REGENERATING THE ITALIAN RACE: 
THE ITALIAN METHODIST MISSION AND THE 
AMERICANIZATION OF ITALIAN HISTORY 

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What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one’s ancestors.¹
–James Baldwin

Many white Americans in the early twentieth century had written off Italian immigrants as an inassimilable “menace” to society.² The Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), however, had established an institution that persistently argued that assimilating Italian immigrants was possible. The MEC’s Italian Mission declared, in its “Brief History of the Mission,” that the Italian “with a little Anglo-Saxon tonic was capable of developing rich corpuscles, which in turn would rehabilitate the sinews and muscles, and brain and heart of a once, powerful people.”³ How to inject that tonic was a vitally important question for the Mission. The declaration was certainly not a prescription for massive blood transfusions. Instead, the Mission used its publications to tell the stories of the heroes of the Italian race in such a way that they would find a place in the national myths that constituted American identity. Through

¹ James Baldwin, “Talk to Teachers,” in Collected Essays, ed. Toni Morrison. (New York: Literary Classics, 1998), 683. Image above from the Mission Photograph Album Collection of the General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church located in Madison, New Jersey. Handwritten on photograph: “A section of the Italian night school at the Church of All Nations. Before the war, this school had an enrollment of from 75 to 100 each season.”
these myths the Mission challenged the idea that Italians were inassimilable, arguing instead that Italians were once a great race that had become a victim of degeneration.

This essay explores the myth-making practices of the MEC’s Italian Mission conference as narrated in Methodist publications. I argue that The Mission took advantage of the racial “inbetweeness” of the Italian race, legally categorized “dark white,” and creatively constructed narratives about its ancestry in order to graft it symbolically into American national myths—narratives of the past that provided meaning for American present and future identities. Americans inherited the idea of Italian racial inbetweeness from Italian scholars who racially divided “North Italians” from “South Italians.” From this construction, Anti-immigrationists taught that the Italian race was “contaminating” America. As those who wanted to include the Italian race in the “American melting pot,” Methodists countered by writing Italian heroes into America’s historical narrative. Benedict Anderson, author of Imagined Communities, instructs, “that nationalism thinks in terms of historical destinies, while racism dreams of eternal contaminations.” Since national myths did not include Italian heroes, nativists surmised that the Italian race threatened America’s destiny. Methodists, in contrast, cast a vision for the future of these “Americans in the making” by writing the Italian race into American history. That is, Methodism countered nativists’ racial stereotypes by mythologizing “Garibaldi and other great men not born in this country” into what they called “true Americans.” These myths tried to lift Immigrant heroes to the stature of founding Americans like Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln.

Mythologizing Italian heroes rendered the actual experiences of Italian immigrants invisible to Methodist readers. The Mission’s myths rendered Italian immigrants invisible because they omitted those Italian characteristics in the historical narrative that distinguished them from white Protestant Americans. Methodist authors presented Italian heroes as victims of oppressive authority, defenders of democracy, and conquerors of the wild. Ralph Ellison, African American author and race theorist, explains that invisibility is a “refusal to see.” He teaches that, when races are fictionalized we should view those fictions as “projected aspects of an internal symbolic process through which, like a primitive tribesman dancing himself into the group frenzy necessary for battle, the white American prepares himself emotion-

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6 “A Short History,” 14.
ally to perform a social role.”

White Methodist missionaries mythologized Italian historical heroes to validate their Americanization attempts. In other words, the Italian Mission only presented Italians in a manner that enabled the missionaries in the Mission to perform the social role they claimed to occupy.

The Italian Mission

The Mission, an organization associated with a network of social gospel inclined ministries, was the culmination of almost three decades of MEC outreach to Italians—the largest group of millions of new immigrants from southern and Eastern Europe. As one Methodist reporter put it, “Not until the sons of Italy began to come among us by the hundreds of thousands annually, did the Church seem to feel any particular concern about them.”

Small numbers of Italians had lived in the United States for decades, but it was not until the 1880s, during what historians call the Second Wave of Immigration, that their presence, which reached 4.1 million by 1920, provoked national attention. The First Wave of immigrants—English, German, French, and Swedish—were known entities by this time and had made their place in American life. Most of the new immigrants came from Eastern and Southern Europe: Slavs, Hungarians, Italians, Jews, Poles. Of these, Italians were the largest group. Most Italian emigrants came from Italy’s mezziogiorno, a region that was comprised of a large illiterate farming class from southern Italy who many nativists believed threatened America’s future. The MEC established the Mission to respond to national anxiety about how to handle the new immigrants, sometimes described as “flooding” America, by associating its goals with Americanization. Americanization was the mobilization of various social organizations to assimilate immigrants through language, education, and hygiene. The Italian Mission directed its energies at emigrants primarily from the mezziogiorno, because nativist Americans thought Italian racial blood innately determined them for barbarism and savagery.

Josiah Strong, social gospeler and a voice frequently referenced by home missions groups like the Mission, declared in Our Country, his “Anglo-Saxon” manifesto for civilization, that “nothing can save the inferior race but a ready and pliant assimilation. Whether the feebler and more abject races are going to be regenerated and raised up, is already much of a question.” Strong did not commit himself to finding an answer to the question of Italian regeneration. Rather he emphasized the notion that Italians were weak and feeble. Strong clarified this emphasis when he asked, “What if it

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13 I am using the term “Anglo-Saxon” in the manner it was used in the Mission between 1912 and 1916. Though technically the term only referred to descendants of English and Saxon ancestry, “Anglo-Saxon” became a conventional term for the white race.
should be God’s plan to people the world with better and finer material?”
His question was based upon the observations made by white Americans that
Italians were dark-skinned and appeared to suffer from an evolutionary lapse
in those qualities necessary for building Anglo-Saxon civilization.  In other
words, did Italians have the capacity to be regenerated?
For the Mission, how Italians would be regenerated was as much a
question as whether they would be regenerated. If the Mission attempted
to regenerate Italians into “true Americans,” then it needed to confront the
narrative that had already type cast them as “dishonest, mendacious, immor-
mal, lazy, dirty, degraded, sensual, theatrical, and childlike.” In 1908,
a watershed year for the Italian Mission and Methodist home missions, the
Methodist General Conference authorized the Italian Mission and the MEC
agreed upon its Social Creed. By coincidence, Israel Zangwill’s play, The
Melting Pot, debuted in Washington, D.C., providing unexpected visibility
for the concerns of the Mission. The Melting Pot was a play about a Jewish
immigrant who found his American identity by embracing the racial, nation-
al, and religious diversity of America through his love of a white Protestant
American woman. Diversity in Zangwill’s play, however, was not a means
by which to cast a pluralistic vision. In his melting pot, and those that fol-
lowed, racial, religious, and national differences were “bleached out.”
 Critics of the melting pot metaphor argued that the Americanization program

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Taylor Co. for the American Home Missionary Society, 1891), 233, 223. Some scholars sug-
gest that Strong and others did not mean “race” when they used the word, rather they meant
something more transitory and cultural, as opposed to biological and fixed. Many contemporary
historians replace the word “race,” in this period, with the term “ethnic,” arguing that race was
the word used before ethnic came into common use. But this explanation defends a presentist
bias rather than a historical reality. As David Roediger points out in *Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White: the Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* New Ed. (New York: Perseus, 2006), the term “ethnic” was scarcely used during the
eyear early twentieth century and when it was used it represented no stark contrast from “race.” The
term race was completely muddled during this period and omitting race in favor of “ethnic”
distorts the reality that race had various meanings which overlapped and even contradicted one
another. Strong’s statement did not counter the racial belief that traits were inherited biologi-
cally in favor of an explanation of difference that was explained by culture. He was, instead, a
product of various racial theories like the Lamarckian theory that races could biologically trans-
omit acquired characteristics like a capacity for mathematics or the English language. This belief
led to his suggestion that assimilation was the only hope for uplifting inferior races. His Social
Darwinism, however, offers a likely explanation for his pessimistic outlook on the potential of
this assimilation work.

15 Joseph P. Cosco, *Imagining Italians: The Clash of Romance and Race in American Percep-
nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F00D16FD3516738DDDFA0894D8415B888CF1D3&
scp=9&sq=zangwill%20melting%20pot&st=cse.
18 Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the
Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia UP, 2004), 49. Landsberg explores the importance
of the “Ford English School Melting Pot.” It has become the most famous of imitations that
followed the play, but others found the metaphor to be just as useful.
it symbolized should have been more aptly called “Anglo-Saxonization.”

By associating with this symbol, the Mission identified itself as a mini-melting pot where Italians could be “assimilated” to Methodism through what Bishop William Burt called “Christian Americanism.” Burt’s Christian Americanism, was not religious in name only, it took on religious ritual form as well. As was the case with most social gospel organizations, the Mission did not minimize the importance of individual salvation. The Mission’s action agreed fully with the thoughts of the social gospel Theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch:

> Our discussion cannot pass personal salvation by. We might possibly begin where the old gospel leaves off, and ask our readers to take all the familiar experiences and truths of personal evangelism and religious nurture for granted in what follows. But our understanding of personal salvation itself is deeply affected by the new solidaristic comprehension furnished by the social gospel.

In the context of assimilation, however, personal salvation took on a new meaning. Bishop Burt made it plain that he believed that the Mission needed to “Give Them The Gospel” by sharing the message of God’s grace. However, immigrants were not simply being converted to Christ. The content of that salvation included solidarity with the national interests of the day, specifically preserving the homogeneity of the Anglo-Saxon race.

Burt summarized the work of the Mission succinctly when he was quoted as calling upon a gathering of white Methodists to “Save the Immigrants.”

> Our need today is a personal experience of the grace of God which shall manifest itself to those about us. We must look outside the walls of these elegant churches . . . . You owe a debt to their [Italian] ancestors which you can never pay. Christianity was first brought to us by the Latins. To them we owe some of the choicest contributions in literature, art, philosophy, and science. Take my message: Save these people whom God has sent into your midst.

That Italians were outside the walls of a church communicated to white Methodists that Italians needed Protestant religion. The audience, however,

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19 Horace Kallen, “Americanization and the Cultural Prospect,” *Culture and Democracy in America* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 177; Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, 3rd ed (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983), 21. Herberg defined Americanization by saying, “Our cultural assimilation has taken place not in a ‘melting pot,’ but rather in a ‘transmuting pot’ in which all ingredients have been transformed and assimilated to an idealized ‘Anglo-Saxon’ model. Despite widespread dislike of various aspects of British life, our relation, cultural and spiritual, to our British heritage is vastly different and more intimate than is our relation to the cultural heritages of the later immigrant groups, who with their descendants compose a majority of the American people today. Our cultural assimilation has proceeded in essentially the same way as has our linguistic development—a few foreign words here and there, a few modifications of form, but still thoroughly and unquestionably English. The ‘Anglo-Saxon’ type remains the American ideal to which all other elements are transmuted in order to become American.”


23 “Save the Immigrants!” *La Fiaccola* (September 19, 1912), 1.
needed motivation. Burt called upon history, specifically “Latin ancestors,” to inspire his listeners to save Italian immigrants. The list of possible Italian ancestors was capable of inspiring his audience: Dante Alighieri, Leonardo da Vinci, Machiavelli, Galileo Galilei and others. Still, Italian heroes needed to do more than inspire; Burt used them to convince his hearers that the Italian race was suitable “material”\textsuperscript{24} for the Mission’s melting pot program.

The Italian Mission was established to gain support for and bring together all of the evangelistic work between the Atlantic Coast and a meridian drawn east of Indianapolis, Indiana. By 1912, that boundary expanded west to include Chicago, Illinois. Often, individual missions were nothing more than small rooms. Occasionally, however, entire church buildings were dedicated to ministering to Italian immigrants. Whether small or large, both operated with the expressed purpose of “giving the gospel to the Italian in America”\textsuperscript{25}; likewise the phrase “in America” could have easily been exchanged with “for America,” because there was no distinction made in the Mission between evangelization and Americanization. The Mission’s newspaper proclaimed that it was “Helping Make New Americans for a New America”\textsuperscript{26}; similarly the Mission’s deaconesses proclaimed that they were helping “win America for Christ.”\textsuperscript{27} The Mission’s gospel, or good news, announced that in spite of all propaganda to the contrary, it had “confidence in the Italian character and capacity for Americanization.”\textsuperscript{28}

Capacity, according to the Italian Mission, was only a question because the Italian race had been victimized and its character oppressed. Methodists believed that the Catholic Church had severely oppressed the Italian population. Garibaldi, an Italian hero presented in the Mission as a “true American,” was celebrated for participating in anti-clerical movements. The “Short History of the Mission and Reasons for Organizing It” included in the Mission’s conference minutes, instructed that Italian degeneration was due to its subjection to “a semi-pagan hierarchy actuated by a utilitarian, casuist standard of ethics, which produced a low standard of morality, and tended towards self-annihilation.”\textsuperscript{29} The “hierarchy” referred to in the quote was a euphemism for the Mission’s implied rival, Roman Catholicism.

William Burt, bishop of the Methodist Mission in Italy, shared the historical narrative’s anti-Catholic assessment. Burt, who had served more than twenty years in Italy, was appointed to oversee the Italian Mission in 1912 and brought, along with himself, controversy to the Mission. He had caused a stir in Rome for being accused of anti-Papal rhetoric and “proselyting.”\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{24} The terms “material,” “stock,” and “character,” were common phrases used to describe the racial temperament, innate sense of morality, and rank of ancestry of particular races.
\textsuperscript{25} “They of Italy Salute You,” \textit{Christian Advocate} (September 30, 1909), 7.
\textsuperscript{26} “Helping Make New Americans for a New America,” \textit{La Fiaccola} (July 16, 1914), 2.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Woman’s Home Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church} (January 1909): Front matter.
\textsuperscript{28} “They of Italy Salute You,” \textit{Christian Advocate} (September 30, 1909): 7.
\textsuperscript{29} “A Short History,” 14.
\textsuperscript{30} Bishop Burt preferred to say that he was “evangelizing” for reasons I discuss later in the essay.
In 1910, when ex-Vice President Fairbanks attended a Methodist church during his visit to Italy, the Pope issued a statement of strong disappointment that former Vice President would condone such vitriolic speech by attending a church responsible for it and refused to meet with him. Fairbanks confessed to having had a “strong desire to pay his respects to the head of the Catholic Church, whose followers had played such an important part as good American citizens.”

Burt, on the other hand, persistently defending his work against the Pope, “A distinguished diplomat said to us recently, ‘Tell the people in America that the Papacy is the same as it was a thousand years ago. Before I came to Rome I used to deride as bigots, narrow minded, and un-Christian those who spoke against the Roman Catholic Church, but since I came to Rome I have been fully converted.’” When the Bishop returned to the United States he brought that same converted anti-Catholic passion with him.

Anti-Catholicism, however, did not always find its way into Italian hero narratives. When Italian heroes were introduced, there was no mention of Roman Catholicism, because racial degeneration was narrated as the result of Catholicism. Leaders in the Mission taught that there was no connection between Catholicism and the Italian race. The Mission declared that only one-third of Italian immigrants, at best, were Catholics. The remaining two-thirds of the immigrants were depicted as being either nominally Catholic or viewed as being without religion. Interestingly, while the Mission taught that Italians were not Catholics, it did launch a campaign against “Romanism.” The Mission balked at the concept that Catholic meant “ROMAN Catholic.”

Challenging the notion that catholicity was the sole possession of the “Roman Church,” the Mission submitted an editorial to Long Island’s Daily Star—which was never published there—protesting, “We are PROTESTANT CATHOLICS as distinguished from ROMAN Catholics.” The Mission proclaimed that ceding sole possession of the term “catholic” to the Roman church was giving away too much authority for the Mission. Editorials of this sort made clear that the Mission viewed Catholicism as a rival. It was a force to be reckoned with largely because most people believed that Italians, regardless of what Methodists taught, were Roman Catholics.

If Italians were portrayed as Catholics, then they were forbidden to Protestant proselytizers. The 1910 World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh established that “anything that looked like evangelical proselytism of Catholic or Orthodox adherents was necessarily off-limits.”

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ward off suspicion that the Italian Mission was proselytizing, or converting adherents from one religion to another, it declared its efforts as evangelistic, arguing that Italians had no religion at all. According to the Mission, the best understanding of Italians was found in language describing them as “pagan.”

An editorial in *La Fiaccola*, the Italian *Christian Advocate*, warned, “If we do not Christianize them, they will paganize us.” Many Protestant missionaries used the word “pagan” to describe the absence of religion in the Italian race and the absence of Christianity in particular. People described as pagans were thought to be at a primitive or childlike stage of the religious process. They were blank slates to be Christianized. Characterizing Italian rituals in this way was a very Protestant way of categorizing religion, considering that Italian spiritual practices were widely known and accepted by most Catholic clergy. The term “religion,” however, was reserved for those rituals and practices that were most akin to Protestantism. Since Methodists defined religion from a white Protestant perspective—creedal, hierarchical, institutional, biblicist—a study that “revealed the fact that [Italians] not only did not go to Church, but were decidedly anti-clerical” was interpreted to mean that Italians, having rejected the church, were not Catholic, thus they were not religious. Robert Orsi suggests that, “neither perspective—neither the one that waits for them to become American Catholics nor the one that insists that they rejected the church—is adequate or accurate.” Instead of viewing Italian street festivals, votive offerings to saints, and tongue-dragging practices as religious, Methodist home missionaries dismissed these well-publicized rituals as “indifferent” or “antagonist to all religion.” Perceptions of this sort rendered Italian religion and people invisible to the Mission.

Having argued away the substance of the religion of many Italians, the Mission needed only to convince naysayers that the Italian race had the capacity for its version of religion and civilization. Many white Americans feared that the Italian race, particularly the South Italian, was too “childlike,” “quick-tempered,” “hot-blooded,” “violent,” and under the influence of criminal “Black Hand” societies to be included in the future of the nation. In 1911, a *New York Times* article entitled “Races that Go Into the American Melting Pot” speculated with the Italian anthropologist Giuseppi Sergi that the large population of Italians emigrating from Sicily and Calabria were from “the least productive and most poorly developed portions of the country.” More alarming than the idea that the South Italian race was underdeveloped was that “the foremost Italian ethnologist traces their origin to the Hamitic stock of North Africa.” In a nation that defined the black race by the “one-drop rule,” which meant “that a single drop of ‘black blood’ makes

37 “A Short History,” 14.
a person a black,” the proposition that Italians had blood from African ancestry, put the South Italian race in a precarious social position.38 The *New York Times* article insisted that “it must be remembered that the Hamites are not Negrotic, or true African.” Still, it continued, “there may be some traces of an infusion of African blood in this stock in certain communities of Sicily and Sardinia, as well as in Northern Africa.” This apparently explained why “from Italian statistics . . . all crimes, and especially violent crimes, are several times more numerous among the South than the North Italians.”39

Articles like this one were the result of America’s confusion about the racial status of the Italians. Between 1907 and 1910 congressmen “seriously debated and doubted whether Italians were ‘full-blooded Caucasians.’”40 For three years national politicians, civic organizations, religious groups, and industrial representatives were invited to testify before Senator Paul Dillingham’s Immigration Commission about how to address the new immigrant population. By the end of the debates, the Dillingham Report affirmed the legal status of the Italians by concluding that they were Caucasian.41 The commission also published the *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, which was responsible for providing the *New York Times* with its racial description of the South Italian’s violent, childlike, and hot-blooded nature. While home missions organizations expressed ambivalence about the violent nature of the Italian race, they seized upon the notion that Italians were child-like and quick-tempered, because it was this combination that the Mission taught made them eager and capable of learning.42

The Italian Mission’s racial imagination construed contemporary Italians as pagan and child-like, and it conversely construed Italians of the past as noble so that it could challenge the perception that the Italian race was inassimilable. It argued that Italians were degenerated, but capable of regeneration. Still, the Mission did not recognize the religious legitimacy of Italian ritual practices any more than it recognized that the social problems the immigrants faced were primarily a result of their new environment rather than their supposed “degenerate” blood. The idea that their blood was “degenerate” was a better option for Methodist missionaries, than the idea that “Catholicism was

41 Lawrence DiStasi, *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment During World War II* (Berkeley, CA: Heyday Books, 2001) and Stephen Fox, *Uncivil Liberties: Italian Americans Under Siege During World War II* (Parkland, FL: Universal Publishers/Upublish.com, 2000), tell the stories of thousands of Italians who were under suspicion as possible traitors during World War II. The stigma of their foreign status has only been resolved in the recent half-century since WWII.
in [Italians’] blood.” Racial degeneration was mutable, racial determinism was not. Methodists imagined that Italian blood had malleable characteristics: paganism and racial primitivism. To advance this notion, the Mission championed the concept of racial degeneration. Portrayed as a degenerate race, there was hope that, with a little Anglo-Saxon Methodist help, Italians could be regenerated.

Methodist missionaries targeted Italians with the idea that they could transform Italian paganism and primitivism through “Christian Americanism;” a shorthand for Anglo-Saxon Protestant evangelism. Christian Americanism, however, was not well received by some prominent sociologists. Edward Steiner cautioned that home missions churches should “share in the responsibilities which these strangers bring, without a thought of proselyting them; and she [the Protestant church] will find that her efforts are needed, and are not in vain.” Steiner did not teach that Methodist participation in Americanization was problematic. He believed that these organizations could perform their patriotic services without evangelizing.

Steiner’s criticism was taken harshly. Protestant home missions organizations strove to be accepted as legitimate Americanization programs. The Italian Mission was associated with an interdenominational network of home missions organizations that embodied the spirit of “The Social Creed of the Churches,” especially as it expanded into its 1912 version. For these churches, “Home Missions was only another name for Christian sagacity and patriotism.” The Methodist Italian Mission, in particular, was eager to report that Steiner’s views had changed when he singled out the “Methodisto” church when he gave a partial commendation of home missions in his next book, *The Immigrant Tide*. Steiner’s commendation comes across as half-hearted, because he summarized his sentiments by cautioning that conversions are too often “simulated for loaves and fishes.” In other words, he believed that the churches were simulating conversions in order to gain financial support.

Accusations of falsified conversions were not limited to secular sociologists like Steiner. Constantine Panunzio, a former preacher in the Italian Mission, accused the Mission of simulating conversions and numbers in his memoir, *The Soul of an Immigrant*. Panunzio, an Italian convert, who after being licensed to preach petitioned to have the Italian Mission abolished, wrote that quantitative considerations outweighed qualitative ones in the Mission. He was appalled that pastors in the Italian Mission seemed more concerned with “showing not doing.” As Panunzio recalled, the need for a good showing “gave rise to a competitive, duplicating, wasteful system.” He recalled, that some pastors in the Mission had reached a “professional un-

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derstanding, whereby [a new pastor] could count on their membership until such a time as he had built up one of his own, and in that way make a good showing." Panunzio learned "by mere accident that seventy-five percent of the membership of one [mission] was enrolled on the books of the second, and thirty-five percent on the books of the third." His frustration with these practices was that the emphasis on making a "good showing" left Italians "practicing their Old World customs and habits as if nothing American were within a thousand miles of them."47 With such small numbers, simulating crowds, even simulating conversions in print by fictionalizing history became important and, perhaps, necessary actions.

Converting Columbus

*La Fiaccola*, the Italian Mission’s newspaper, had a creative method for loosening the grip the Old World had on the immigrant population. It portrayed heroes of the Old World, in its pristine form, as a precursor to the New World known as America. In essence, *La Fiaccola* wrote Italian heroes into the American mythos by presenting them as proto-Protestant Anglo-Saxon pioneers. What the Mission could not accomplish, in fact, it attempted to do in print. *La Fiaccola* portrayed the Italian heroes Columbus, Giuseppe Garibaldi, Giuseppi Mazzini, and Giuseppi Verdi as “True Americans.” Despite their Italian, and sometimes Catholic affiliations, *La Fiaccola* reconstituted them through creative historical revisions to present them as Protestant Americans.

The Mission declared that Italians would be contributors to America only if “Methodism were to do her part with these new Americans in the making.”48 Methodism’s part in the American melting pot drama apparently included grafting Italian heroes into the national myth and reconstituting them as Americans. Italians were characterized as dark-skinned, foreign-tongued, intemperate, Catholic, members of the “pick and shovel brigade,”49 so most white Americans were unclear whether Italians would contribute to the American melting pot or if the Italian stock would be a “menace”50 to society and the future of the potentially great “race” of Americans. The Mission, though as uncertain about the future of the Italian race as the rest of America, wrote convincingly of the past arguing that because Italians were once a race that desired freedom like white Americans’ Anglo-Saxon ances-

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49 Horace Kallen, “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot,” in *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1924), 100. Kallen explained that the nation had yet to make up its mind about the social/racial status of Italians because they were too closely associated with “negroes” in low class labor.
50 Howard Grose, *The Incoming Millions* (New York: Fleming Revell, 1906), 107. The idea that the Italians would be a menace or a threat to the future of America was not isolated to any one author or publication. Rather, the perpetuation of the idea of Italian “Black Hand” societies and the Italian race’s connection to African blood in popular articles and books suggested: that if Italians were not adequately dealt with, then the nation would suffer in the future as a result of neglecting the problem.
tors, they could be regenerated.

In an English language article published in La Fiaccola entitled, “October Twelfth 1492-1916,” P. Richless used this narrative of racial regeneration to make Christopher Columbus into a prototypical American. Articles like this one were very common in the newspaper. La Fiaccola attempted to disciple its Italian immigrant constituency after American heroes, which had the corollary affect of softening its sometimes anti-immigrant white American readers. Occasionally, it presented Italian heroes like Columbus as well. Richless’s article sought to make October 12th “not only memorable, but fraught [sic] with romance and meaning.” In 1914, Columbus Day, though celebrated throughout the history of the United States in various forms, was not a nationally recognized holiday. That did not come about until 1937. Richless’s appeal, then, foreshadowed the kind of recognition that would bring Columbus Day into national prominence.

Richless re-imagined Columbus through the lens of racialism as an example of the evolutionary possibilities that were available to Italian immigrants if they would “by upright and conscientious living, by toil and sacrifice and achievement in this land of Columbus, help men to the realization of that real freedom and unstinted opportunity for which they long.” In other words, the gift that Christopher Columbus provided the world, “La Piu’ Grande delle Scoperte,” was the kind of gift that the Italian race could continue to share with the world through working for those American values of liberty and democracy. Memorializing Columbus this way symbolically unified the Italian race with the Anglo-Saxon race through the Mission’s Christian Americanization program.

According to Richless, Christopher Columbus proved that the Italian race was good enough stock to be included in the American melting pot:

To the Italians in America, the day and the name [Christopher Columbus] must have added significance; for they, the lineal descendents of the race from which he sprang, are at last, after the lapse of centuries, slowly but surely becoming in part the inheritors of that gift which his genius bestowed upon the world.

There needed to be no fear that the race that had suffered the “lapse of centuries” would bring the other races down with it; for they came from descendents as noble as Columbus. Moreover, they were, with the help of the Mission, “slowly but surely” assimilating into American society.

The way that Richless saw Columbus was hardly distinguishable from the American myth of how the Puritans answered their “errand to the wilderness”:

Hark back to that day, four hundred and twenty four years ago, when after his tem-

53 English translation “The Greatest Discovery.”
pestuous voyage, he stepped upon American shores. Fair these shores,—but wild! A land of promise indeed! But virgin and infested with savages and all the evils and difficulties of unconquered nature.56

From the days of Mary Rowlandson’s wilderness filled with Indians “thick as trees” to Daniel Boone’s taming of Kentucky’s “howling wilderness,”57 British Protestant descendants have distinguished themselves as white, Christian, and civilized over and against the wild element of the Indian. Here, Richless writes Italian immigrants into that myth, narrating that Columbus must confront the “wild” land, “virgin and infested with savages.” In so doing he grafted them into the national mythology of white civilization. The narrative was presented as though the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria sailed with the Mayflower and landed in New England with the Puritans.

The fact that Columbus landed in the Caribbean and did so under the authority of Queen Isabella, a Catholic, was ignored by Richless’s reminder to his readers that they owed as much thanks to the Italians as the New England Pilgrims because “their being in America themselves is due to the genius of one of the Italian race.”58 Since the Italian race had a noble man like Columbus in its lineage, the Mission taught that the Italian race could be regenerated for use in white civilization as it had been in the past. The evidence Richless gave was found in the gift of the North American continent that the race had given through Columbus. Here again, we see race narratives at work. Nineteenth-century romantic racialism taught that each race had a unique gift to contribute to the world. Lyman Abbott announced that it was “the function of the Anglo-Saxon race to confer these gifts of civilization, through law, commerce, and education, on the uncivilized people of the world.”59 The great thinker W.E.B. Du Bois advanced the notion that “the Negro was gifted with second-sight,” and a religious nature through which the world could be saved.60 In a similar manner, Richless was making the case for Italians that their race, as evinced by Christopher Columbus, could offer toil and sacrifice, or the hard work of manual labor to further “freedom” and “opportunity” in America.61 Richless was attempting to argue that the Italians were a legitimate race, not just in American mines or factories, but a race that could be safely mixed into the Protestant “American melting pot.”

Conclusion

The racial construction of Italian heroes was essential to the regeneration narrative of the Italian Mission’s Americanization program. By offering creative constructions of heroes, like Columbus, as quasi-Protestants and

prototypical Americans, the Mission taught that Italians were once a great and noble people. The implication, of course, was that Italian race in its immigrant form was not such a noble people. For the Methodist Episcopal Church’s Italian Mission this simply meant that they were degenerates. They were a threat to be sure, but they were a threat with the capacity for regeneration, and thus potential inclusion in the national milieu. Since few Italians were converting to Protestantism, grafting Italian historical heroes into national origin myths was an imaginative way to argue for their inclusion in the American melting pot.

The Italian Mission’s myth-making technique is a potent example of the importance of race in early twentieth-century Methodist expansion. Racial construction, as we have seen it function in the Italian Mission, was used as a unifying method for assimilating Italian immigrants to Methodism and subsequently to American society. The nationalizing efforts of the Mission colluded with racial theories to gain support for the evangelism of Italian immigrants to Anglo-Saxon America. White social gospel proponents’ commitment to Anglo-Saxon civilization colored the way that they approached the problem of so-called “lesser races” of immigrants in their midst. While some groups of social gospel prophets were pessimistic regarding the assimilability of immigrant races, Methodists chose to utilize racial theories of the day to promote the view that assimilation was possible.

The creative ability to adopt foreign national heroes like Columbus into American mythology was a benefit to the Americanization program in which the MEC made important contributions. Methodists were the forerunners of Protestant Americanization work among Italian immigrants, inspiring and, at times, advising the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions and the American Baptist Home Missionary Society to engage in similar action. These white social gospelers helped set a tone for what Protestants meant when they defined the terms “American” and “Christian” in the twentieth century. A bold racial imagination was key to constructing these identities. This innovative method, while fraught with ambivalence about the racial value of the Italian race, foreshadowed the methods many racial minority groups would employ in the 1920s when they appealed to government officials for their racial heroes to be included in public school history textbooks.

In a similar way, Methodist historians have much to do to investigate further the role that race played in the history of Methodist religion during this and other periods, particularly among white Methodists. As historian Morris Davis commented in *The Methodist Unification*:

> In the study of American religion, many departments and class offerings continue to separate specialties of “American religion” and “African American Religion.” While the genesis of the separate study of African American religion was motivated by a desire to compensate for a lack of inclusion, its persistent separate life speaks volumes about how little has changed in the unspoken assumptions of what
“American religion” is: white American religion.\textsuperscript{62} Davis’s insight speaks as loudly to the macro-level of Methodist denominational studies as it does to the macro-level of American religion. While it is certainly the case that the nomenclature of the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church (now the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church) easily lends itself to racial inquiry, many people, at least when the church supported white American expansionism during the Progressive Era, perceived of the Methodist Episcopal Church racially; as a white church responsible for spreading the gospel to other races.

Methodism in America, from the late nineteenth through the early twentieth century, cannot be properly understood without a racial analysis. Constructing racial images and racially homogenizing immigrants, even among progressive groups like the Methodist Italian Mission, were key components of Methodist work. This reality suggests that race was not an issue only when Methodists discussed “the negro problem,” as in the Joint Commission Meetings. Moreover, it explains why race was such a divisive issue in the years leading up to the 1939 Unification. The Methodist Episcopal Church was largely under the power and authority of white Anglo-Saxons who affirmed that their home missions goal was that America’s new immigrant population, specifically the Italians, would “be moulded [sic] into our image and bear the marks of our characteristics whatever they may be.”\textsuperscript{63} Though the Italian Mission was abolished in 1916, its legacy of imagining Italians as a race with the capacity for regeneration persisted and was a significant reason why, after the Mission was abolished, Italian missions and churches could be absorbed into their respective regional conferences, as opposed to being segregated into a racial one.


\textsuperscript{63} Steiner, \textit{On The Trail}, 308.