

# Open Peer Review

*unquotable - nicht zitierfähig - ne pas citable*

---

## REVIEW OF

*Katharina Peetz*, LISTENING TO ORDINARY RWANDANS  
SEARCHING FOR A NEW THEOLOGY AFTER GENOCIDE

---

That this excellent theological reflection on postgenocidal theology in Rwanda was rejected for publication by the centre in Kigali in which it was presented is a testament to its honesty and evidence of the continued underlying tensions in this traumatised society. It is entirely appropriate that it should now appear in *theologie.geschichte*. I should make clear that I have never been to Rwanda and that my knowledge of the genocide comes from the media, one or two books and the famous film *Hotel Rwanda*. Nevertheless, I did ecumenical work for four and a half years in Papua New Guinea and for twenty-three years in Ireland, where the terms of the discussions I had with colleagues and Christians involved in conflict were almost identical to those reported by Peetz.

The concept of ‘ordinary theology’ provides an extremely useful basis for Peetz’s analysis. Assuming the role of a non-expert, listening and learning in the face of people’s trauma and grief, is indeed the only possible attitude to adopt in such a situation. Peetz finds that so-called ‘ordinary’ Christians have reflected deeply and honestly on their experiences, invoking the Christian doctrines with which they are familiar, whether Catholic or Protestant. At the centre of these reflections is the conviction that God is not to blame for the atrocities that occurred; rather, their evil can be ascribed to Satan as the creature and antithesis of God. God, in fact, is often portrayed as vulnerable and weak and hence able to empathise with those who have suffered. God’s judgement balances love and justice, and this is the model for reconciliation arising from forgiveness and repentance. Forgiveness, however, is

essentially free, otherwise it is not valid as a basis for reconciliation; one might add that this also applies to forgiveness that is hasty and superficial rather than a genuine response to profound repentance stemming from a deep personal conversion (metanoia). Forgiveness may well be a precondition for reconciliation, but it is a free gift which may also be refused. Peetz is generous in allowing for those who find it impossible to forgive.

An interesting thread running through her discussion, one that deserves to be drawn out more explicitly, is the multiple religious affiliation of many Rwandans, including the urge to convert to other churches on the part of some survivors. She mentions the role of Muslims in the conflict and the continuing presence of traditional healers. Peetz also touches on the post-colonial dimension of the conflict, another theme that could be further developed elsewhere. Looking on from outside as an ecumenist, I was profoundly affected by the way Rwandan Christians seemed to prioritise ethnic identity over denominational affiliation, despite over a century of evangelisation. The value of Peetz's research is that she shows how deep this betrayal was, but at the same time how admirable are the efforts being made by 'ordinary' Christians to find their way beyond it, though she also suggests that different responses are legitimate. Her excellent analysis, soberly based on patient listening to those affected, is indeed a call to a 'humbler' theology.

**Author:**

John D'Arcy May, Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin