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News from the Swenson Center

The 2014 Olsson scholar: Philipp Gollner

Philipp Gollner, of Austrian origins, with an MA in history from University of Notre Dame in South Bend, IN, has been selected as the 2014 Dagmar and Nils William Olsson Scholar.

Gollner is now a Ph.D. candidate, Presidential Fellow at the department of history at the University of Notre Dame.

His research project, which he intends to work on at the Swenson Center is titled: **“Evangelize-Americanize: White Religion and Acculturation among late 19th – Century Swedish Immigrants.”**

This is a part of his application for the scholarship, where he explains his planned work:

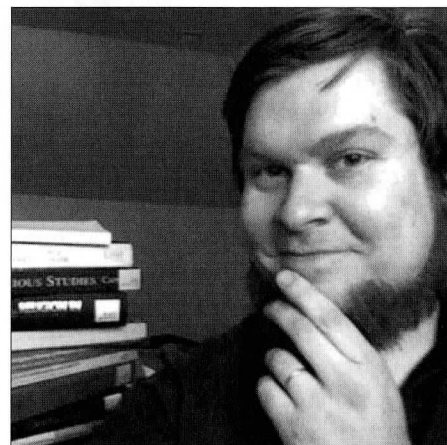
“European immigrants to the United States, we are told, imagined themselves as American through adopting English, employing ethnicity and race, becoming consumers, or joining labor. Religion supposedly followed, dictated by socioeconomic mobility. However, this account fails to see how changing religious identities could themselves be forms of acculturation – particularly for immigrants whose racial whiteness was uncontested. Anglo-Saxon Protestants scouted for ‘digestible’ immigrants in Scandinavia, only to ‘Americanize’ them at a Chicago Congregationalist seminary upon arrival; and Swedes thus educated set out to convert their Lutheran countrymen, bring the ways of the white man to China, and save America from Mormonism among Scandinavians in Utah.

“These stories all point to the significant role of religion in trans-

forming Swedish migrants from racially white to fully red, white, and blue. Clearly outlined and in its research stage, my project depends on a month-long immersion in non-digitized source material of evangelical Swedish congregations that interacted significantly with the Chicago Anglo-Protestant scene around the turn of the century. All these records are located at the Swenson Center. I bring two questions to them: for one, what did these immigrants and their American mentors regard as ‘Americanization?’ And what function did they ascribe to religion in order to reach this goal? I expect to put these sources in conversation with recent efforts by younger scholars to outline what “white religion might have meant in late 19th century America in order to explore how religion shaped the cultural status of white immigrants and offered the Swedes a profoundly religious alternative to institutionalized Lutheran forms of making (a) home in America. Consequently, I argue that the shift from immigrant particularisms to outward-looking, ecumenical, and optimistic religious activism was central to what these Swedes and their Anglo-Protestant mentors understood as Americanization.

“This project is a crucial part of my approved dissertation, where it will be compared and contrasted with stories from Norwegian and Mennonite immigrant source bases. It therefore sits at the intersection of broader historiographies of religion and acculturation with the best historical literature on the Scandinavian experience in the U.S. In part, I

rely on the revival of ethnic history that has probed the culturally negotiated structures of meaning among immigrant groups in many case studies since the 1970s. Within this tradition, the stories of Swedish immigration are well outlined. The fact that it is only one of a myriad of group study subgenres however continues to beg the question about a unifying category of analysis. For example, more recent studies have emphasized whiteness as a malleable construct that classified immigrants amongst themselves and toward those who controlled the category. Indeed, the Swedes whose stories frame my project imagined themselves as racially desirable newcomers, confirming the thesis that whiteness held great cultural power. Yet their continuing quest for Americanization also reveals its limits – here are groups that took whiteness for granted, but self-identified as fully American primarily along the lines of their religion’s social function in a pluralist context.”



Philipp Gollner. (Picture from Facebook).