

Christian Churches in Post-Genocide Rwanda:
Reconciliation and Its Limits

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The 1994 Rwandan genocide ranks among the most shocking episodes in modern African history. In just 100 days, soldiers, police, and militia from the majority Hutu ethnic group systematically slaughtered over 500,000 members of the Tutsi ethnic minority. A civil war that the genocide reignited killed tens of thousands more, drove over half the population from their homes, and led to the downfall of the government that organized the genocide.¹ The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the predominantly Tutsi rebel group that took control of Rwanda at the conclusion of the genocide, used substantial force against the civilian population to establish its authority, arrested tens of thousands of individuals on genocide charges, and launched two invasions of the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) justified in part by continuing security threats from the genocidal forces. At the same time that they exercised coercive rule, the RPF also embraced a language of national unity. Since 2000 in particular, the RPF-led government has undertaken a massive program of transitional justice, ostensibly to promote reconciliation and national healing, while also launching an ambitious program of

¹ For the best accounts of the 1994 genocide, see Des Forges, 1999; Prunier, 1995; and Guichaoua 2016.

economic and social development that involves substantial reorganization of rural livelihoods and massive urbanization (Longman, 2017; Thomson, 2013).

As one of the most Christian countries in Africa,² Rwanda's Christian churches should be expected to be integral to the processes of promoting reconciliation, healing, and unity. Yet the possible contribution of the country's churches to reconciliation have been undermined by the fact that the churches were themselves sullied by complicity in the genocide. Having long held close ties to the state and practiced ethnic discrimination within their own institutions, the churches failed to offer a prophetic critique of the brutal plans for genocide put forward by a cabal of the country's political, military, and business leaders. Instead, Christianity provided moral cover for the violence, allowing killers to believe that their horrific actions were somehow acceptable. In fact, churches became Rwanda's killing fields, with perpetrators often murdering fellow parishioners in the very church buildings where they had previously worshiped together.

As I discuss in this chapter, the genocide and the social and political changes that followed have led to major shifts in Rwanda's religious landscape. The established churches – particularly the Catholic Church – have lost members since 1994, while numerous new churches, especially independent Pentecostal churches, have attracted many adherents. Both new and old churches have sponsored projects to promote reconciliation and unity, but these have been mostly piecemeal individual initiatives, while none of the churches has developed a fully coherent national program to promote accountability for the genocide and other violence in 1994 and to encourage reconciliation within a still-divided population. The historic churches have changed their leadership and apologized for their roles in the genocide. Yet the basic conditions that allowed the churches to become complicit in the genocide have not changed. Churches, both

² The World Religion Database states that Rwanda is 91.51% Christian and 4.78% Muslim. Johnson and Grim, 2017.

new and old, still seek a close relationship with the state and continue to play ethnic politics. At the same time, even in the face of ongoing human rights abuses, the churches have failed to offer a prophetic voice. As a result, the ultimate contributions of the churches to reconciliation and national healing remain limited.

Christian Churches in the Rwandan Genocide

I have analyzed the involvement of Rwanda's Christian churches in the 1994 genocide in depth in my book, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (Longman, 2010), so I provide here only a brief overview of my main arguments. To explain why Rwanda's churches became implicated in the 1994 genocide, I contend, requires understanding the nature of Christianity as it was implanted in Rwanda. When the first Catholic missionary order, the White Fathers, arrived in Rwanda in 1900, they determined to focus on converting the country's elite, believing that if the country's leaders converted to Catholicism, the rest of the population would follow. They interpreted power relations in Rwanda largely in ethnic terms, viewing the Tutsi minority as a racially superior group that naturally dominated the subservient Hutu majority and small Twa group, and they focused their conversion efforts on the Tutsi. While the distinction between Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa had existed as a hierarchical distinction prior to colonization, the missionary's policies helped to solidify the distinction between the groups and transform them into racial categories. Although rates of conversion remained modest at first, after the White Fathers pushed the colonial authorities to replace the sitting king with his pro-Catholic son in 1931, the population began to convert to Catholicism en masse. Protestant churches arrived later in Rwanda and were hampered by the change from German to Belgian control in the First World War, but rather than establish themselves as a populist alternative to the Catholics, they

competed directly with them in attempting to convert the Tutsi chiefs as well.

From Christianity's arrival in Rwanda, then, the religion was distinguished by two key principles – a cozy relationship between church and state and a practice of playing ethnic politics. After the Second World War, as ideas of social justice and political independence spread across Africa, the unequal relations between Hutu and Tutsi came into question in Rwanda. Catholic clergy and laypeople were key to Hutu efforts to argue for greater rights and helped to inspire a 1959 uprising against Tutsi chiefs that led to a transfer of power. The king was deposed in 1961, and Rwanda gained independence in 1962 with an entirely Hutu government. Although Rwandan politics and the structures of ethnic power were upended by the 1959 revolution, the churches were able to establish a close relationship with the new regime swiftly, in no small part because new President Grégoire Kayibanda rose to prominence as secretary to the bishop of Kabgayi, editor of the Catholic newspaper, and head of a Catholic consumers cooperative.³ President Kayibanda sought popular legitimacy as an advocate for the Hutu majority, and massacres of Tutsi took place in the first years of his rule, then again in 1973. Rwanda's Christian churches remained silent in the face of these attacks on civilians.

When President Kayibanda was deposed in a 1973 coup by his defense minister, Juvénal Habyarimana, churches were again swift to develop close ties with the new regime. While President Kayibanda based his power on allies from his home central region of Rwanda, President Habyarimana was from Rwanda's north; both Catholic and Anglican churches began to promote Hutu bishops from northern Rwanda in an effort to strengthen ties with the new leadership. Beginning in 1990, the Habyarimana regime found its power challenged by both a

³ Carney, 2014, argues convincingly that in *Christianity and Genocide*, I overstate the degree to which the Catholic Church was divided along ethnic lines and lent active support to the 1959 revolution, but I contend that my basic point, that the church engaged directly in Rwanda's ethnic politics remains valid.

domestic pro-democracy movement and an invasion by the Uganda-based RPF. Even as church hierarchies maintained their support for Habyarimana, some individuals from within both the Protestant and Catholic churches provided backing to the democracy movement, for example, helping to organize several new human rights groups. The Habyarimana government responded to the pressures both by offering limited political reforms and by stoking anti-Tutsi resentments. As the RPF gained ground in the civil war, the Habyarimana regime was able to coopt many of its previous opponents, creating a broad anti-Tutsi coalition and putting regime critics on the defensive. A series of small-scale massacres of Tutsi heightened ethnic polarization and normalized ethnic violence in the country. While all this was happening, the churches played a role in promoting peace talks and called for all sides to show respect, but they failed to specifically call out human rights abuses, even when church personnel were targeted in attacks. At the same time, many of the top church leaders, including the Anglican and Catholic archbishops, maintained obvious public support for Habyarimana and were openly hostile to the RPF.

On April 6, 1994, the plane carrying President Habyarimana was shot down as it approached the airport in Kigali. In the days following the assassination, government troops and pro-government militias sought out and killed opposition politicians, civil society activists, and journalists of all ethnicities, as well as many prominent Tutsi. Meeting little resistance, particularly from an international community that sought only to evacuate its nationals, regime supporters systematically expanded the violence to the rest of the country over the next several weeks, focusing on completely eliminating the country's Tutsi minority. With the regime undertaking widespread violence against their ethnic fellows, the RPF re-launched its attack on Rwanda and quickly occupied the north and east of the country, then moved over the next three

months to drive out the genocidal regime and capture the rest of the country.

Church leaders responded to the violence by calling for Rwandans to support the new government, even as that government was organizing the slaughter of Tutsi women, children, and elders. While calling for calm, church officials portrayed the violence exclusively as a civil war, failing to speak about genocide or massacres of civilians. Given the history of strong church support for the regime, the longstanding practice of ethnic discrimination in the churches, and the failure of church leaders to condemn ethnic violence, both in the early independence era and since 1990, many Rwandans understood anti-Tutsi violence as something their churches tolerated. Throughout the country, Tutsi were lured into church buildings with promises of sanctuary and then slaughtered there, often by fellow congregants. In my research on the churches and the genocide, I documented cases of death squads that held mass before they went out to kill and killers who paused in the middle of their slaughter to pray at the altar. As I have written, “Christians could kill without obvious qualms of conscience, even in the church, because Christianity as they had always known it had been a religion defined by struggles for power, and ethnicity had always been at the base of those struggles” (Longman, 2010: 164).

The Changing Post-Genocide Religious Landscape

The genocide and war that shook Rwanda in 1994 caused extraordinary upheaval, killing hundreds of thousands, driving two million Rwandans into exile, displacing another two million, and ending in a military victory by the Rwandan Patriotic Front. Over the next several years, most of the predominantly Hutu recent refugees returned to Rwanda, along with hundreds of thousands of long-term Tutsi refugees, most of whom had been living in Uganda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Burundi since violence in the 1960s, returned to Rwanda. This social and political turmoil had a major impact on Rwanda’s religious landscape. At the end of the

genocide, the churches were devastated in almost every conceivable way. Church buildings that served as death chambers were soiled and sullied and some severely damaged. Church leadership was diminished, with both clergy and the church hierarchies either dead or in exile. Most significantly, the reputation of the churches was severely damaged, as their claims to moral leadership were undermined by their implication in the genocide. Many church officials, both lay and clergy, were complicit in the genocide, including some members of the hierarchy.

A number of factors led to major changes in Rwanda's post-genocide religious landscape. First, the complicity of the churches in the genocide changed their public standing and reduced their popular support. The desecration of church buildings through violence and the involvement of church members and leaders in the genocide undermined the moral authority of the churches. The post-genocide government openly accused the established churches, particularly the Catholic Church, of supporting the genocide and actively prosecuted several clergy. Most prominently, in 2000 the government put Augustin Misago, the bishop of the Catholic diocese of Gikongoro, on trial on genocide charges. Although he was acquitted, the fact of his prosecution suggested the degree to which the Catholic Church was tainted by the genocide ("Rwandan Court," 2000). The accusations against the churches were not limited to the Rwandan government, as the International Criminal Tribunal in Arusha brought charges against other clergy, including a Catholic priest convicted of bulldozing his church building with Tutsi inside, a Seventh Day Adventist pastor extradited from the United States, and an Anglican bishop who died in detention before going to trial. Under universal jurisdiction, the Belgian government convicted four Rwandans, including two nuns, on genocide charges (Ames, 2001).

The involvement of the churches in the genocide pushed many Christians to seek new communities of faith. Genocide survivors in particular left the Catholic and Mainline Protestant

churches in large numbers. Some found it difficult to return to church buildings where their families had been killed. In my interviews in the decade following the genocide, a few survivors spoke openly about their disappointment in the churches because of the genocide. Yet even among those who did not directly identify the churches' ties to the genocide as a source of their disenchantment, many expressed alienation from their former churches. Several survivors I interviewed told me that they found the rituals in the established churches lacking and that they needed something that was livelier and touched their hearts more. Large numbers of survivors have thus joined the newer Pentecostal and charismatic churches.⁴

A second factor contributing to changes in the religious landscape is the many new churches the refugees who returned to Rwanda beginning in 1994 brought back with them. Among the Tutsi who fled Rwanda in the 1960s, many blamed the Catholic Church for the violence that led to their exile, and therefore many joined Protestant churches in their host countries, including churches like the Assemblies of God, the Disciples of Christ, independent Pentecostal groups, and others not present in Rwanda at the time. Some of the Hutu refugees also converted to new churches in their refugee camps, particularly in the Democratic Republic of Congo (then called Zaire), but also the Lutheran Church in Tanzania. Upon their return to the country, the former refugees set up branches of new denominations, particularly in Kigali, and also established many new independent churches.⁵

Third, the post-genocide government relaxed (at least temporarily) the controls over religious organizations that the previous regime had established. The Habyarimana regime had maintained control over religious groups through a strict registration process that allowed the government to exclude groups they perceived as threatening. As recently as 1986, the

4 Fieldnotes, 2001-2005.

5 Van't Spijker, 2013: 63-70 attributes the growth of new churches largely to this factor.

government prosecuted three hundred members of unregistered “sects,” accused of “inciting the population to rebellion against the established powers, for insulting the flag or official symbols of sovereignty of the Republic, for calling for disobedience” (“Carnet,” 1987). After taking power, the post-genocide government stopped enforcing these regulations, allowing new religious groups to proliferate. Given general public disenchantment with the Catholic Church and Mainline Protestants, the liberalization of controls over religious groups allowed the population to establish numerous new churches. Not only are there many new denominations present in Rwanda, but the number of non-denominational congregations has skyrocketed. Anne Kubai (2007: 207-210) notes that the many new independent churches have benefited from international networking, with churches in the United States, Canada, and elsewhere providing financing and other forms of support to help churches begin and expand their operations.

Finally, post-genocide Rwanda has experienced major shifts in population. The country has experienced very rapid urbanization,⁶ as many survivors have left the communities where their families were killed, while many Hutu have also moved to the cities in search of employment or sought to escape the close political control in the rural areas in search of the relative anonymity of life in the cities. Moving out of rural communities, people left behind the churches where they and their families were active for generations, creating a natural constituency for the many new churches.

These factors have caused a massive shift in religious affiliation in Rwanda, leading in particular to a rapid growth in non-denominational Evangelical and Pentecostal churches but also the establishment of many denominations not present in Rwanda prior to 1994, like the Lutheran Church that now has around 80 congregations (Brinkert, 2009). Gérard van’t Spijker (2013), a

⁶ Rwanda has experienced a massive 18 percent urbanization rate in recent years, leading Kigali to more than triple in size since the genocide. Somma, 2017.

Protestant scholar whose work in Rwanda has spanned decades, notes that after the genocide, new churches were “sprouting like mushrooms.” Though he does not himself see a widespread rejection of the previously established churches, he notes that by 2001, there were already over 300 new churches in the country (van’t Spijker, 2001). Kubai (2007) also discusses the major growth in new churches and notes that the Pentecostal Churches have been particularly attractive to Tutsi, both survivors and returned refugees:

Pentecostalism offers people a purpose to live and a strong sense of identity and “people participate as individuals”. This is particularly true in post genocide Rwanda, where the two elements — the purpose to live for survivors and returnees and a sense of identity — are crucial for the creation of a new reconciled society, new national identity to replace ethnic identity (199).

The impression that many Rwandans have changed churches is backed up by survey research. According to a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life poll in 2010, 12 percent of respondents claim to have left the Catholic Church, while Protestant affiliation has grown by 12 percent, from 26 to 38 percent of the population (Pew Forum, 2010).⁷ Evidence in the poll also suggests that the mainline Protestant churches have lost at least some membership to the new churches in Rwanda. While the growth of Pentecostalism has occurred throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and Rwanda’s first Pentecostal denomination, the Pentecostal Church of Rwanda (ADEPR), was growing impressively even before the genocide, the rate of Pentecostal growth in post-genocide Rwanda has been truly remarkable. In analyzing the Pew survey and an original survey that he conducted, Joshua Theodore Bazuin notes a general shifting of people from one church to another. He found an even higher rate of change out of the Catholic Church than Pew, but he also found that Mainline Protestants had experienced little net change, losing many members while also gaining some from Catholics. More than a third of the members of

⁷ The survey specifically notes that 66 percent of respondents claimed to have been raised Catholic compared to 54 percent who claim to currently be Catholic.

Evangelical or Pentecostal churches were raised in a different religious tradition. He notes that at least 20 percent of Rwandans have switched religious affiliations since 1994 (Bazuin, 2013: 222-225).

It is worth noting that at the same time that Pentecostal churches have experienced rapid growth, Islam has become much more visible in Rwanda, leading many to conclude that Islam has experienced similar rapid growth (C.f., Lacey 2004). In reality, the evidence shows only small numbers of people have converted to Islam, but the impression of growth has been created by the positive public image of Islam in post-genocide Rwanda, which has inspired many Muslims to be more open about their faith, wearing identifiably Muslim clothing for example. In contrast to the Christian churches that were facing criticism for their involvement in the genocide, Muslims were believed to have played a less prominent role in the genocide.⁸

Churches and Reconciliation

In the years immediately following the genocide, Rwanda's Christian churches were slow to take up the issue of reconciliation. The churches were initially in a rebuilding mode, literally repairing their buildings while seeking as well to reconstruct congregations that had lost many members to death and many more to exile. The ranks of the clergy were devastated, as many pastors, priests, brothers, and nuns were either killed in the genocide or in exile outside the country, some of them under cloud of complicity in the genocide. Priests and pastors from among the returned Tutsi refugee population replaced many of the absent clergy, but their

⁸ Neither the Pew nor the Bazuin polls show significant conversion to Islam. The Pew poll, for example, shows no difference in the percentage reporting to have been raised Muslim and that currently claiming to be Muslim. In my own research, I found sufficient cases of Muslims involved in the organization and execution of the genocide to raise doubts about the claims of Muslim non-involvement. It does, however, seem to have been the case that Muslims were more reluctant to kill fellow Muslims than Christians were to kill fellow Christians, and Mosques were not used as locations for carrying out the genocide in the same way that churches were.

position as outsiders made it difficult for them to address the issues that happened in their communities prior to their arrival. Given the deep wounds left by the reality that church members had killed one another during the genocide, sometimes in the sanctuary itself, most churches simply chose not to engage the past. In fact, the Catholic Church actually shut down several grassroots reconciliation initiatives, such as a highly successful lay leadership program in Butare that they regarded as “too political.”⁹

The churches were ultimately pushed to begin to focus on reconciliation after the government adopted reconciliation and national unity as major priorities. In 1998 and 1999, then-President Pasteur Bizimungu organized a series of meetings at the presidential residence, Village Urugwiro, where a wide variety of national thought leaders gathered to consider plans for the country’s future. Among the numerous proposals that came out of the Village Urugwiro meetings were the creation of a National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) and a proposal to adopt Rwanda’s traditional local dispute resolution mechanism, *gacaca*, to deal with genocide cases. Not long after the Village Urugwiro meetings, the leader of the RPF, vice-president and defense minister Paul Kagame, assumed the presidency.¹⁰ As president, Kagame initiated major policy shifts (based in large part on the Village Urugwiro proposals) that pushed the country simultaneously to confront the history of the genocide and to chart a new course for the future. Using public discourse, educational reform, memorials and commemorations, and trials, the government promoted a narrative of the past that highlighted the genocide as the central point of Rwandan history and portrayed the RPF as the heroes who had stopped the genocide and were now unifying and transforming the country, effacing the violence the RPF itself committed against civilians as it secured power. Gacaca trials required every community in

⁹ Fieldnotes, Butare, 2001-2004.

¹⁰ I discuss the government transition in 1999-2000 in greater depth in Longman, 2017: 149-155.

Rwanda to gather on a weekly basis to discuss the events of 1994, listing those who had been killed and property destroyed then holding public trials, led by a panel of lay judges drawn from the community, for those accused of participation. The NURC also implemented a number of programs to confront the past, including re-education camps in which ex-combatants, former prisoners, prospective university students, and newly elected politicians spent as long as three months relearning Rwandan history with a focus on understanding the divisions that led to the genocide.¹¹ These programs focused on confronting the past were a first step in Vision 2020, an ambitious development program intended to make Rwanda a middle-income country by the year 2020 (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2000).¹²

As the government made confronting the past a major policy focus, churches took up the promotion of national unity and reconciliation as well. The law creating the gacaca courts provided incentives for perpetrators of the genocide to confess their crimes and implicate others in exchange for a reduced sentence. Building on the Christian tradition of confession, Churches played a major role in encouraging confession in the gacaca process. Bazuin (2013) found in his interviews that among Catholics and Anglicans, “confession as a sacrament emerged as an important theme in how people have dealt with the pain of the past and forged ties of reconciliation in the present” (153)¹³ Confession was particularly important among Pentecostals, who integrated gacaca confessions into the process of spiritual rebirth required for conversion. In my research on transitional justice from 2001-2006, I heard many reports about a wave of

11 The government program using the tools of transitional justice to construct a new collective memory for Rwanda is the major focus of my book, Longman 2017. See in particular chapters 2 through 5.

12 The first goal of the document “Rwanda Vision 2020” is, “Reconstruction of the nation and its social capital” (Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 2000: 6).

13 See also Carney: 2015.

conversions to Pentecostalism among prisoners that pushed the prisoners to cooperate with the gacaca process, beginning by confessing their crimes during the genocide.¹⁴

A major aspect of the government's program for confronting the past has been the establishment of memorials and commemorations, and they have actively encouraged the churches to support and participate in these activities. Since churches were themselves the country's main killing fields, in the immediate aftermath of the genocide a substantial number of church buildings were preserved as genocide memorials, while the churches – particularly the Catholic Church – fought to regain control over their buildings. The government retained church buildings in Nyamata, Ntarama, and Nyararbuye (a convent) as memorial sites, but all other structures were returned to the churches, sometimes as a result of compromise. For example, the Catholic cathedral in Kibuye was returned to sacred purposes after the church agreed to build a large mass grave and garden as memorial in front of the main entrance. In Kibeho, the church was returned to religious use, but a section of the sanctuary was developed as a genocide memorial. Most churches where massacres occurred have built mass graves and gardens as memorials on their grounds. Places like Nyakibanda Seminary in Southern Province and Jesuit Centre Christus in Kigali have installed memorials to church personnel lost in the genocide.¹⁵

The government has also encouraged churches to develop commemorative activities as part of the “Week of Mourning,” the annual week officially commemorating the genocide. Many churches have established their own religious services of commemoration. As Célestin Nsengimana (2015) writes:

Faith based commemoration is a space to remember and express traumatic feelings, to bury bodies of victims in dignity once found, to deliver messages for sustaining survivors and to call people to truth telling, unity and reconciliation as well as educating individual and collective memory in the sense of what the

14 Fieldnotes, Rwanda, 2001-2006. See also Brinkert, 2009.

15 Fieldnotes, 2001-2006.

International Theological Commission called purification of memory (78).

The Presbyterian Church, for example, has a national commission for unity, reconciliation, and genocide prevention that organizes an annual service of commemoration at the national level and supports local and regional commemoration efforts (Nsengimana, 2015: 82).

As a number of scholars have documented, Rwanda's Christian churches – both old and new – have established a wide range of reconciliation programs in the past two decades. Jay Carney, for example, analyzes a sample of reconciliation programs within the Catholic Church, including Peace and Justice Commissions. Most of the institutions or groups he discusses existed prior to the genocide and were later adapted to promote post-genocide reconciliation. These reconciliation programs are mostly local parish-level or diocesan-level initiatives, and in some cases they have run into conflict with the church hierarchy or political officials. In fact, Carney notes that, despite their important contributions, “such ministries can feel like ad hoc, grassroots initiatives led by charismatic individuals, lacking broader coordination and consistent institutional support” (Carney, 2015: 810).

Protestant churches have similarly developed numerous local-level reconciliation and peace initiatives but have lacked comprehensive national programs. The two major Protestant ecumenical groups, the Protestant Council of Rwanda (whose members include most of the mainline churches, but also the ADEPR) and the Evangelical Alliance of Rwanda (an umbrella body for many of Rwanda's new churches), have each sponsored seminars and small-scale activities focused on reconciliation, as have most of the major denominations and international Protestant groups like World Vision and Church World Service (C.f., Rouner, 2002). The EAR, for example, formed the Collective of Peace and Reconciliation Builders (CAPR) that has trained both pastors and lay leaders in peacemaking, but the scope of the program remains modest (Bazuin, 2013: 70). The Presbyterian Church's unity and reconciliation commission provides

training in reconciliation and sponsors occasional peacebuilding activities (Nsengimana 2015: 82). The Lutheran Church of Rwanda has organized its own reconciliation seminars, “to create a safe space where, for example, a survivor and a released perpetrator may learn about Christian reconciliation together, and begin the process of rebuilding their relationships in an environment in which they feel comfortable, a church” (Brinkert, 2009: 30-31), as well as a prison ministry and other programs, but again the scope of the programs is limited.

Church-sponsored reconciliation activities are, thus, diffuse rather than large-scale and centralized, yet the numerous Christian reconciliation programs have made important contributions to promoting community building and healing. The international Christian communion provides support and funding to many of the programs created by local congregations, individual clergy and lay leaders, and international church groups frequently visit Rwanda to study and participate.¹⁶ For example, Reconciliation, Evangelism, and Christian Healing (REACH) is an initiative of an Episcopal priest, supported by an Anglican group in the UK, that organizes intensive multi-ethnic seminars that provide opportunities for victims and perpetrators to confront one another. As portrayed in the documentary *Coexist*, while these seminars do not guarantee good inter-ethnic relations, they do lead to many important, difficult conversations and much soul-searching, but the total number of participants remains small.¹⁷

Although these diverse programs offer important opportunities for healing for some individuals in some communities, the evidence suggests that the churches’ main contribution to reconciliation in Rwanda is not through formal programs but in the quotidian work of ministering to individuals in need, preaching the Gospel, and building community. Scholars

¹⁶ Given my work on the churches in Rwanda, I am frequently contacted by church and school groups traveling to Rwanda to study reconciliation.

¹⁷ Mazo, 2014. I serve as one of the commentators in this film. See also. Brinkert, “Building a City on a Hill,” pp. 47-59.

looking at Rwanda's churches today note that the messages delivered by churches often focus on peace, unity, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In an assessment of Presbyterian peace and reconciliation activities, Nsengimana (2015) finds that pastors commonly promote reconstruction, peace, justice, and forgiveness. Studies on other churches show a similar focus on issues of community and healing in sermons, songs, and other church functions. The churches and various Christian organizations are also engaged in countless health, education, and development projects that they rightly portray as contributing to the healing of the country by helping to address the real material needs of the population. In 2016, the NURC, now headed by former Episcopal bishop John Rucyahana, reached agreement with the major denominations to work more closely with the NURC to implement a program called *Ndi Umunyarwanda* (I am Rwandan) to increase preaching and programming on peace, unity, and reconciliation (Nsengimana 2016).

As Bazuin (2013) writes:

Religion has played a significant role in Rwanda's reinvention. Religious beliefs have helped people interpret the genocide in ways which make it possible for them to have hope. Religious values have emphasized that all Rwandans are created in God's image, creating important moral groundwork for reconciliation. Religious teaching has moved people towards forgiveness, and the data indicate that forgiveness is the crucial link between religion and reconciliation in Rwanda (283).

Churches have been an important resource for Rwandans as they have struggled to live together peacefully and have worked to build their country. Van't Spijker (2001) provides a careful analysis of new hymns in the Presbyterian Church and finds that their content is highly eschatological and that they "reflect a theology of escape, of a fundamental withdrawal from society" (274). Yet he argues that, "the credal hymns of the Rwandese layman choirs should not simply be characterised as songs of consolation, but as songs of consolation and empowerment. ... There is no reason to see the eschatological tendency in a great number of the new credal

hymns as being opposed to the longing for a theology of reconstruction” (van’t Spijker, 2001: 275).

Through preaching, singing, praying, and other church activities, Rwandan Christians have sought ways to rebuild their lives in a world that has been rent by genocide and war. Rwandans are seeking comfort and meaning in the face of serious challenges in their lives, and religion plays an important role, even as the number of Christians who have participated in formal church-sponsored reconciliation programs remains quite small. The reality that nearly a quarter of Rwandans have changed religious affiliations, however, indicates that many people are not finding what they need to live in modern Rwanda in their churches and are not entirely content with the consolation the churches are offering them.

More of the Same in Church-State Relations

While Christian churches have provided important support for reconciliation and community building, they have not fully addressed the factors that led to their implication in the genocide in the first place. After the 1994 transition, the mainline churches almost universally changed their leadership, condemned the actions of their predecessors, and committed to working closely with the post-genocide government in the implementation of its programs. Yet in doing so, they reproduced the very pre-genocide practices of playing ethnic politics and uncritically supporting political authorities that set the stage for the churches’ disgraceful role in the genocide. Among the numerous new churches, most have fallen into the same established pattern for Rwandan churches of seeking a close relationship with government officials. Neither the new churches nor the old have offered a prophetic voice to call out the government when it violate human rights or undermines democracy.

The involvement of the churches in the Rwandan genocide presents a difficult challenge to those who want to see Christianity as a positive force in the modern world and explore its potential to contribute to unity, peace, and reconciliation. As I argued in *Christianity and Genocide*:

As a practicing Christian myself, the conclusion that the very prevalence of Christianity in Rwanda – a conservative, hierarchical, bigoted variety of Christianity – helps explain why genocide did occur fills me with anguish. ... The failure of the churches in Rwanda reflects on Christian churches throughout the world and should inspire Christians everywhere to ponder their own beliefs and to analyze their own institutions to ensure that they do not similarly exclude and condemn (Longman, 2010: 304, 322-323).

Among theologians, both inside and outside Rwanda, the involvement of the Christian churches in the 1994 genocide has in fact inspired considerable reflection. For example, the political violence of the Rwandan genocide has been a key point of reflection for Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole (2001, 2005a, 2005b) as he recognizes that narratives (which churches help form) have the power to create identities, and that “stories do, in fact, kill” (2005a: 101). According to Katongole, the Rwanda genocide challenges all Christians, not just in Africa, but across the world, to recognize that nation-state politics creates a “tribalist” narrative that threatens the church and that the church must focus on visibly performing an alternative reality of unity across social boundaries through actions such as the Eucharist.¹⁸

Rwandan theologians have also struggled with the religious implications of Rwanda’s violent history.¹⁹ Some, like Tharcisse Gatwa, a Presbyterian who was the head of the Rwandan Bible Society in 1994 and went on to earn a doctorate at Yaounde, directly tackle the

18 Anglican theologian Ephraim Radner (2012) has similarly grappled with the ways in which the genocide demonstrates the corrupting influence that the politics of division can have on the universal Christian church.

19 Van’t Spijker (2017) provides a helpful overview of several recent theological PhD dissertations by Rwandan students, including Gatwa, reflecting on the challenges for the churches in post-genocide Rwanda.

involvement of the churches in the genocide and its meaning. Gatwa (2001) criticizes the Rwandan churches for being too close to the Rwandan government in the period leading up to the genocide and urges churches to provide an independent prophetic voice that challenges the state to promote democracy as a means of overcoming the legacies of violence. Other Rwandan writers, like Catholic lay-leader Laurien Ntezimana, address the details of the Rwandan case less directly but are clearly shaped by the experience of the genocide. Ntezimana (1998) explores the power of God to bring stability in the face of apocalyptic violence.

Although theologians have called on churches to transform their conduct, the institutional churches have not yet fully confronted the implications of their complicity in the violence, even as they have come to accept some responsibility for the genocide. The Protestant churches admitted their involvement in the genocide earlier than the Catholic Church, with the Anglican Church leading the way. George Carey, then archbishop of Canterbury, visited Rwanda shortly after the genocide and openly condemned the silence of Rwanda's Christian churches in the face of the violence ("Archbishop Carey's Visit," 1995). He organized a committee within the Worldwide Anglican Communion that investigated the church's role in the genocide and produced a surprisingly frank and condemnatory report. Following this international intervention, Rwanda's new Anglican bishops, especially John Rucyahana and Emmanuel Kolini, took a very active line condemning their predecessors, allying themselves closely with the new government, and committing the Anglican Church to the struggle against genocide. Other Protestant church leaders have followed suit, speaking out against their church's involvement in the genocide and supporting the post-genocide government's programs of national unity and reconciliation.

In contrast, the Catholic Church was much slower to admit its culpability. In a 1996 letter

written by Cardinal Ratzinger (later to become Pope Benedict XVI), Pope John Paul denied that the Catholic Church bore any responsibility for the genocide, because, “The church itself cannot be held responsible for the misdeeds of its members who have acted against evangelical law” (“Pope Says Church,” 1996). Other Catholic writers (c.f., Radoli 1998) suggested that Christian participation in the genocide was evidence that conversion to the faith in Rwanda was insufficient, implying that the violence was rooted in Rwandan culture. Carney noted in 2015 that, “Unfortunately, Rwanda’s Catholic bishops have refused to issue a formal statement of corporate confession for the Church’s failures and shortcomings before and during the genocide” (809-810). In 2016, the Episcopal Council of Rwanda’s Catholic Church did finally issue a formal apology for the church’s role in the genocide (Mbonyinshuti 2016), followed by Pope Francis in 2017 asking for forgiveness for the “sins and failings of the church and its members” for their role in the genocide (Sherwood, 2017), though many critics of the church feel that these statements do not go nearly far enough.

Even as the churches have implemented reconciliation programs and come to admit a degree of fault in the genocide, they have failed sufficiently to address the conditions that allowed them to become complicit in the genocide in the first place. As I described in my book on Christianity in the Rwandan genocide, when political power in the country shifted after the 1959 Revolution, the churches did not change their close relationship with the state but merely shifted allegiances; having previously favored the ruling Tutsi minority, the churches shifted their allegiance to the new Hutu ethno-nationalist government and brought in Hutu to lead their institutions. Between 1962 and 1992, the Catholic Church did not appoint a single Tutsi bishop, while Hutu became leaders of almost all the Protestant churches (Longman, 2010: 73-81).

In a similar fashion, after the predominantly Tutsi RPF took power in 1994, nearly all of the churches replaced their leaders with Tutsi, most of them Tutsi who had been living outside of Rwanda in 1994. Scholars who have studied the new Rwandan churches (c.f., van't Spijker 2013, Kubai 2007) attest that they are largely established and led by the Tutsi returnee community as well. The RPF has actively intervened to ensure that churches choose leaders who meet their approval, sending troops to pressure the Free Methodist Church when it was meeting to select a new president and freezing the bank accounts of the Episcopal and ADEPR (Pentecostal) churches until they agreed to change their leadership.²⁰ The new church leaders have, in turn, sought to ally themselves with Rwanda's new political establishment. Phillip Cantrell (2009) observes that:

The Anglican Church is deeply supportive of the regime in Kigali. No separation of church and state exists in Rwanda as it is understood in the West, and the Anglican Church has failed in many ways to function as an independent organ of civil society. There is even evidence that suggests that Kagame's government exercises input in the promotion of church leaders (322-323).

Kubai (2007) notes that many of the new Pentecostal churches are led by returned Tutsi refugees and that these churches commonly encourage their members to support government programs. Many government officials are known as *Abarokore*, Born Again, and the new churches have enthusiastically welcomed the opportunities afforded by a close association with the state, emulating the model established by the Catholic and Mainline Protestant churches.

The Catholic Church has lost much of its prominence in post-genocide Rwanda, not only because of its role in the genocide but also because a majority of the leaders of the RPF government are Protestants, in both mainline and Pentecostal churches. The prosecution of Misago was the most prominent attempt by the state to humble and intimidate the Catholic

²⁰ Fieldnotes, 1995-1996, 2001-2003. I discuss RPF pressure on churches in the broader context of constraints on civil society in Longman 2011.

Church. Yet rather than respond with a defense of its independence and power, the Catholic Church has continued to seek to appease the government. For example, when the prominent Rwandan Catholic priest and human rights activist André Sibomana was named acting bishop of Kabgayi after the genocide, he spoke out against human rights abuses by the new regime, including the terrible conditions in the prison in his diocese, but he told me that the Vatican asked him to temper his criticisms because they needed to prioritize building a better relationship with the new government. Under pressure from the regime, his name was not put forward as permanent bishop.²¹ The leaders who have been appointed in place of outspoken individuals like Sibomana have been careful to avoid alienating the regime.

In addition to the problem posed by maintaining too cozy a relationship with the state, churches in post-genocide Rwanda have also followed the pre-genocide precedent of playing ethnic politics. One of the ironies of RPF rule, particularly since 2000, has been a policy banning ethnic identification at the same time that the regime emphasizes ethnicity by making the genocide the central justification for its administration. As I write in *Memory and Justice in Post-Genocide Rwanda*, the RPF government has argued that ethnicity is an artificial colonial creation that must be eradicated, but much of the population believes that the government continues to discriminate in favor of the Tutsi, particularly returned refugees (Longman 2017). The churches have been caught up in this contradictory policy, embracing the government's programs of national unity while also appointing mostly Tutsi returnees as leaders. Cantrell (2009) notes that the ethnic gap between the parishioners and the church leadership has posed major problems in the Episcopal Church:

Given their Tutsi-Ugandan identity, many Rwandans see the Anglican hierarchy as outsiders. ... Until the Anglican Church can separate itself from and challenge the ruling regime to enact political reform, many in the pregenocide Hutu

²¹ Interviews with Sibomana in Kabgayi and Kigali, 1996.

population will likely remain suspicious of the intentions of the church, compromising the message of Christian unity and reconciliation (322-323).

It has been relatively easy for the new leaders of the Episcopal, Presbyterian, and other churches to condemn the actions of their predecessors in the genocide because the new leaders were themselves from the group targeted in the genocide. Yet their criticisms have not been backed up by any institutional reforms. Kubai (2007) charges the new churches with having re-invented rather than transcending social divisions. She notes that the churches are largely the creations of returnees, who dominate the congregations, and that the congregations themselves are divided along Anglophone-Francophone linguistic lines between returnees from Uganda on the one hand and returnees from the DRC and Burundi on the other.

Having been imported into Rwanda by the returnees from various places, the new churches were formed along group identities of their founders, on the basis of shared cultural experiences while in exile. These churches seem to have confined themselves to group identities and hence they have had little impact on the national process, in spite of their appropriation of the healing and reconciliation rhetoric (Kubai, 2007: 213).

In short, Rwandans Christian churches – new and old – have yet to distinguish themselves from the state in a way that would allow them to offer a prophetic voice. In his newest work exploring Christian engagement with reconciliation, Katongole (2017) turns back to Rwanda and notes that even as churches have embraced the rhetoric of reconciliation and national unity, the silences that prevail in Rwanda continue to inhibit reconciliation. He discusses a woman he encountered who told him, “The greatest problem of this country ... is silence. Many feel that their story has no place in Rwanda. They follow the government policies, they gather at rallies and sing the government slogans, but they are keeping a distance from everything.” A major area of silence, a major part of the story that cannot be told in Rwanda today, is the suffering caused by those currently in power. Many Rwandans lost their family members not in the genocide but at the hands of the RPF as they marched across the country in

1994, in the months after they took power, during their two interventions in Congo, and as they put down an uprising in the northwest in 1997 and 1998. While this violence cannot be equated with the horrific systematic slaughter of the genocide, the massacres, summary executions, and other attacks by the RPF were nevertheless major human rights violations that left tens of thousands dead. While levels of state-sponsored violence have been much lower since 2000, the RPF has continued to rule in a highly authoritarian manner, tolerating almost no dissent and arresting or assassinating many journalists, civil society activists, and opposition politicians (Longman, 2011 and 2017).

As was true in the years leading up to the 1994 genocide, Rwanda's Christian churches have remained almost entirely silent about ongoing human rights abuses in the country. Even as the churches have supposedly promoted reconciliation, they have failed to address the experiences of loss and suffering of much of the population. The genocide not only affected the Tutsi, who were its main target, but also challenged the very moral foundations of the country, so the churches were quite appropriate to confront it. Yet to buy into the official narrative that regards *only* the genocide as worthy of attention and to completely ignore other experiences of violence limits the possibilities for healing. By reinforcing silences around RPF crimes, the churches seem to be serving the interests of power rather than promoting meaningful reconciliation. Churches help to reinforce the myth of Rwanda's miraculous rebirth even in the face of obvious affronts to democracy and human rights. For example, the churches have remained silent even as the major challenger to President Kagame in each of the last three presidential elections has been prevented from campaigning, charged with trumped up crimes,

and imprisoned.²² As has been true since Christianity arrived in Rwanda, the official churches seem more focused on appeasing political power than in providing a prophetic witness.

Conclusions

In an interview shortly before his death in 1998, Catholic activist Sibomana²³ (1999) expressed hope about the ways in which average Rwandans were learning to live together, but he offered a damning condemnation of the institutional churches:

I have noted with a certain bitterness a strong continuity in the history of the Church. Yesterday, its senior officials colluded with the state. The same thing is happening today. Power has changed hands, the ideology is different, but the attitude of the heads of the Church is the same: instead of looking after the most destitute, those who are suffering and can't see the light at the end of the tunnel, their eyes are fixed on those who run the country and from whom they expect rewards.

In this chapter, I have argued that Rwanda's Christian churches became implicated in the 1994 genocide because of their close collaboration with the state, history of playing ethnic politics, and their own internal political struggles. Since the political transition, churches have instituted many programs to help rebuild society, particularly at the local level, and the new leaders of the churches have apologized for their predecessors' role in the genocide. Yet as Bazuin (2013) notes, "Reconciliation as practiced in the country, and especially among religious groups, focuses on repairing interpersonal relationships as opposed to political or ethnic relations" (269-270). The churches have made no structural changes to prevent their being involved in future violence, and they have failed to develop an independent prophetic voice that

22 Former President Faustin Bizimungu was imprisoned in 2002 after he formed a new multi-ethnic political party. Victoire Ingabire founded a new party and sought to run in the 2010 elections, but her party was not registered, and she was imprisoned. In 2017, Diane Rwigara, daughter of a prominent Tutsi businessman who died under mysterious circumstances a year before, was prevented from running for president then imprisoned on corruption charges.

23 Father Sibomana died when he was denied the right to leave Rwanda to seek needed medical treatment.

can hold the powerful in the country – particularly politicians - accountable. Once again they have sought close collaboration with the state and continued to play ethnic politics. Even the new churches that have emerged in part in response to the failures of the established churches have followed the same route of seeking close ties to political authorities and refraining from speaking prophetically about abuses of power.

As Rwandans seek to build a new society after the horrors of the genocide, war, and authoritarian rule, Christian churches will need to play a key role. To date, churches have played an important part in helping people learn to cope with the past and live together peacefully. They have created valuable programs to deal with the legacies of the genocide and commemorate the lives lost. Yet healing in Rwanda remains limited (despite an official narrative claiming the country's miraculous rebirth), in large part because the current government has enforced silence around the violence it used to establish its own power, and churches have been complicit in this silence. In fact, the churches' practice of urging support for the current regime, despite its involvement in major human rights abuses, is reminiscent of the blind support churches offered to the Kayibanda and Habyarimana regimes. For Christian churches to provide a more meaningful contribution to building a new Rwanda, they need to interrogate their own practices, to establish independence from the state, and to begin to speak with a prophetic voice inspired by the Word of God rather than political considerations. Ultimately, Rwanda needs strong, prophetic, independent churches to develop a brighter future.

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