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Corinna Dahlgrün,  
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# **Overcome Evil with Good**

Interdisciplinary Reflections  
from Theology, Conflict Science,  
and the Military

Corinna Dahlgrün, Carolina Rehrmann, André Zempelburg (Hg.)

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# Table of Contents

## Introduction

*Carolina Rehrmann*

Overcome Evil with Good – an Impossible Undertaking? .....7

*Corinna Dahlgrün*

Offiziere und Theologiestudierende – Die Geschichte einer Kooperation.....23

*Leonhard Fritz / Felix Hinz*

Seminarbericht zum Seminar „Versöhnung“ der Führungsakademie der Bundeswehr .....33

## Theory

*Phillip Tolliday*

Overcoming Evil with Good: A Theological Perspective.....41

*Volker Stümke*

Wege zur Überwindung des Bösen: Friedensethische Erwägungen .....55

*Alistair McFadyen*

Theology, Torture, Terror, Policing: How not to Have Enemies or to Overcome Evil .....77

*André Zempelburg*

Aspects of Dealing with Evil in Israelite-Jewish Tradition .....97

*Carolina Rehrmann*

Protracted Evil: Emotions in Enduring, Ethno-National Conflicts..... 113

## Case Studies

*Marcello Clemenz / Kai Nickeldorf / Alexander Strelau / Franz Voißel / Steffen Wortmann*

Die Bundeswehr – Böses tun, um gut sein zu können? ..... 145

*Volker Stümke*

Eine Fußnote zu „Die Bundeswehr – Böses tun um gut sein zu können?“ ..... 153

<i>Charalampos Karpouchsis</i>	
Silent Echoes of Good Deeds: The Example of Kalavryta.....	155
<i>Carolina Rehrmann</i>	
Protracted Evil: Missing Persons and the Case of Cyprus .....	181
<i>Phillip Tolliday</i>	
Responding to Institutional Abuse in the Anglican Church of Australia: Ambiguities in Overcoming Evil with Good .....	209
<i>Miriam Schade</i>	
Overcome Evil with Good – Fallstudie Kornelius .....	223
<i>Rachel Muers</i>	
Claiming Blessings: Theological Reflections with Quaker Peacebuilders on Overcoming Evil with Good.....	237
<i>Alistair McFadyen</i>	
Investigating the 7/7 London Bombings: Suspects; Victims; Human Beings .....	249



# Claiming Blessings: Theological Reflections with Quaker Peacebuilders on Overcoming Evil with Good

Rachel Muers

## Introduction

In this paper, I seek to develop a theological account of how 'overcoming evil with good' is experienced and practised by a network of grassroots peacebuilders in post-conflict situations. The contemporary case studies that form the basis of the paper are drawn from a collection of testimonies from the peacebuilders and peace activists who are part of Quaker Peace Network Africa. Following the reflections of these peacebuilders, I take as my initial starting-point the idea that peacemaking is not only, or not even, an attempt to fix a problem or eliminate an evil. It is, rather, the act of claiming a divine promise – the promise of blessing.

My source for the peacebuilder testimonies is the collection *This Light That Pushes Me*, a book and photographic exhibition containing the words, the stories and the portraits of people who are both survivors of violence and actively involved in peacebuilding. Many of the author-subjects have become founders and directors of the projects of Quaker Peace Network Africa.<sup>1</sup> Short verbatim quotations from the contributors are typeset as poems, and juxtaposed with their photographic portraits and prose narrations of their experiences. In reading the stories recounted in *This Light That Pushes Me*, I am attentive to the particular decisions made about their representation – providing close readings of this material as it stands without making assumptions

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<sup>1</sup> The book itself is a joint venture between the aforementioned network (whose chair wrote the introduction), British Quakers, and the photographer Nigel Downes, himself a survivor of a very violent childhood. The book is produced for a general audience of all faiths and none.

about the extent to which it is, or is not, backed up by systematic theological reflection on the part of the individual or of the compilers of the book. It is important to note that the collection and circulation of these testimonies occurs in the context of Quakerism as a globally-networked peace church tradition – committed both to nonviolence and peace activism as practices, and to integrating these practices into theology and spirituality.<sup>2</sup>

Two aspects of the collection of testimonies to be considered should be highlighted here. First, the contexts in which the Peace Network operates can mostly be described as *post*-conflict situations – meaning *inter alia* that they challenge any simple binary between situations of war and situations of peace. Conflict persists on many different levels; questions about the integration of peace and justice come to the fore; peace is understood not simply as the absence of war, but rather as a complex multi-faceted reality requiring long-term commitment and (at least for some of the activists and theorists involved) as a process rather than an end-state.<sup>3</sup> Second, the people whose voices are heard in the collection are survivors of violence as well as peace activists. Questions about the nature and possibility of healing, what it means to ‘resolve’ a conflict, or how the pervasive evil can be overcome with good, all affect them at an individual as well as a societal level.

In order to explore the potential significance of these peacebuilders’ testimonies for Christian theology, I also bring the peacebuilders’ experiences into dialogue with Julian of Norwich – writing from a very different time and place, and frequently hailed in the twentieth century (in England at least) as a theologian for our time and an ‘apostle of reconciliation’.<sup>4</sup> An important piece of background for this recontextualisation of Julian is the careful work of Grace Jantzen and others to set her in her fourteenth-century English context – in the aftermath of the social breakdown caused by the plagues, amid religious and political rebellion violently suppressed – not only as a detached commentator, but also as a participant in the life of a suffering city.<sup>5</sup> Although the journey from fourteenth-century Europe to twenty-first-century Africa might seem a long one, it has in fact been taken before, in a series of articles relating her work to reconciliation activities in post-genocide Rwanda.<sup>6</sup> Unusually, however, for work on Julian and reconciliation or peacebuilding, I focus initially not on her assertion that she sees ‘no blame’ in God, but rather on her wider reflections on sin, evil and the goodness of God; I return to the question of blame and forgiveness at the end of the paper. This

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<sup>2</sup> On which see Muers 2015.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the importance, and the successes and failures, of post-conflict ‘peacebuilding’ in African countries since the 1990s see Khadiagala 2017.

<sup>4</sup> On Julian as twentieth-century ‘apostle of reconciliation’, see Whitehead 2009, 132.

<sup>5</sup> Jantzen 1987.

<sup>6</sup> On Julian in Rwanda, see Maskulak 2017; Maskulak 2011.

de-prioritisation of questions of blame and forgiveness reflects the balance of material in the peacebuilders' testimonies themselves.

## Claiming Blessings: The Peacebuilders

“We lost people.  
We lost people.  
Even relatives.  
Relatives.  
Friends.  
Relatives.  
Many many many many.  
It was worse here in Rwanda.  
Violence brings only  
Hatred Death Conflict  
Blessed are the peacemakers  
I think  
People want to be  
Blessed.”<sup>7</sup>

David Bucura, whose words are quoted above, was one of the key figures in the establishment of the Quaker peacebuilding and reconciliation program in post-genocide Rwanda; he was himself a refugee in Congo and most of his family were killed. His lament for Rwanda mourns both the loss of individual people and of relationships and kin networks.<sup>8</sup> He creates, in a few words, a vivid picture of social collapse as well as a litany of specific and unique pain. Everybody ‘lost people’ irreplaceably and everyone was drawn into the maelstrom of ‘hatred, death, conflict’. In the disordered but inevitable and inescapable sequence of sin–violence, hatred, death, conflict, one thing leading to another and none of them leading anywhere – he voices a collective predicament of being unmade. In comments elsewhere, he has expressed equally vividly the deep sense of the *incomprehensibility* of evil – a sense that persists despite the availability of social,

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<sup>7</sup> Bucura in Shipler Chico 2014, 40.

<sup>8</sup> Bucura’s repeated references to ‘relatives’ – and indeed the repeated lament ‘we lost people’ – recall the connection, explored by Akinola and Uzodike, between *Ubuntu* philosophies and post-conflict peacebuilding projects in many African contexts including Rwanda. Akinola and Uzodike 2018.

political and psychological explanations, of which he makes use in his work: 'I can't understand from where the devils of 1994 came'.<sup>9</sup>

In the middle of this collective, inescapable and non-sensical situation, the key turning point is the dominical promise 'Blessed are the peacemakers'. The participants in the peace networks – initiating and leading local reconciliation programmes, community mediation and dialogue groups – are identified here as people who 'want to be blessed'.<sup>10</sup> To be precise, as Bucura's words make explicit, they believe that they, along with their fellow-suffering creatures, are *promised* a blessing. They reach out, with their intellects and their imaginations as well as with their bodies and lives, to claim the blessing that is supposed to be theirs.

The refusal to give up on the promise of blessing becomes, for Bucura and his colleagues, the refusal to compromise with violence. This in turn leads to the pursuit of risky small-scale activities of peacemaking without guarantees. A clear example from *This Light That Pushes Me* of such risky small-scale activity is in the story of Rose Imbega, whose peace activism began with an incident of impromptu local mediation – averting group violence and risking its redirection towards herself – following a conversation she overheard on a bus.<sup>11</sup>

The language of 'claiming a blessing', or recognising the promise of a blessing, helps to articulate the open-ended character of the action undertaken. Peace work in the post-conflict situation is not – as numerous commentators have observed – a matter of restoring a previous situation or of imposing a known solution; in the type of work described here there is no clear prior understanding of what success will look like. As Esther Mombo, a Quaker theologian closely involved with peacebuilding work, has put it: 'Reconciliation is not a skill to be mastered ... it comes as a stance assumed before a broken world rather than as a tool to repair that world'.<sup>12</sup> Nor is peace work straightforwardly a matter of obedience to a command whatever the consequences. Peace work is practical engagement with the realities of the given situation, on the basis of a trustworthiness but – as things stand – vague promise.

This idea of undertaking risky work on the basis of a promise of blessing helps to explain a further feature of how the peace activists describe their work. The theological words of the activists quoted in *This Light That Pushes Me* frequently sound – if quoted out of context – naïve and overoptimistic, especially when set alongside their stories of horrendous and irrecoverable loss. Joseph Mamai Makhokha, for example, a survivor of the 2007-8 election violence in the Mount Elgon area of Kenya, says 'Even if our perceived enemies drove us away / I think there

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<sup>9</sup> In Friends Peace Teams 2017.

<sup>10</sup> An extensive range of examples are described and discussed in Mombo and Nyiramana 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Shipler Chico (Hg.), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Mombo 2017, 130.

is something of God in that person ... Let each see that of God in their perceived enemy'.<sup>13</sup> This kind of statement, I suggest, is best understood not as something that can be demonstrated – as the fruit of experience or the conclusion of a process of theological reasoning – but rather as the *starting* point for the practice of peacebuilding. The blessing of finding the image of God in the 'perceived enemy' is something that is promised and not yet realised; it needs to be claimed through the engaged practice of peace work.

## Claiming Blessings: The Theologian

“[We] see evil deeds done and such great harm inflicted that it seems impossible to us that any good could ever come out of this. And we witness this, sorrowing and grieving over it, so that we cannot repose in the blessed contemplation of God as we should do.”<sup>14</sup>

The accusation of over-optimism has also from time to time been levelled at the theology of Julian of Norwich. A significant proportion of the discussion of her thought has focused on the affirmation that 'sin is befitting, but all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well'.<sup>15</sup> Denys Turner, Marilyn McCord Adams and others have offered detailed refutations of the idea that Julian is here offering theological 'cheap grace' in the form of a denial of the reality and gravity of sin.<sup>16</sup> They draw attention to passages like the one quoted above; Julian's affirmation that all shall be well arises in the context of her intense awareness of the extent and depth of human suffering, from which she is never released and into which her theological work draws her more deeply.

Julian rejects accounts of sin that exclude it from the providential goodness or good providence of God, and thus has no choice but to affirm that it is 'befitting'. The fact that she makes this affirmation even in the face of her inability to see how any good can come of the 'great harm' that sin has caused to God's creatures does not signal a decision to stop paying attention either to the

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<sup>13</sup> Shipler Chico (Hg.), 20. Mamai Makhokha, a survivor of violence in the Mount Elgon area, died in 2015; he had held several leadership roles among Kenyan Quakers and in the Friends Church Peace Team.

<sup>14</sup> Julian of Norwich 2015, 80.

<sup>15</sup> Julian 2015, 74.

<sup>16</sup> Turner 2011, especially 85–88; Adams 2011. Note that Adams does not altogether acquit Julian of the charge of putting forward an overoptimistic theology; she writes that Julian 'does not consider the chances and changes of this present life sometimes wrecks and ruins human agents, at least *prima facie*, shatters them into people who would be unable or twists them into people who would be unwilling to profit from her advice.' Adams 2011, 445.

‘great harm’ or to the character of God. Rather, it is the starting-point for further close readings – of the narratives and images of Christ that constitute Julian’s visions and are also formed out of her life experience, of the teachings of ‘holy church’, and of the lives of fellow-Christians.

There is a parallel, I suggest, between Julian’s determination to continue to wrestle with the experience of ‘great harm’, sorrow and grief, and the peacemakers’ action of claiming a blessing. As Turner puts it, Julian has to ‘win through’ with ‘time and much reflection’ to the conviction that the outworking of salvation in Christ is an uncountably greater good than a world with no sin and no redemption.<sup>17</sup> Julian refuses all economic accounts of soteriology – that is, all suggestion that Christ pays a price or penalty *owed* for sin – and instead treats salvation as a ‘work of pure delight’ that exceeds all possible calculations of price. The pain of sin (for Julian) is met by, or, better, enclosed in and anticipated by ‘a kind of blessedness we might never have had nor known if that quality of goodness which is in God had not been opposed.’<sup>18</sup> In other words, even in the middle of her reflections on sin she reaches not (only) towards repair or recompense but towards ‘bliss’ or blessedness as the *telos* of God’s ways with the world.

Asking *how* all things shall be well in the light of the great harm of sin – as Julian does repeatedly in the course of her revelations – becomes, like the work of the peacemakers, an insistent grasping after a blessing that one has been promised but cannot confer on oneself. It is also an expression of deep longing, longing to be who one is, to be blessed. Peacemakers do not emerge from this encounter as doers of good works, who receive (in this world or the next) the reward of a blessing for obedience to a dominical command. They are, rather, people caught in the middle of the senseless maelstrom who still *want to be blessed*, whose ‘action’ is longing or thirst for a blessing.

Can we meaningfully talk about theological *thinking* as ‘claiming a blessing’? The image of Jacob wrestling – and refusing to let go of the one who wrestles with him until he has been given a blessing (Gen 32:26) – appears occasionally in recent theology, usually in relation to the reading of difficult texts or of engagement with specific contemporary issues.<sup>19</sup> The image draws together powerfully the sheer difficulty of theological work (hermeneutical, constructive or apologetic) and the sense that it is compelled or motivated by divine encounter – as well as the coexistence of pain and blessing in the texts and traditions theologians inherit. My framing of theological work as ‘claiming a blessing’ goes beyond the image of wrestling with specific texts and traditions, to identify theological *fides quaerens intellectum* as the work of holding on to received knowledge

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<sup>17</sup> Turner 2011, 212, 214.

<sup>18</sup> Julian 2015, 129; see Turner 2011, 210–11.

<sup>19</sup> Williams / Highton 2007. Another famous, if very bleak, example is Phyllis Trible’s reflection that ‘to tell and hear texts of terror is to wrestle demons in the night, without a compassionate God to save us.’ Trible 1984, 3.

of and speech about God, in the confidence that it will be life-giving and intelligible in a particular situation where this is not yet apparent.

As has already been suggested, to talk about blessing in theology is to point to the *telos* of creation – in a way that refers both back to God’s blessing on all creatures and forward to the eschatological consummation, the ultimate aim of God’s saving and relating.<sup>20</sup> It is also to point to the substantive content of that *telos* – the full well-being and flourishing of creatures – and to the connection between the conditions of created well-being and the conditions of ultimate blessedness. Creatures are destined to be blessed *as* the particular creatures they are, above and beyond what can presently be known of their needs and capacities but without annihilating their particularity. Blessing mediates between the general or universal (God pronounces blessing on all creatures, or on all the nations) and the irreducibly particular and differentiated (blessings are given to many specific creatures and creaturely realities). This open-ended dynamic of blessing acquires a new dimension – and gives rise to new concerns – when the focus is on *claiming* a blessing rather than on pronouncing one. *Wanting* to be blessed, *claiming* a blessing, appears in this perspective as a creaturely act of trusting response – in the context of the enormous gulf between the blessing promised and the present situation.

The theologian seeking understanding is claiming a specific blessing that has its own specific ground of hope – namely, that divine truth is knowable and shareable, that reason and understanding are included in the dynamic of blessing. Crucially, as with the work of the peace activists, the blessing given – the understanding reached – is not exactly determinable in advance from the problem confronted or the question posed; Julian rarely receives a direct answer to any of the questions she asks; but she does advance in her understanding, and in her capacity to communicate that understanding, in response to every question she asks.

Both Julian’s work and the work of the peacebuilders is genuinely unfinished business, not simply a matter of communicating a known truth and waiting for the world to accept it. The tension between full confidence on the basis of the word received, on the one hand, and compassionate suffering and longing for completeness, on the other, is captured in many of the juxtapositions of *This Light That Pushes Me*. In many cases the words of the peacemaker express confidence, and her or his story shows how the situational courage arising from that full confidence results in very small-scale, impermanent and fragile change in situations of extreme suffering or danger. The audacity of the declarations, in terms of the mismatch between what is claimed and what is observed, is matched by the audacity of the actions in terms of their contextual vulnerability. The key point to note here, for the purposes of connecting the peace activism with theology, is that it is not merely a question of the gap between theory and practice or between the ‘already’ and the

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<sup>20</sup> For a summary of this theme – which draws heavily on Westermann 1978 – see Kelsey 2009, 447–450. See also Ford 1999, 239–251.

‘not yet’; it is that the peace activists do not yet know what their faith *means* at the point where they begin to act. In the same way, Julian trusts, and unfolds the implications of, the visions she sees while, by her own repeated account, not knowing what they mean.

In the final section of this paper I indicate some further ways in which peacebuilders’ reflections on ‘overcoming evil with good’ can enter into dialogue with theology – and in doing so I turn back, briefly, to the questions of justice and forgiveness with which much previous theological work on peacebuilding has been concerned. I argue that it is significant that such questions are *not* to the fore in the peacebuilder testimonies I have discussed – and that this in turn sheds light on Julian’s controversial ‘God of no blame and no wrath.’<sup>21</sup>

## Healing not Fixing: Understanding the Peacebuilders’ Hope

“Healing  
is different  
from fixing.  
It is easy to fix things  
but it takes time for healing ...  
It is risky also  
so you need to understand  
That things will not unfold the way you are expecting.”<sup>22</sup>

“Someone can’t forgive with a broken heart. We need first to heal our wounds, our deep wounds. Then start the work of peace and reconciliation ... [We] need to heal. Then forgive. Then love.”<sup>23</sup>

Adrien Niyongabo, founder of a trauma recovery and community reconciliation centre in Burundi, and leading Rwandan Quaker peacebuilder, Cecile Nyiramana, both write in post-conflict contexts where questions of blame, forgiveness and retrospective justice are much to the fore. Nyiramana is a victim of genocide who is also the wife of an accused perpetrator; her grassroots peacebuilding work has focused on the establishment of dialogue, reconciliation and healing groups for women across communities. These activities of community groups sat alongside the much larger-scale, and much-discussed, *gacaca* court processes for justice after the 1994

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<sup>21</sup> See Maskulak 2011.

<sup>22</sup> Adrien Niyonbago in Shipler Chico 2014.

<sup>23</sup> Cecile Nyiramana in Shipler Chico 2014.



genocide; reflection such as Nyiramana's offer a valuable additional perspective on the struggle to 'overcome evil with good' in the context of horrendous suffering described by David Bucura.<sup>24</sup>

Niyongabo's comment that it is easy to 'fix' things suggests a reference to the kind of post-conflict 'closure' that can be achieved through the apportioning of blame and innocence for past wrongs, the determination of punishments or recompense, and the conviction that justice has been served. It might also recall models of peacebuilding within which 'peace' is a clear externally-determined end point, achieved at a specified time. Moreover 'fixing' suggests the return to a previous known state – 'overcoming the evil' by going back to where we were before.

By contrast, as we have seen, the activities of the Quaker peacebuilders are not 'fixing' according to a predetermined plan, but rather engaging in an open-ended process – in which 'things will not unfold the way you are expecting'. Referring to this open-ended process as 'healing' draws attention both to the deep suffering with which the process begins, and to the ongoing suffering that is not 'fixed' by a return to previous norms, by a cessation of open hostility, or even – importantly – by the processes that apportion judgement and blame, and enact forgiveness. It is important, of course, that neither Niyongabo nor Nyiramana denies the importance of 'fixing' or of forgiveness. Forgiveness and the framework within which it sits – and localised acts of 'fixing', of setting particular quarrels right, of figuring out how to do justice – matter very much *in their place*; but their place is within a larger process, which both reaches deeper into shared suffering and trauma – attending to the 'deep wounds' and the 'broken heart' – and opens up the promise of a greater and as-yet-unimagined good – not only forgiveness or uneasy coexistence, but love.

Nyiramana's prioritisation of healing over forgiveness, which is based on her own extensive experiences of grassroots community work with women in Rwanda, sheds new light on Julian's claim to see no wrath and no blame in God. Julian seeks a theological response to the 'great harm' of sin and even to the 'evil deeds done', in the context of the good providence of God, that eschews the juridical – both in the relation between God and humanity, and in the judgements that humans might make about divine goodness. Accounts of divine justice and punishment, and theodicies, perform a kind of 'fixing' in relation to the manifest ills caused by human sin; something similar could be said, indeed, of the economic accounts of soteriology which, as mentioned earlier, Julian eschews. They enable a kind of intellectual balance or satisfaction to be achieved through the knowledge that justice has been done and (in the case of divine wrath) forgiveness granted, but, as Nyiramana's experience shows, all is *not* well because the heart is still broken. Moving too quickly to find a resolution to the process of 'overcoming evil with good' leaves both the heart and the community unhealed.

Nyiramana suggests, in both her writing and her peacebuilding work, that an exclusive focus on forgiveness – on resolving and overcoming a specific past wrong – leaves the heart unhealed

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<sup>24</sup> On *gacaca* courts, see inter alia Bornkamm 2012; Melvin 2010; Longman 2010.

because it denies the depth and complexity of shared suffering. Instead, she contextualises acts of forgiveness within a process that begins with healing and opens out into love. This in turn prevents forgiveness from becoming *either* a way to deny the depth of suffering and trauma *or* an end-point that prevents people from claiming the full blessing that is offered to them.

Taking this insight back to Julian's work, the relativisation of forgiveness – and of the whole question of divine wrath and blame – comes perhaps into sharpest focus, or makes most sense, in her meditation on the crucified Christ. Christ suffers in his flesh the pain of the whole of creation – the 'great harm' and inexplicable evil deeds – including the tearing apart of the social body, suffered 'out of kindness', that is, in kinship with humanity. Longing and compassion, which Julian sees intertwined in her vision of the crucified Christ, are born together in the space of lament for collective loss.<sup>25</sup> Compassion at Christ's suffering passes over into 'kind compassion' for the suffering of others – and extends into a longing for communal healing and shared blessing.<sup>26</sup> All of these movements – the compassion of Christ and Christ's desire for humanity, the compassion and sorrow of the one who contemplates his suffering, the compassion for others that it engenders, and the love that underlies 'each instance of kind compassion that a man feels for his fellow Christians' – are open-ended, not because there is doubt about what they mean or where they are going, but because they have to be lived out, and their promise claimed, in each particular situation.

## Conclusion

The actions and words of the peacebuilders discussed in this paper arise from a place of deep lament and loss – confrontation with evil deeds, with great harm, and with the impossibility of seeing a way out of the predicament. Their responses to the predicament, both in actions and words, bespeak a remarkable optimism – expressing the desire to be 'blessed', expecting to encounter God in the supposed enemy, seeking not only to fix isolated problems but to bring about long-term healing. I have sought in this paper to begin a conversation between these peacebuilders and a theologian who speaks out of a similar place of lament and loss – reflecting on and enacting the struggle to claim a promised blessing. Both theological work and peacebuilding are understood here as practices motivated by the desire for individual and communal healing and blessing, met and carried by the divine desire for the healing and blessing of creation.

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<sup>25</sup> On the importance of the social body for Julian, see Bauerschmidt 1999.

<sup>26</sup> 'Each instance of kind compassion that a man feels for his fellow Christians out of love – it is Christ in him.' Julian 2015, 76.

Much more could be said both about Julian's theology and soteriology, and about the theological background of the Quaker peacebuilders discussed here. However, a theological conversation that ignored *practice* – both the practice of theology and the practice of peacebuilding – would, I suggest, risk missing important insights on the theme of this volume. It would risk 'fixing' problems on the theoretical level without asking how these fixes contribute to processes of healing that move communities towards love.

The projects to which the present volume relates raise an important set of questions about the relationships between theology, ethics, pastoral practice and activism, which the comparison I have sketched here may help to illuminate. Looking at theological work as 'claiming a blessing', and placing it alongside peace activism, invites recognition of its contextual motivation – the particular needs, desires, suffering that surrounds it – as theologically significant, but not determinative of the content and not the only basis for judging its success. 'Claiming a blessing' is not just finding a ready-made theological solution for a real-world problem, but it *is* searching for the intelligibility and life-giving character of Christian faith in the real world. None of this makes theology *the same as* peace activism (or any other practice to which it might be compared) but it makes it harder to place it in a different category altogether – and also harder to draw sharp and well-defended lines between contextual, practical, systematic, pastoral and mystical theology on the basis of their supposed different relationships to context and practice.

One of the most important insights of the study processes to which this volume of papers relates is that theology should not be understood, either as theory that is developed nowhere in particular and then put into practice in the real world, or as the end-point of a process of gathering experiential data. Theology is itself caught up in the struggles of individuals and communities – the everyday 'evil deeds' and 'great harm' as well as the extraordinary ones – and its processes of seeking understanding can themselves be caught up in the movement of 'overcoming evil with good'.

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