Opinions
Rwandan Anglican bishops who openly supported a genocidal regime

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Bishop Jonathan Ruhumuliza at the 17th National Umushyikirano Council in Kigali, Rwanda, in December 2019. Courtesy

Please beware when silence is no longer silence but speech. Also, be careful when neutrality is no longer prudence but alignment—and when "explanation" becomes advocacy for mass murder.

The conduct of Anglican bishops Augustin Nshamihigo and Jonathan Ruhumuliza during the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994, belongs squarely in that moral abyss.

What they did was not just denial. It was participation through legitimation. It was pastoral authority placed at the service of a genocidal state.

On June 5, 1994, as Rwanda bled and churches overflowed with corpses, the British newspaper—The Observer—published Mark Huband's now-searing report, aptly titled "Church of Holy Slaughter."

Huband described a press conference in Nairobi held by the two Rwandan Anglican bishops—not to denounce the genocide, but, in their own words, "to explain what is happening."

Huband's account is devastating: "The Archbishop's voice grew higher as his refusal to condemn Rwanda's genocide and blame those responsible became more and more outrageous."

Outrageous is a restrained word. What unfolded was not ignorance but intent. Not confusion but choreography.

Archbishop Augustin Nshamihigo and Bishop Jonathan Ruhumuliza "arrived in

Nairobi on Friday not to condemn but to explain what is happening." That phrase alone should chill the conscience. When genocide is ongoing, explanation without condemnation stands as justification.

The bishops immediately identified their villain—not the architects of mass murder, not the interim government directing extermination, not the militias emptying churches with machetes and grenades—but the Rwandese Patriotic Front.

Bishop Ruhumuliza declared: "The RPF had planned in advance to kill some of their opponents. They had weapons to kill these people. This has become a big hindrance to the work of pacification by the interim government, the church and other peace lovers."

This phrase alone merits permanent infamy. A government directing genocide is rebranded as "peace-loving." A church complicit in silence is listed among peacemakers. And the force stopping the genocide is blamed for causing "the humanitarian crisis."

Huband contrasted this obscenity with reality: "Across Rwanda the work of the 'peace-loving' government is to be seen for those who must look at it. At the Nyarubuye Catholic mission in the far east of Rwanda last week, we saw the heads of decapitated children lying close to their bodies..."

When asked the most basic moral question—whether they condemned the murderers who had filled Rwanda's churches with bodies—the bishops refused. They "dodged questions, became agitated," their voices rising as the truth cornered them.

Huband drew the unavoidable conclusion: "Even the most senior members of the Anglican church were acting as errand boys for political masters who have preached murder and filled the rivers with blood."

This was not rhetorical excess. It was a decent diagnosis. Archbishop Nshamihigo's declaration crystallized the theology of moral collapse: "I don't want to condemn one group without condemning the other one... Our wish is not to condemn, but to show the situation that is happening in the country."

This is not balanced. It is a false equivalence weaponized against victims. To refuse to condemn genocide while condemning those who stop it is to take sides—explicitly and knowingly.

Defending genocidaires

The Nairobi press conference did not emerge from nowhere. It was the public performance of a position already committed to paper weeks earlier by Bishop Jonathan Ruhumuliza.

In a letter dated May 12, 1994, addressed to José Chipenda, Secretary General of the All Africa Conference of Churches, Ruhumuliza offered a written defense of the genocidal order, clothed in religious language and bureaucratic banality.

The letter which I have copy, but with several linguistic mistakes, begins with an understatement bordering on blasphemy: "Our country is facing many problems as you know." Many problems. As if genocide were a logistical inconvenience.

Then comes the invocation: "According to what happened and still happening... God is

powerful." The genocide against the Tutsi is neither named nor mourned. Instead, "God is powerful" hangs over mass murder like a perverse benediction. The word genocide does not appear anywhere in the letter. Erasure is the first act of denial.

Bishop Ruhumuliza then places blame squarely where the genocidal government and their supporters demanded it be placed: "The death of our President brought to us a difficult period where many people have lost their lives. The breaking of the cease-fire by The Rwandese Patriotic Front led the country in disorder and the population started killing each other."

Think about it. "Started killing each other." The deliberate symmetry dissolves perpetrators and victims into moral mist. Organized extermination becomes spontaneous chaos. State policy becomes a tribal accident.

Then comes praise—shameless admiration—for the genocidal government: "After the setting up of a new government, we see that things are changing in a good way. The ministers are doing their best to bring back peace in the country although they are facing many problems."

Genocide is rebranded as progress. Extermination becomes "a good way." Ministers directing mass murder are heralded as peacemakers. This is not naïveté. It is an endorsement.

Bishop Jonathan Ruhumuliza even reports administrative normalcy: "Out of ten prefectures, six have started their normal works."

Normal works. While bodies rot in rivers and churches. Kigali, he notes approvingly, "is still under the control of the Government." Control here is not governance; it is domination through death and terror.

The bishop mourns only one thing: "...the rebels are destroying everything, killing everybody they meet while the Government is trying bringing peace in the country."

Victims are invisible. Only perpetrators are humanized. The remedy he offers concludes with the moral inversion: "Rwanda needs peace and ask the Rwandese Patriotic Front and the Government to sit together..."

This is the final obscenity: legitimizing a genocidal regime as an equal moral interlocutor. Negotiation here is not peacemaking; it is laundering mass murder into political normalcy.

Nowhere in the letter is there a word for the Tutsi victims. No expression of grief. No prayer. No denunciation. The only people deserving "spiritual, physical, material" support are "Rwandans"—a category that, in this context, includes those wielding machetes.

The consistency is alarming. The Nairobi performance was no deviation. It was the public articulation of a genocidal theology already learnt, written, disseminated, and defended.

And yet—astonishingly—this record did not disqualify Bishop Ruhumuliza from rehabilitation in England. On May 31, 2020, The Guardian published an article titled "Church welcomes back Rwandan bishop accused of defending genocide." Chris McGreal and Harriet Sherwood reported:

"A year after Ruhumuliza arrived in Britain, he was appointed honorary assistant

bishop in the diocese of Worcester... The Church of England said it had conducted extensive checks and found no evidence of complicity in genocide."

When complicity lost meaning

Lambeth Palace's decision to see "nothing evil" in Bishop Jonathan Ruhumuliza's conduct—specifically his May 12, 1994 letter to Rev. José Chipenda and the subsequent Nairobi press conference—stands as one of the most morally tone-deaf ecclesiastical judgments of the post-genocide era. It is not only a failure of discernment; it is an insult to reason, an affront to humanity, and a wound reopened for genocide survivors who learned, yet again, that their suffering can be administratively minimized if the offender wears a collar.

One wonders what these "checks" were designed to detect. Smoke without fire? Genocide denial without words? Complicity without speech? If a bishop praises a genocidal government in writing, then repeats the same narrative before journalists while refusing to condemn mass murder, what additional evidence does a church require? A signed confession? A machete blessed at evensong?

Let us recall the sequence, because sequence matters. First came the letter to the All Africa Conference of Churches from Kigali, typed, signed, and faxed while genocide was underway. It praised a government actively exterminating a people, framed the slaughter as "disorder," blamed the RPF for everything, and portrayed genocidaires as agents of peace. In June 1994 came the Nairobi press conference, where the same narrative was repackaged for the global media. Different medium, same message.

This, in less than a month. Same genocide. Same narrative. Same victims erased. Same perpetrators laundered. Same refusal to name genocide. Same blame assigned to the RPF. Same portrayal of the genocidal government as a force for peace. This was not confusion followed by correction; it was consistency followed by amplification.

The timing of this moral collapse is not incidental; it is damning. In media-studies terms, timing is never neutral: it is a framing device, a weaponized variable used to shape perception before facts settle. Bishop Ruhumuliza and his clerical collaborator did not simply wander into Nairobi by chance.

They arrived there precisely as the genocidaires' government was fleeing Gitarama for Gisenyi, pushed out by the advance of the Rwandan Patriotic Army. Gitarama, let us recall, had served as the seat of this criminal regime since April 12, 1994—a government that coordinated extermination while concealing itself in the language of legality and order. When that seat fell, when the lie of "state authority" collapsed under military reality, the bishops surfaced in Nairobi, not to repent, not to confess error, but to repackage defeat as virtue and flight as victimhood.

This was not a coincidence; it was an applied spin doctoring. What crisis-communication scholars describe as "reputational salvage" was here baptized in clerical

language. As the genocidal project lost territory on the ground, it gained advocates in clerical robes abroad.

The Nairobi press conference functioned as a theological evacuation route, airlifting a collapsing narrative into the international media before the truth could catch up. This is classic agenda-setting: seize the microphone early, flood the discourse, and define the crisis before journalists, diplomats, or jurists do. The message was clear: the genocidaires were not retreating because they were criminals being defeated; they were peace-seekers being overwhelmed.

The Rwandan Patriotic Army was not stopping genocide; it was destabilizing harmony. This was narrative warfare synchronized with military defeat, and the bishops played their part with chilling discipline. To describe such coordination as naïveté insults intelligence. It was a calculated effort to rescue a genocidal government's moral reputation at the very moment it was losing its grip on power.

Media theorists call this "frame inversion": perpetrators cast as victims, resistance to evil reframed as aggression, mass murder laundered into "pacification." The logic mirrors the genocidaires' own vocabulary during the bloodiest weeks of April to June 1994, when the intensification of extermination was euphemistically labeled "civil defense" and "restoring order."

Bishop Ruhumuliza's praise of that government as peacemakers, fits seamlessly into this lexicon. His words were an attempt to overwrite reality. And when bishops participate in such overwriting, they do not just mislead—they bless criminal fibs, granting moral cover to crimes that international law rightly names as genocide.

The choice of Nairobi, the use of the press, and the appeal to international Anglican audiences were not accidental platforms but strategic ones. This was message laundering through respected institutions. The implicit gamble was cynical but clear: that Western audiences, fatigued by complexity and reverent to clerical authority, would accept a bishop's cassock as a substitute for evidence.

That Lambeth Palace later chose to see "nothing evil" in this performance is not institutional caution; it is institutional blindness of the most perilous kind. It signals that words—so long as they are delivered with episcopal confidence—are exempt from moral scrutiny, even when they rehabilitate genocidal power.

In the end, this episode exposes a deeper scandal than one bishop's ideology. It reveals how ecclesial authority, media access, and moral vocabulary can be fused into a propaganda instrument, capable of gaslighting the world while genocide survivors are still counting their dead. Ignoring the power of words does not neutralize them. Unchallenged words harden into narratives; narratives justify actions; actions become swords. And when the Church blesses the most poisonous words, it risks finding blood on its hands—while insisting, with tragic serenity, that it sees nothing at all.

Lambeth Palace's response was to declare—after the fact, from the safety of distance—that there was nothing sinful, nothing evil, nothing morally disqualifying

in this conduct. One must pause here, not for politeness, but for sanity. If praising a genocidal government while genocide is ongoing does not constitute moral failure, then the Church has effectively announced that genocide apologetics are compatible with episcopal ministry. That declaration alone should have triggered outrage across the Christian world.

The insult cuts deepest for survivors. For those who lost families, who saw churches turned into killing fields, Lambeth's judgment reads like this: your killers' narrators deserve understanding; your suffering deserves procedural indifference. And for those who defeated the genocidaires' government—the very people whom Jonathan Ruhumuliza accused—this decision is a final twist of the knife. The force that stopped the genocide is condemned; the government that organized it is praised as "peace-loving." This is not moral ambiguity. It is a moral inversion.

Worse still, Ruhumuliza's language fits perfectly within the logic of genocidaires themselves. In late April through June 1994, the regime described the intensification of mass murder as "pacification" carried out through "civil defense." Killing became an order. Extermination became stability. Ruhumuliza's vocabulary mirrors this logic almost verbatim. That Lambeth Palace failed—or refused—to recognize this continuity is not ignorance; it is willful blindness.

If Lambeth Palace wishes to salvage even a shred of credibility, there is only one conceivable mitigation it could offer: proof beyond reasonable doubt that Bishop Ruhumuliza was mentally incapable at the time—unable to distinguish right from wrong when he wrote the letter and addressed the press. Anything less collapses under its own weight. Because the alternative explanation is devastating: that a sane, authorized bishop consciously chose to defend genocide, and that the Church later chose to excuse him.

One must also ask the obvious, if uncomfortable, question: what compelled the two clerics to gaslight the world through the media? Who exactly did they imagine was waiting in Britain for a bishop who could explain away genocide from the pulpit? Were Anglicans suffering from a shortage of genocide apologists? Was there a pastoral emergency requiring the urgent importation of a man who could reassure consciences that mass murder was simply "peacemaking"?

The reality is grotesque at present. Lambeth Palace did not merely misjudge a bishop; it declared that words used to sanitize genocide are morally tolerable if delivered calmly, bureaucratically, and with episcopal confidence. That decision is an insult not only to survivors, but to the very idea of moral reason. A Church that cannot recognize evil when it is praised in writing and broadcast to the world has abandoned its claim to be a moral witness.

Against own principles

What makes the decision of Lambeth Palace especially severe is that it stands in open contradiction to Anglican theology's own understanding of truth and witness. Anglicanism has long rejected the idea that authority con-

secrates falsehood.

From Richard Hooker's insistence that reason, Scripture, and moral discernment must operate together (Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity, Book V), to the Lambeth Conferences' repeated affirmations that the Church's public witness must be anchored in truth rather than expediency (Lambeth Conference 1948, Resolution 25; 1978, Resolution 21)

The 1888 Lambeth Quadrilateral grounds ecclesial legitimacy in faithfulness to the Gospel, not institutional self-protection. Likewise, The Five Marks of Mission—officially embraced by the Anglican Communion—commit the Church "to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom" and "to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation."

To praise a genocidal government as peacemakers, or to treat such praise as morally neutral or a marginal error; it is a repudiation of these commitments. It empties "witness" of content and turns episcopal authority into a shield for deceits. Anglican theology appreciates truth not as a concept but as faithful testimony (martyria), even when that testimony is costly—a theme repeatedly emphasized in Anglican moral theology (see Paul Avis, The Anglican Understanding of the Church, 2000). By refusing to name evil as evil, what Lambeth Palace did is to betray vocation instead of maintaining unity.

It chose institutional quiet over prophetic clarity, diplomacy over discernment, and in doing so aligned itself not with the Johannine Christ who declares Himself "the truth" (John 14:6), but with the silence Isaiah condemns as watchmen who see yet do not warn (Isaiah 56:10). As St. Augustine warned in De Mendacio (A.D. 395) and City of God (Book XIX), lie spoken—or accepted—for the sake of fake peace, does not preserve order but corrodes justice at its root.

Such blindness is not innocence; it is complicity. And when the Church abandons truth in order to avoid discomfort, it does not merely fail genocide survivors—it forfeits its claim to moral authority altogether.

Faithful collaborators

If cheerleading genocidaires, legitimizing their government, erasing victims, blaming those who stopped the killing, and refusing to condemn mass murder do not constitute complicity, then the word has lost meaning.

This institutional indifference vindicates Mark Huband's phrase—Church of Holy Slaughter. It raises questions the Church of England at Lambeth Palace has never answered. Who funded the Nairobi trip in the middle of genocide? Who approved the press conference? Who decided that silence, distortion, and false equivalence were acceptable episcopal conduct?

Imagine, even hypothetically, a bishop holding a press conference in 1943 to explain that Hitler's Third Reich was "trying to bring peace," that resistance fighters were the real problem, that condemnation would be "unbalanced." The outrage would be seismic. Careers would end. Institutions would tremble.

That such outrage never materialized in

this case reveals an ugly truth: African victims are granted a cheaper moral currency. Genocide Against the Tutsi could be relativized, explained away, spiritually anesthetized—without consequence.

A bishop is not a neutral observer. He is a moral witness. When he blesses a hate crime, he profanes his organization. When he defends a genocidal government, he does not merely fail his flock—he stands against the Gospel he claims to preach.

A bishop in the Catholic, Anglican, or Lutheran tradition is not a decorative Christian accessory. He is not a purple shirt with a big silver cross, a liturgical mannequin with a mitre and a crozier for ceremonial effect. A bishop is authority embodied—vetted, consecrated, entrusted with doctrine, discipline, and moral judgment. In ancient language, he is a prince of the Church. When such a figure speaks, he does not merely express opinion; he teaches, signals, and legitimizes.

This is why the claim—explicit or implicit—that a bishop who defended a genocidal government was merely confused, naïve, or mentally unwell is not altruistic; it is dishonest. Bishop Jonathan Ruhumuliza did not escape from a psychiatric ward and accidentally found a typewriter. He wrote deliberately. He repeated himself consistently. He knowingly defended a genocidal regime. What animated him was not stupidity or insanity, but ideological possession.

What Augustin Nshamihigo and Jonathan Ruhumuliza did was not denial of genocide. It was vigorous moral collaboration with perpetrators. And the churches that excused them did not merely err. They became accessories to the lie.

History has already rendered its verdict. The only question that remains is whether the Church of England will ever have the courage to accept it.