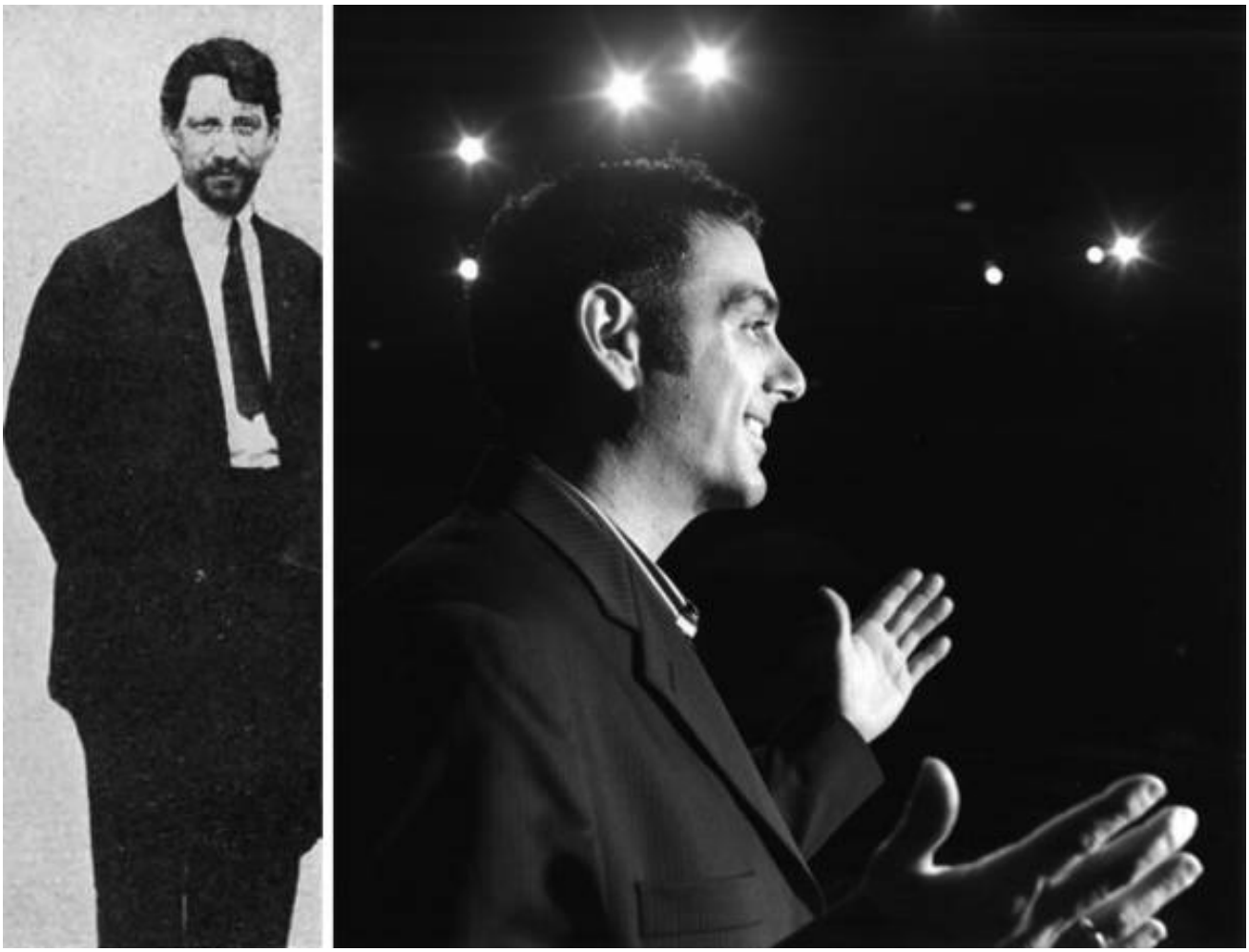
Who are the Heirs of Carlo Tresca?

James Periconi (December 27, 2007)



In an Italian America in which there are no more Carlo Trescas to fight the devil of capitalism, the closest we may have today is Frank Santora, charismatic Pentecostal minister in New Milford, Connecticut, who helps his followers overcome their negative self-image and lead a life of dignity, fighting a more traditional Devil.

My title takes off from the famous question asked for decades about the murder in

New York in 1943 of Carlo Tresca, one of the most colorful political and journalistic figures in early Italian America, which is: “Who killed Carlo Tresca?” Let’s quickly get over the disappointment that there are no political figures quite like Tresca to stir people to radical action any more.

Perhaps the closest heir in the period between Tresca’s era and the present one is Father James Groppi, a militant priest who led largely African-American youth in marches for justice in mid-1960’s Milwaukee. (We’ll save his story for a later day.)

Instead, the unlikely answer to my question is Brooklyn-born, Staten-Island-and-New-Jersey raised Frank Santora, pastor of the Faith Church in New Milford, Connecticut. More about him in a moment.

According to historian Nunzio Pernicone in his superb Carlo Tresca: Portrait of a Rebel [2](New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), January 11, 1943, was a day like others in Tresca’s life, in which he alternated between two worlds, one the upper-middle-class and cosmopolitan elite of American writers, artiest, intellectuals and political activists, and the other the Italian anti-Fascist subculture. He lunched that day with writer John Dos Passos, among others.

Tresca and a Milanese lawyer friend left Tresca’s Il Martello office uncharacteristically late, that evening, to have dinner (following an aborted meeting that others in the radical Italian community inexplicably failed to show up for). An assassin emerged from the war-time “dim out” shadows while Tresca and his friend waited for a light to change at 15th Street and Fifth Avenue. The assassin shot Tresca twice, killing him instantly. His assailant was never found, and different theories abound about who was responsible for the assassination. The order might have come from Mussolini directly, or perhaps from Generoso Pope, the pro-Fascist publisher of Il Progresso Italo-Americano, but the actual hitman appeared to have been the recently released from jail Mafioso, Carmine Galante. But how Tresca was assassinated, and by whom, is not really our story.

Tresca was an impassioned orator capable of stirring to direct action (or violence, when something good could come of it) the emotions of a crowd against the capitalist “devil,” whether that crowd was composed of members of a particular union or working men generally. But he did so in a language that uneducated workers could understand. He was the publisher and chief writer of several revolutionary socialist and anarchist newspapers, including that premier Italian radical newspaper of the 1920’s, Il Martello (The Hammer).

He was, to put it simply, a charismatic leader of the sort that would appear does not exist any more,

at least not in Italian America. (Besides the biography noted, there now exists in English an autobiography, edited by Pernicone, of Tresca, both of which enormously increase our understanding of this flamboyant leader, previously memorialized by Dorothy Gallagher, whose All the Right Enemies.is good on Tresca's life, especially his assassination, but not on his ideas, due to her lack of facility in Italian.)

Enter pastor Frank Santora, who at first blush is an unlikely candidate for heir to Tresca (as well as an unlikely candidate, perhaps, for a lengthy recent New Yorker profile [3] of him and the larger movement of Pentecostal ministers in the Northeast by Frances FitzGerald, which is how I know about him). After all, Tresca was an atheist, and an anti-cleric, really, an "inveterate priest-hater," according to Pernicone. On the other hand, Santora was raised a Catholic, and he was an altar boy. But his story is inspiring.

When his mother, seeking a more personal and direct experience of God, started to attend a Pentecostal church in New Jersey, to where young Santora's family had repaired from Staten Island, Santora joined the church and there decided to give his life to Christ formally. While still in college at
Rutgers, studying accounting, he went to
Rhema Bible Training Center in
Tulsa, Oklahama. There, he met another Italian-American former Catholic, the Reverend Anthony Storino, a
New Jersey pastor and regional director of the Rhema association for the Northeast. Storino, who had prior to finding his ministry worked in his family's jukebox-and-pinball-machine business, described himself to the New Yorker reporter as "a street kid from
New Jersey," with only a year in community college.

Speaking without pretense or envy of Santora's success in dramatically increasing the membership of the church he took over, Storino, who became close friends with Santora, says, in an authentic Italian American voice undistorted by his own success as a pastor, "It worked out good . . . Frank turned that baby around." Indeed, Santora made changes that vastly increased the size of the church, which became a true Pentecostal church that taught spiritual warfare with the Devil – not unlike the warfare against the devil of capitalism and capitalists that formed the core of Tresca's preaching to workingmen – and the approach of Armageddon.

By 2005, in addition to a substantial increase in the size of his congregation, Santora changed the name and indeed the whole identity of the church. The
Faith Church motto became "Real people, real life, real faith," and its mission "to help people discover the winner within them through a growing relationship with Jesus Christ." Santora no longer focuses on Armageddon, but about "real life, inspiration and hope."

Key, indeed, unique to Santora's theology – and really why his story reverberated so much with me – is an idea he developed in his recent book, Identity Crisis [4], where he explains how to shed a negative self-image. I thought of Santora's Italian-American background in reading this.

The elephant in the room in discussions of Italian America has traditionally been the negative self-image that Italian Americans carry with them. And it is what Tresca, in a slightly different way, deal with in exhorting working men to feel good about themselves and about fighting for the dignity and respect they deserved as working men, as against the political version of Santora's traditional Devil, i.e., capitalism.

According to Pernicone, Tresca shed his flamboyant, rable-rousing persona in one-on-one conversations over a simple pasta dinner with Italian workingmen. Tresca was famous, in such conversations, for never letting a worker Italian feel his poverty or lack of education as a barrier to Tresca's respect for them.

And so it appears to be with Santora, who is described in the New Yorker article in one-on-one conversation as not at all theatrical, exhortative or overwhelming, but rather patient and caring. And the author of the profile makes clear that the church audience to which he preaches in New England – the least fertile ground one might imagine for such a ministry – is made up largely of fallen away Catholic ethnics, who are by definition disaffected from their Catholic roots. Like Tresca's union workers and other working men, fallen away Catholics who become Pentecostalists have found an alternative route away from the Devil and to salvation.

It would of course be far too reductive (and untrue, as well) to say that "because" he's Italian American, Santora became a Pentecostal minister or, as one, has focused on helping people overcome their negative self-image. But in reading about Santora I thought of the ways that Italian Americans break through the ambivalence they feel about their Italian American identity.

Frank Santora has discovered a new and seemingly positive way – in a world that has no more Carlo Trescas – to stir crowds and in both that manner and in small gatherings to move the hearts, as well as the minds, of people. Many of them are Italian American. Santora helps them, among other things, shed their negative self-image, and thereby to live a better life. How many of us could claim the same accomplishments for ourselves?

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