

EVANGELICAL WOMEN FACING RELIGIOUS DISCRIMINATION IN PORTUGAL: A BRIEF HISTORICAL OVERVIEW (1933-2014)

by

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ABSTRACT

The problem of the paucity of knowledge on the historical discrimination related to religious freedom in Portugal is addressed in this paper as an academic contribution. Five women were interviewed specifically to inform this paper because of their first-hand experience of being persecuted for their Evangelical faith. The notion is that although Mourão (2008:20) placed Portugal among the best countries where religious freedom was respected in 2008, history demonstrates that prior to 1981 the reality was different as religious freedom was not truly respected in Portugal.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an historical report on how Evangelical women faced discrimination in Portugal. The intention is to underline this part of Portuguese history which is yet to be studied. The reason why I chose this topic stems from the research gathered for my PhD thesis entitled *The Impact of the 1974 Revolution on Religious Freedom in Portugal (1974-2009)*. My audience should expect to be informed about the historical process to implement religious freedom in Portugal. This paper will discuss the plight of evangelical women who faced religious discrimination and persecution in Portugal. Despite the legal advances of the *1911 Constitution* which granted religious freedom for the first time in the country, Portuguese Evangelicals came under threat because of Salazar's intolerance of the *1933 Constitution*. To worship as an Evangelical was dangerous and women were subjected to discrimination as well as their male counterparts. However, Evangelical women demonstrated their resilience and loyalty to Christ in perilous circumstances until the historical tide turned. Women who were interviewed informed that the situation changed after 1974. A short background will be presented before I discuss the true experiences of women who faced discrimination because of their religious beliefs.

1. HISTORICAL REFLECTION ON THE PRESSURE EXPERIENCED BY PORTUGUESE EVANGELICAL WOMEN DURING THE SALAZAR REGIME

In 1933, Salazar adopted a new *Portuguese Constitution* according to which "it was illegal for a citizen to practice any religion other than Roman Catholicism" (DaSilva (2015:43). Salazar's "conduct [resulted from] ... centuries of polemics anti-Protestant" (DaSilva, 2006:51). Subsequently, the United Nations adopted "the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* on 10 December 1948" (N-a, n-d:5). Yet, Salazar continued his "subtle and all-pervasive...repression" (Raby, D.L., 1988:3). In Salazar's words, "We are antagonistic to all the great heresies" (Robinson, 1979:52). His efficient secret police (PIDE) and the censorship system (Soares, 1975:46-47) led Soares, (1975:21) to describe "Salazar's regime ...[as] one and the same with Nazi version". There was no religious freedom in Portugal and both men and women were subjected to persecution and discrimination.

It was under a reign of terror that Protestant, Evangelical and Pentecostal believers

experienced their faith. As DaSilva (2015:15) reports, “When Evangelicals were baptized in water, they professed to be ready to endure any discrimination, persecution or repression and always to follow Christ at any cost”. New Church members

Would not be baptized unless well proven that candidates were indeed ready to accept the responsibilities and duties of their condition as followers of Christ, which implied...becoming “second class citizens” in Portuguese society. (DaSilva, 2015:17).

Evangelical preachers “were imprisoned and tortured [and killed] by...PIDE” (DaSilva, 2015:17). Yet, according to DaSilva (2015:16), “Evangelicals prayed intensively for liberty”. According to Barata, *et al* (1999:37), “The spiritual wrestling was done with the knees on the ground as brothers and sisters...in Portugal prayed”. Despite “the cruelty of the...civil and religious authorities” (Da Silva, 2015:16) the Evangelicals reacted with profound resilience in their opposition to the regime by illegally organizing evangelistic meetings in streets and squares, attracting the attention of the police. The majority of these were Evangelical women whose husbands had fled the country because of religious intolerance and poverty leaving them behind.

Since 1950 many Evangelical men had emigrated to countries like France. “Parallel to the legal emigration movement, no less illegal current must have been verified for France” (Arroteia, 1983:49), and between 1958 and 1971 clandestine emigration to France grew exponentially, (Arroteia, 1983:50). These Evangelical emigrants left their wives behind to care for the children. These women demonstrated their resilience by holding firmly to their faith while facing harsh persecution. Across the country, Evangelical women demonstrated their defiance of Salazar’s regime by attending church services without their husbands, which was dangerous because

Deliberate...[and] organized persecution was carried on, with particular violence like stoning, illegal police arrest, destroying of worship property and the burning of Christian literature. (DaSilva, 2006:65).

Despite the cruelty meted out by the Salazar regime, Evangelical women faced discrimination and persecution, remaining resilient in the true spirit of Christianity and following Christ’s example as He went to the cross. Additionally, Evangelical women faced the ‘illegality’ of their faith in the absence of their husbands for at least two decades.

Information obtained from women who were interviewed is presented next. This information corroborates the religious intolerance in Portugal from 1930 to 1981.

2. THE RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE AND PERSECUTION OF WOMEN IN PORTUGAL

Five interviews were conducted with various Portuguese women to inform this paper. Maria Correia said that her eldest son suffered as a result of victimization at school. She was threatened with arrest when she confronted the School teacher because being an Evangelical was illegal in Portugal at the time. In addition, Correia described the discrimination and persecution inflicted by the Roman Catholic priest in Oleiros in the 1960’s:

Those of Portela did not suffer much, but those of Barreira suffered a lot... There was also the truck with the gasoline to blow up the church...and kill Pastor José Pessoa.

The maliciousness of the Roman Catholic clergy is evident in their actions to any individual who was not of their denomination.

Mónica Contente explains that in 1959-1960 a group of Evangelicals were distributing literature in Évora and they were “forbidden to continue and the police dragged the pastor and his wife into prison”. Contente adds that in 1980, while in Guarda: “[Evangelical women] were greeted with guns: shotguns, axes, forks, stones...due to ignorance and religious obscurantism”.

Rute Cunha corroborates the existence of religious hostility, discrimination and segregation in Portugal until 1981. Cunha said:

We used to do evangelism... And...in the Guarda area... Some people were...on the stairs... [with] stones prepared for...when we would pass... They began to insult us, several people...from different houses. I remember having to get away from those rocks.

Cunha adds that people used to address the ‘Evangelicals’ in a derogatory manner by calling them ‘Protestant’, inferring that they were ‘cursed and outcast’, because at the time

if you were not Roman Catholic you were considered not to be a Christian.

Isabel da Silva experienced religious bullying, particularly at school with her brother Joel. According to Isabel, “In the village where I was raised we were the 'Protestants', it was a village only of Catholics and the only evangelicals were my mother and three children. We were derogatively called 'Protestants’”. She adds:

They waited for us... my brother was taken to the pole; his legs were opened and... two boys tied his legs and threw his sex against the pole until they really hurt him. And they threw buckets of cold water at me or waited for me at the door and threw me with the door in my face... There was always psychological and physical torture. (Da Silva, 2017:2 – Interview 4).

In an interview, Luísa Costa claimed:

I belonged to the Assembly of God... When the first church opened...in Trofa...the [Catholic] parish priest rang the bells, put the people around our church and did not let the church open. Then for the following Sunday a prayer service was held on Saturday night where the Trofa police...arrested the pastor and the owners of the house... They took them prisoners to Santo Tirso, which was our district, and the court of Santo Tirso opened on Sunday to try the [evangelical] Christians and they were acquitted. From this great persecution was born another church in Santo Tirso.

Costa also states,

They... threw...rocks, [beat us] with sticks, and would not let us through. We were going to school and there was a lady who taught [the Catholic] doctrine and she beat us. People would not let us in the street... we were young. (DaSilva, 2017:1 – Interview 5).

She adds,

They hit us. It was a lot of people when my mom was going to take us to school because we were 6 or 7, ...there were...over 20 people beating my mother. They called us 'Protestants'. It was a great persecution of the church. The following year I had a...niece who died...and we were from two o'clock in the afternoon until six o'clock and they would not let us enter the cemetery, they would not let us conduct the funeral. And we had to come to [National Republican] Guard of Santo Tirso at 6 o'clock in the afternoon so that we could hold the funeral of...my niece We suffered much, much persecution, we were much despised.

Evangelical women experienced extreme persecution at the hands of Roman Catholic people. Their cruelty cost many people their lives, causing pain and sorrow to Evangelical women whose husbands were not there to support them in their hour of need. The humiliation and degradation that these women experienced was unbearable, however, their strong belief and faith gave them the resilience to withstand whatever they experienced as a result of the cruelty of the Roman Catholic people.

The interviewees represent a universe of thousands of other evangelical women who suffered for their faith in Jesus Christ, many of whom are still living. The decrease of religious intolerance and persecution is addressed next.

3. THE DECREASE OF INTOLERANCE AND PERSECUTION IN PORTUGAL

All the interviewees mentioned that religious intolerance and persecution is decreasing in Portugal. DaSilva (2015:319) explains that “After the 1974 *coup d'état* and the subsequent Revolution it is evident that democracy [is] gaining ground and this [is] a step in the right direction, that is, towards freedom of religion”. As he points out:

The period post 1974 to 2009 is a very significant historical period for the Portuguese nation because it gave rise to a new school of thought related to democracy and secularism which had its roots in the 1974 Revolution.

A 2014 Report states that the *Portuguese Constitution* “guarantees the religious freedom of its citizens and the Government respects this right in practice” (N-a, (2014:414)). The two relevant legal instruments to provide for religious freedom are: “The *2001 Religious Freedom Act* and the *2004 Concordat with the Holy See*” (N-a, (2014:414)). In addition, “A Commission on Religious Freedom was created as an independent and consultative body of Parliament and Government (Article 52 of Law no. 16/2001)” (N-a, (2014:414)). Then “In 2004, the Government created a Working Group for Interreligious Dialogue, with a view to promoting multicultural and multi-religious dialogue between government and society” (n-a, 2014:415). The situation is now better because as reported in 2014: “There have been no significant cases of discrimination on religious grounds or abuses of religious freedom by the Government” (n-a, 2014:415). Portuguese Evangelical women benefit from the changes promoted by the democratic regime.

CONCLUSION

Despite the constant danger, Portuguese Evangelical women demonstrated an extraordinary resilience by responding to social and political prejudice and persecution “with an attitude of forgiveness, tolerance and pity for their neighbours’ historical and biblical ignorance, and prayer for those violent and resistant individuals infuriated people” (DaSilva, 2006:65). These women kept their Evangelical faith in Jesus Christ as the perilous times of the Salazar’s regime gave way to a new political era of democratic rule. In the present day, Evangelical women experience religious liberty in Portugal although the process of democratic change is still proceeding.

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