couple moved from Naples to Avellino and "went to work for Christ with intelligence and zeal." The husband preached and, as the Report put it, "the wife, who is unusually gifted, gathered a school and began to instruct the children in God's Word." Meanwhile in the United States, Dr. Chivers praised New York's Rev. Agostino Dassori, so capably assisted "by that most efficient and zealous worker, Mrs. Dassori" (1905, 190).

Bowler points out that for the first three-quarters of the twentieth-century missionary work provided a means for intelligent and talented women to find a meaningful role in a Protestant environment "overwhelmingly a man's world" (2019, 10). "At a time when American Christian women," Bowler writes, "could not occupy pulpits in their own churches, sit on governance committees, or serve as delegates to conferences, they operated mission boards with amazing energy and efficiency" (2019, 84).

Oftentimes these missionary women – like Mrs. Dassori – directed Sunday schools or organized women's church circles. They spoke to children and women and never to men or full congregations. And they could not partake of full theological training no matter how earnest their desire; no matter how profound their faith and intelligence. Neither the Italian Department at Colgate nor the Baptist School at Rome ever educated a woman even if we are one in Christ Jesus.

In his discussion of church organization, Mangano said that ideally "a well-trained Italian pastor" should "work with adults, an earnest Christian American" should "handle boys' and young men's work" and "an Italian-speaking woman" should "spend her time visiting and teaching in the homes" and perhaps also organize the children's Sunday school (2007, 188). Women missionaries spoke to children and women while male pastors spoke to men and entire congregations.

It may seem obvious and repetitious to state, but whether the Baptist School at Rome or Mangano's Italian Department of the Theological Seminary affiliated with Colgate University, all students were male. When the latter had a five day reunion in 1928 the entire program featured men speaking to men and perhaps more than half of the time Anglo ministers addressed their Italian colleagues. However, on the afternoon of the closing day, Mrs. Willard Smith spoke at a "Meeting of the Wives of the Alumni and Their Friends" (Program 1928).

At the Italian Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., women began the evangelical work. "Mrs. H. J. Finley, stirred up over the fact that nothing was being done for the spiritual welfare of the Italians then living in the Capital City . . . caught the vision of her opportunity to initiate an endeavor for their spiritual uplift" (Marseglia 1948, 48). Along with Margherita Mauro, who spoke Italian, the mission work commenced. Through the efforts of Mauro and others, eventually Rev. Marseglia became pastor of the church and mission.

Sometimes affluent women financed mission work. The Baptist Italian Mission Report for 1901 praised an English woman who furthered "the Gospel in Italy." Miss Emery gave

her “time and labor and money.” The Report notes: “Rich in this world’s goods, she was richer still in faith and in every kind of good works. Hundreds, if not thousands, of poor now miss her, and every mission and agency for good shared in her sympathy and her purse.” She died at the age of seventy-four and yet even when elderly “she was as light of step as a girl; her heart was young, and her spirit and manner cheery and bright.” Men authored these Reports (oftentimes Rev. George Boardman Taylor) and such comments as just quoted reveal attitudes regarding gender roles.

And I do not seek to proffer any judgment on the people of the past nor to place a present sense of values and duties upon the past. Yet, sometimes expectations regarding class, gender, and money could be rather crass. The Italian Mission Report for 1906 notes that the evangelist in Gravina married “a well-to-do member of this church.” The hope had been that through this alliance the church “would be self-supporting”; in other words, Gravina would not require support from Rome. This paragraph in the Report concludes: “but such is not the case.” Is their disappointment if not annoyance expressed in this understatement?

What characterized a good woman, a woman not an annoyance? The early twentieth-century volume of parable-like biographies *Heroes of the Faith in Modern Italy* (1914) contains prose sketches of six male heroes, one heroic couple, and then closes with four model women. Rev. J. S. Anderson, the author, describes “Lisa: The Italian Christian Lady” as a “true lady.” Anderson explains:

She was born in comfortable circumstances, and received a high education; but wealth and learning do not in themselves make a woman a lady. The pure refinement of her tastes, the tender sympathies of her nature, the sensitive feeling of her soul, the lofty nobility of her character, made the subject of the present sketch a fine type of her who reigns as queen in the sphere of true womanhood, the lady. (1914, 95)

Another hero, “Ernesta: The Italian Christian Teacher,” “surpassed all her fellow scholars” (1914, 88) at school and later formed a “*scuola evangelica*” (1914, 87) – for children.

Rev. Angelo di Domenica married Mary Traver in May of 1914. She had worked with him for three years in New Haven. That spring husband and wife, pastor and missionary worker, began their long career and life together in Philadelphia. The Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin* introduced them to the city. The introductory article described Mrs. di Domenica as “a slim, slight lady, with a humorous twinkle in her brown eyes” and the Rev. Dr. di Domenica as “a short, dark little man” (quoted in di Domenica 1956, 64). The article notes Mrs. di Domenica’s enthusiasm for organizing sewing and cooking classes. The article adds, “Mrs. di Domenica expects to take a vital and active interest in her husband’s work” (1956, 65).

Rev. Antonio Mangano also married an Anglo woman, “Mabel Austin Farnham, of Suffield, Conn., a graduate of Vassar College” (Farnham 1907, 315). Rev. Sbrocco of Bristol, Connecticut, according to the *Baptist Home Mission Monthly*, benefited from “the efficient help of his newly wedded American wife with whom he became acquainted through her service among the Italian missions under the Woman’s Board” (Bruce 1908, 477).

The parents of the contemporary American poet Lewis Turco similarly met through mission activities. In his poem “An Immigrant Ballad,” Lewis has his dad enamored with “a

Yankee girl” who did “what good folk did” *before* “he heard a sermon said” (1998, 33) which reverses the order of real life events. Perhaps Lewis Turco composes his poem this way to present his mother with more missionary power than the evangelical pastor who preached the sermon Luigi Turco heard. May Putnam Turco attended the School of Religious Education at Boston University and then did Italian mission work. In a brief memoir *Shaking the Family Tree* (1998), Lewis Turco notes that for his mother who was “better educated than her husband” (1998, 13), marriage “was a disaster . . .”

For it brought to an end the long process of turning herself into something extraordinary. Not that father was in any way unkind – I can hardly imagine a more compassionate man, but his upbringing in the old country had been typical, he was the man of the house, it was his calling that came first, and mother necessarily came second. (1998, 27)

Lewis adds that even though his “family was very poor . . . our expectations were middle class expectations” (1998, 23). Lewis even attended the prestigious Baptist affiliated prep-school Suffield Academy and eventually the Turco family received that preacher’s reward, a parsonage.

In Mario Puzo’s novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1988), Mrs. Colucci, the wife of the minister at the Literal Baptist Church, tells Gino, a young son of protagonist Lucia Santa and a boy who has a propensity for mischief and rebellion, “Mr. Colucci is the head of our house, as God rules over the world” (1988, 99). Gino has his doubts regarding household hierarchy. His mother, after all, has the strength of will to guide the destiny of her large family. Puzo notes that Lucia Santa “gave not her assent” for her husband Frank’s conversion to a Protestant faith; “. . . the father could not be vetoed. She gave her blessing” (1988, 94). And so Lucia Santa, a non-practicing Catholic woman of the Hell’s Kitchen area of Manhattan may seem to typify the “powerful women” of the Italian Harlem neighborhood that Robert Anthony Orsi describes in *The Madonna of 115th Street* (1985). “The powerful women of the community,” according to Orsi, “were expected to show an absolute respect for their husbands and sons in public, even though everyone in the community knew that such subservience was theater” (1985, 133). “Italian women,” Orsi says, must “exercise their power in the domus” and yet “appear powerless” (1985, 147). On the other hand, unlike Orsi and like Puzo’s Mrs. Colucci, the leading Italian-American Baptist of the early twentieth-century, Rev. Antonio Mangano, stated, simply: “The Italian husband is verily head and lord of his own house” (2007, 133).

From the actual world of the Italian Baptist Church of Meriden, Connecticut to the imagined world of the Literal Baptist Church of Puzo’s novel and from the 1890s to the late twentieth-century in these Protestant environments a man led both the congregation and the household; a wife – whether Italian or Anglo – even if better educated than her spouse, contributed to her husband’s mission by speaking to other women and teaching children. Bowler observes that by the late twentieth-century “female missionary societies . . . had been gutted as an ecclesiastical force” (2019, 84). As more women entered the workforce, Bowler states, “mass volunteerism was becoming less economically viable” (2019, 84). In some Protestant faiths, too, some women began to be ordained and to speak from the pulpit and to an entire congregation: men, women, and children. In 2004 Anna Maffei became the first

woman president of the Unione Cristiana Evangelica Battista d'Italia, a position she held for six years.

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