


Responses to violence and human suffering in Christian hymnody: A study of responses to situations of violence in the work of four hymn writers

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Dates:

Received: 20 July 2018

Accepted: 04 Feb. 2019

Published: 21 May 2019

How to cite this article:

Tönsing, J.G., 2019, 'Responses to violence and human suffering in Christian hymnody: A study of responses to situations of violence in the work of four hymn writers', *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75(1), a5197. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v75i1.5197>

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This article looks at violence and the response to violent situations from the perspective of Christian hymnody. It examines where the content of hymns reflects experiences of violence and the hymn writers' response to this. The work of four hymn writers is studied: two German traditional hymn writers and two contemporary English hymn writers. In each case, the article examines how they describe the violent situation, how they deal with the issue of human guilt, and what their response is. The article points out that often, hymns that deal with difficult issues do not become easily accepted in the congregational repertoire. However, as can be seen in these four cases, sometimes hymn writers do manage to find the language that can ensure that a hymn or song becomes a deep-felt way for congregations to express their feelings and experiences. Important in this acceptance is whether the hymn finds an appropriate expression of hope beyond the pain.

Keywords: Hymns; Violence; Response; Guilt; Pain; Paul Gerhardt; Jochen Klepper; Fred Pratt Green; Graham Kendrick; Lutheran.

Introduction

In the final years of the Zuma administration in South Africa, anger was growing and there were many protests. The simmering discontent easily let the protests boil over into violence. Crime and abuse of all kinds are continually high in the country, leading people of faith and theologians to ask what their contribution can be in this situation. These years were also violent internationally, with wars displacing countless people, as well as mass shootings and attacks by extremists of different persuasions. This article looks at violence and the response to violent situations from the perspective of Christian hymnody.¹ Hymns can offer a window into how Christians have responded in the past, and an indication about what is seen as a useful response by congregants. To keep within the scope of an article, the research was limited to songs from hymnals and song books which are in use in my own church of Lutheran confession.² While the survey was extensive, the discussion below will focus on four hymn writers only, who have written hymns with situations of violence as the clearly identifiable background.

When one studies hymns, it is important to distinguish between hymns and songs that are written, even printed, and those that are taken up by a congregation as 'their' hymns, the hymns that they own and sing.³ Normally, hymns survive that are not too specific, hymns that do not talk too clearly about certain kinds of suffering. People want to recognise themselves in hymns if they are to 'own' them. So, mostly hymns are more likely to gain popularity if they use generic references to suffering or pain, which can cover anything from war through cancer to divorce, or general images of light and darkness. If there is talk of human complicity in the violence, it will be more readily accepted if it is in generic terms about human sin and guilt. Songs have been and are being written that are more specific, but they are less readily taken up by congregations. This means that they may be sung on special occasions when the pastor or worship team chooses them, but are generally not 'owned' by the congregation. It does happen that specific songs are rediscovered

1. This article was written for the annual conference of the Society of Practical Theology in South Africa held in January 2018. The topic was 'Reforming Practical Theological Anthropology with the focus on culture, gender and violence'.

2. This is the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Southern Africa (N-T).

3. Of the 535 hymns in the German Lutheran Hymnal (EG), I personally know 431, which at 80% is likely to be considerably higher than the average congregant. Those very regularly sung are probably only about 20% of this total. For the English hymnal, the figures are likely to be substantially lower.

Note: The collection entitled 'Christina Landman Festschrift', sub-edited by Wessel Bentley (University of South Africa) and Victor S. Molobi (University of South Africa).

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later. For example, hymns about the threat of nuclear war are now no longer sung,⁴ but might become relevant if such a threat would grow again. Of course, songs also have to be musically and poetically suitable for congregational use.⁵

This article discusses songs, some of which have definitely 'made it' as congregational hymns; others have at least 'made it' into hymnals and well-known song books, although it is not clear how often they are actually sung.

Paul Gerhardt (1607–1676)

Gerhardt is the most important Lutheran hymn writer after Luther himself. He was born in 1607 so lived through the entire violent period in Germany known as the 30 years' war. This began in 1618 as a religious conflict after the Reformation and became a battle for power for the whole of Europe. Germany was devastated. In places two-thirds of the population died, and the rest was left to starvation, plague and disease (Geiger 2007:29). Paul Gerhardt lost three of his four children in the post-war years (Hesselbacher 1982:52, 77, 96). The war ended in 1648. The first selection of his hymns was published in 1647 by Johann Crüger, still during the war (Albrecht 1995:105). Some of those published in the next edition of the Crüger hymnal in 1653 were probably still written in the war years, the others in the years of great suffering immediately following.

Gerhardt's hymns are hymns of trust in God's care and providence in the midst of suffering. The cross of Christ features prominently as an image of suffering and hope beyond death. While most of the hymns use generic terms for suffering, such as *Elend* [misery], *Leiden* [suffering] and *Pein* [pain], some hymns are much more specific.

The most specific is a song of thanksgiving for the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, published in 1653 (EKG 392).⁶ It has strong language about the devastation of war and portrays the suffering as a punishment of God. It proclaims that Germany has been given a new chance to be faithful and warns the nation not to take the gift of peace lightly but to treasure it. The hymn uses very strong language for the devastation after the war: *Städte voller Schutt und Stein... Dürre, wüste Heid, Gräber voller Leichen* [cities full of rubble and stones ... dried out, wild heath, graves full of corpses]. There is a promise that there will be a lasting peace if people will follow God's ways. This is a clear example of a hymn that was too specific to a particular context to become a true congregational hymn, though with the violent history of Europe, there must have been other chances to sing it. It became popular again after the Second World War. Having a well-known tune, shared with another hymn (EKG 188), of course, made it easier to take it up again. It provided a voice to people who were saying that the devastation of Germany

4. For example, the translation of the hymn *Great God, our source and Lord of space* in the German Hymnal (EG 431).

5. For what this means see Tönsing (2013:290–296).

6. This article follows the hymnological convention of using abbreviations rather than publishers when quoting from hymnals and song books. The full references are provided in the References section.

at the end of World War II was judgement for going badly against the ways of God. This led to the hymn being included in the German Lutheran Hymnal of 1950 (the *Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch* EKG 392), but it was removed from the next edition in 1990, because it was seen as no longer relevant. One can hope that Germany will never again have occasion to revisit this decision.

There is another hymn that speaks very specifically of war and bloodshed. It must have been written in the years of war, though only published in 1653 (EG 58). It is sung in congregations, though usually only once a year. It is a hymn for the end of the year, Old Year's Eve, where at least in the German Lutheran tradition, services are held. The hymn describes the walk of the human being from one year to the next, 'through fear and troubles, through war and great terrors which cover the whole world' (v3). It describes the protection of God in the midst of all the pain, and, astoundingly, tries to discover God as a fountain of joy: This is one of Gerhardt's most powerful lines, full of alliteration (five Fs and seven S sounds), *Schliess zu die Jammerpforten, und lass an allen Orten auf so viel Blutvergiessen die Freudenströme fließen* [close the gates of lament and pour out your streams of joy over all the places of bloodshed]. The joyful undercurrent of Gerhardt's hymns, though written in such times, is always an astounding characteristic. Unlike in the first hymn, here there is no critique of the violence, no mention of human sin or pride, but the suffering of war is portrayed as equivalent to the suffering caused by losing direction in life (prayed for in v. 12), or disease or depression (v. 13). The song culminates in a petition for the Spirit and salvation. The hymn proclaims the presence of God as comforter and bringer of joy in the midst of suffering of all kinds. This hymn does not speak about human sin and failing.

A third hymn using prominent anti-war imagery is a free metrical versification of Psalm 85 (EG 283). While it was published in 1653, it is likely that it was still written during the war as it includes a prayer for help in evil days. The hymn, as does the psalm, reminds God of his mercy to the country in former days. It prays for an end to the war and for the weapons to rest. There is no direct mention of human guilt or involvement in the war. This hymn also shares a tune with another hymn (EG 299), so can be used without a problem when the occasion demands it. It is too specific to become a 'congregational hymn' in the true sense, but is a valuable resource for times of conflict and violence.

There is not a major difference in Paul Gerhardt's hymns written during and after the war, as even after the end of hostilities, life was still very hard and dangerous, with the diseases and the plagues. However, as the 1647 edition of Johann Crüger's hymnal *Praxis Pietatis Melica* already contained some Paul Gerhardt hymns (Hesselbacher 1982:34), one can know that some were definitely still products of the war years.

Two of Gerhardt's Passion hymns were published in 1647 and these are still regularly sung (EG 83 and 84). They have no overt image of war, but speak in general terms of human

guilt and Christ's redemption. One of these has become Gerhard's most famous hymn: *O sacred head*.⁷ While there is an individual focus in both hymns, redemption is something that is brought for the world. The Easter hymn (EG 112) casts the Easter story in the images of a great cosmic battle between Christ and 'the enemy', who is not clearly defined, but could be either Satan or death itself. The message is strong: Although death may seem all powerful, victory has already been won. Two other hymns where images of violence or terror feature are a morning hymn (EG 446) and an evening hymn (EG 477). These hymns thank God for protection from the terrors of the night, or ask him for protection for the dangerous night ahead. They speak in general metaphorical terms of the 'dark shadows', or of 'fear' and 'Satan's desire' which God has delivered the person from (EG 446 vv. 2 and 3), but one can well imagine the horrors of war behind these words. The words in the evening song are comforting and have become a well-known evening song with children: *When dangers loom around me, your angels will surround me and sing, 'This child will meet no harm'* (EG 477 v. 8 [author's own translation]).

Gerhardt does not deny the horror of war and violence, but finds God's redemptive hand in human history and human pain. The selection discussed above shows that while the general songs are definitely more regularly sung, there is a place for the more specific hymns that articulate a particular experience of suffering and response to violence, especially if this is poetically very well performed. It is a help if these more specific songs are written to well-known, or easily learned tunes. However, such hymns will never be at the centre of a congregation's repertoire.

Jochen Klepper (1903–1942)

Jochen Klepper lived in the time of the Nazi regime. He had some theological training but then worked as a journalist. Not only was he critical of the regime, but in 1931 he had also married a Jewish widow with two daughters (Thalmann 1977:62), who converted to Christianity sometime after their marriage. She was baptised in 1938 (Ludwig 2012:142), but this was irrelevant to her status as a Jew, which was a racial category. Klepper saw clearly the danger to the life of his wife and daughters but for a long time resisted the thought of leaving Germany. In the end, he did try to leave but failed. Only the older daughter managed to leave for England (Thalmann 1977:221). In 1938 many of his sacred poems were published in a booklet named *Kyrie* (Ludwig 2012:142). He was hampered in his work by the Nazis, and increased depression made him less and less productive, but some poems continued to be written. When he no longer saw any way out, he and his wife and younger daughter decided together to end their lives in 1942 (Thalmann 1977:378).

Klepper wrote both as a victim of the Nazi terror and as a member of the German nation, who was responsible for unleashing this hatred and violence. He saw the horror as part

of the guilt of humanity as a whole, rather than produced by enemies 'out there'. Although he would have been completely justified to use a language of 'them' who unleash violence, and of 'evil enemies', this language is almost entirely absent. Any guilt is always 'our guilt' or even 'my guilt'.

Prominent in his hymns are the theme of light and darkness and guilt and redemption. His language is deeply biblical (Ludwig 2012:109). Indeed, Klepper himself comments on the fact that often, biblical words 'need no additions by a poet' (Thalmann 1977:189). Although there is a great undercurrent of trust in the hymns, there is a dark edge of fear and bitterness which is absent in Gerhardt. In a published Christmas hymn, which is too dark to be sung in most congregational Christmas services, he connects the Christmas story, our guilt and the cross: 'in front of the manger yawns the open grave' (EG 50 v. 3 [author's own translation]).

In contrast to the Christmas hymn, his Advent hymn has become a firm favourite in Lutheran congregations. It has powerful images of light and darkness; its central image is of the morning star which shines when it is still dark, but when morning is not far away. It conveys hope, even joy.

Though many nights still darken the guilt and pain we face,
Yet now there travels with us the star of God's own grace.
(EG 16 v. 4 transl. David Schubart)

Klepper also wrote a hymn for the close of the calendar year, based loosely on Psalm 90 (EG 64). It speaks about the 'burdens of the year' which God should transform into blessings. It again expresses awareness of sin and guilt and trusts in God's mercy. It calls people to trust in God who is unchanging.

The poems in Klepper's volume 'Kyrie' won a loyal following among more critical Christians in Germany and became more well-known after the war. There was a sharp controversy about whether the Christian congregation could sing hymns by someone who had committed suicide (Thalmann 1977:381). However, the hymns were too powerful to be shunted aside and they became a way for Germans to express their awareness of their complicity in the sin and guilt of the Nazi era. The post-war *Evangelisches Kirchengesangbuch* included three hymns by Klepper in the main section. The regional addendum of the Westphalian church included a further 5 (EKG-RW:1133). The hymnal of 1994 includes 12 hymns by Klepper (EG 957 'Klepper'). Unfortunately, not all his poems have found the tunes they deserve. Some hymns included in the EG have had several different tunes over the years.⁸

In the case of the hymns by Klepper, it can be easily seen that the tune plays the largest role in the question of how a hymn is received by the congregations. However, the tone of the words is also important. There are always people who will gratefully receive a song with clear contextual reference, and sometimes hard-hitting words. Undoubtedly, such prophetic hymns are needed, though such hymns seldom become

⁷This hymn is found in many different English hymnals, though the translations vary. The most used is that of James Waddell Alexander (UMH 286).

⁸Hymns of Klepper which had different tunes in the older German Lutheran hymnal EKG 1974 and the next revised edition EG 1994: EKG 45/ EG 64, EKG 451/ EG 379.

congregational hymns in the true sense. Hymns and songs that are honest about the painful reality of violence, and verbalise it in a way that people (both directly and indirectly affected) will feel comfortable singing about, are relatively rare, but they do exist. Having a treasury of such challenging hymns to draw on in a time of crisis is an important asset for a preacher. However, it is those hymns that both articulate painful realities and hold up a message of comfort which will find a more permanent home in a congregation.

Fred Pratt Green (1903–2000)

I first became aware of this hymn writer through his translation of the wonderful poem of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, 'By gracious powers' (ELW 656). Unlike some other translations, the one of Pratt Green does approximate some of the beauty and power of the original. I will not go into the Bonhoeffer hymn, except to point out the interesting fact that this most famous of Bonhoeffer poems was also written for Old Year's Eve. It seems that this occasion brings out reflections on human life and social issues more readily than other occasions which may be more loaded with theology and tradition. This hymn expresses trust in God's care in the midst of 'evil days' (v. 2), where God gives a 'cup filled to brimming with bitter suffering' (v. 3). However, one can go into the New Year with the confidence that God will always be there.

Pratt Green was born in 1903, so lived through two world wars and must have witnessed some of the violence and suffering associated with this. His surname was Green, but he started calling himself 'Pratt Green' to be distinguished from another pastor F.P. Green (The Telegraph 2000). However, he only started writing hymns in 1967, nearly at retirement age, when he was co-opted onto a committee planning a supplement to *The Methodist Hymn Book*. When gaps were identified in the hymnal, such as hymns on social justice themes or Christian unity, he was approached to write something, as he had published poems before. He took up the challenge (The Telegraph 2000). It is, of course, very different whether one writes a hymn out of inner compulsion because one is moved or affected by something, or if one writes it to fill a perceived gap. However, it is clear that Pratt Green cared about the issues he wrote about. While he was obviously not a victim of violence, at the time of writing, it is clear that he had witnessed violence and was deeply concerned about what would be the future of the church unless it spoke up for the victims. The violence in society as a whole affects the credibility of the Christian witness, whether the church is immediately affected or not. Suffering was brought close to home when he and his wife became guardians to Elizabeth Shephard at the outbreak of the war. She was the daughter of a missionary who had to flee the Japanese in Burma and later died of leprosy in India (Stainer & Bell n.d.). Fred Pratt Green's hymns definitely fill a gap in hymnals and they are powerful poetry:

Across the world, across the street, the victims of injustice cry
for shelter and for bread to eat, and never live before they die
God is God, though lands were all forsaken.
God is God, though all by death were taken.

Although all races had left not traces,
in starry spaces God's love embraces creation. (ELW 729, 2)

This verse acknowledges the violence that is inherent in the structural injustice of poverty and exploitation, which ultimately needs force to sustain it. Although the UK was involved in various military conflicts during the years of writing, it is the violence embedded in the normal economics of the consumption-driven society that he speaks to in his verses. This can also be seen in the verses below:

3. In conflicts that destroy our health we recognise the world's disease,
our common life declares our ills. Is there no cure, O Christ, for these? (ELW 610 v. 3)

This is a violence that devastates the poor, but also hurts those who seem to have a better life, those in the congregations that sing these hymns:

But if, forgetful, we should find your yoke is hard to bear;
if worldly pressures fray the mind and love itself cannot unwind
its tangled skein of care: our inward life repair. (ELW 580 v. 2)

In a much more upbeat song, which calls on the congregation to sing praises, he includes a reminder that the church can sing even in the face of pain:

So has the church, in liturgy and song,
in faith and love, through centuries of wrong,
borne witness to the truth in ev'ry tongue' Alleluia!

And did not Jesus sing a psalm that night
when utmost evil strove against the light?
Then let us sing, for whom he won the fight: Alleluia! (ELW 850 vv. 3 & 4)

The songs of Fred Pratt Green are included in hymn books used by our congregations, but the hymns are still largely unknown in the congregations I know, with few exceptions. However, internationally they seem to be well taken up and used, as can be seen by the royalty payments earned particularly from America (The Telegraph 2000). His texts definitely give voice to crucial issues in our social environment, a reminder to the church that it neglects its social responsibility at the cost of its credibility. Some texts have a good balance of comfort and challenge, and should last for a while in a congregational setting. It is likely, however, that many are chosen for singing by the preacher and worship leaders rather than by congregants.

Graham Kendrick (1950–)

Kendrick is a contemporary songwriter, who is still writing although the time of his greatest popularity is over. His most famous song, *Shine Jesus, shine*, spread around the world and has been translated into countless languages. He was called the 'father of modern worship music' (Kendrick website n.d.). His 'March for Jesus' movement drew millions onto the streets in the 1980s. Kendrick made a point of linking social issues with faith, arguing for Christian responsibility and a faith active in love (St. Michael's Singers 1996:4).

Like Pratt Green, he lived in England and was never a personal victim of violence and war, but he was conscious of injustice and violence around the world and believed that it was important that Christians got involved. He wrote in his book *Shine, Jesus, Shine*: ‘Tremendous results have been seen in movements that have combined righteousness and praise. This could explain why our arch enemy Satan, seems to work very hard to separate the two’ (Kendrick 1991:213).

In our congregations, the song with social themes which has had the most resonance is ‘Beauty for brokenness’. It enumerates petitions to God in several stanzas, one of them focusing on violence and war:

Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,
cities for sanctuary, freedoms to share;
peace to the killing-fields, scorched earth to green,
Christ for the bitterness, His cross for the pain.

It culminates in the refrain:

God of the poor, / friend of the weak, / give us compassion we pray:
melt our cold hearts, / let tears fall like rain;
come, change our love / from a spark to a flame.

The cross of Christ and the fact that he became human and experienced pain and suffering is prominent in Kendrick texts.

One of a hated race, stung by the prejudice
suffering injustice, yet He forgives.
Wept for my wasted years, paid for my wickedness,
He died in my place, that I might live. (MP 221 v. 2)

Also, Old Testament texts about justice and suffering feature more prominently in his song texts than in those of many other contemporary songwriters. He argued that much of the biblical knowledge of new converts comes from songs, more particularly from the singing of ‘Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs’ (St Michael’s Singers 1996:4). So, he wrote quite a few new psalm paraphrases, for example, *Arise, Lord* on Psalm 10 which speaks about God’s care for the oppressed (Kendrick 2003:CD).

A song based on the prophetic text in Amos 5:24 is a passionate plea against the madness of the arms race which directs resources away from those who need it, and was sparked by street violence in the UK. Kendrick raises questions about the root causes of the violence that has flared and finds it in the lack of justice. Here quoted are verses 2 and 3 of *O Lord, the clouds are gathering*:

2. O Lord, over the nations now / where is the dove of peace?
Her wings are broken. / O Lord, while precious children starve,
the tools of war increase, / their bread is stolen.

Have mercy, Lord, (Have mercy, Lord). / Forgive us, Lord,
(Forgive us, Lord.).

Restore us, Lord, revive Your church again. Let justice flow (Let
justice flow)
like rivers (like rivers), / and righteousness like a never-failing
stream.

3. O Lord, dark powers are poised to flood / our streets with hate
and fear.

We must awaken! / O Lord, let love reclaim the lives
that sin would sweep away, / and let Your kingdom come! (MP 509)

Another text expresses solidarity with Christian brothers and sisters who are victims of religious persecution in the countries in which they stay. It does not protest the violence but prays for Christ’s return:

Lord, help us to live worthy of / our sisters and our brothers,
who love You more than their own lives, / who worship as they
suffer;

to embrace the scandal of the cross, / not ashamed to tell Your story
to count all earthly gains as loss / to know You and Your glory.

How long, Lord, till You come?

How long till the earth is filled with Your song? How long? (SF
1177 v. 2)

His most moving text against violence is one that he was commissioned to write by Pro-Life groups (St. Michael’s Singers 1996: CD booklet:8). It is interesting that one of the most impassioned texts against violence by a Christian writer is an anti-abortion text – of course, written by a man. It raises questions why many evangelical Christians defend unborn life so much more vehemently than very vulnerable life that is already born, and, of course, what role this issue plays in the whole fight to defend patriarchal values. However, Kendrick’s text is written in a sensitive way and can be used to protest other violations of vulnerable life as well. It is not very obvious that it is an anti-abortion text:

1. Who can sound the depths of sorrow in the father heart of God,
for the children we’ve rejected, for the lives so deeply scarred?

And each light that we’ve extinguished has brought darkness to
our land:

upon the nation, upon the nation have mercy, Lord!

4. Who will stand against the violence? Who will comfort those
who mourn?

In an age of cruel rejection, who will build for love a home?

Come and shake us into action, come and melt our hearts of stone:
upon the nation, upon the nation have mercy, Lord! (MP 766)

These are words one could sing for refugees and migrants, for children denied school or medical help and for those unborn who have no hope of a dignified life on this earth. It is not clear how often this song is sung, but the melody is singable and the words moving, so it is usable as a congregational hymn. It is the kind of song which is needed about a whole range of other issues as well.

Conclusion

What conclusions can one come to in such a limited study of only four hymn writers?

Firstly, it shows how rare hymns and songs are which directly respond to violence, and which prove sustainable in a congregational setting. Such songs are definitely needed so that worshipping Christians can express themselves more concretely in difficult times. It should really not be necessary for a hymnal commission to have to specifically request texts to fill the great gaps in this area. However, it seems that Christian writers do not do this so well.

Secondly, it becomes clear that very specific texts have a more limited appeal. However, one can still name or reference social ills or sins in a way that congregations can take up. When Jochen Klepper spoke about sin and guilt, specifics were not named but the context was clear to everyone, and Germans were able to take it up as their confession. In Kendrick's last quoted song, the supposed sin is named in a sufficiently general way that people of different persuasions on this particular issue can identify with the text. Nevertheless, in these songs, it becomes clear that 'sin' is not something abstract and merely spiritual but that it has social consequences which are very real.

Thirdly, it is the subtext of hope and even of joy that will make congregations tap into songs with more serious content. Where this is missing or very muted, as in the Christmas hymn by Klepper, congregations are unlikely to take it up. One can read many Klepper poems as powerful portrayals of a dark era. But congregational hymns need to inspire hope. It is important to note that in order for a hymn to be of comfort in dark times, people have to get to know it and sing it in less dark times. Times of crisis are not times where people are going to learn new songs. However, the undercurrent of hope and joy makes a congregation sing Bonhoeffer, Gerhardt and Klepper even if they are not experiencing the same dark times. When crisis then strikes, they have a well of comfort to draw on.

Lastly, this study shows the value of having particular times to reflect on the social situation, which in the German Lutheran tradition is Old Year's Eve. It can also happen at other times, but such occasions need to be 'owned' by the congregations.

This shows the challenge both to songwriters, but also for pastors and leaders of worship, to write, find and teach hymns and songs that can help a congregation voice its pain in times of violence and suffering and find the hope that lies in the Christian message.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he or she has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him or her in writing this article.

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