

Accepting the Unacceptable: Christian Churches and the 1994 Rwandan Genocide

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In a time span of one hundred days, between April and July 1994, Rwanda's political arena imploded. The country collapsed into chaos, and violence escalated into the genocide of one million people among members of the Tutsi ethnic group and moderate components of the Hutu ethnic majority in the country. The genocide occurred in one of Africa's most Christian regions, with ninety per cent of the population identifying itself as part of a Catholic, Protestant, or Seventh-day Adventist Church as of 1991 (Longman, 2001; Henning, 2001). Inevitably, in the aftershock of the genocide, many questioned the role, and attempted to fathom the association of Rwanda's Churches with the genocide. As a consequence, the Church has faced numerous criticisms from diverse fronts, and has been repeatedly blamed of culpability in the violence that occurred during those obscure months (Longman, 2010). However, it was only in 2017 that Pope Francis, upon meeting the Rwandan President Paul Kagame, officially asked for forgiveness for the Catholic Church's role in the 1994 genocide, stating that, in Rwanda, the "sins and failings of the Church and its members had ultimately disfigured the face of Catholicism".

To what degree were Christian Churches involved in the genocide of 1994? Does the Church's guilt lie merely in a sin of passivity, in the actions of few bad apples within the sacrosanct lines of the Clergy, or did it have a role in actively shaping the ethnic and political realities that made the genocide feasible and possible?

In the years following the genocide, a major denunciation has imputed the Church for its passivity and inaction in the face of the slaughters, committing a sin of omission and lack of action. Others have acknowledged the allegations against specific individuals within the clergy, yet deny the universal responsibility of the Church as an institution – including Pope John Paul II (The New York Times, 1996); in a communication released by the Vatican in 1996, John Paul affirmed that 'the Church could not be held responsible for the guilt of its members that have acted against the evangelic law'. In support to this claim, it has been argued that, in Rwanda, the Church 'was also one of martyrs' (The Tablet, 1994), and neglecting this aspect would certainly result in an unbalanced account of history. Yet, the case for Christian Churches' deep and direct implications in the Rwandan violence, with their responsibility going well beyond silence or the actions of a few, remained strong over the two decades following the genocide, and eventually prevailed with the statements made by Pope Francis in 2017 (Bartov & Mack, 2001; Longman, 2001, The Guardian, 2017). Whichever reading of history one should adopt, it remains undeniable the role of the Church in the Rwanda massacres was far from a simple phenomenon, but should instead be analysed as the result of a set of intricate dynamics.

A less immediate, yet fundamental element is the role performed by the Church in actively setting the grounds for the racial framework within which the genocide occurred (Longman, 2001; 2010; Ahlbäck, 2006; Van 't Spijker, 1997). Peculiarly, in the context of Rwanda, religious convictions did not function as organizers of group identity (Longman, 2010). The genocide was not pursued on the dividing lines between religious groups, as it happened in other theatres of violence such as Lebanon, India, Sudan, Sri Lanka, or Northern Ireland (Ibid). Nevertheless, Christianity and its proselytizers were essential in defining and crystalizing lines between ethnicities in a context where ethnic differentiation would have otherwise been negligible (Katongole, 2005). Eventually, the genocide was pursued by the regime precisely on the base of this racialization of ethnicity.

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Surely the first Christian missionaries to reach Rwanda did not construct ethnicities from scratch (Longman, 2010). Yet, in pre-colonial Rwanda the terms Tutsi and Hutu were empty of racial significance. Instead, these groupings represented mainly trans-ethnic identities and established societal classifications on which communities in Rwanda centred their economical and power interactions (Vail, 1989; Katongole, 2005). Otherwise, the groups formed 'a single cultural community of Kinyarwanda speakers' (Mamdani cited in Katongole, 2005, p.71) not only united under a common language, but also costumes, traditions, and beliefs. In their attempt to comprehend the local organization of society, the first missionaries – known as White Fathers – applied their very own European understandings of race and ethnicity, and managed to solidify previously elastic social categories into rigid ethnic ones (Longman, 2010). In fact, the White Fathers applied misleading sociobiological theories to local social constructions. This was seen with the so-called "Hamitic narrative" and its racist interpretation of Rwandan society. This narrative assumes that "Negroid" populations – from which European's claimed the Hutu descended from given their physical characteristics – were inferior to pastoral "Hamitic" groups of "Caucasoid" origin, distantly related to Europeans (Ibid), from which the Tutsis were believed to originate. This racist interpretation of Rwandan society – even if a less immediate factor in the historical analysis – set a fundamental premise for the 1994 genocide because it promoted and directed the internalization of these notions in the country (Ahlbäck, 2006).

The crystallization of ethnic lines is a necessary but insufficient condition to understand the Rwandan massacres and to assess the involvement of the Church in such events. To fully grasp the dynamics behind the Church's role, it is essential to reflect on a number of more immediate aspects.

By openly supporting the political regime and legitimizing ethnic discriminations, the Church was crucial in rendering the action of the Hutu government morally justifiable, and the participation in the genocide ethically acceptable to the rest of the population (Longman, 2001; 2010). Only one year after the genocide, historian Doris Bergen, pursued research on the role of religion in the Holocaust. She claimed that 'Christianity did play a critical role, not perhaps in motivating the top decision makers, but in making their commands comprehensible and tolerable' (Bergen, 1994, p.329). These findings are also valid regarding the Rwandan genocide. In the overwhelmingly Christian country, most of the population assumed that the bloodbaths of Tutsis were coherent with the teachings of the Church (Longman, 2001). In the eyes of the persecutors of the massacres 'God had abandoned the Tutsis' (McGreal, 2014). Furthermore, a number of disturbing testimonies of local ecclesiastics, gathered by Timothy Longman (2001; 2010) throughout years of remarkable field research, depict how death squads would attend mass, prey, and kneel in front of the altar. Subsequently, the same people would commit massacres, at times at the foot of those same consecrated altars – not out of a lack of respect for the Christian faith, rather driven by the politicized and discriminatory nature of Christian institutions in Rwanda (Ibid). As a Tutsi priest reported, 'people came to mass each day to pray, then they went out to kill' (in Ibid, p. 3).

From these accounts, it appears evident that the Catholic Church in Rwanda not only failed to forcefully condemn the massacres but also played a main part in the legitimization of the government's actions in the eyes of its people. At the same time, it also chased a hazardous pattern of encouraging popular submission to governmental authority (Longman, 2010).

The rationale driving these dynamics is multi-faceted. Since the colonial era, the Church had participated actively in struggles of political nature and was deeply incorporated into the Rwanda's structures of power (Bartov & Mack, 2001). Religious groups in Rwanda operated as complex and layered interest groups, and members of the clergy maintained close personal ties with political and business figures both at the local and national levels (Longman, 2001). In the local context, pastors and priests often covered administrative posts in the prefecture councils and were personally linked to local authorities. At the national level, Church leaders stood as influential public figures, habitually associated with the government in command. For instance, the Catholic archbishop of Kigali, Vincent Nsengiyumva, regularly appeared at public events in company of President Habyarimana before his assassination; served as the personal confessor of the President's wife; and sat on the central committee of the Revolutionary National Movement for Development (MRND) for more than a decade while the body implemented the discriminatory policies that eventually led to the genocide (Ibid; Stier & Landres, 2006). Similarly, the leaders of the Anglican, Baptist, and Presbyterian Churches were all associated with the ruling elite through personal links of friendship, interest, or blood (Longman, 2001). Understandably, this multi-layered, intimate, and interest-driven cooperation between the State

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and the Church led to an elevated prospective for gaining extensive profits on both sides. While political authorities controlled the means to increase the status and the wealth of the clerics, the members of the Church had ample social influence to consolidate popular support for the government, and even to suppress opposition against a corrupted political realm (Bartov & Mack, 2001). Ultimately, maintaining the status quo was fundamental for a large majority within the Church personnel as they enjoyed open and privileged access to corrupt Rwandan political actors.

However, since the late 1980s, the power of this pyramidal network of personal connections has trembled. During this time, the churches of Rwanda had rooted into sites of social struggles and turned into vital arteries for the emerging energetic civil society (Longman, 2010). As reported by Longman (Ibid, p. 115):

In the 1980s, the influence of liberation theologies, church institutional reforms, the expansion and re-conceptualization of church-sponsored development activities, and the emergence of new church-related organizations fostered the growth of a democratic sentiment within the churches.

This wide-breath call for democratization arose from an expanding network of individuals operating either within or just outside the churches. Essentially, this malleable network intended to contest the dysfunctional structures of power on which secular and religious realms in Rwanda were grounded. Therefore, the movement for democratization that developed between the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s placed substantial pressure on governmental authorities as well as on the religious ones (Ibid). A mounting popular mass of people within the Church, increasingly aware of the fundamental unfairness of a fraudulent system of power relations, began questioning and contesting both secular and religious authorities for corruption, unscrupulousness, and voracity (Bartov & Mack, 2001).

Eventually, the conflict between conformist and democratizing voices within the Churches became increasingly politicized. The conservative establishment (a large majority within the clerical ranks), responded by supporting violence, repression, and eventually genocide vis-à-vis an imminent process of reform and democratization inside and outside the religious structures (Ibid). In this context, a vast majority of the clergy sustained from affiliating with the regime as a means to preserve privileges enjoyed throughout past decades (Henning, 2001). A deep crisis occurred within the power structures of the Church. This resulted from conflict within the dynamics of individual churches. It was also a result of a vital interest the Church had in preserving the status quo in order to maintain privilege and socio-political prestige. These conditions are necessary to comprehend the nature and the depth of the Church's involvement in the Rwandan Genocide.

In the aftershock of the genocide, some sympathisers with the Church have suggested a picture of the Church in Rwanda as a frail institution unable to challenge the State in the context of the genocide (reported in Bartov & Mack, 2001). Yet, such a perception is misleading. The potential for State-Church conflict existed, and Churches could have hypothetically opposed the slaughters (Ibid). To neglect such a possibility would be to 'grossly misconstrue the relationship between Church and State in Rwanda and ignore the substantial independent power that the Churches enjoyed' (Ibid, p. 149). Catholic Churches represented major centres of power in Rwanda, in control of significant monetary and human capital (Ibid; Longman, 2001; 2010). For instance, the Church stood as the largest off-farm employer in peripheral areas, and autonomously offered social services such as distributing resources while running health and education facilities in a country with high levels of malnutrition and poverty (Bartov & Mack, 2001). With such an independent base of power, Churches had maintained a formal autonomy from the State both during the colonial and post-colonial periods (Longman, 2010). Nonetheless, the point made here should not be misinterpreted. It is not to argue that the Church could have independently prevented the genocide if it had simply chosen to do so. However, it could be argued that the Church in Rwanda undeniably stood as the best-suited autonomous centre of power to challenge the systematic massacres from occurring (Bartov & Mack, 2001). This statement is made on the assumption that the genocide was never 'a foregone conclusion' (Longman, 2010, p.197). To follow the line of thought of Longman (2010, p.197):

Churches could have played an important role in supporting those who resisted the genocide, in informing the world about what was happening in Rwanda, and in making genocide more difficult to execute.

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In conclusion, the role of the Church in the Rwandan genocide was key in the escalation of violence. This essay has argued that the Church is to blame for its passivity in respect to the slaughters. Its culpability does not rest on the actions of a few within the clergy. Rather, the Church is to blame as an institutional entity. Misreading's of the Church's history in Rwanda have resulted in 20 years of misinterpretations on the elements that permitted the tragedy. Ultimately, the Church alone could not have prevented the genocide from occurring. Yet, it represented the only institution within civil society in possession of enough autonomy and influence to attempt to deviate the course of the events, oppose the regime and, at the same time, create awareness and put pressure on the international community (Ibid). Its reluctance and often outright refusal to do so has come to represent one of heaviest failures of Christian ethics and of the institutions that profess and practice its commandments.

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