

Genocide and the role of the Church in Rwanda

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What exactly was the role of the Catholic Church in the Rwandan genocide? Ndahiro Tom, a Rwandan human rights commissioner, paints a picture of deep historical and political complicity and calls for the Church to restore its credibility by contributing to the process of justice.

Why do they eat my people as they eat bread? (Psalm 14)

All over Rwandan hills, valleys and mountains, thousands of crosses mark mass graves of genocide victims of 1994. During the genocide, many Tutsis were massacred in or around places of worship, including Catholic churches – paradoxically, in a country which was the most Christianised in Africa, with Christians representing more than 80% of the population. Catholic bishops in Rwanda have sometimes claimed that all Rwandans believe in God. (Kinyamateka, No. 1614, January 2003, pg. 6) There are hundreds of churches and chapels everywhere and almost every day followers repeatedly recite the prayer, “Our Father who art in heaven”, pleading with the Father to deliver them from evil (Matthew 6:13). From where, then, did the malevolence at the root of the genocide come? How and by whom could it have been overcome? Part of the answer to these questions is the Church and its mem-

bers.

According to Jean-Pierre Karegeye, a Jesuit priest, genocide is morally hideous, an evil expressed in forgetting God, and hence a new form of atheism. Karegeye asks several pertinent questions which merit consideration: “Christians killing other Christians? How could Rwandan Christians who manifested commitment to their faith have acted with such intense cruelty? How did ordinary people come to commit extraordinary evil...? Does the sin of genocide disturb the relationship between God and the perpetrators in official Catholic Church discourse? How can we explain the strange situation of priests involved in the crimes of genocide who are still running parishes in Western countries? Why are they protected by the Vatican against any legal proceedings?” He concludes: “The Church’s attitude towards genocide seems to suggest that the hierarchy of religious values is not usually in proportion to the hierarchy of moral standards.”

Generally, in Rwanda, the leadership of the Christian churches, especially that of the Catholic Church, played a central role in the creation and furtherance of racist ideology. They fostered a system which Europeans introduced and they encouraged. The building blocks of this ideology

were numerous, but one can mention a few – first, the racist vision of Rwandan society that the missionaries and colonialists imposed by developing the thesis about which groups came first and last to populate the country (the Hamitic and Bantu myths); second, by rigidly controlling historical and anthropological research; third, by reconfiguring Rwandan society through the manipulation of ethnic identities (from their vague socio-political nature in the pre-colonial period, these identities gradually became racial). From the late 1950s, some concepts became distorted: thus democracy became numerical democracy or demographic.

The philosophy of ‘rubanda nyamwinshi’ a Kinyarwanda expression, which politically came to mean ‘the Hutu majority’, prevailed after the so-called social revolution of 1959 ignored the basic tenets of democracy. In my view, recurrent genocides in Rwanda since 1959 were meant to maintain the ‘Hutu majority’ in power, by killing the Tutsi. Distributive justice became equivalent to regional and ethnic quotas; and revolution came to mean legitimised genocide of the Tutsis.

Church authorities contributed to the spread of racist theories mainly through the schools and seminaries over which they exercised control. The elite who ruled the country after independence trained in these schools. According to Church historian Paul Rutayisire, the stereotypes used by the Hutu-dominated Rwandan government to dehumanise Tutsis, were also spread by some influential clergymen, bishops and priests, before and after the genocide. The Catholic Church and colonial powers worked together in organizing racist political groups like

the Party for the Emancipation of the Hutu (Parmehutu).

Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour le Développement (MRND) was the party which in the mid-1970s had introduced and institutionalised policies of racial discrimination which they termed “équilibre ethnique et régional” (ethnic and regional equilibrium, a quota system). The Church fully supported the quota system, but on 30 April 1990, five Catholic priests from Nyundo diocese broke the silence. In a letter to the Church’s bishops in Rwanda, they called the quota system ‘racist’ and urged that it was high time “the Church of Jesus Christ established in Rwanda proclaimed aloud and tirelessly” to denounce it, since it constituted “an aberration” within their Church. They maintained that the only sure justice in schools and employment was the one which only took account of individual capacities, regardless of people’s origins, and that it was on this condition that the country could have citizens capable of leading it with competence and equity.

In conclusion, they said: “The Church should not be the vassal of the secular powers, but it should be free to speak with sincerity and courage when it proves necessary.” The authors of this letter were Fr. Augustin Ntagara, Fr. Callixte Kalisa, Fr. Aloys Nzaramba, Fr. Jean Baptiste Hategeka, and Fr. Fabien Rwakareke. All but the last two were killed during the genocide.

Within the Catholic Church, this discriminatory policy had long been in the seminaries. According to Fr. Jean Ndolimana, the enrolment of Tutsis in the Nyundo diocese was limited to 4%. On the school card, every seminarian had to indicate his fa-

ther's ethnic group. Instead of condemning those who were against the racist system, instead of playing an important role in institutionalising injustice by convincing their congregants to accept a morally reprehensible policy, Church leaders should have spoken out against racist discrimination. Regrettably the Church took the side of the political regimes, and thus was unable to exercise its prophetic role. It did not denounce political and social injustices, nor did it condemn the first mass killings, nor those which followed.

It is difficult to describe the position taken by the institutional Church just before and during the genocide. It is appropriate to take note of a declaration made by some "Christians" who met in London in June 1996: "The church is sick. The historical roots of this sickness lie in part with the "mother churches". She is facing the most serious crisis in her history. The church has failed in her mission, and lost her credibility, particularly since the genocide. She needs to repent before God and Rwandan society, and seek healing from God." This diagnosis offers a good summary of the situation. The Church lacks a sense of remorse and therefore cannot repent; hence its active involvement, in my view, is the last stage of genocide – denial.

Twenty-nine Rwandan Catholic priests, from Goma, Zaire, wrote a letter to the Pope in August 1994, demanding that the Rwandan government should allow all refugees home and then hold a referendum to determine the country's political future. The authors of this letter had no good programme for the country. All they wanted was to hold in contempt the Pope's acknowledgment of the genocide. As early as 15 May 1994, the

Pope had declared that the massacres in Rwanda were indeed genocide.

The priests wrote to the Pope: "Everybody knows, except those who do not wish to know or understand it, that the massacres which took place in Rwanda are the result of the provocation of the Rwandese people by the RPF." These priests, contaminated by the genocidal ideology, placed His Holiness the Pope in the category of "those who did not wish to know," to cover up their own shortcomings and those of the government they served.

Accepting failure is a virtue. Even so, it is difficult for institutions like the Catholic Church that are known to command respect world wide – above all when such institutions, have been party to policies of racial discrimination and genocide. The Church decided to adopt silence and slander as defence mechanisms. The question is why the Vatican has accepted or tolerated such tendencies.

The call for remorse and repentance still seems unnecessary and problematical for the Catholic Church. In March 1996, Pope John Paul II told the Rwandan people, "The Church... cannot be held responsible for the guilt of its members that have acted against the evangelic law; they will be called to render account of their own actions. All Church members that have sinned during the genocide must have the courage to assume the consequences of their deeds they have done against God and fellow men."

Had this been accepted and done, it would have helped to end a culture of impunity that has characterised Rwanda for more than thirty-five years. This could have been an established warning to anyone who harboured the archaic racist ideology. It

could have acted as a deterrent to foreign mentors, warning that continuation of such politics contravenes the principle of natural justice and is liable to be punished by law. Thirdly, it offers the only premises on which durable reconciliation; rehabilitation and reconstruction could take place or be cemented.

I chose to write about the Catholic Church and the genocide in Rwanda because I would argue it was the only institution involved in all the stages of genocide. As a layperson, it is astounding to hear about the “love, truth and trust” that the Church has achieved in a country where genocide took more than a million lives in just a hundred days, and to see the institutional Church protecting, instead of punishing, or at least denouncing those among its leadership or in its membership who are accused of genocide.

There is no doubt that throughout the history of Rwanda, Church leaders have had ties with political power. The Church was also involved in the policy of ethnic division, which degenerated into ethnic hatred. In order to succeed in its mission of uniting people, the Church in Rwanda and elsewhere must examine its attitudes, practices, and policies that have too often encouraged ethnic divisions.

Church leadership should both be on the side of and be perceived to be on the side of justice and the victims of injustice rather than on the side of genocide perpetrators and deniers. The Church must remember what Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in his April 1933 es-

say, “The Church and the Jewish Question”.

As he wrote, one way in which Churches could fight political injustices was to question state injustices and call the state to responsibility; another was to help the victims of injustice, whether they were church members or not. To bring an end to the machinery of injustice, he said, the Church was obliged not only to help the victims who had fallen under the wheel, but also to fall into the spokes of the wheel itself.

Since justice is an unavoidable integral element of the process of reconciliation, the Church should be among those asking that the perpetrators of genocide be brought to justice. If the Church contributes to the process of justice, unity can be re-established among Rwandans, in general, and among Christians, in particular. It is the only way that the Church can restore its credibility, and thus be what it is called to be: a witness to faith, hope and love, to truth and justice. Only in this way will the Catholic Church in Rwanda be able to help save the people of Rwanda –all the people - from future suffering and bloodshed.

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