Observations on Why Promotors of Italian American Culture Need to Know More

The Italian/American Experience of Religion

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Opinion

I am convinced that there are in America today numerous young men and women of Italian origin who are proud of their heritage, not in the sense of those hoodlums who scream about Italian power, or “Italian is beautiful” and similar imbecilities, but in the sense of awareness of one’s hereditary values. This can be done, provided one is willing to spend years and years digging and digging, without expectation of any reward, except the feeling of doing some good. (Giovanni Schiavo, The Italians in America Before the Revolution, 1976)

I have opined – some might say ad nauseam – about the necessity knowing fundamental Italian and Italian/American history for those who see themselves as protagonists in the national discussion on Italian ethnicity in the United States. In my Re-reading Italian Americana: Specificities and Generalities on Literature and Criticism (Tamburri 2014), I dealt with such notions in chapters 1 and 8, the importance of which is so vital, in my opinion, that I felt compelled to bracket my overall discussion of Italian/American literature and criticism with this exhortation. In chapter 1, I stated (2014, 4):

[I]t is necessary that the in-group have a firm grip on the history of Italians in America: specifically, their migratory history; their development as a community herein surely through World War II; the dominant culture’s treatment of Italians in America, especially before the onslaught of the 1970s’ “Made in Italy.” These basic literacies, I would submit, are requisite for a

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1 See Tamburri 1991 for my use of the slash (/) in adjectival binomials regarding ethnicity.
deeper understanding of our migratory history and its consequences for “immigration” to figure as a major rallying point. It is not enough to sing the virtues of classical Rome and Renaissance Italy to declare oneself a well-informed spokesperson of Italian America. . . . To understand the Italian in the United States, one needs to possess an intimate knowledge of that history, regardless of his or her standing in the community.

It is very much knowledge of both Italy and Italian America that helps scholars better understand the challenges immigrants faced at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and, further still, comprehend the roots of said challenges. All Italian/Americans who identify as such, not just scholars of the field, need to inform themselves of Italian history in order to be an informed person of Italian heritage.

Given what I have just stated, and in regard to a discussion of a more performative nature – namely, when one decides to engage in activism around Italian/American history and culture – I returned to the idea once more (Tamburri 2014, 152–53), this time in chapter 8, stating that it is “imperative that [one] have a fundamental knowledge of Italy’s history and how it might relate to today’s world of Italian America”; and, further still, that “the individual who claims to be in the forefront, who declares . . . to be the spokesperson, [s/he] needs to know all of what [Robert] Viscusi [offers his] reader in his preface and introduction [of his Buried Caesars]. Anything short of a solid knowledge of these facts – and how to relate then to other phenomena – is simply not acceptable.”

Such knowledge gaps create negative rhetorical outcomes that are embarrassing for Italian Americans within a greater discussion of US ethnicity.

One such example of an egregious outcome is contained in an article penned by an individual who sees himself as a leader of the Italian/American community, whatever this monolithic entity may be according to him and others who use the label so freely, especially with the anteceding definite article “the,” as if there were only one community of Italian Americans. My contention is not with the individual per se, but rather with a particular incorrect assumption in their article. My intention is to correct a historical misconception, not to engage in any supercilious ad hominem attack on this individual or anyone else who makes such a claim contrary to history and current scholarship.

The article is titled “What Makes Us Italian American?” (Russo 2021a). In it, the author writes (Russo 2021a, 10):

We are the descendants of poor but proud people whose values are rooted in three essential elements, namely a deep and abiding sense of family, a strong work ethic and a centuries-long devotion to our Catholic faith [emphasis added].

I was surprised that this statement would come from an Italian/American in 2021, particularly from someone who sees himself as the leader of and spokesperson for major Italian American organizations. This is especially perplexing since he preceded the above-mentioned

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3 The author in question is the current president of the Conference of Presidents of Major Italian American Organizations (COPOMIAO), an entity with over fifty member organizations.
declaration with the statement (Russo 2021a, 10) that the “first step in being an Italian American is learning and appreciating our family’s history, both in Italy and here in America.”

Such a statement essentializing Italian/Americans as Catholics ignores the complex nature of Italians and Italian/Americans and their relationship to – or against – Catholicism, especially as a religious structure of doctrinal guidance. Of course, class, gender, geography (e.g., northern Italy vs. southern Italy), migration, and demographics also play a part, be it here in the United States or in Italy. It is true that more than 95% of Italians at the dawn of the twentieth century were Christians – but not all were Catholics (Data Player 2021). But it is also true that there was, at the same time in the United States, the “Italian Problem,” as Henry Browne (1946) underscored. There was a concern in some quarters that Italian immigrants would not be loyal to the Catholic Church and, in others, these immigrants might now support the Catholic Church (Browne 1946, 52–53). In her entry “Religion” in The Italian American Experience: An Encyclopedia, Mary Elizabeth Brown (2000, 539) tells us that “[m]ass migration from Italy presented a possibility of a religious heterogeneous Italian community. Several American Protestants dominations conducted missionary work among the immigrants.” In 1933, H. G. Duncan (184) wrote that Italy was “the least Catholic of the catholic countries of Europe . . . [And that a]ccording to both Catholic and Protestant estimates, between 60 and 75 percent of the Italians in the United States maintain no connection to the church.” Joseph Varacalli (1986), in turn, points out that “the immigrant’s ultimate allegiance [was] to the mostly non-Catholic culture of south Italy” (1). Rudy Vecoli had already discussed in detail the Italian immigrant’s complex relationship to religion in his 1969 essay, “Prelates and Peasants: Italian Immigrants and the Catholic Church.” He tells us that “[m]illions of Italian immigrants and their children, it was thought, were succumbing to religious indifference and even apostasy, deserting to the camp of the enemies of the true faith” (Vecoli 1969, 220). Indeed, said problem had already been identified at the end of the nineteenth century. As Vecoli (1969, 244) tells us:

[In 1886 by Monsignor Gennaro de Concilio . . . professor of theology at Seton Hall University and pastor of an Italian church in Jersey City, lamented that half a million of his countrymen were living “without any religious help or comfort, and do not practice any religious duty; they do not hear mass; they do not, for years and years, use the sacraments; they do not listen to the word of God.” (244).

In addition to the primary texts both Vecoli and Varacalli cite in their respective essays, one might then move on to more recent studies (e.g., Peter D’Agostino [2004], Richard Juliani [2007], Robert Orsi [1985], Joseph Sciorra [2015]). Were the essay in question truly engaged in Italian history, conversant with many chronicled phenomena over the past 160-plus years in both Italy and in the United States, it would reflect that such an issue is even more complex today. Approximately 74% of Italians ascribe to some form of Christianity, with Catholicism as the majority group among Christians; the percentage differs in a few polls, fluctuating between approximately 72% to 83%. (World Atlas; Pew-Templeton). Other denominations of

4 Varacalli’s 1986 revisitation of Henry J. Browne’s 1946 exegesis of the “Italian Problem” is truly one place to begin one’s education on the Italian American’s relationship to Catholicism. From there one can get a good handle on the significant preceding essays, especially Vecoli’s extended study cited herein.
Christianity include Eastern Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witness, Methodist, and other kinds of Protestant. Other forms of religious practices in Italy include Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. Further still, approximately 12–14% of Italians are unaffiliated and/or professed atheists. As an aside, let us remember that the National Catholic Educational Association’s latest report (2021, 1) underscores the ecumenical characteristic of Catholic schools: “The majority of families who transferred into Catholic schools were Catholic (68%), reported a household income of $100,000 or higher (66%), and were white (78%).”

Richard Alba had pointed out the challenges and complexities of religion as an identifying characteristic in his 1985 (112–13) book, *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity*:

Religion is inextricably bound up with the definitions of many American Ethnic groups. Irish Catholics, for example, must be distinguished from Irish Protestants, since these two groups entered the United States in different periods, settled in different places, and are distinguishable in a variety of ways, from politics to educational achievements. Therefore, in defining groups to compare against Italian Americans, to chart the latter’s shifting place, it is often desirable if not necessary to include religion (the religion in which a person was raised, in deference to the notion of ethnic origins, rather than current religion). But this seems undesirable for defining the Italian group, if only because this book concerns Italian Americans, whatever their religion. (Also, limiting the Italian group to persons raised as Catholics might bias the results a bit, by excluding some relatively acculturated Italian Americans who have been raised as Protestant.) In any event, the Italian-American group remains heavily Catholic. Over 90 percent of Italian Americans in the combined General Survey Sample were raised as Catholics, and 80 percent called themselves Catholic at the time they were surveyed. [emphasis in the original]

A few observations about Alba’s comments. First, his data come from the General Social Survey and are currently still available online (see NORC). Second, Alba (1985, 113) clearly underscores the complex nature of religion as a fundamental quality to identifying Italian Americans: “limiting the Italian group to persons raised as Catholics might bias the results a bit, *by excluding some relatively acculturated Italian Americans who have been raised as Protestant*” (emphasis added). Indeed, as we saw above, not only “Protestant[s]” but Eastern Orthodox, Jehovah’s Witness, Protestant, and Methodist are among other Christian groups; and, I would add here, those other above-mentioned religious practices in Italy: e.g., Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism. Third, in Alba’s survey group, which dates from a 1975–1980 statistical portrait (1985, 109), we see that at that time, more than four decades before our author in question’s declaration of Catholicism as an essential identifying characteristic, only “80 percent called themselves Catholic at the time they were surveyed.”

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5 In contrast to the author under question’s desire to make all Italians and Italian Americans Catholic, one might readily recall the tragic history of the Waldensians in Italy, which begins at the end of the twelfth century. In the centuries that followed their excommunication in 1184, the Waldensians were the victims of further social exclusion and physical violence (e.g., the “Massacre of Méridol” [1545], the “Piedmont Easter” [1655]). For one example of Italian Waldensians in the US, see North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources...
When pitted against essential declarations such as Catholicism as a *sine qua non* to evaluate any notion of an Italian/American identity, these demographic figures underscore the problem associated with a declaration that Catholicism is one of three essential elements to being Italian/American. Such a statement negates *tout court* the other 20% of Italians and all their descendants in the United States, including the 8,000 Italian Jews who were deported from Italy to Germany and killed in the concentration camps. Primo Levi, an Italian Jew who survived Auschwitz, wrote the literary classic *Se questo è un uomo (Survival in Auschwitz)*, which is a harrowing narrative of life in a German concentration camp. The classic De Sica film, *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, from the novel of the same name by Giorgio Bassani, another leading literary figure of twentieth-century Italy, recounts the tragic consequences of Italy’s five-plus year enforcement of racial discrimination against Italian Jews, the infamous “Leggi Razziali” decree of November 17, 1938.⁶ Why do I mention such historical events in Italy? Because, if you say that our “first step in being an Italian American is learning and appreciating our history . . . in Italy,” as we read in “What Makes Us Italian American?” then it should reflect such a complex history, including the history of Italian emigration in the shadow of what would become World War II.

Italian fascists forced many Italian Jews to leave Italy and emigrate to other countries, including the United States, where many established themselves as leaders in science, the academy, religion, and other fields. According to the article in question, they would not be considered Italian/American despite their birth in Italy and immigration to the United States – all because they were not Catholic.⁷ Why would none of them be considered Italian/Americans? Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, atheists, and others are all part and parcel of an Italian-descendent population and, as such, constitute a plurality of Italian/American communities in the United States.⁸ As such, then, we need to redefine the notion of “Italian/American community” as a broad, diverse group of people who share the commonalities of what is Italian in its various and sundry forms, and, in so doing, we can then speak in terms of “the” Italian/American community, as is the wont of many.

Given what I have outlined above, let me say that the notion of being rooted in “a deep and abiding sense of family, a strong work ethic” (Russo 2021a) is more than welcomed and is something I believe that, while not unique to Italian/Americans, ties together many of the diverse ethnic groups in the United States, as well as the many types of Italian/Americans. Conversely, the notion of being rooted in “a centuries-long devotion to our Catholic faith”

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⁶ There is a plethora of excellent books on the subject. To start, I would mention Feinstein (2004), Zimmerman (2005), and Zuccotti (1987).

⁷ See, on this, Pontecorboli 2015.

⁸ And what of those who may have converted from Catholicism to Islam? I have in mind Patricia Dunn, novelist (https://www.patriciadunnauthor.com), and Maria Provenzano Singh, one of the few women taxi drivers in New York City (https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-15236154).

⁹ Were we to then pass into the political realm, then we would find ample material to discuss with regard to the substantial tradition of anarchists and the sort. In this regard, one can begin with the work of Marcella Bencivenni (2011), Nunzio Pernicone (2016), and Fraser Ottanelli (Pernicone and Ottanelli, 2018).
as an over-arching criterion presented as a *sine qua non* to qualify one’s Italian/American identity is inaccurate – it is simply too essentialist and exclusionary. To be clear, the application of such a notion only recalls, alas, some of the horrible legacies of religious and ethnic intolerance, be that legacy in the form of twentieth-century Italian racial laws, which were part and parcel of the Holocaust; or the victims of the “foibe,” the mass killings by Yugoslav partisans, both during and immediately after World War II, of the local ethnic Italian population;¹⁰ or, yet still, in an earlier form as the Armenian Genocide.

I have put these thoughts to paper for one primary reason – a need for Italian/Americans, especially leaders in the community, and scholars of Italian America to be as well informed as possible of the history and heritage before engaging in any form of all-encompassing discourse on the history of Italians in the United States, especially on notions of identity. Italian/American history does not begin with the 1891 lynchings in New Orleans, as the author in question recently stated in a letter he penned to the president of the United States as a complaint of President Joe Biden’s two proclamations on Columbus Day, one honoring Native Americans, the other honoring Columbus and Italian Americans: “By effectively ‘cancelling’ Columbus Day, you have shown that you . . . do not truly understand our story, which began with the lynching of eleven Italian immigrants in 1891 by a mob of five thousand people in New Orleans” (Russo 2021b, 1).

Italian/American history begins in 1635, when Pietro Cesare Alberti first set foot on what is now New York’s shores. That history continued with the likes of Filippo Mazzei, Carlo Bellini, and Lorenzo Da Ponte; it continues today because we stand on the shoulders of those individuals among whom we ought readily to include all non-Catholic Italian/Americans.¹¹

**Bibliography**


¹⁰ In 2004 the Italian government instituted a *Giorno del Ricordo* (Day of Memory), on February 10, to commemorate the victims of the “foibe” and the forced exodus of nearly the entire population of Italians then living in Dalmazia and Venezia Giulia, which was brought about by Yugoslavia.

¹¹ I wish to thank Stephen Cerulli, Donna Chirico, Fred Gardaphé, and Joseph Sciorra for comments on an earlier draft.


