CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE RELIGION IN PRE-GENOCIDE AND GENOCIDE RWANDA

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CHRISTIAN CHURCHES: ACCOMPLICES IN GENOCIDE?

When the genocide scorched Rwanda in 1994, killing up to one million people in its wake, it was seen not only as the culmination of a civil war raging since 1990, but of decades of ethnic mass violence. Since Rwanda's independence in 1962, repeated massacres between the Tutsi minority of the country (about 15 percent) and the Hutu majority had left hundreds of thousands of people dead. In the genocide, while most victims were Tutsi, countless moderate Hutu who refused to participate in the bloodbath were murdered as well. Different from previous eruptions of violence, this time the churches no longer functioned as sanctuaries. Instead, they became morgues. More people were killed in churches and parishes than anywhere else. Combined with the fact that over 90 percent of the Rwandan population consider themselves Christians, this begs the question of what role religion—and more concretely: Christianity—played before and during the genocide. Up to this day, the involvement of the churches remains controversial as the questions surrounding a “complicity of the Churches” (Rittner, Roth, and Whitworth 2004) have not yet been fully answered. Complicity in the genocide goes

beyond wielding a machete or denouncing refugees. Complicity also involves creating and sustaining the conditions in which the genocide could occur. In order to get a better understanding of the “religious factor” in the Rwandan genocide, I will use the six-dimensional model outlined in Chapter 3 in order to approach religion in this conflict (Frazer and Owen 2018; Frazer and Friedli 2015). Of the six dimensions of religion, four feature prominently in the context of Rwanda, namely: religion as community, as a set of teachings, as discourse, and as an institution.

RELIGION AS COMMUNITY: RELIGIOUS VS. ETHNIC IDENTITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Different from other ethno-religious conflicts, for instance, in Northern Nigeria or Sri Lanka where varying religious traditions are a major factor, the genocide in Rwanda took place within one and the same religious community. Christians were killing Christians. Divisions were not even along denominational lines such as in the Northern Ireland conflict between Protestants and Catholics. Rather, people of the same faith traditions, even from within the same local church congregation, murdered each other. The divider aspect of religion as community that encourages thinking in terms of “us” vs. “them” along religious lines therefore does not seem to pertain to the Rwandan situation. Nor does the connecting aspect that rests on the assumption that religious communities create a strong communal identity, transcending other divisive factors such as ethnicity. Instead, it appears that in Rwanda identity was viewed in terms of ethnicity rather than religion. Here, one needs to keep in mind that the terms “Hutu”, “Tutsi”, and “Twa” (a small minority of ca. 1 percent) are not conventional ethnic descriptions. Rather, they were used to denote professions and/or wealth. Whoever owned more than ten cattle was considered a herdsman or Tutsi. Whoever had less was a Hutu, a farmer. Twa were traditionally potters (Bataringaya 2012: 22). It was only the colonial powers—first Germany, then Belgium after World War I—who cemented these differences into ethnic categories through their strategy of divide-and-rule. Notwithstanding the historical responsibility of Europe for the ethnic-political conflicts in Africa, Rwanda seems to prove that the blood of ethnicity is thicker than the water of baptism. In

marked contrast, the small Muslim community in Rwanda was not drawn into the genocide as their shared Muslim identity transcended the Hutu-Tutsi distinction (Prunier 1995: 253).

Yet despite the apparent prominence of ethnicity, the nexus of religion, community and Christian identity is more complex. Religious identity was recreated on a different level as ethnic identities became sacralized into pseudo-religious identities. The most powerful religious player in pre-genocide Rwanda, the Catholic Church, endorsed the state's unjust ethnic policies. Their mission strategy rested largely on ethnicity as they targeted the elite for conversion, first, favoring Tutsi, then Hutu. Ethnicity thus became enmeshed with religion, it became religiously charged and turned into a sacralized ethnic identity, grotesquely illuminated by génocidaires taking daily communion during the genocide to strengthen themselves for their "work".

The work of René Girard on religion and violence helps to illuminate the nexus of religion, communities, identities, and relationships. According to Girard, human relations are based on reciprocity; we live in "mimetic" relationships. The reason for this is desire. Human conflict in turn is therefore not so much about differences, such as in ideology, religion or ethnicity, but about rivalry (Girard 1998: 132). Given humans' inclination for desire and competition and the mimetic nature of our relationships, mimetic rivalry can quickly turn into a spiral of increasing hostility and violence. Small misgivings are retaliated by bigger offenses and so on. Archaic communities, Girard points out, had a sacred built-in braking mechanism in the mimetic spiral.

When you have that mimetic violence, there comes a point when you forget about the object and you concentrate on your opponent ... and there is a tendency for the system to simplify itself ... until finally everyone polarizes against a single enemy who seems responsible for the whole crisis.

(Girard 1998: 133)

This single enemy is the scapegoat. The escalating violence can be brought only to a halt once the scapegoat is killed, thus mirroring the sacred ritual of the Old Testament scapegoat killed for the sake of the people. In this ritual, the scapegoat becomes both victim and sacrifice.

This quick overview already reveals its pertinence for the Rwandan context. The deliberate creation of fixed ethnic boundaries combined with decades of colonial policies of favor and disfavor had intensified ethnic rivalries, offsetting a spiral of violence with repeated massacres. From this perspective, artificially constructed differences in terms of ethnicity are therefore just the façade for the problem underneath, namely rivalry. Rivalry in Rwanda has many faces, ranging from a feeling of inferiority on the side of the group in disfavor with the colonial powers over an unjust quota system in education to the scarcity of natural resources such as land. In a context of ingrained cultural violence (see below: Religion as a set of teachings: problematic theology) and structural violence by the colonial powers, the step to direct violence is a small one indeed. Once the spiral of mimetic violence had escalated, the system's tendency for self-simplification started showing and the need for a victim-sacrifice arose. Killing the scapegoat—the Tutsi—bestowed a sense of sacralization to both the scapegoat and the killers. While Girard's theory must not be overstretched in the effort to understand the nature of violence in Rwanda, it helps to shed light on certain aspects, such as the role of mimetic relationships and the sacred ritual of killing a scapegoat. Rather than exposing and confronting the underlying rivalry between Hutu and Tutsi and the escalation of violence, the churches supported the existing ethnic divisions. It is "by making ethnic violence understandable and acceptable to the population ... [that] Churches helped to make genocide possible" (Longman 2001: 166).

RELIGION AS A SET OF TEACHINGS: PROBLEMATIC THEOLOGY

Approaching religion as a set of teachings in pre-genocide and genocide Rwanda provides another helpful angle for understanding the role of religion in this context. From the Christian message with its core concepts of love and mercy, how could such atrocious acts of hatred spring forth? One line of thought tries to explain this paradox in terms of a superficial faith. From this perspective, the mass conversions to Catholic Christianity following the baptism of Rwanda's King Mutara III Rudahigwa in 1943 were seen as guided mainly by strategic purposes, rather than denoting a genuine

transformation of hearts and minds. While this argument might hold a certain validity, it does not take that into account which appears to be at the core of the paradox: theology itself.

The theological teachings disseminated by both the early missionaries and later the institutionalized churches emphasized respect for authorities, not least for the hierarchy of the Church, and obedience to the state. Furthermore, the Christian religion was portrayed as a spiritual, inner affair with no bearing on public life. “Christian identity was socially and politically irrelevant” (Carney 2014: 119). In the aftermath of World Wars I and II, eschatology figured prominently in the churches’ teachings. Believers were told to look to their rewards in heaven, rather than being burdened by the life in this world (Munyaneza 2001: 64). This-worldly issues such as poverty, injustice, and violence were not to be concerns of the Christian, but better left to politicians. While obedience to authority is indeed one aspect of the Christian Scripture (such as in Romans 13), the teachings of the churches neglected other crucial aspects such as active love for the neighbor (as illustrated by the Parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37) that extends even to one’s enemy (Matthew 5:44).

Rwandan converts hardly learned about important Christian concepts such as responsibility, freedom, and the prophetic witness of speaking truth to power. Even as massacres of Tutsi were taking place throughout the country during the Civil War 1990–1993, the church leaders mostly failed to name or condemn them. For instance, in their Easter message of March 1991, the Catholic bishops preached on the love of enemies, yet failed to address the massacre of Tutsi at Ruhengeri in the previous month. And even when the massacres were mentioned, blame was allocated to Hutu or Tutsi rather than the government. Chained to a highly dubious theological justification of loyalty to ecclesiastical hierarchy and state power, Christian-based social justice remained a thin concept, even as younger priests tried to carry some of the atmosphere of change of the Second Vatican Council into the Rwandan context. Though there were notable exceptions, one needs to conclude that by failing to speak out against ethnicity-based injustices—ranging from discrimination over exclusion to murder—and by failing to condemn state instigated hatred, the churches gave the impression that they condoned the expanding violence against the Tutsi as in line with

Christian belief. “The churches, thus, not only failed to provide an obstacle along the path towards genocide but actually helped to create a moral climate where genocide was possible” (Longman 2010: 162f.).

RELIGION AS DISCOURSE: LANGUAGE, CULTURAL MYTHS, AND *WELTANSCHAUUNG*

Religion as discourse is yet another fruitful lens to employ. Approaching religion through discourse means, first of all, taking a closer look at language. Drawing on pseudo-theological notions of duty and loyalty to authorities, Christian language was often instrumentalized for political purposes. For example, after the Tutsi RPF (Rwanda Patriotic Front) Army had invaded Rwanda from the North in 1990, sparking the civil war that culminated in the 1994 genocide, the religious language of Christian unity and duty was invoked to appeal for national unity and the obligation to serve one’s country. On October 12, 1990, Vincent Nsengiyumva, Archbishop of Kigali and member of the central committee of the ruling party until 1990, reminded Catholics of their “duty of protecting the country against all peril and against all menace, from wherever it comes—from the interior or the exterior” (cited in Carney 2014: 197). Jean-Pierre Karegeye thus rightly points to the “strong interaction in political and religious speeches [that] facilitated the way to genocide” (Karegeye 2011: 97).

Yet religion as discourse goes beyond language as a system for communication and extends to a cultural and linguistic framework that molds the entire life. For a better understanding of how mentalities on religion and violence developed in the context of Rwanda, we need to go back to pre-colonial times. Long before the arrival of Christianity at the turn of the 20th century, religion was already an integral part of Rwandan life. The spiritual world, inhabited by a heavenly Being called *Imana* and other spirits, was believed to have a direct influence on the living. Participation in different cults, such as that of *Lyangombe* or *Nyabingi*, offered access to spiritual powers. Like other parts of Rwandan oral history, these cults were vibrant with violent images, stories, and initiation rites. Forming the cultural and linguistic background, “the stories told and learnt by heart, orally and transmitted, were full

of violent images ... and the banalization of violence and death” (Munyaneza 2001: 58). Christianity failed to address this cultural heritage of violence. Not only did Christianity not challenge it, but contributed to reinforcing latent violence, for instance, by using Kinyarwanda words associated with violence in the translation of the Bible and hymns. God and Jesus Christ, for example, are called *umutabazi* (savior/liberator). In Rwandan oral history and cultural myths, however, this term is inseparably connected to the glorification of violence as it refers to quasi-mythical heroes who were sacrificed for their people.

Rwandan traditional *Weltanschauung* was further characterized by the belief in predetermination and fatalism. The experience of misfortune or violence was met with resignation as the expression of Imana’s will or as the result of angry spirits one had failed to pacify. This thinking aligned itself only too easily with Christian ideas of predetermination. At times, biblical narratives were employed to justify ethnic differences. “Especially the Book of Genesis was used to prove that *Abatutsi* pastoralists were like Abel, and *Abahutu* like Cain who was agriculturist and who fell in disgrace and therefore was cursed” (Munyaneza 2001: 64). Instead of addressing and critically examining the violence latent in Rwandan history and cultural myths, the churches ignored or worse, contributed to cultural violence. This failure on the side of the churches helped to sustain conditions in which violence and injustice could be understood as preordained and therefore inevitable, making the struggle against it seem pointless.

RELIGION AS AN INSTITUTION: CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS, THE CONSTRUCTION OF HEGEMONY, AND POWER STRUGGLES

In order to better understand the role of religion in creating the conditions for genocide to occur, we also need to look at religion as an institution. Here, the following three aspects come into view: a church-state relationship that lacked critical distance, the construction of hegemony, and power struggles within the Church. Given the prominence of the Catholic Church in pre-genocide Rwanda, we will be looking at this church in particular. In 1900, the so-called White Fathers, a French Catholic Missionary Order, were the first

Christian missionaries entering Rwanda. The White Fathers aimed to convert the elites first, hoping that the masses would follow. Since the native king, Yuhi V Musinga, was a Tutsi, the missionaries focused on the Tutsi. When after World War I Belgium succeeded Germany as the colonial power, the new colonial rulers relied on the White Fathers for their cultural experience as they implemented a policy favoring Tutsi over Hutu. Tensions between the two groups intensified when the Belgian authorities issued identity cards that cemented ethnic affiliation, making race the central identity marker. Throughout their rule, colonial authorities collaborated closely with the Catholic Church. When King Musinga resisted conversion, his son Mutara III Rudahigwa, a devout Catholic, was implemented as his successor. "There was a perfect relationship between Church and State" (Van't Spijker 1997: 241).

Increasingly, it became apparent that church affiliation was a way to achieve political power and the masses followed when their king was baptized in 1943. Even after Rwanda's independence in 1962, the Catholic Church continued to grow, until 65 percent of the population were members of the Catholic Church. Examples like the already mentioned Vincent Nsengiyumva, who was both Archbishop of Kigali and a member of the central committee of the ruling party until the Vatican forced him to resign from all political posts, illustrate the close ties between the state and the Church. While too much distance between Church and state can result in a church that is disengaged and disinterested in worldly affairs, too little distance can result in a lack of critical prophetic witness on the side of the church. The latter was clearly the case in Rwanda. Even during the civil war and genocide, official Church statements would shy away from criticizing the government openly, thus giving the impression of implicit support of the government's actions.

Church affiliation was not only seen as an entrance into the sphere of political power but linked to power and opportunity in general. Oftentimes, the Church was the main community supplier of jobs, education, health care, and other resources. Being educated and possibly sponsored in a church school was often the only chance of escaping the spiral of poverty. The hierarchy within the Church was thus mirrored in society through the construction

of hegemony. Much power was concentrated in the hands of few deciding who would get hired and fired and who would receive financial or practical aid. Even when the churches' policy changed from privileging Tutsi to favoring Hutu after 1959, the underlying structures remained in place. With the Church being the main source of practical help and opportunities, dependents had little choice but to consent to its policies. This was a problem not only in the Catholic Church, but also in Protestant denominations that had sprung up since 1907. Timothy Longman describes the construction of hegemony in view of the Presbyterian Church.

While supporting the dominant class position of a limited elite and providing little real opportunity for advancement to the majority of people in the parish, a patrimonial system within the church created dependency in the subordinate classes that limited their ability to challenge the system.

(Longman 2010: 221)

Antonio Gramsci's analysis of power is helpful here, as he describes the emergence of a "false consciousness" by the powerless who seem to have internalized the oppressive ideology. Yet next to a "false consciousness" (Gramsci 1971: 12), it is also the dire necessity of having no practical alternatives that led to people's acceptance of the status quo.

At the same time, reform movements from within the churches increasingly questioned the patrimonial system of power, the lack of transparency, and susceptibility to corruption. New ideas from liberation theology challenged especially the Catholic Church to become progressive agents of social change on behalf of the poor. In the 1980s and early 1990s, massive power struggles evolved within the Church as conservative and progressive strands fought for influence. Conservative parts within the Church saw the new democratic and social movements as threats to their own power. They thus perceived of the genocide as conducive to preserving the status quo. "Many church leaders were ultimately sympathetic to the genocide because it could help to bolster their power and preserve their hold on office against this movement for reform" (Longman 2001: 175).

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES IN RWANDA: COLLABORATORS IN VIOLENCE, WITNESSES FOR PEACE

By approaching religion as community, as set of teachings, as discourse, and as an institution, we have gained a better understanding of the role of religion in creating and maintaining the conditions in which ultimately the Rwandan genocide could take place. Yet to portray all Christian churches per se as genocide collaborators would be a misrepresentation. While our discussion has already revealed a multifaceted picture, it becomes even more complex when we take the numerous initiatives for peace and reconciliation by individuals and church communities before the genocide into account. As the focus of this chapter is on the conflictive side of religion rather than its peacebuilding capacities, a few examples must suffice here (cf. Schliesser 2018). One prominent effort for de-escalation and peace was the creation of the so-called Contact Committee in the middle of the civil war, in 1991, by ten Protestant and Catholic Church leaders. It was meant to provide a platform for mediation between the different political parties, especially between the government and the RPF, encouraging democratization and political reconciliation (Gatwa 2005: 206–208). While it could ultimately not prevent the genocide, it helped facilitate the transition to a multiparty system. Still on the eve of the genocide, on January 1, 1994, the Contact Committee organized a peace march for all Christians across denominations. Thousands of Christians marched and prayed for peace in Rwanda's capital, Kigali, and other cities throughout the country.

Next to Church initiatives, countless individuals withstood the violence, at times paying for their courage with their lives. When ethnic violence was rampant in December 1991, Thaddée Nsengiyumva, bishop of Kabgayi and President of the Rwandan Episcopal conference, issued a pastoral letter “*Convertissons-nous pour vivre ensemble dans la paix*” (“Let us convert to live together in peace”) (Nsengiyumva 1991). In this pastoral letter, Nsengiyumva admonished his church to take responsibility for its part in creating and sustaining ethnic divisions and called for a renewal within the Church. During the genocide, Nsengiyumva repeatedly issued public calls for the killings to stop as he assisted the International

Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in caring for war displaced people in his bishopric. He was murdered on June 5, 1994.

A flat description, therefore, of all Christians or all churches as implicated in the genocide does not do justice to the numerous individual and Church-led efforts at peace and reconciliation. Despite their courage, however, these initiatives were not representative of the overall attitudes on the side of the churches. For the most part, instead of openly criticizing ethnic violence, church leaders continued to call for support of the government. "In distancing itself from the Rwandan genocidal regime, the church would have had the chance to cut off the moral support to political violence" (Karegeye 2011: 100). Instead, the churches remained silent.

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