

GERTRUDE VON PETZOLD (1876-1952):  
QUAKER AND FIRST WOMAN MINISTER

Claus Bernet

Free University Berlin, Germany

ABSTRACT

Gertrude von Petzold was a pioneer in many ways: in England she was the first woman who got a post as a church minister, in Germany she was the first woman who qualified for a professorship in Germanics at Kiel University. At times when women were not even allowed to vote, von Petzold pursued her academic career eagerly. Her ecumenical attitude resulted in membership within the Lutheran Church, the Unitarians and finally the Quakers.

KEYWORDS

Germany, Unitarian, Germanics, Woman Minister

Gertrude von Petzold is well known in England as the first woman who got a post as a minister. What is not known is that this woman was also for a short time a Quaker. This fact is of interest for Quaker historians.

Gertrude von Petzold came from Germany. She was born on 9 January 1876 in Thorn (which was then in West Prussia, and is now in Poland) as the daughter of a military officer.<sup>1</sup> She was named 'Gertrud' to which she added an 'e' in England. She grew up a Lutheran which was the common practice in West Prussia. In 1897 she passed her teacher's exam in Friedenshof (Stettin) and from there she went as a governess to Great Britain. She was thus one of the many emigrants who left Germany around 1900 because they saw no future for themselves there. In St Andrews (Scotland) she passed her University entrance exam and studied for four years at the University of Edinburgh for a Masters of Arts degree.

In 1901, Petzold transferred to Oxford where she studied theology at the (Unitarian) Manchester College. The resentment against women in Oxford was so great that at first her male colleagues refused to sit with her at the same table. At the same time there were also positive events. Thanks to the Hibbert Trust she was able to study for

a period of time at the Berlin University, there she was one of the first women to attend lectures in theology.<sup>2</sup>

After finishing her studies she was immediately able to find a post as a Minister. This was sensational for a woman at that time; she successfully competed against seven male candidates. On 29 September 1904 she became the first woman minister in England. Quite a bit is known about her activities at this time and this need not be repeated here.<sup>3</sup> After four years Petzold went to America and became active in the 'Iowa Sisterhood' within the Unitarian church. In Des Moines, where many Germans had emigrated, she was asked to become the head of the Unitarian community there (Free Christian Church, Iowa).

Petzold did not stay long in America. Before she returned to England she preached to Lutherans in Bremen (Germany) in 1911, and to the Reformed Churches in Zürich and Basel even though this was not actually permitted for women to do.<sup>4</sup> Between 1911 and 1915 she was a Minister at the Waverley Road Church and the Small Heath Unitarian Chapel in Birmingham, England. At the same time she continued her studies at Birmingham University and received another MA in the summer of 1915, which was to be very useful to her at a later stage.<sup>5</sup>



*Gertrude von Petzold*

Gertrude von Petzold: the photo shows her with an androgynous expression, more similar to the biblical Moses than to the first female Minister of England. Photo courtesy of the Unitarian Historical Society, Manchester, UK.

Shortly after the start of the First World War, Petzold had to return to Germany since she was not able to get citizenship in Great Britain and emigration to America was not possible. At first she accepted a temporary post at an American church in Berlin and<sup>6</sup> then she matriculated in Tübingen in order to study Theology and Germanics.<sup>7</sup> Since she had already received her MA in Birmingham, she was able to get her doctorate within a very short time. In 1917 she handed in her dissertation to Otto Behaghel (1854–1936), a famous authority on German Studies in Giessen.<sup>8</sup> Her dissertation 'Images of the Saviour in the German Novel of the Present time' was dedicated to Rosa Widmann, a close friend of hers, who, like her, had had to leave England in 1915.<sup>9</sup>

In 1918 Petzold became a pastor at the protestant free church in Königsberg and in 1923 at the one in Tilsit (then East Prussia).<sup>10</sup> At the end of the First World War she joined the Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (SPD) in Prussia, her home region, and was, until 1923, city councillor for the SPD in Königsberg. She was socially active as a member of the 'Monistenbund' and later as a member of the National Socialist *Volkswohlfahrt*.<sup>11</sup> Until 1937 she travelled regularly to Great Britain and pleaded for understanding between the two nations.

At the same time her academic career continued. In Frankfurt/Main Petzold was active as a lecturer in English language. In 1933 she was for a short time dismissed from further education activities but she fought for her reinstatement.<sup>12</sup> This was important, since after 1934 most free church communities were banned and Petzold had to look for a new profession.<sup>13</sup> The following years were difficult: Petzold was several times under Gestapo observation.<sup>14</sup> In a report at the beginning of the Second World War she was characterised as follows: 'She is generally seen as hysterical but as a result of her political past and her present stance she cannot be seen as above suspicion... However she is a harmless, somewhat eccentric spinster (55–60 years old) who in my view and that of others is totally harmless'.<sup>15</sup> Her contacts with England and the USA were seen critically—it is possible that Petzold tried to obtain an emigration permit, but this was not granted.

In 1941, through the writing of a *Habilitation*, Petzold qualified for the possibility of gaining a professorship in the field of *Germanistik* (Germanics) at the University of Kiel. Since she was the first woman to achieve this, she was labelled a 'woman pioneer'. However, for several reasons, she did not receive the call to a professorship; at the age of 65 she was too old and to become a professor without close ties to the NSDAP was not possible. It may also have been true that because of the war, very little funding was allocated to the Humanities: all resources were expended in the war effort.

This far we know Gertrude von Petzold as a Lutheran and a Unitarian. However, at least since her time in Birmingham, Gertrude von Petzold also maintained contacts with representatives of The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers). One may assume that, for Petzold, the tradition of women preachers in the Society since the seventeenth century was of great interest. In Germany her contacts with Quakers strengthened. There was a lively group of Quakers in Frankfurt where she lectured and attended Meetings. She was particularly impressed by the poet Alfons Paquet (1881–1944), the painter Charlotte Pauly (1886–1981) and Rudolf Schlosser (1880–1944),

who had also studied theology and who later became a Quaker. In this community, Petzold enjoyed the openness about and warmth towards England, her second home, which she had had to leave against her wishes. Frankfurt was next to Berlin the most important centre for the German Quakers. Here Gertrude Luckner (1900–1995) studied Social Sciences in the 1930s, and Ruth Elsner von Gronow (1887–1972), a theologian, researched for her book *Christian Unity in the Free Town of Frankfurt*. Karl Wilker (1885–1980), lectured at the Frankfurter *Volkshochschule* on Further Education; Gerhard Ockel (1894–1975) opened a private practice here; another Friend, Richard Ullmann (1904–1963), who emigrated to England in 1938, also lived there.<sup>16</sup> While the Quaker office in Berlin organised the German Yearly Meeting, Frankfurt am Main was a pulsating place of Quaker thought and personalities, and the Meeting contained those who debated and discussed and quarrelled with energy and passion on the way forward for the German Quakers. One could say that Berlin was the head and Frankfurt the heart for the German Quakers of this period.

In November 1940 Gertrude von Petzold was accepted into membership of German Yearly Meeting. A year later, however, she resigned her membership.<sup>17</sup> She did not make a mark in the German Yearly Meeting in this short time, nor can any information be found about her joining and leaving. In this difficult time Quakers in Germany did not put down on paper personal details so as not to endanger their members, many of whom were under Gestapo observation. One may assume that the outbreak of the Second World War was a hard emotional blow for Petzold who felt the pain because of her especially close connection with England. She may have looked for ways of strengthening pacifism and to maintain her contacts with the English while living in Germany.

After the end of the war she continued to live in Germany. Up to her death she was active in helping refugees, particularly those from East and West Prussia and later those from the GDR. She died on the 14 March 1952 in Bad Homburg, a small town to the north of Frankfurt am Main.

Gertrude von Petzold never married. Her life was filled with constant study, lectures and travels. She was an intellectually very interested person. Her most important works are her dissertation 'Heilandsbilder im deutschen Roman' (Images of the Saviour in the German Novel, 1924) and her thesis 'Harriet Martineau und ihre sittlich-religiöse Weltanschauung' (Harriet Martineau and her moral and religious world view, 1941). There are also a number of smaller studies of the influence of Nietzsche on the Scottish poet John Davidson ('John Davidson und sein geistiges Werden unter dem Einflusse Nietzsches' [John Davidson and his Intellectual Development under the Influence of Nietzsche, Leipzig 1928] and the essay 'Nietzsche in englisch-amerikanischer Beurteilung bis zum Ausgang des Weltkrieges' [The Assessment of Nietzsche by the English and Americans up to the Outbreak of WWII]).<sup>18</sup> Petzold held Davidson in high esteem because of his interest in Nietzsche, which was exceptional in the Anglo-American cultural scene.

Her present importance lies in the fact that she was the first ordained minister with a post in England and so she is recognised as a pioneer of female ministry. Her sermons were liked not only out of curiosity but because of her eloquence and language. At the same time she can be seen as an unusual example of crossing confes-

sional boundaries by belonging to Lutheran, Unitarian and Quaker communities, sometimes all at the same time. Gertrude von Petzold should not be forgotten by Quakers and those who study Quakerism.

## NOTES

1. University archive of Giessen, no. Phil Prom 1520.
2. Gilley, K., 'Gertrude von Petzold: The Pioneer Woman Minister', *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society* 21.3 (1997), pp. 157–71, here p. 159. Later in her life she gave several public lectures in Berlin (1906) (p. 161). See also Gilley, K., 'Petzold, Gertrude von', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* 43 (2000), pp. 965–66.
3. Gilley, 'von Petzold', p. 160. See also 'Lady Minister Who has Just Conducted her First Marriage Service', *The Sketch*, 12 July 1905.
4. Davy, E., 'A Woman in Swiss Pulpits', *The Inquirer* 3610, n.s. 71 (2 September 1911), p. 562.
5. Gause, F., 'Gertrud von Petzold', *Altpreußische Biographie* 3 (Marburg 1975), p. 1038.
6. State Archive Berlin (Bundesarchiv Berlin), R/58/6026 (715).
7. Gause, 'Petzold', p. 1038.
8. Petzold, G. von, *Heilandsbilder im deutschen Roman der Gegenwart*, Giessen, 1924. The book was originally entitled '*Das Christusbild im deutschen Roman der Gegenwart*', but this was changed by Behaghel; University archive of Giessen, *Promotionsakte* of Petzold, no. Phil Prom 1520.
9. Gilley, 'von Petzold', p. 165.
10. Gause, 'Petzold', p. 1038; Gilley, 'von Petzold', p. 166.
11. Gause, 'Petzold', p. 1038; Bundesarchiv, R/58/6026 (715).
12. State Archive Berlin, R/58/6026 (715).
13. Fritz, G., *Vom Ersten Weltkrieg bis zum Untergang Königsbergs*, Köln, 1971, p. 58.
14. State Archive Berlin, R/58/6026 (715).
15. State Archive Berlin, R/58/6026 (715–716). Furthermore, the Gestapo assumed erroneously that von Petzold had been a Quaker preacher in England until 1914.
16. For further details on all these individuals, see Bernet, C., *Quäker aus Politik, Kunst und Wissenschaft in Deutschland. 20. Jahrhundert. Ein biographisches Lexikon*, Nordhausen 2007.
17. Archive of German Yearly Meeting, Planckstraße Berlin, Membership book, no. 400.
18. *Anglia. Zeitschrift für englische Philologie* 53 (1929), pp. 134–218.

## AUTHOR DETAILS

Claus Bernet studied history, city planning and social work. Since graduating from the Free University of Berlin, he has been working on a doctoral dissertation in the Early Modern Period at Halle University. In 2001 he was a research assistant under Professor Hans Merckens in Berlin and in 2002 an Eva Koch Fellow at the Woodbrooke Quaker Study Center in Birmingham. His writings cover German Quakerism, the relationship between Quakerism and pietism and biographical studies, including those of Margaret Fell, Rufus Jones and Corder Catchpool. His book *Rufus Jones (1863–1948): Life and Bibliography of an American Scholar, Writer, and Social Activist* will be published in 2008.

Mailing address: Taurogener Str.2, 10569 Berlin, Germany. Email: bernetc@web.de.