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QUAKER WOMEN IN SOUTH AFRICA DURING THE APARTHEID ERA

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This study explores the idea that women members of the Quaker community (the Religious Society of Friends) in South Africa played a 'highly visible and significant role' in the struggle against apartheid. The author uses both archive material and her findings from questionnaires, occasional interviews and participant observation to investigate the level of their involvement. She finds that when apartheid began in 1948, Quakers, with a few significant exceptions, displayed a tendency to accept the status quo and concentrated on their personal spiritual development, avoiding political activity. However, the impact of the Sharpeville massacre and the later Soweto uprising galvanised many into activity. The Quaker women the author studies (the majority of whom were white) all took a stand against the apartheid regime; some worked for its overthrow in modest ways, others in a more overtly dangerous and illegal fashion. She discovers that the Quaker principles, or 'testimonies', of peace and equality, coupled with the active role that women play in the Society (particularly evident in their espousal of social issues such as poverty alleviation and education), were key factors in her respondents' decisions to oppose the regime, and the manner in which they did so. The author looks at how their position as women – for example, in terms of the potential impact on their families– affected their level of involvement: the constraints of their social roles held some back, while others paid a price for their involvement. However, she finds that many are still active today, participating in the struggle to mitigate post-apartheid South Africa's many problems.

Key words: Apartheid, the anti-apartheid struggle, racism, non-violence, social injustice, activism

Key themes:

The way Quakers reacted to apartheid, and the radical change that occurred in their attitude towards active opposition to apartheid

The significant role women Quakers played in the anti-apartheid struggle

The impact on women Quakers of their involvement in the struggle

Of potential interest to: those with a general interest in Quaker involvement in the anti-apartheid movement, women's role in the anti-apartheid movement, Quaker women activists.

Chapter One: Introduction

In this chapter, the author introduces the purpose of the dissertation – to investigate the role Quaker women played in the struggle against apartheid. She outlines the relationship of the study to previous research into the Quaker response to apartheid, explaining that it neither contradicts nor duplicates earlier findings, but adds to the body of research. She focuses specifically on women – an area she believes has been under-researched. Her study required her to consult various sources of material, but the bulk of her research revolves around an analysis of her findings from a questionnaire she circulated in South Africa and among women with South African connections in the UK. This was supported by her study of Quaker historical archives, including letters and reports from the time, and through informal interviews and discussions. The first part of her dissertation (Chapters Two and Three) gives an overview of Quaker history in South Africa, and discusses the role of women in the Society, and their stance during the early years of apartheid. The following chapters profile the women who participated in the research, and explores their reactions to apartheid as Quakers and as women (Chapter Four), how they lived with or confronted it in a Quaker fashion, and the impact it had on their lives (Chapter Five and Six). The final chapter examines her respondents' views on post-apartheid South Africa.

Chapter Two: The Historical Background

Overview

This chapter gives a brief outline of the Society, the history of Quakers in South Africa, the role of women in the Society of Friends, and the reactions of Quakers to slavery and racism.

Quaker beginnings

The Quakers emerged as one of the most durable of the many offshoots of Christianity that arose during the ferment of the Civil War in the 17th century. Persecution appeared only to strengthen their resolve to 'speak truth to power' and oppose what they regarded as immoral laws. They dispensed with the outward symbols and structures of mainstream Christianity, meeting together to worship in silence in the belief that everyone possesses the ability to know God directly. Although Quakers possess no creed or formal statement of belief, they have 'testimonies' (guiding principles of truth, equality, peace, simplicity and community). These initially acted as a strict demarcation from the outside world, but were later interpreted as a guide to ethical engagement with society.

The role of women in the Quakers

From the first, the Society professed a belief in the equality of men and women. From the early period into the 19th century, this often appeared to be nominal – although, the author points out, there has been a long tradition of women participating in church affairs and in other Quaker, or Quaker-inspired, activities (the prison reformer Elizabeth Fry, for example). The 19th century saw a move away from the more conservative, male-dominated approach of the 18th, and by the 20th century the high level of women's involvement in the Quaker tradition of service was undeniable.

The Quakers in South Africa

The presence of Quakers in South Africa can be traced back to the 18th century. During the Boer War, their adherence to the peace testimony and the idea that 'there is that of God in everyone' led them to oppose the British colonial authorities: Quaker-influenced reports on the conditions the Boers suffered in the British concentration camps helped raise awareness of the brutality of the war. However, they exhibited a paternalistic attitude towards black South Africans; few raised their voices against the blatant prejudice written into the Act of Union instituted after the Boer War.

Quakers and racism

The pivotal role Quakers played in the abolition of slavery is well known, but the history of their opposition to racism was more equivocal. In the US, following the abolition of slavery, many Quakers failed to welcome those of African or mixed race heritage into their local communities, exhibiting a social prejudice that did not sit well with their belief in equality. The author suggests that the lack of an unbroken anti-racist tradition may have played a part in the problems South African Quakers have encountered in trying to attract more black members, despite their opposition to apartheid.

Chapter Three: Quaker Women and Apartheid – The Historical Record

Overview

This chapter analyses the evidence provided by the Minutes of Southern Africa Yearly Meeting (SAYM) from 1948 to 1986, and shows the marked development in Quaker thinking over this period. In the earlier Minutes, Friends appear more pre-occupied with spiritual matters, although there are frequent references to 'race relations' and the 'good works' of various individuals. The later Minutes reflect the watershed in consciousness caused by the Sharpeville massacre and the subsequent state of emergency, with Quaker opposition to apartheid exhibiting a more activist character.

The development of Quaker opposition

The author uses her analysis of the Minutes of SAYM (from 1948 to 1963) to explore Tonsig's (1992) belief that throughout the 1950s Quakers clung to the hope that the government would eventually ease its racist legislation; it only required patience and good will. During these early years of apartheid, it appears that Quakers were content to attempt to simply mitigate its most egregious consequences. However, even these hopes were continually thwarted – even attempts to meet inter-racially for prayer were banned. The author, however, notes that women were at the forefront of raising the issue of opposition to apartheid (in the 1953 Meeting most of the contributors to the discussion on the ANC's non-violent Defiance Campaign were women). Women members voiced concern about the hardship caused by the Group Areas Act (the enforcement of strict segregation). Although Tonsig captures the overall tenor of the Quaker approach, the author contests that this period also marked the beginning of a more active involvement in opposition to apartheid – a move that was, for the most part, inspired by women.

The move to active opposition

During the 1966-86 period the anti-apartheid movement was at its height, and the response of the Quakers as recorded in the Minutes of the Yearly Meetings of this period reveals a far greater level of concern – in contrast to the final Minute of the 1953 Yearly Meeting, which records that the Meeting agreed that Quakers should not participate in the Defiance Campaign. A series of events – the most prominent being the Sharpeville massacre in 1960, the 1976 Soweto schoolchildren's uprising, and the death of Stephen Biko in custody in 1977 – shook the Quaker community out of its former lethargy. The growing number of atrocities and the militant response of black South Africans forced Friends to realise the full horror of the regime, and to begin to actively work towards a more equal society – a decision which would of necessity bring them into confrontation with the authorities. Quaker women, it appears, were at the forefront of this move into active opposition.

Chapter Four: Profiles of the Respondents

Overview

In this chapter the author describes the nature of her respondents' relationship to Quakerism and of their opposition to apartheid, and explores their reactions to apartheid as women and as Quakers.

The origins of the respondents

The author comments that Quakers in South Africa tend to be white, middle-class and English-speaking – and this was reflected in the make-up of her group of respondents, with a few exceptions. Of the 28, only 15 were born in South Africa. The others had come to the country for a variety of personal reasons, such as family relationships or marriage, while two came out of a sense of idealism (it was ‘God’s will’). Two had subsequently left in the 1960s, due to the political situation – one of them after the experience of interrogation – and only returned to South Africa after the ending of apartheid. Only seven were born Quakers, the others had joined as adults (they were ‘convinced’ Quakers) and three were ‘attenders’ (attending Meetings for Worship but as non-members). Many had been attracted to the Society as a result of working alongside Quakers on social schemes – as one put it, she saw ‘they were prepared to put themselves on the line’.

The attraction of Quakerism

Some of the respondents who joined the Society during this period appear to have been motivated by the Quaker reaction to apartheid; for others, however, the relationship between their sense of the injustice of apartheid, and horror at its consequences, and their attraction to Quakerism was more complex. One commented that her reaction to apartheid ‘only confirmed my belief in Quaker principles and way of life’; another, ‘being a Friend already caused me to oppose apartheid’; and a third, ‘I objected to apartheid long before I heard of the Quakers’. The author believes the synthesis of spirituality and social/political activism that the Society represents, alongside its principled emphasis on non-violence, either proved a potent attraction or confirmed the strong co-relation many felt between Quaker principles and anti-apartheid ideals.

Reacting to apartheid as women and as Quakers

The author illustrates the range of responses the women gave to the question of whether their gender or the fact they were Quakers had the greatest influence on their reactions to apartheid. Most placed the emphasis on being a Quaker: for example, ‘being a woman was immaterial ... [but] being a Quaker gave me strength and companionship in the struggle’. However, some felt the fact that they were female carried some advantages – ‘I was non-threatening and thus less likely to provoke aggression’ – while others believed it helped give them insight into the continuing struggle of black South African women against poverty and marginalisation, and a more compassionate understanding of their battle to bring up families in often impossible circumstances.

Chapter Five: Quaker Women Living with Apartheid

Overview

The author explores here how Quaker women coped with daily life in the apartheid regime. She illustrates how her respondents tried to apply their Quaker principles to their lives and their work, either openly or covertly, and with varying degrees of effectiveness or feelings of frustration.

Quaker principles and everyday life

The author found that the Quaker principles of non-violence and equality strongly influenced the ways her respondents reacted to the circumstances under which they lived and worked. Most often this precept was congruent with the attitudes they adopted even before they joined the Society; their politics were 'consonant' with Quaker teachings. This affected the choices they made – from their day-to-day interactions to their involvement (as white women living within a regime of extreme segregation) with the black community and its struggles. Some spoke of the paradoxical lives they were forced to lead as part of a privileged white layer, with one respondent relating her feelings of guilt and her determination to live without employing maids. Others were active in anti-apartheid organisations such as Black Sash (a non-violent, white, women's resistance organisation) or the ANC – although this meant negotiating the contradictions between their pacifism and the ANC's espousal of the armed struggle. Their choice of employment echoed their belief in 'Quaker witness' – for example, as teachers in the townships or university lecturers, ignoring censorship to disseminate their research amongst black students or teaching students banned from campus.

Confronting the establishment

The women the author interviewed were all involved in the struggle against apartheid, ranging from those who took small, covert actions, ignoring regulations or committing minor infringements of the law, to women who sheltered those on the run or took part in illegal protests. Some were involved in the Quaker Peace Centre, teaching alternatives to violent confrontation in the townships. Others flouted the apartheid regulations in their personal lives – for example, marrying black husbands. All were aware that the actions they took, even if they did not risk imprisonment (although some did), would have severe repercussions on their family, friends and fellow Quakers. However, the author points out that all her respondents exhibited a tendency to downplay their courage, an attribute she relates to the Quaker tradition of modesty and humility.

Chapter Six: The Price to be Paid

Overview

In this chapter the author considers the effects of their opposition to apartheid on the respondents' personal and family lives, and whether consideration of the impact of their actions on their family, friends or close associates reduced the level of their activity.

The effect on personal and family life

Although the effects were often serious, the author notes how many of the respondents, on reflection, appeared to feel that the outcome for themselves and their families was generally positive. However, this was often less tangible than the fact that some were forced to leave the country, some found that friendships and relationships with family members were severed, and others that their careers were arbitrarily curtailed. On the positive side, one respondent spoke of the effects of her anti-apartheid work on the politicisation of her children and attributed its influence to their maturing into empathic adults, attuned to social injustice. In distinction, another respondent vividly detailed the daily harassment visited on the families of those engaged in opposition to the regime: a husband and father in solitary confinement, police vans parked outside the house, continual surveillance, children left in the care of others – not to mention, the effects of living in a constant state of hypertension, in fear of sudden arrest, interrogation and imprisonment.

The constraints of family life

The author shows how the awareness of the potential repercussions on their families forced women to consider impossible choices, with some preferring to remain childless in order to carry on the struggle without emotional impediment – although many of her respondents did continue to be actively involved despite being married with families. Many also expressed how their membership of the Quaker community provided a support in such circumstances, helping guard against the 'non-specific' but ever-present sense of fear. Some, however, were forced to keep a low profile in order not to endanger their children or elderly parents, causing them feelings of guilt and frustration. What the answers reveal is the deep strain many of the women's active opposition to apartheid caused them, sometimes resulting in mental and physical illness – the classic examples of post-traumatic stress – or marriage breakdown. The overall picture, however, the author concludes, is one of women fighting apartheid in spite of the curbs imposed by circumstances beyond their control, but nevertheless often unaware of their own achievements.

Chapter Seven: Quaker women in post-apartheid South Africa

Overview

Many Quaker women participated in the 1994 election for a free, democratic South African state, taking part in the electoral process as voters, peace monitors or observers, or partaking in voter education programmes. Although some remained strictly non-partisan, others worked for political parties – for example, for the Democratic Party, the main opposition party before the ‘unbanning’ of the ANC. However, as the author points out, amidst the euphoria, some already had misgivings.

Current feelings

When speaking about the current situation, the respondents replied with a mixture of optimism about the vibrant diversity that characterises the new South Africa and an awareness of the problems it still faces. Some felt the peaceful transition formed a solid basis for an equitable democratic system, while concurring that economic racism still exists, with most of the large corporations still in white hands and a high level of unemployment amongst the disadvantaged. There was a sense that the ravages of apartheid continue despite democracy. Two respondents, in particular, expressed disillusion with the corruption of the current government, one characterising it as obsessed with ‘status, hierarchy, authoritarianism and materialism’. Crime and the HIV/Aids epidemic were also major concerns.

The challenge for Quakers

The new South Africa has brought new problems for Quakers to confront: as one respondent put it, ‘rebuilding the type of families, community and nation that has been fought for’. However, the women the author questioned were aware that Quakers do not have a strong enough presence in South Africa, and need to reach out to gain a wider membership. A few respondents suggested that the Quaker part in building a ‘new South Africa’ has been overtaken (or should be subsumed) by other bodies. However, most felt that Quakers still have special qualities to offer in terms of tackling social injustice – as educators and human rights activists, for example – and in continuing to ‘speak truth to power’.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

When the apartheid system of rigid racial segregation and exclusion was first instituted, most Quakers tended to emulate their Quietist forebears and concentrated purely on their personal spiritual journeys – with a few notable exceptions. Significantly, many of these exceptions happened to be women. However, the events of the 1960s and 1970s caused a radical change of heart, and they regained the non-conformist tradition of the early Quakers, bearing ‘Quaker witness’ and ‘speaking truth to power’. Many of the Quaker women involved in the struggle came to the Society in this latter period, attracted by its anti-apartheid stance or the courage of the Friends they worked alongside. Others felt their opposition to the injustices of apartheid confirmed their Quaker outlook. The author, therefore, disagrees with Tonsig’s (1992) conclusion that because they are a small religious body in South Africa, comprising individuals who are ‘seeking how best to live in obedience to their inner light’, it should not be assumed that all Quakers are or must be ‘involved in social action or liberal causes’. The women Friends the author studied encourage her to draw a somewhat different lesson: it was precisely their Quaker beliefs that either launched them into the struggle against apartheid or supported their belief that change was necessary and that they had a role to play. She agrees with Guiton (2000), who believes that women Quakers were both highly visible and central to the struggle, and ‘without them, the Society’s Apartheid odyssey ... would have been voiceless on a public level’. The proof of this may be that many Quaker women continue to work to try to combat its after-effects in the new South Africa.

Summary prepared by Fran Cetti (2012)