




ORDINARY



HEROES



OF **RACIAL**



JUSTICE

A HISTORY OF CHRISTIANS IN ACTION

KAREN J. JOHNSON



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PART I

TELLING TRUE STORIES

Catherine de Hueck and
Friendship House

The walk past all the honky-tonks and slum smells to the store front with the sign Blessed Martin de Porres Library and Friendship House and the statue of Blessed Martin in the window, the exterior set in cavernous rows of sleezezy stores, below the line of unbroken drab 6 story tenements. It was a slum alright. But once inside! The ambience was unforgettable: walls lined with books, a place of not many lights, muted by smoke. (The “B” [Catherine] as we called her smoked like a chimney then.) White faces, Black faces, talking, laughing, friendly, sipping coffee. How simple the solution all seemed then: the sooner we of different races learned to work together, to pray together, to eat, to study, to laugh together, the sooner we’d be on the way to interracial justice. Little did we know the complexities of the sin of segregation then.

ANN HARRIGAN, A WHITE IRISH CATHOLIC FROM BROOKLYN AND DIRECTOR OF FRIENDSHIP HOUSE IN CHICAGO, RECALLING HER FIRST VISIT TO CATHERINE DE HUECK’S FRIENDSHIP HOUSE IN HARLEM



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A DIFFERENT TAKE ON HISTORY

How Catherine founded Friendship House and why questioning that story can make us better disciples.

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FRIENDSHIP HOUSE LORE

Catherine de Hueck was captivating. Those who encountered her met a woman in love with God, who in her Russian accent pontificated about how to love God and love others. From the 1930s in urban Toronto, to Black Harlem in 1938, to Chicago's Black belt in 1942, until her death in rural Canada in 1985, Catherine called wealthy and middle-class White Catholics to not just say they loved Jesus but to love him by meeting the physical needs of people who had less. Like the prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures who called the people of God back to righteousness and justice, Catherine called people in her own time to cease worshiping their idols of wealth and comfort and instead practice righteousness and justice, two ideas that are inseparable in the biblical narrative. She modeled a different way of living through her countercultural, if profoundly imperfect, life.

Catherine's story was unexpected in midcentury America, and she knew it. In her 1946 book *Friendship House*, Catherine uses the strangeness of her story to attract her readers' attention and then, like Nathan speaking to David, turns the tables to point out their sin. In the book, Catherine asks how she, a White woman from Russia, ended up in Harlem, a center of African American life in New York. The immediate answer to her question became Friendship House lore. In 1938, she exited the subway in Harlem with a handbag, three

dollars, and a typewriter, which she would use to write thousands of words, filling letters, newspaper articles, and eventually books. The man showing her the flat she intended to rent told Catherine she must be confused. Why would a White woman want to rent an apartment in Black Harlem? Catherine was not “slumming” like many White people who went to Harlem because she was not going to a club. Catherine responded that she was Russian, which seemed to satisfy the man. Catherine related that he assumed she was like the only other White people who stayed in Harlem (besides the White priests assigned to local parishes): she must be a communist. He showed her the flat.

The strangeness of Catherine’s arrival and subsequent residence in Harlem cannot be overstated. Like most northern cities that had received the hundreds of thousands of Black migrants who moved away from farms where as sharecroppers they eked out a subsistence-level living and navigated a racial hierarchy that was characterized by lynching, New York was segregated. Catherine rented the flat and prayed that the Holy Ghost and the saints would provide furniture. They did, and the New York Friendship House was born.

Friendship House became an oasis of interracial Christian community in segregated New York. Friendship House functioned as a Catholic settlement house: it would grow to provide programming for young people, host a mother’s club for local women, provide used clothing to those in need, offer African American history classes, and help people find jobs. Like other settlement houses, it also became a meeting place for people from different social, economic, and religious backgrounds, a place where new ideas were born. People who visited and stayed there worked to bring Black and White people together for two reasons: to grow in their relationships with Jesus Christ and to bring about interracial justice. For them, interracial justice meant stopping the suffering African Americans endured because of White Americans’ intentional and unintentional actions.

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Catherine was a lifeline to me when I first encountered her, a light in the darkness. I had begun my doctoral coursework wanting to understand how race had worked in American history. My first class on race in early America had been deeply frightening and nearly paralyzing. My professor was amazing, smart, kind, and wise—and wanted the class to be useful to his students. I regularly sat



in the rocking chair in his office during office hours and asked questions, turning ideas around in my mind. But as intellectually stimulating as that was, the subject was awful. We had probed how race had been experienced and intellectually constructed, and I felt a portion of its crushing weight.

For my research project the next semester, I was looking for hope. I wanted to study some Christians who had resisted the darkness and the division that characterized so much of race in US history. I took the train from our inner-city west side neighborhood to the Chicago History Museum on the north side with a list of potential organizations to research in more recent US history that had been doing interracial work. After a few days exploring other collections, I happened upon the Friendship House papers and was hooked. Catherine and her comrades wrote with passion, drawing living water, it seemed, from a deep well of thought and practice that talked as much about people loving one another as it did individual righteousness and people loving God. Their ideas resonated with the Black church tradition that was nurturing me in the interracial—but mostly Black—church I was attending.

Friendship House became the middle of my first book.¹ I had found a historically significant organization and researched what happened before and after the group's founding in Chicago. I spent months in archives in Chicago, Milwaukee, South Bend, and Catherine's intentional community, Madonna House, in rural Canada researching Friendship House. While I soon saw the group's imperfections, its thinking on race and interracialism formed me personally. My questions then revolved primarily around Catherine's approaches to race and theology; I thought economics mattered, but I subsumed them under the category of race.

ANOTHER STORY

Despite my spending years studying Catherine and Friendship House, she continued to captivate me, as she had so many when she was alive. Some of my old questions lingered, like how she ended up in Harlem and what it meant. But when I turned to Catherine for this current book, my rereading of the sources prompted two new questions. Last time, I had glossed over her life in the early 1930s, thinking her arrival in Harlem was of primary concern

¹Karen J. Johnson, *One in Christ: Chicago Catholics and the Quest for Interracial Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

to me because it was then she started talking about race. This time I began wondering more about her years in Canada and her anticommunism. How did her views of economics shape her? I wondered. I also had some ten years of teaching undergraduate students how to do history under my belt and had puzzled with them over how to use sources and how to craft narratives. As I returned to Catherine's life and writings, I asked more about how she portrayed herself to outsiders. I was curious about the notion of histories as stories and wanted to see how Catherine had used them.

While I suspect the Friendship House lore about Catherine, her three dollars, and her typewriter is true, I cannot say for certain that it is. In my initial research, I found Catherine to be sometimes inaccurate and inconsistent in her descriptions of facts and events. Some of Catherine's closest American friends grew frustrated, too, with her at times because she seemed to hold the truth about events in the past loosely. Catherine was fiercely consistent in her passion for God and commitment to moral truths, but her stories were not always accurate in the factual sense. As one colleague observed, "That woman never told a story the same way twice."² Catherine would sometimes dismiss particular facts if they did not serve the moral truths on which she was expounding. But Catherine was not concerned with factual accuracy in the same sense I am; she was concerned with how stories would illuminate larger, deeper truths. All these points have pushed me to treat her work with care and to value contextualizing her so as to tell a true story.

That Catherine and I approach the past differently can make clear a key point necessary for doing history—and being in relationship with others, including God—well: history and the past are not the same. Historians can never fully know the past; only God, who knows the number of hairs on my head, who knit you together in your mother's womb, and who knows when a sparrow falls, knows all the past. Humans write history, which is the remembered past, parts of the past we piece together to tell a story that answers a question we have about the past. As we puzzle through Catherine's story and try to make sense of it, I want us to resist the notion that some histories are simply true and others are revisionist. Crafting histories always requires interpretive decisions; history is not simply an objective list of names and

²Quoted in Ellen Tarry, Oral History, interview by Lorene Hanley Duquin, 1991, 1998.052-072, Madonna House Archive.

dates. Our narrative, therefore, about how Catherine came to Harlem will, by necessity, be incomplete and will highlight certain aspects of her story.

But unlike humans, not all histories are created equal. Good histories must be *true stories*. Let me be clear: I am not embracing relativism. I am asking us to read the past using wisdom, weighing competing narratives, grounding arguments in evidence, and recognizing the limits of what we can know. But good histories are *stories* in that the storyteller makes choices, often depending on the historian's questions and purposes, and the scope of their research. They are also *true*. That is, they are based in careful analysis of sources created in the time period, sources historians call primary sources. True stories must have evidence that supports the stories, and that evidence must be used carefully. As we study Catherine, we will think deeply about the stories we tell, the narratives we have about different issues. I will take Catherine's story that she often told about her founding Friendship House and expand on it, problematize it, and reframe it.

As Christians, we must pay attention to the stories we tell not only about other people but about God and God's work in the world. When we think about God, do we emphasize that he is a God of justice, or do we downplay that aspect of the story? When we think about our roles in God's work, do we think that God's work relies on us or that we can join God in God's work, with ultimate responsibility lying on God's shoulders? Do we think God can handle our sin? Do we think—and act—as though God is on the move? Do we tell stories of people struggling or of people struggling and overcoming? Do we look around our world and see the pain and suffering as an end, or do we know that God will redeem it all? Do we think that this world is good, or do we tell a story that says that God is better, even if God seems more fleeting? Do we believe that what is here will pass away, or do we think of what is in front of us as somehow eternal? Our answers to these questions, and the stories our answers constitute, will shape our imaginations and actions. The discipline of telling of true stories about the past can help us see that we also need to tell—and live into—true stories about God.

The stories we tell are shaped by when we begin and end them. I choose to start in Russia, because of the economic dynamics Catherine experienced there. There, Catherine de Hueck was born Ekaterina Fyodorovna Kolyshkine in 1896 to a noble family. Her parents baptized her into the Russian



Orthodox Church (a fact she downplayed later in life) and raised her largely abroad in cosmopolitan settings. When they were home in Russia, her mother went to the peasants to serve them and taught Catherine to do manual labor, insisting she must know how to do the work she would later expect her servants to do.³ At fifteen, she married Boris de Hueck, who gave her a diary as a wedding present and in his inscription to his young bride wrote that she should write all her ideas and feelings in there for him to read. He would be unfaithful to Catherine.

When World War I began, Boris served in the First Russian Army, and Catherine followed him to the front to serve with the Red Cross. There she saw great horrors. She remembered carrying amputated limbs, covered in blood; retreating among refugees on the roads. “I have seen children slowly dying of hunger, while their mothers lost their reason over tragedy,” she said. “I have seen a field green with grass one day and literally stripped of every blade the next by people who had nothing else to eat. I have seen towns without a single roof on the houses because the straw of the thatching was taken to be boiled and eaten.”⁴ There on the front, she wondered where God was. The answer that came to her was that “it is we who have brought about the wounding of our soldiers, the widows, the orphans, by entering into another war. We always enter into another war. It is our will that does it, not God’s.”⁵

When the Bolsheviks took over Russia in 1917, Catherine’s life became endangered at the hands of her own people. In 1919, communists trapped her and Boris in their family estate in Finland, intending that they starve to death. Catherine remembered,

I was dragged into my own house. All foodstuffs were taken away, but water and fuel were left me—that I might myself prolong my agony. . . . Long, interminable days began—and the cold cruel face of death by hunger came closer, closer, ever closer. The temptation of Satan came with it. It would be easy to close the flue in the fireplace. The merciful fumes of carbon dioxide would fill the room, and cheat starvation. Long interminable nights went by.⁶

³Lorene Hanley Duquinn, *They Called Her the Baroness: The Life of Catherine De Hueck Doherty* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 2000), chaps. 2–5.

⁴Quoted in Duquinn, *They Called Her the Baroness*, 34–35.

⁵Quoted in Duquinn, *They Called Her the Baroness*, 35.

⁶Catherine de Hueck Doherty, *Friendship House* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1947), 4. Carbon monoxide, not carbon dioxide, is lethal. Catherine did use the word *dioxide* in her text.

For three months, they suffered. Lying by the fire, nearly unconscious, Catherine told God, “If you save me from this, in some sort of way I will offer my life to you.” Then she became unconscious and awoke to the shouts of the Finnish White Guards, who had defeated the Bolsheviks.⁷

After a brief reunification with their families, the couple went to Murmansk, Russia, where Boris served in the White Army against the Bolsheviks. Catherine again worked as a nurse and saw the violence and atrocities the Bolsheviks committed, following Lenin’s words that “revolution is in itself an act of terrorism. . . . It is likewise evident that when the revolution is most in danger the dictatorship must be most pitiless.”⁸ That explained the castrated soldiers, the ones tied to trees with their intestines sliced open, the ones with the missing arms and legs. Catherine saw the depths of evil that humans could commit.

When the British evacuated northern Russia and Boris was injured, the couple left for England under the guidance of the British military. Within five months, the Bolshevik army defeated the White Army. In England, Catherine fulfilled a childhood dream to join the Catholic Church. Soon they emigrated to Canada, where Catherine gave birth to her only child, George, in 1921.

They needed money, and so Catherine worked first in manual labor and then, starting in 1924, quite lucratively as a public speaker telling exotic tales about her experiences in Russia for the Community Chautauqua of Canada, an outdoor university of sorts that brought cultural events, entertainment, and lecturers to small towns across Canada. Catherine’s greatest trial was being away from George, her son, whom the unemployed Boris kept even as he saw a mistress. Catherine sent money to them to support George, but it funded Boris’s lifestyle. She went to New York to work, but the work was unstable as she lectured and helped book lectures for a lecture bureau. She helped Boris secure a visa, hoping their lives could be rebuilt together, and she faded in her faith. Boris again took up with his mistress, and Catherine lost hope for reconciliation. But she could not shake the nagging thought that God had saved her for something more than this. But what? The answer brought her back to her roots, to persecution by those who were poor when she was rich. Her answer was in forgiveness and repentance.

⁷Duquinn, *They Called Her the Baroness*, 51.

⁸Quoted in Duquinn, *They Called Her the Baroness*, 56.

QUESTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

How historians think about history is different from definitions of history in popular media. There you may have encountered debates over what the “real” history actually is. I offered a definition of history as “true stories.” They are true in that they must be grounded in evidence. They are stories in that they are shaped by the questions we ask, and we make decisions about what to include or not to include while remaining committed to being as honest as possible. Catherine’s lore about Friendship House’s founding is incomplete, and when we ask additional questions, which I focused around her relationship to the least of these, I was able to write a more complex, fuller story about the origins.

- How would you define *history*?
- How is the definition I offer similar to or different from that?

Although historians are committed to telling true stories, they often disagree with one another about questions related to causality, significance, change over time, and other matters. These debates are, in a sense, similar to disagreements people can have with friends, colleagues, and family members. As a historian and a teacher (and in my best moments as a parent, spouse, daughter, and friend), I am committed to being able to articulate someone’s position on a subject in a way they would say is accurate, even if I do not agree with them. Psychologists call this reflective listening.

- How might this definition of history as interpretive (and often debated) be helpful in strengthening your relationships with others?

Narratives about history are contested because they are not only about the past but also about who “we” are. For instance, are Americans a people characterized by freedom, or are we fundamentally oppressive? You may have heard debates between proponents of revisionist history and traditional narratives, with each side claiming that theirs is *the* right way to interpret the past.

- How could a more complex understanding of what constitutes history offer a different lens into these debates?

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