

GERTRUDE von PETZOLD Sesquicentenary

We have already had as our readings in this service extracts from two of the three sermons of Gertrude von Petzold which in 1908 were published in Manchester under the title The Higher Life.

Unitarians in England often take-pride in claiming that ours was the first denomination to open its ministry to women. The induction of Gertrude von Petzold into the ministry of Narborough Road Free Christian (Unitarian) Church in Leicester, in 1904, supports this claim. However, that event does need to be put into context.

Nearly 25 years earlier, Caroline Soule, the widow of a Universalist minister, was ordained into the ministry of the Universalist Church in Glasgow.

In Glasgow as elsewhere, the Universalists had close contact with Unitarians, and Caroline Soule preached at the Dundee Unitarian Church and had pastoral oversight there during Henry Williamson's absence in the United States.

In the United States of America, of course, the story of women in the ministry starts even earlier, when the Congregationalists ordained Antoinette Brown in 1853, although a few years later she turned Unitarian. She inspired Olympia Brown, ten years younger and not related, to persevere in her effort to enter the Universalist ministry, which she achieved in 1863. This pioneering work bore fruit in the 1880s and 1890s, especially in the missionizing work of the *Iowa Sisterhood*. Two of the Unitarian ministers centrally involved in this were Florence Buck and Marion Murdoch, worth mentioning because they were "occasional students at Manchester College, Oxford, in 1892.

Mention also needs to be made of Martha Turner, who was appointed to the ministry of the Melbourne Unitarian Church, in Australia, in 1873. When she went to Britain in 1883, after resigning her Melbourne pulpit, she preached in many English and Scottish pulpits, although did not take up a settled ministerial appointment.

In England in the 1870s, Frances Power Cobbe and Anna Swanwick almost forced their way into James Martineau's lectures at Manchester College, Oxford.

After them, there was increasing pressure for women to have the right to attend college lectures. It has been suggested -- perhaps churlishly -- that it may even have been the shortage of {male} students at the college which helped the progress of women. Whatever:- in 1892 not only were Florence Buck and Marion Murdoch occasional students, but Mrs Humphrey Ward (always known by her husband's name, then and now!) was invited to lecture on Priscillian. No doubt all this helped to prepare the ground for Gertrude von Petzold.

Gertrude was born in Thorn, East Prussia (now Torun, the birth place of Copernicus, in Poland). Her father was an officer in the Prussian army, and her mother instructed her thoroughly in the Lutheran catechism. After teacher training, she reacted against the limited role of women in Germany and the narrowness of Lutheran dogma.

She went to Britain because she believed it offered her as a woman a better opportunity for higher education. Aged only 19, she made her way to St Andrews University in Scotland, where she took her first degree (1895-97). She then went to Edinburgh University, where she spent four years and gained another degree. Then she became the first woman to train and qualify for the ministry of religion in England. (NOTE: In England! There **is** that limitation on her place in history.)

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She later wrote: "I always loved the Bible. As a child it opened to me a world of dreams and yielded abundant nurture to my imagination. ... As a little girl I wrote spiritual songs and through my mother, who had had many sad experiences in life, I learned to concentrate my emotions in the realm of the religious. ... By my 18th year, no sooner had I left seminary but I became aware how inadequate my training had been and the burning desire arose in me to improve my intellectual culture -- yes, to begin it all over again. ... So I decided, briefly and quickly, to proceed to England, which had long recommended itself to me as a land of freedom. ... Ever since I had left school I had begun to doubt the traditional forms of Christianity. ... I had especially arrived at the conclusion that many of the biblical stories could not possibly be understood literally. ... I had therefore to undertake a long period of preparation and I entered upon it with the courage of youth. ... The study itself, the free fellowship in life and thought, the manifold incitements of the academic career left me little time to entertain material considerations as to my future. ... I sought for truth and the true content and aim of life. ... At the same time the determination had arisen within me to dedicate myself, if it were possible, to the practical work of ministry. ... Having myself struggled up to perfect freedom in religious matters, I felt that only in such a free atmosphere could I pursue my chosen vocation."

She encountered some strong opposition. Male students did not like having a woman among them. Fred Hankinson later reported: "I was a student at MCO at the same time as Gertrude von Petzold when the other male students refused to have her sitting at the refectory table with them, so I championed her and talked them round so that she was able to eat with the rest of them; I supported the suffragettes as she did."

She did well in her studies, and then had to look for an appointment. Despite the notion that churches would be unlikely to accept a woman as minister, she was offered the pulpit of the Free Christian (Unitarian) Church in Leicester. There were also no less than seven male candidates for that post, but the decision to invite her was unanimous! R. A. Armstrong commented: "We recognize the courage of her who tonight breaks a perverse and mischievous tradition."

Of her appointment at Narborough Road Church, Gertrude von Petzold wrote: "This prerequisite (of a free atmosphere) I found in the Free Christian Church of Leicester, one of the congregations belonging to the Unitarian fellowship, which requires of its ministers and its members alike only the worship of God and the service of man in the spirit of Jesus Christ. I here entered the service of a congregation which has no binding dogmas or creeds, no consistories, synodal authorities and the like, but is conjoined only

through the genuine, intimate relationship of religious feeling and Christian endeavour."

Eloquent in the pulpit and challenging on many a suffragist platform, von Petzold grew quickly in reputation -- even her photograph was sold on the streets of Leicester. Perhaps there was a reason for that.

Horace Balding wrote: "Miss von Petzold was strikingly beautiful. Every Sunday afternoon she conducted a "Men's Meeting", and the Narborough Road Church was filled with men sitting out in the vestibule where her clear diction could be heard by all. My mother remembered that the topic of conversation throughout the week would be the address given by Miss Petzold at the Men's Meeting."

And a member of the Leicester congregation wrote: "Gertrude von Petzold has done more than anyone to clear away prejudice against Unitarianism in Leicester. At first people came out of curiosity, but it was her earnest spirituality that made them stay."

Two decades later, Clara Barton recalled: "She caused quite a stir in the town and great interest was taken in the services and many excellent tributes were paid to the first woman minister by the public and the press. She had a beautiful personality and seemed to attract people of all

conditions ... and sometimes we wished the crowds would keep away as our own members had difficulty in finding seats at the services."

She visited Berlin in 1906, lecturing on liberal Christianity, and conducted a German service in the American church there, the first woman ever to do so. In 1907 she was the only European woman delegate to attend the Fourth International Congress of Religious Liberals in Boston, Massachusetts.

In 1908 she left Leicester for the United States, and allied herself to a group of radical Unitarian women ministers working in Iowa and Illinois. She deputised for Mary Safford as chaplain in the state legislature in Des Moines.

In 1910 she returned to England, to become minister at Small Heath Unitarian Church in Birmingham. Again, she attracted large congregations and was much in demand as a speaker -- including lectures on Luther, Calvin and Wycliffe. One journal reported: "A curiously fascinating personality, she has slightly aquiline, clear-cut features, a wealth of dark hair rests upon a broad brow and her dark expressive eyes impart earnestness to her oratory. There is something ascetic about her bearing which lends conviction to every word she utters."

And another contemporary comment comes from R. J. Campbell: "Miss von Petzold is one of the most brilliant speakers of the day, a scholar of repute and - I think - the only ordained minister of her sex in this country."

In 1911, on another visit to Germany, she preached at the Lutheran Church in-Bremen and at the Swiss Reformed churches in Zurich and Basel,. speaking generally on the ministry of women. She freely associated with religious liberals of all denominations, even suggesting that Unitarians could sometimes be too conservative!

As early as 1910, she had said: "There is no work in the world, except perhaps the slaughtering of other people, that a woman cannot do as efficiently as a man, if she is given the same training and opportunity."

By the time the Great War began, her application for naturalization had lapsed because of her time in America. Despite the support of civic leaders in Leicester and Birmingham, both for her and for her friend and helper Rosa Widmann, her application and Rosa's were turned down. In December 1914 she wrote to The Inquirer, appealing on behalf of the 30,000 alien internees in Britain. A few months later, appealing for naturalisation, she wrote: "I am utterly opposed to Germany when it comes to the war, as a believer in the brotherhood of man, so I would be regarded as an alien there."

... I do not want to be interned and I cannot apply for exemption because I do not want exemption. want naturalization. For this I have applied twice, and as this is denied me, I willingly bow to the powers that be. I am, as I have always been, an enthusiastic supporter of the British Constitution and of British ideals. I intend to be a student -- i. e. in Germany -- only until I can return to my flock."

Although they stated a preference for the USA, she and Rosa had to return to Germany, where she came close to being interned. In Germany, she eventually (in 1917) became pastor of the Free Evangelical, non-credal congregations in Königsberg and Tilsit -- the only free churches in East Prussia,. where she also tried to establish such a church in Memel. Then she took a Doctor of Philosophy degree and became a lecturer in English at Frankfurt University, the first woman to achieve this status in Germany.

As a committed internationalist she promoted Anglo-German relations whenever possible, even in the first year of the Great War before she was deported, and when anti-German feeling resulted in arson attacks at the Small Heath Church. Between the two World Wars she made several trips to England, offering to conduct services where invited, being motivated by the desire to promote reconciliation. For this she was well qualified because of her unique background.

And soon after World War II she wrote an article for The Inquirer (9 August 1947) entitled "English Refugees in Germany".

Her large sympathies remained clear at the time of her death in 1952, when she was devoting her energies to the cause of refugees then flocking into West Germany from eastern Europe. She died at Bad Homberg, near Frankfurt, West Germany, on 14 March, 1952. her involvement as a woman in religious developments in Britain, Germany and America in the first half of the twentieth century, and in the women's movement, especially with regard to suffrage, earns her a niche of no little significance and interest.

Agnes Clark wrote of von Petzold: "I had anticipated a masculine lady, with masculine manners, in semi-masculine dress. Instead I caught glimpses ... (of) a pale, spiritual, classically-featured face, whose pallor was emphasized by the dark mass of black hair resting above the wide, white brow ... a sad, sweet, serious face; a graceful, gracious presence full of dignity and charm. The voice too was sad -- a rich, clear voice, with a plaintive note underlying and running through all its modulations; in this sentence hardly discernible ... in the next dominant. I have not heard better elocution. ... Complete absorption in her subject, an utter absence of - affectation, consuming earnestness, and a cleaving sincerity marked the preacher's discourse."

In a long and learned paper on Harriet Martineau, in 1941, von Petzold wrote: "She belonged to those very special people whose distinguishing character trait was a passionate even fanatical desire for truth and who were always ready to become part of a more highly developed civilization, progressing from one level to a higher one: in the words of Nietzsche - 'only the person who is willing to change is fit to be part of my family'."

That could indeed be said of Gertrude von Petzold herself, and it makes a suitable conclusion to this memoir of her life and her contribution to the ministry of Unitarian women in Britain:

"She belonged to those very special people whose distinguishing character trait was a passionate even fanatical desire for truth and who were always ready to become part of a more highly developed civilization, progressing from one level to a higher one."

Amen