CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

RELIGION IN POST-GENOCIDE RWANDA'S QUEST FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION

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INTRODUCTION: THE CONTEXT

On April 6, 1994, the plane carrying Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana and Cyprien Ntaryamira, the president of Burundi, was shot down as it approached Kigali, capital of Rwanda. Everyone on board was killed. While the question of responsibility remains disputed until today, this attack served as the catalyst for the genocide in Rwanda. Since 1990, Rwanda had suffered under a civil war. With the attack on the plane, civil war culminated in the well-prepared massacre of up to one million children, women and men, while the world community stood by and watched (Dallaire 2004). Most of the victims belonged to the Tutsi minority (ca. 15 percent), yet countless moderate Hutu (ca. 85 percent) who refused to participate in the killings were murdered as well. What became the fastest genocide of modern history stood out not only because of its preventability, systematic preparation and brevity, but also because of its cruelty. Many victims were cut into pieces with machetes or buried alive. Due to the excessive sexual violence in the Rwandan genocide, sexual violence and mutilation has since become acknowledged and punishable as genocidal crimes

(“Akayesu ruling” of 1998). Another characteristic of the Rwandan genocide is that many victims and perpetrators knew each other. They were neighbors, friends, or even family.

Convicted perpetrators, who have been released from prison, usually return to their home villages, oftentimes the place of their atrocities and the home of survivors. There, feelings of hatred and fear, shame and revenge, are all mingled together. With a country virtually in ashes, the struggle for everyday survival was compounded by the emotional turmoil of both survivors and perpetrators wrestling with anxiety and hostility. Rwanda’s long-term president Paul Kagame realized that in order for the country to be rebuilt, he needed to provide stability and social unity. He thus initiated a “National Politics of Reconciliation”, pushing reconciliation initiatives on all levels in society. On a national level, Rwanda’s “National Unity and Reconciliation Commission” (NURC) was founded that promotes different reconciliation and sensitization projects throughout the country. The terms “Tutsi”, “Hutu”, and “Twa” were forbidden, and the official motto “We are all Rwandan” was introduced to forge a new, national identity. On the judicial level, Rwanda established the so-called *gacaca* courts, traditional mechanisms of conflict resolution. In terms of stability and economic progress, Kagame’s reconciliation strategy seems to be paying off as Rwanda’s Human Development Index (HDI) has steadily increased and foreign investors hail Rwanda’s “economic miracle” (Amman 2015: 31). At the same time, however, reports of severe and continuing violations of human rights and of a political climate that stifles basic rights, such as freedom of the press and freedom of political opposition, give rise to concern (Bouka 2018).

WHAT HAPPENED TO RELIGION AFTER THE GENOCIDE?

A hundred days of slaughter in 1994 left Rwanda permanently altered. The effects of the genocide were not only visible on the social, economic, and political levels, Rwanda’s religious landscape changed as well. With about 90 percent Christians, pre-genocide Rwanda was—and still is—one of the most Christian countries on the African continent. Within the Christian faith, it was Catholicism that was most prominent with almost two-thirds of the population

following the Catholic faith. Different from other African countries, the wave of Christian revival and renewal that had swept across Africa at the end of the 20th century had bypassed Rwanda to a large extent.

It was only after the genocide that these “new” churches experienced any kind of significant growth in Rwanda. While the once dominant Catholic Church lost almost one-third of its members, Protestant churches doubled their membership numbers from 19 percent pre-genocide to 38 percent post-genocide (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda 2014: xv). Most of this increase can be attributed to new churches of Pentecostal and charismatic orientation. Pentecostal and charismatic churches place special emphasis on a personal relationship with God through accepting Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior and on spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues and divine healing. With their emphasis on healing, on breaking with the past, and a new beginning, Pentecostal churches seem to hearken to the needs of a society traumatized by mass violence. It was oftentimes through refugees returning from exile that these new churches were introduced to the country.

Contributing further to the change of the religious landscape after the genocide was a sense of disillusion and disappointment with the established churches, especially with the Catholic Church. As discussed in Chapter 5, churches had become the sites of massacres rather than sanctuaries of refuge. Not only did people feel betrayed by the lack of assistance by the churches when it was needed most, but questions of a possible complicity of the churches (Rittner, Roth, and Whitworth 2004) remain unanswered until this day.

RELIGION: A MAJOR PLAYER IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION

Despite these changes, religion remains a major factor in Rwanda's current civil society. While the religious microlevel has undergone major changes, the macrolevel remained nearly the same with still about 90 percent of the population adhering to the Christian faith. Contrary to many secularized countries in the West, religious actors at both the individual and institutionalized

levels are significant players in this country's processes of social change: "Religion has been and continues to be part of Rwanda's system of meaning-making and meaning-interpretation, and hence has contributed to shaping new values, demands of propriety and interpretations of old norms that have emerged after the genocide" (Kubai 2016: 3). This holds especially true for Rwanda's process of reconciliation and its quest for sustainable peace and social cohesion. Reconciliation is understood both as a process of healing relationships and as the result of this process. The process includes different elements, such as confessing one's guilt, asking and granting of forgiveness, and making amends. Against the background of the genocide, reconciliation, social unity, and development are explicit topics on the agendas of many churches. The churches generally support the government's top-down reconciliation strategies, yet at the same time they supplement them with bottom-up strategies.

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION: CONTRIBUTIONS

Based on our discussion of the specific characteristics of religious actors in Chapter 7, the following examines the contributions of Christian churches in Rwanda's reconciliation process. I will make use of the examples of different Church denominations, including "traditional" churches, such as the Presbyterian Church, the Anglican Church, and the Catholic Church, "new" churches, such as Pentecostal Church of Rwanda (ADEPR) and Christian Life Assembly in Kigali, as well as non-church-based Christian actors like Christian Action for Reconciliation and Social Assistance (CARSA). My analysis is based on both literature analysis and recurrent empirical research and ethnographic work I have conducted in Rwanda since 2014.

TRUST: RELIGION AS COMMUNITY, RELIGION AS PRACTICE

Trust in the churches and their moral credibility had been seriously harmed through the genocide. The consequences of the perceived failures of the churches are visible in the changed religious landscape as people turned their backs on the established churches. Regaining

the trust of the people thus proved to be a key challenge for many churches as they sought for ways of dealing with the past. While many chose to downplay their actions and inactions during the genocide, some took a different route. A group that included representatives of Tutsi, Hutu, and the West from different church denominations gathered in Detmold, Germany, in 1996 to draft a confession of guilt, the so-called “Detmold Confession”. The Confession begins by acknowledging that reconciliation starts with recognizing the suffering of the other and with asking for forgiveness, “The Rwandan people will never be reconciled with each other unless each party accepts to kneel down before the suffering of the other party, to confess their own offense and to humbly ask forgiveness of their victims” (Detmold Confession, §1). For 20 years, the Detmold Confession remained the only one of its kind, until in 2016 the Catholic Church in Rwanda issued a long-awaited apology, followed by a statement of Pope Francis in 2017. Trust needs authenticity, not least in terms of dealing with the past. A genuine confession of guilt helps prepare the ground for sustainable peacebuilding and reconciliation. At the same time, confessions of guilt, apologies, and asking for forgiveness in words, symbols, and deeds are not limited to religious actors, such as churches, but have proven powerful tools of conflict resolution in the political realm as well (cf. The 1970 Warsaw Genuflection of the German chancellor Willy Brandt).

RELATIONSHIPS AND IDENTITY: RELIGION AS COMMUNITY

Many Rwandan churches emphasize the importance of building relationships, of creating a sense of belonging and identity. In the context of the nation’s reconciliation process this not only means building relationships with survivors and with perpetrators, but also assisting both in building relationships with one another. Pascal Bataringaya, current President of the Presbyterian Church, sees relationship building as a specific strength of the churches as compared to government initiatives: “The churches have something special. They walk with the people, with the perpetrators, with the victims. People feel that they are not alone” (Bataringaya, Kigali, February 21, 2016, personal interview). Against the background of *ubuntu*, that is, the idea that one’s own identity is bound up with that of

the other person—"I am because we are" (Tutu 2011), I will illustrate the emphasis on relationships by referring to the example of Remera, a small village in Western Rwanda.

In Remera, the pastor, a trained mediator, of the local Presbyterian congregation founded the "Lights". It is the aim of this group, named after the Gospel of Matthew 5:14 ("You are the light of the world"), to reach out and establish relationships with survivors and perpetrators. Once these relationships are established, they invite both to participate in the weekly meetings of the Lights. During these meetings Christian concepts such as forgiveness, healing, and transformation are discussed, supplemented by insights from trauma therapy, conflict resolution, and mediation. Through the ongoing engagement of the Lights, relationships between survivors and perpetrators are established and supported. The example of Remera illustrates our discussion of social network theory above (Chapter 4.1). It is by means of "connectors"—such as the pastor and the members of the Lights—that different groups and individuals are linked, even across (former) enemy lines. By connecting them, new ideas and concepts, such as on forgiveness or dealing with trauma, are disseminated; a prerequisite for the paradigm change required by complex social processes such as reconciliation and building a new nation.

NETWORKS AND FUNDING: RELIGION AS AN INSTITUTION, RELIGION AS SPIRITUALITY

"Global networking is an inherent characteristic of the whole enterprise of the new churches in Rwanda" (Kubai 2007: 208). The link between local congregations and global partners is visible as churches bring together locals, returnees, and sponsors from abroad. This holds true for both new and traditional churches such as the Presbyterian and the Anglican Church. Their close ties with the German United Evangelical Mission (UEM), for example, facilitate not only networks and connections, but also funding. In terms of conflict resolution, the local-global perspective of many churches can be an asset as resources and knowledge, as well as experiences and best practices are being exchanged across borders. The experiences of Remera, for instance, have attracted interest in places like Germany, the US, Nigeria, or Kenya.

SERVICES: RELIGION AS PRACTICE

As in many other African contexts, the churches in Rwanda provide a number of community services, including education, medical services, orphanages, or microfinance. In that way, they do not differ significantly from non-religious actors such as NGOs. Some churches prioritize certain services, while others display a wider array. The Pentecostal Church of Rwanda (ADEPR), for example, focuses on education. With about two million members it self-describes as a “religious organization with the vision consisting of quantitative and qualitative transformation of the Rwandan Community by Jesus Christ Integral Gospel” (Kwizera 2015). ADEPR is responsible for 80 nursery schools, 158 primary schools, 58 secondary schools, six vocational and technical schools, and four bible schools. ADEPR’s literacy programs throughout the country were awarded prizes by UNESCO. In the post-genocide context of Rwanda, the significance of education for processes of conflict resolution and peacebuilding can hardly be overemphasized. “Education has played a great role during the reconciliation process since it has been used to sensitize the Rwandese society to build the skill of living with diversity” (Sundqvist 2011: 183).

NORMATIVE CONCEPTS AND VALUES: RELIGION AS A SET OF TEACHINGS, RELIGION AS PRACTICE

As people go to church each Sunday, they listen to teachings on dogmatics (what to believe) and ethics (how to behave). As any religion, the Christian faith includes strong normative concepts and values. In the aftermath of the genocide, concepts such as reconciliation, forgiveness, and grace have become particularly significant. These theological concepts become very concrete once they are set in the context of torn social fabric and the quest for the healing of broken relationships. Genocide survivor Fr. Marcel Uwineza, S.J., recounts his mixed emotions when he met one of the murderers of his parents, brothers, and sister.

I thought he was coming to kill me too. But I could not believe what happened. As if in a movie, he knelt before me and asked me to forgive him. After a time of confusion, asking myself what was happening, and by which force I could not describe, I took him, embraced him and said: “I forgive you; the Lord has been good to me.” Ever since that

moment, I have felt free. I have realized that forgiveness heals the for-giver even more than the forgiven.

(Uwineza 2016a)

Uwineza's description of "a school of forgiveness" that he perceives God has led him through since the murder of his family is that of a very personal experience, yet it is not an uncommon account, either. Narratives like Uwineza's help illustrate the potency of concepts like forgiveness and healing in transforming attitudes and behaviors.

HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE: RELIGION AS SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION AS DISCOURSE

Part of Christian theology is a specific understanding of anthropology or human nature. Human flourishing is cast not only in terms of physical and material well-being, but also in spiritual and emotional terms. From this holistic understanding follows for many Christian churches that care for the soul must be accompanied by care for the body. Reconciliation initiatives by the churches in Rwanda are therefore often linked to development projects. As Nathan Gasatura, bishop of the Anglican Church, explains,

The aim is not only to reconcile, but to do projects together, they give them cows together, to feed together, milk the cow together, share the milk together, sell what remains of the milk together, divide the cash together. They would get medical insurances together, build their homes together ... get into cooperatives together, maybe it is rice, maybe it is bee hives, maybe about credit and savings. They also go to church together, celebrate together.

(Gasatura, Butare, February 23, 2016, personal interview)

Connecting the spiritual with the material, and reconciliation with development, the sustainability of both are enhanced as welcome synergies are reaped.

DEALING WITH TRAUMA AND RESTORING MEANING: RELIGION AS A SET OF TEACHINGS, RELIGION AS SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION AS PRACTICE

Violent conflict leaves visible and invisible wounds. If the latter are not treated, they might not only result in severe post-traumatic

stress disorder (PTSD), keeping the individual from effectively managing his or her own life. They can also contribute to the spiral of violence that turns former victims into perpetrators. Meanwhile, a quarter of a century after the genocide, second-generation trauma has become a major challenge as the challenges of survivor guilt and finding meaning are being reframed in the next generation. Through developing trust, personal relationships, and feelings of belonging, Christian churches help create a place where trauma can be addressed and healing processes begin, oftentimes by enlisting the help of trained trauma counselors. Trauma healing workshops such as offered by CARSA teach participants strategies to alleviate the effects of PTSD and build resilience (cf. CARSA Trauma Healing). Participants learn to share their stories in a safe way that does not result in re-traumatization and given the opportunity to do so. They furthermore receive counseling in order to give and receive forgiveness. Situating one's own story in the larger eschatological framework of Christian hope can help restore meaning to first and second-generation victims of trauma.

RITUALS: RELIGION AS SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION AS PRACTICE

Rituals provide structure and stability in daily life. Religious rituals, such as prayer, meditation, or communion can become important resources of support, especially in times of social upheaval. Catholic communities in post-genocide Rwanda have attempted to utilize Christian ritual in terms of reconciliation such as in *gacaca nkirisitu* (Christian gacaca), a pastoral process for perpetrators and survivors. Genocide perpetrators are asked to abstain from the sacraments for six months, while participating in a weekly catechetical program. They are encouraged to confront their shame and seek forgiveness from the victims. If both consent, survivors join perpetrators in receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation. "Echoing ancient church penitential traditions, the priest ... performed a ritual rite of reincorporation including the sprinkling of baptismal water" (Carney 2015: 20), followed by a celebratory feast with the entire community. Based on the conviction that reconciliation is a long-term process, the church then assists in facilitating day-to-day relationships between the perpetrator and the survivor.

MEMORY: RELIGION AS A SET OF TEACHINGS, RELIGION AS SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION AS PRACTICE

Memory is central to human identity—to who we are and how we have become who we are. Oftentimes, memory is used to foster hatred and perpetuate stereotypes. Recognizing the importance of memory for reconciliation and sustainable peace, the Christian churches in Rwanda seek to contribute to the healing of memories, for instance, through trauma workshops and their emphasis on forgiveness. Christian churches participate in the nation-wide rituals of remembrance, for instance, through the joint preparation of the week of remembrance following April 7 as the Genocide Memorial Day. At the same time, churches develop their own rituals of commemoration. The Presbyterian congregation in Remera, for instance, erected a memorial site with the names and graves of the church members killed at a prominent place next to the church. There, survivors have a place for their grief as their murdered loved ones are being acknowledged by the community. Bringing Christian eschatological hope and a framework that reaches beyond the individual lifespan to people's despair is the "theological imperative of memory" in post-genocide Rwanda (Uwinzea 2016b).

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION AND RECONCILIATION: CHALLENGES

Next to the significant contributions of the Christian churches and their potentials for supporting, if not leading positive social change, the following problems emerge.

REINVENTING SOCIAL CLEAVAGES

Rwanda's reconciliation process is marked by the official motto "We are all Rwandan". Much political and social energy has been invested in the creation of one collective national identity, transcending former ethnic identities. Yet the problem seems to be more complex as additional layers of identity are being added to society, for instance, by returnees from Anglophone and Francophone countries. These emerging new social alignments are also visible in some churches as language, common backgrounds, and affluency become

markers of identity. For example, Christian Life Assembly, one of the fastest growing churches in Kigali, represents an Anglophone identity, with many members being returnees from East Africa. The apparent affluence of its members is a further identity marker of this church. Especially in urban contexts it seems, therefore, as if “the churches have wittingly or unwittingly reinvented new layers of identity” (Kubai 2007: 212), thereby inadvertently countering their own reconciliation efforts.

LACK OF ATTENTION TO HUMAN RIGHTS

For years, Rwanda has been criticized for its tight political control, state intimidation, and suppression of basic human rights (Human Rights Watch 2019: 491–495). One example is the problematic situation of the Twa people, a minority of about 1 percent. Traditionally hunters and gatherers, the Twa have suffered political and social marginalization for decades. In April 2016, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination issued an official warning that the Twa are threatened by extinction. Yet within Rwanda’s current political discourse on national unity that obliterates different social groups, the problem of the Twa cannot even be adequately framed. The denial of ethnic plurality results, in this case, in the denial of basic human rights to a certain group of people, with harmful consequences to the nation’s process of social unity and reconciliation. Perhaps due to the harsh political climate, the churches have so far expressed little interest in issues of human rights, thereby neglecting their role as advocates on behalf of the poor and marginalized.

(TOO) CLOSE CHURCH AND STATE RELATIONSHIP

In general, Christian churches in Rwanda seek good relationships with the state. In terms of conflict resolution and reconciliation, the churches support the state-led top-down initiatives. Quantitative studies support our findings here that there are no systematic differences between the different religious groups and their engagement in peacebuilding (Bazuin 2013). The close relationship between the churches and the state is illustrated by the presence of (former) church representatives in higher government positions,

such as the president of the “National Unity and Reconciliation Commission” (NURC), an Anglican bishop. The reconciliation and forgiveness rhetoric of the state aligns well with the churches’ own core values. At the same time, the churches mostly abstain from critically addressing problematic state conduct. This lack of prophetic stance has evoked some inner-church criticism (Kazuyuki 2009; Nsengimana 2015), yet mostly the churches “try to see how to gain favor from the state instead of challenging it” (Nsengimana 2015: 108).

ONE-SIDED CONCEPT OF RECONCILIATION

Processes of reconciliation must pay adequate attention to peace, justice, mercy, and truth in order to be sustainable (Lederach 1999). Yet in the context of the Rwandan reconciliation process, churches seem to focus primarily on mercy and peace, while neglecting justice and truth. This impression is supported by Josephine Sundqvist’s study on Pentecostal churches and reconciliation. “The Pentecostal movement has barely been emphasizing justice in their reconciliation strategy or their interpretation of the concept” (Sundqvist 2011: 169). The neglect of justice and truth is visible, for instance, in a problematic official discourse on memory that primarily enforces the “narrative of the victor”, while suppressing dissenting voices. If reconciliation lacks justice and truth, however, resentment towards it is likely to build up.

CONCLUSION

A thorough understanding of post-genocide Rwanda’s ongoing major social experiment called “Politics of Reconciliation” needs to take the contributions of religious actors into account. Churches successfully contribute to the social change needed for sustainable peace on multiple levels. Their specific contributions display both formal and material characteristics. Formal aspects such as building trust and personal relationships with survivors and perpetrators or offering different community services such as health care and education are supplemented by material aspects such as disseminating normative concepts and values related to reconciliation and forgiveness, while offering meaning and hope in the face of a traumatic

past. At the same time, certain challenges emerge. A one-sided understanding of reconciliation neglecting justice, a Church-state relationship lacking critical distance, and a lack of explicit concern regarding the state's human rights violations seem to be amongst the most pertinent problematic aspects threatening to turn "thick" and substantial reconciliation into a "thin" and formal process.

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