

# Opinions

## Tutsi bones in flower vases on the altar

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Clothes of victims of the Genocide against the Tutsi, who were killed in Nyamata Catholic Church. Courtesy

In the first week of May, 1994—my sense of smell had been permanently altered. I could no longer smell anything clearly—not because my nose had failed, but because the stench of death had overtaken every breath, every moment, every church.

In the parishes of Kiziguro, Karubamba, Mukarange, Nyarubuye, Kibungo—which were the only ones I had visited, death had become a permanent resident. Corpses lay strewn across altars, rotting in pews, piled in

silence beneath the Stations of the Cross.

The air was so thick with decay that even breathing felt like betrayal—an act of life in places meant to preserve it. The stench clung to the nostrils and to the soul. No incense burned anymore, only the putrid odor of genocide.

The air in eastern Rwanda no longer smelled like soil or rain. It reeked of death.

I was there. I smelled it. I stepped over blood-soaked Bibles. I sat on pews where killers prayed before slaughtering families.

And I conversed with others as though life were continuing, while in truth, we were living in a nightmare where the cross had become a machete, and the altar a butcher's table.

To this day, I sometimes question my sanity for having survived it—for having watched so much death take place, precisely where life was supposed to be sacred.

Something within me had begun to erode—not just my sense of smell, which had been dulled by the overwhelming stench of death—but my grasp of reality, of sanity, of the meaning of faith itself.

The country I once knew, a land steeped in Christian rituals and piety, had become a crucible of unspeakable horror.

I stood as a witness—not just to the killing, but to the collapse of meaning where it was supposed to be strongest: inside the churches.

The rot of bodies, many already decomposed, lay scattered in and around the Catholic churches I mentioned— and in nearly every public place that once symbolized community.

But it was the churches that betrayed me the most. The houses of worship became slaughterhouses. The same walls that once echoed with prayers and hymns became chambers of screams, of begging, of agony.

In those weeks of April and May, the unthinkable became routine. Tutsi were hunted like animals. And worse, they were killed in the places they thought they would be safe—houses of worship, convents, mission schools.

Such spaces in Rwanda had become graveyards with altars.

The crucifixes looked on, silent and splattered with blood. By that first week of May, I began to question my own sanity. How could I still talk to others—have conversations—while surrounded by such horror?

Were we no longer human? Or had humanity retreated from Rwanda altogether?

I have struggled with this betrayal ever since.

I want to bear witness to this. To say that I was there. That I remember the smell, the sounds of birds and crickets, the silence of the world. And most painfully, I remember the silence of the church.

One image, even today, haunts me beyond

measure. It is at Nyarubuye where hundreds of my relatives were killed by the genocidaires.

At Nyarubuye Church, where hundreds had sought refuge, the killers did not just stop at murder. They desecrated the dead with chilling creativity.

I remember most vividly the altar at Nyarubuye church. When the killers came, they did not just murder the bodies—they debased what was left. Bones—femurs, tibias, ulnae, scapulae—were lovingly arranged in flower vases.

Not discarded, but displayed. On the altar. The killers, maybe some of them catechists, deacons, or “brothers in Christ,” carried out this grotesque performance with twisted delight. What were they thinking? I still do not know. But I cannot forget.

I stood there. I saw it. The vases meant to hold symbols of life and beauty were now filled with symbols of brutality and contempt. What were they thinking?

I still do not know. But the sight shattered something in me. It shattered my soul, my ability to associate the church with anything divine.

It was a ritual of mockery, an abomination. Maybe they thought they were making an offering. Possibly they thought they were decorating their victory.

Perhaps they thought nothing at all. What is real—the extermination of the Tutsi was a continuous process.

Some years later, I read David Gushee’s words in his essay, “Why the Churches Were Complicit: Confessions of a Broken-Hearted Christian”.

I felt seen. I felt heard. Gushee names what I witnessed: the utter bankruptcy of a faith that had become performative, tribal, and hollow. He saw the same rot I smelled.

To this day, I know people who struggle with liturgies. They find it hard to sing hymns, not because they lack faith in God, but because they lost faith in those who claimed to speak for Him.

They saw the robes stained with blood. They smelled death inside sanctuaries. They were witnesses as scripture was used not to liberate but to lynch.

Gushee describes himself as a “broken-hearted Christian.” That is the only kind many can be now.

A Christian who is not broken by the genocide, not wounded by the failure of our institutions, is not paying attention.

Jesus said in Matthew 23:27, “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.”

That was Rwanda in 1994. A whitewashed tomb. A nation full of Bibles and catechisms, but also full of hatred, bigotry, and pusillanimity.

This is why so many of us questioned our faith. Not because we had stopped believing in God, but because the people who claimed to speak for Him had become death dealers.

They had used His name in vain — not with casual profanity, but with deliberate and determined betrayal. And that, I believe, is the worst blasphemy of all. I had to call it quits.

For years I could not set foot in a church. The smell of incense made me nauseous. The sound of choirs triggered flashbacks.

The reading of Scripture often felt like a defamation. How could I trust these words when those who preached them had shown so little integrity?

Eventually, as a post-confessional atheist, I began to read the Bible again, but this time with new eyes. To read about Jesus—not just the lamb, but the lion who overturned the tables of corrupt religion.

I realized that questioning faith after genocide is not apostasy. It is honesty.

Today, I no longer ask, “Where was God in 1994?” It is none of my interest. I ask instead, “Where were God’s people?”

How could so many call themselves Christians while organizing extermination campaigns, while locking families in churches and setting them on fire, while swinging machetes and praying before bed?

How did the commandment “You shall not murder” become negotiable? How did the beatitude “Blessed are the peacemakers” get buried beneath genocidal propaganda?

The truth is painful: Christian teachings in Rwanda had been distorted or misconstrued — or perhaps, worse, selectively manipulated to baptize ethnic hatred.

Instead of standing up against evil, many church leaders blessed it. Instead of opening the doors of refuge, they locked them and handed the keys to the killers.

Since the end of the first week of May 1994, I have changed my mind. I decided not to believe in the hollow religiosity that teaches forgiveness without truth and justice, unity

without memory, piety without protest.

What I believe now is much simpler, and much harder: that if God exists and is love, then anything that masquerades as faith but breeds hatred is heresy sacrilege. I'm hedging.

When I was young, I was taught at my Sunday School that a Christianity which does not resist evil is not Christianity at all. That unless the Church repents not just in words but in truth—naming names, examining theology, changing its pedagogy—it will betray again. It is safer not to be naïve.

What I know is that by the end of May, 1994, many were broken beyond belief. They were now aware that the churches that taught Rwandans to love were the same churches that locked Tutsis in and called the killers.

Some priests pointed out Tutsi to be killed. Some held prayer services in the morning and joined killing squads in the afternoon. And that many more simply looked away.

Where was the voice of love? Where was the voice that said, "You shall not kill" (Exodus 20:13)? Where was the courage to say, like the prophet Isaiah, "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil" (Isaiah 5:20)?

Instead, we heard nothing. Or worse, we heard betrayal cloaked in piety.

In the years leading up to the genocide, the seeds of hatred were planted even in religious education. Our faith institutions became complicit, whether by omission or outright participation.

I cannot count how many times I saw bodies laid before the crucifix. The Christian symbol of salvation, desecrated.

It became impossible to look at the cross

without remembering the bodies beneath it. The wood of the cross and the wooden benches of the pews were soaked in blood.

Many survivors have recounted the terror of the machete, the screams that died in throats. I remember those too.

But what haunts me is this: how did a people so saturated in Christianity become the architects of such evil? How did the message of love and salvation curdle into a culture of annihilation?

Yes. What we saw made us question not just people, not just politics, but the core of faith itself. The image of Jesus, once a source of comfort, became unbearable to look at.

His wounds were no longer symbols of redemption—they were reminders of betrayal. His commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:31), seemed to mock us in the blood-soaked aisles where neighbors hacked neighbors, children killed classmates, and pastors handed over entire flocks to slaughter.

In Rwanda, love was dull. A neighbor was not someone to appreciate and trust anymore, but someone to fear, someone to betray.

I wept when I read what Gushee wrote. Because I had lived it.

The betrayals came not only from machete-wielding mobs, but from priests who opened the gates to the killers, from nuns who turned away the wounded, from so-called Christian neighbors who whispered where we hid.

The scriptures, supposedly full of love, justice, and compassion, were hollow in those moments.

Where were the sermons of resistance?

Where were the voices crying out in the wilderness, preparing the way not for killers but for justice?

A faith that does not resist evil is no faith at all. A Gospel that does not protect the innocent is not Good News—it is a tool of betrayal.

Where was love?

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud... It keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.” (1 Corinthians 13:4–6)

Where was this love? Where was it when children were hacked to death in front of their mothers? Where was kindness when babies were smashed against church walls to save bullets?

Where was the truth when priests told lies to save their own lives? Where was love when the altars of the Lord became tables on which bodies were dismembered?

The killers were not aliens. They were baptized. They had taken communion. Many sang in choirs. Some led Bible study.

Yet they sharpened their machetes and swung them with resolve. They hunted infants with a diligence one would expect of someone on a holy mission—not of salvation, but of annihilation.

Some of them sang Christian songs while killing. I remember hearing a hymn being hummed, “Yesu ni we Mucunguzi wanjye”—Jesus is my Savior, while a mother and her three children were butchered at Mukarange.

Survivors remember the killers’ faces. They joked. They laughed. They placed bones in vases. They stepped over corpses

to reach the altar as if reenacting a parody of the Mass.

The Book of 1 John tells us: “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (1 John 4:20). By this measure, Rwanda in 1994 was full of liars. And the Church—our Church—was the enabler.

We must tell the truth: Christianity in Rwanda was deeply complicit in the genocide. Not just by omission, but by commission. By silence and by speech. By acts of cowardice dressed up as spiritual neutrality.

And we must also tell another truth: no ritual, no sacrament, no church title can replace the core of the Gospel, which is this — “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13).

I am not writing these things to condemn all Christians. Where were the Christians who laid down their lives?

Yes, a few existed—and they shine like stars in a dark sky. Some sheltered the hunted. Some gave their lives. But the silence of the majority was deafening.

The truth is that many churches in Rwanda in 1994 became dens of death.

Jesus said, “You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness... it is no longer good for anything” (Matthew 5:13).

The church in Rwanda lost its saltiness. It became tasteless. Useless. Dangerous.

Gushee is right: structures, garments, books, liturgies—all these can become tools of evil if they are unmoored from love, from truth, from courage. And in Rwanda, they were.

What happened in Rwanda should never

be read merely as a failure of politics. It was a failure of discipleship. A failure of theological imagination. A failure of moral courage.

Somewhere along the way, the Church in Rwanda forgot that love is not just a sermon, it is a stand. It is refusing to stay neutral when evil demands compliance.

It is risking everything to protect the image of God in others—especially when that image is under assault.

I remember a testimony about a man in Karubamba who quoted scripture as he prepared to kill. “You shall not suffer Amalek to live,” he muttered, invoking ancient genocidal commands.

He was twisting scripture into a sword, baptized in blood. Yet he considered himself a Christian.

Others carried rosaries, crosses, hymnbooks—as they hunted their neighbors. I was told about a young woman—barely 16—hiding in a sacristy.

A group of boys found her, dragged her out, and raped her repeatedly under the crucifix. Afterwards, they shoved a splintered pew into her body. They were singing a church hymn when they did it.

Gushee helps me articulate this anguish. He writes with broken-hearted clarity, “The Churches were there. The Christians were there. And they did not stop it.”

Indeed, the problem was not that Christianity failed to reach Rwanda. The problem was that its message had become distorted, even reversed.

The teaching of love became a vehicle for hate. The virtue of courage was replaced by cowardice. And animals began to look more

human than people did.

When I imagine what was in the eyes of those killing children with machetes, I no longer see human beings. It is something else—emptiness, a void where humanity had once been.

But these were people baptized in the name of Christ. They had taken the Eucharist. Some had even preached the gospel. What happened?

Gushee hints at it: religious identity, without moral transformation, is meaningless.

Scripture is not magic. It is not a spellbook. It is a call to conversion. And when it is twisted, it becomes a weapon. We saw this in Rwanda.

Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father” (Matthew 7:21). We had many who said, “Lord, Lord.” In fact, they did the opposite.

They hid behind liturgy while sharpening machetes. They gave sermons and then gave orders to kill. They sang hymns and then sang songs of hate.

The book of James says, “Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead” (James 2:17). I believe Rwanda was a nation of dead faith. Faith that did not resist evil, but accommodated it.

And so, if I may ask, what did Rwanda’s Christianity mean?

What does it mean to build cathedrals in a country where priests can call for the extermination of a people?

What does it mean to teach theology if it cannot stop genocide? What does it mean to

preach about love and then deny shelter to a fleeing child?

The presence of churches guarantees nothing. Faith without courage, faith without love, faith without truth—it is worse than no faith at all.

Let the Church weep. Let it repent. Let it never forget. Let it never again allow hatred to masquerade as holiness.

Because I remember the bones in the vases. I still imagine the killers who smiled when they were doing the most abominable.

We must ask ourselves: Do we preach a gospel of comfort or of courage? Do we build churches to serve God or to serve power and individual political, social and economic interests? Do we teach love that costs something, or love that excuses everything?

Where was the courage of Isaiah 1:17: "Learn to do right; seek justice. Defend the oppressed"? Instead, we heard silence. Or worse, we heard complicity.

And yes, there were exceptions — a few brave souls who sheltered the hunted, who paid with their lives to protect their neighbors. But they were the exception that proved the rule: the institutional Church, by and large, was not only silent. It was guilty.

I remember a testimony where a priest used Paul's words not to teach humility, but to urge compliance with mass murder.

The priest quoted Romans 13 to justify obedience to the genocidal government: "Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established."

How did love come to mean hate? How did the virtue of courage get replaced with cow-

ardice? How did shepherds become wolves? At what point did Rwanda's sacred spaces stop being temples of hope and become slaughterhouses?

Before the killers arrived at churches, many Tutsis ran there thinking they would find protection. The logic was simple: they won't kill us in front of the cross. But they did.

In front of the crucifix. In front of the Virgin Mary. In front of holy water fonts and Eucharist chalices. The killers came singing hymns. They came with rosaries in their pockets and blood on their hands.

I began to ask myself questions no sermon had prepared me for. Could this faith be real? Had we believed in a lie?

What kind of God allows His name to be used to justify this? Why did the churches not become Noah's Ark for the hunted Tutsi? Why did they become their tombs?

Even now, I shiver remembering the children crying beneath church pews, only to be silenced forever. I shudder at the memory of the flower vases with bones.

What kind of blasphemy was this? Not just a moral failing, but a theological collapse.

The teachings of Jesus—radical love, self-sacrifice, compassion for the marginalized—were twisted into tribalism, cowardice, and complicity.

Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. But in Rwanda, many of His followers cheered as tombs were filled.

"Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground." (Genesis 4:10)

The blood of Rwanda's victims cries out still. Not only for justice, but for truth. For

confession. For accountability.

To every preacher who remained silent: your silence was not neutral. It was permission.

To every church that remained open during the killing, then claimed ignorance: your walls bear witness.

To every believer who thinks the Church's reputation is more important than its repentance: remember that Jesus overturned the tables in the temple—not out of hate, but out of righteous fury.

Faith torn apart

In 1994, churches demonstrated the spinelessness of silence. “Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them.” (Ephesians 5:11)

Yet the Church did not expose the deeds of darkness. It accommodated them. It blessed them by its silence. It shielded perpetrators behind its sacraments. Cowardice reigned where courage should have stood.

The religious hierarchy failed us. Bishops offered platitudes. Priests ran away or collaborated. The faithful, scared and confused, clung to crosses that brought no help. The silence of the Church, like that of Cain after killing Abel, became deafening.

We had reached a point where animals seemed more dignified than humans. A cow could pass a roadblock unharmed. A dog could wander a neighborhood and live. But a Tutsi child? A Tutsi infant? Their crime was to exist.

A genocide survivor recalls seeing an Interahamwe pet a dog right after finishing off two young Tutsi girls. The gentleness he extended to the animal was in stark contrast to

the hatred he inflicted on the humans.

What had become of us? What had the Church taught—or failed to teach—for such moral collapse to occur?

By May, one genocide survivor told me, her prayers had grown bitter. She no longer prayed for safety. She no longer believed in divine protection.

She only prayed that she might not go mad. That her soul, torn and hollow, might survive one more day. She prayed for death to come quickly if it had to come. She envied the dead, who had escaped the horror.

Psalm 23 once comforted many: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”

But in 1994, the valley of death was not a metaphor. It was literal. And the Tutsi feared evil, because evil was present, and God seemed very much absent.

Thirty-one years later, one survivor still struggles to sit in a church without flashbacks. He still cannot say “Amen” without remembering how many said it before being slaughtered.

He still flinches when he hears certain hymns, remembering the killers who sang them with bloodstained hands.

What allowed this to happen? Was it not a theology that prioritized ritual over righteousness? That emphasized obedience over conscience? That confused piety with holiness?

Gushee's grief rings true when he says:

”The desecrated churches and parish houses and seminaries and church schools and prayer books and Bibles of Rwanda will sur-



vive (unlike the murdered people who once used them) as the enduring memorial to this fact.”

But I would add this: They are not the only memorial.

We, the survivors, are also memorials. We carry the memory in our bodies, our minds, and our broken faith. And we will not let the world forget.

I carry that desecration in my soul. I carry it as a stain that no amount of prayer or preaching has yet erased.

To the global church, I say this: Do not congratulate yourselves on the number of baptisms or the size of your choirs.

None of that guarantees anything. Rwanda was baptized in blood, not because it lacked religion, but because it lacked courageous religion backed by a colonial power.

It lacked prophetic faith. It lacked the kind of discipleship that says “no” to evil even when it comes dressed in priestly robes.

To the churches of the world, beware. Beware of hollow piety. Beware of nationalism dressed in liturgy. Beware of tribalism hiding

behind creeds.

Beware of a faith that refuses to speak when it matters most. Because the next genocide may not come with warning signs. It may come with choirs. With candles. With prayers.

It may come again, unless we remember what happened in Rwanda. And unless we finally, truly, dare to believe that love means courage.

That faith means resistance. And that no altar, however adorned, is holy if it is silent in the face of evil.

Never again is a promise. Not a slogan. And not just to the world. But to the Church.

If this is not evil, then nothing is.

If we cannot learn from the Genocide Against the Tutsi, then the Gospel has failed in us.

If the bones placed in flower vases do not haunt us, if the stench of death in sacred places does not humble us, then our theology is ash.

It is dust. It is nothing.

This is not merely history. It is a warning.