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When Priests Forgot About God: An Analysis of the Catholic Church's Role in Genocide

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ABSTRACT

The Catholic Church in Rwanda for more than a century was a witness to the atrocities of genocide. One million Rwandans died in 100 days while many Catholic priests and nuns stood by offering no assistance. Others participated in the slaughter. The majority of those killed were killed in churches or on church grounds. Since Belgium's acquisition of Rwanda, there have been ties between the Catholic Church and the government of Rwanda. The Catholic Church blamed Belgium for the ethnic class designations and for disturbing the native culture. The Church and priests, however, remained silent and maintained their silence to keep teaching and practicing in Rwanda. While over 60,000 were charged in connection with the genocide, imprisoned for hate crimes, and later released, fewer than twenty, including priests and nuns, were tried and sentenced.

Keywords: Catholic Church, priests, Rwanda, genocide

Introduction

To fully understand the depth of involvement of the Catholic Church in the Rwandan genocide requires a historian's careful analysis of the Church's role in the events that unfolded in Rwanda in the summer of 1994, the troubled history of intolerance for over one hundred years, and the historical developments that lead up to the violence. The Catholic Church played a role in the periodic unrest by partnering with the government and fighting for its share of power. Since the colonization of Rwanda, there have been problematic ties between the Catholic Church and the government of Rwanda. Of the nearly one million people who died during the one hundred days of

slaughter, the majority died in churches or on church grounds.

During the 1994 genocide, many Hutu and the Rwandan government participated in murdering seventy-seven percent of the Tutsi population.¹ What explanation makes sense of the actions taken by human beings against other human beings during the Rwandan genocide? The evidence shows that Rwanda's genocide took place for decades in smaller numbers of murders until its culmination of a full-blown slaughter in 1994. It took place in plain sight of those who were supposed to be closest to their God, their higher spiritual power – Catholic priests, nuns, Protestant ministers, and lay clergy. As discussed here, the Catholic Church's actions, before and during the one

¹ Marijke Verpoorten, "The Death Toll of the Rwandan Genocide: A Detailed Analysis for Gikongoro Province," *Population* (English ed.) 60, no. 4 (2005): 331. <http://doi.org/10.2307/4148179>; Peter Celestine Safari, "Church, State and the Rwandan

Genocide," *Political Theology* 11, no. 6 (December 2010): 873–93. <https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.v11i6.873>.

hundred days of killings, came under scrutiny. At various times prior to Belgium's acquisition of Rwanda, Hutu and Tutsi vied for the position of king and village leaders. Church leader Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, reviewing the situation about a divided Rwandan society and the 1994 genocide, stated, "the blood of tribalism ran deeper than the waters of baptism."²

Belgium's Acquisition of Rwanda

In 1918, after the agreement to end World War I's fighting, the territory held by Germany on the continent of Africa was split amongst the Allies. In 1923, Rwanda transferred to Belgium's rule, where Catholicism was the predominant religion.³ Following the national revolution in 1959, Rwanda gained independence in 1961 from Belgium.⁴ This rebellion and subsequent independence put a Hutu regime as the Rwandan government's power sending many Tutsi into exile. Nevertheless, the majority of the Catholic Church leaders remained Tutsi. This conflict also resulted in five to eight thousand Tutsi murdered by the Rwandan government. Those seeking refuge in another country remained in exile until the early 1990s when they attempted to return to their home state with the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). It was at that time that many politically connected Hutu began planning the annihilation of Tutsi.

Before Belgium's acquisition, a Tutsi king ruled Rwanda even though the majority

of Rwandans were Hutu. After Belgium gained control of Rwanda, a consensus was that physical features and cultural habits signified Tutsi or Hutu's characteristics. Many singled-out Tutsi by a preconceived notion that the Tutsi had light skin, were tall, and ate a particular diet. This profiling later proved to be an inaccurate assumption as some Hutu were identified as Tutsi and killed during the 1994 killings even though their government identification cards stated otherwise.⁵ Under Belgium's rule, the Tutsi and Hutu were split into strict classes, causing discontent among Rwandans.⁶ Even though the Tutsi had migrated to Rwandan territory, the Tutsi became the "upper" class because of Rwanda's Tutsi king. The Tutsi king converted to Catholicism. Rwanda, then under a Catholic king, became a predominately Christian country. Belgium added to Rwanda's civil unrest by actively trying to destroy the cultural practices of the Rwandan people. The designation of Hutu or Tutsi, which were once considered a social and economic status, turned into racial discrimination. The Belgian government divided the Rwandan people into categories according to the skin color, nose length, height, and size of their heads.

Racial Inequality

In 1927, Monsignor Classe, a Belgian bishop whose opinion was respected by and influential with the Belgian government, wrote to the government about the Hutu and Tutsi inequality. He stated that although the

² J.J. Carney, *Rwanda Before the Genocide: Catholic Politics and Ethnic Discourse in the Late Colonial Era* (Oxford University Press, September 2, 2013), 207.

³ Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak: A Report* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), xi.

⁴ Phillip A. Cantrell, "We Were a Chosen People": The East African Revival and Its Return to

Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Church History* 83, no. 2 (2014): 422-445.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640714000080>.

⁵ Helen M. Hintjens, "Explaining the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda," *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 2 (1999): 241-286.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/161847>.

⁶ Safari, 876.

Tutsi and their children were smart and progressive, the government should give equal credit to the Hutu and Twa.⁷ According to Gérard Prunier, Monsignor Classe, later realizing that the words Tutsi were smart and progressive served only to provoke and agitate the government and Hutu, attempted to clarify his thoughts with a subsequent letter, stating:

The greatest mistake this government could make would be to suppress the Mututsi caste. Such a revolution would lead the country to anarchy [...] We will have no better, more active and more intelligent chiefs than the Batutsi. They are the ones best suited to understand progress and the ones the population likes best. *The government must work mainly with them.*⁸

Classe's attempt to clarify his statement only managed to make the situation worse. The Belgian government removed the Hutu chiefs and filled the positions with Tutsi. In 1931, King Musinga,⁹ a Hutu chief, was removed and replaced by his son, Mutara III Rudahigwa. The Catholic Church no longer wanted King Musinga on the throne because he refused to convert to Catholicism. In turn, King Musinga did not like the Catholic priests and Church. The Catholic Church, building upon existing political structures

and perceived piety, selected Mutara III. Mutara III converted to Catholicism after taking the throne. Once again, the Catholic Church was in a powerful position with a Catholic Tutsi chief as the Rwandan king. By 1945, the Catholic Church baptized ninety-five percent of the Tutsi.¹⁰ Villages throughout Rwanda also had Tutsi chiefs. The chiefs retaliated against the Hutu, making them work out of work camps like the Hutu once did to the Tutsi.¹¹

During this time, Belgium was planning a reorganization of Rwanda. The Belgian government wanted Rwanda to be a Christian state.¹² "The Catholic Church played an [...] important element in the Belgian reorganization of Rwanda"¹³ because the Belgians found the White Fathers both knowledgeable and helpful. This order of priests, the Society of Missionaries of Africa, got the name because they wore white cassocks instead of black cassocks like other priests.¹⁴ The Belgian government built schools operated by Catholic priests to keep the support of the Catholic Tutsi king. These elite schools were opened primarily for Tutsi children because they required tuition to attend, allowing the more economically stable Tutsi families to take the first seats over the Hutu. These funds supported the Catholic Church and the priests who taught at the school. The parish pastors were able to

⁷ J.J. Carney, "Beyond Tribalism: The Hutu-Tutsi Question and Catholic Rhetoric in Colonial Rwanda," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42, no. 2 (2012): 172-201. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006612X646178>.

⁸ Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 24-26 (emphasis in original).

⁹ Cantrell, 427.

¹⁰ Cantrell, 427-428; citing John Bauer, *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994): 249.

¹¹ Prunier, 26-27.

¹² Prunier, 31.

¹³ Prunier, 32.

¹⁴ Kathryn Rountree, "Catholic Missionaries in Africa: The White Fathers of the Belgian Congo 1950-1955" (LSU Master's Thesis, 2009), 3323-3328. https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/3278.

become wealthy by this support, causing power struggles and participation in “ethnic politics.”¹⁵ The Catholic catechism was a part of the school’s curriculum; therefore, ensuring the Tutsi children a place in the school gave the Catholic Church the first opportunity to convert them.¹⁶ However, it served to fuel ethnic discrimination in the Catholic Church. Although Belgium was behind the push for a Catholic Rwanda, the local state governments continued pressuring the Church about its unequal treatment of the Hutu.

In 1952, Jesuit missionaries went to work in Rwanda at the request of King Mutara III. They focused on feeding the poor and educating the children. The Jesuit missionaries educated the Hutus. The Catholic Church blamed Belgium for the ethnic class designations and by entering Rwanda, disturbed the native culture. Even though Rwanda had a king, it operated indirectly under the rule of Belgium. In 1955, in retaliation to the Church’s complaints, the Belgium government directed the Jesuits to move their school from Rwanda to Usumbura, Burundi, present-day Bujumbura, Burundi. The Catholic Church, and local priests in Rwanda, again declared discrimination unfair to the Hutu and spoke out in their defense. The Jesuits did not return to Rwanda until 1966, and they did so to open an elementary and high school in Kigali. The

Church also opened a novitiate, making Kigali the center for religious education.¹⁷

Reversal of Power and Demand for Equality

With the encouragement and assistance of two Catholic missionaries, eleven politically powerful Hutu elite wrote a declaration demanding a resolution to the inequality and racial discrimination. In their declaration, they listed out expected solutions. This nine-page document dated March 3, 1957, was called *The Manifesto of the Bahutu*.¹⁸ The *Manifesto* also blamed Belgium for civil unrest in Rwanda because Belgium was an absent ruler. The *Manifesto* writers demanded that the government continue the practice of indicating whether a Rwandan was Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa on official government identification cards.¹⁹

Following the publication of the *Manifesto*, the Tutsi no longer held the political power. In 1959, the Catholic Church, assisted by the Belgian government, again incited the two groups. Belgium removed the Tutsi king from power, ending the monarchy.²⁰ The first president of Rwanda, Gregorie Kayibanda, was one of the authors of *The Manifesto*.²¹ To gain control of the Tutsi, the local government, joined by many Hutu, killed thousands of Tutsi. Many other Tutsi went into exile in nearby countries to escape the killings.

¹⁵ Timothy Longman, “Church Politics and the Genocide in Rwanda,” *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31, no. 2 (2001): 173. <https://doi.org/10.1163/157006601X00112>.

¹⁶ Cantrell, 427.

¹⁷ “Rwanda-Burundi Region,” “Jesuit Rwanda-Burundi,” *Society of Jesus*, last modified 2017. <http://www.jesuitsrwb.org/aboutus/rwanda-burundi-region>.

¹⁸ *The Manifesto of the Bahutu*, 24 March 1957, Poland Rwanda 1958-1960, *Records of the Research Center and Socio-Political Information Center (CRISP)*, 1962, translated from French. <http://francegenocidetutsi.org/ManifesteDesBahutuLe ttreEtCommentaires1958.pdf>.

¹⁹ Safari, 877.

²⁰ Safari, 877.

²¹ Gourevitch, 61.

Nevertheless, even though Hutu gained strategic roles in the government, the Tutsi clergy remained in control of the Catholic Church. The Tutsi priests were still teaching, in charge of the Catholic schools, and most of the parish priests were Tutsi. In 1966, after much complaining to the government by Hutu, all Catholic schools were nationalized. Nationalizing the Catholic schools took them out of the Church's control. The Church lost control of the decisions regarding who was to be hired or fired as teachers, which students would be allowed to attend and promoted, and the curriculum to be taught. The Catholic Church and priests were forced to remain silent if they wanted to continue teaching and practicing in Rwanda. Consequently, their silence played a significant role in the genocide.²²

After WWII, Flemish missionaries from Belgium began moving into Rwanda. These missionaries were more progressive and were disturbed by the poverty of the Hutu.²³ By the early 1970s, the Catholic Church started to make changes focusing on the Hutu. The Hutu continued to complain about unfair education advantages given to Tutsi. Hutus also claimed that they could not find employment because the Tutsi were taking Hutu positions in schools and jobs. At the National University, Hutu students took it upon themselves to post flyers telling all Tutsi to leave the school. Suspected staff and students, who did not hold Tutsi identification cards had their noses and fingers measured for confirmation.²⁴ Many

left the university, going into exile in fear of retaliation. Subjected to harassment, Tutsi holding civil service jobs and private business positions lost their jobs. For their safety, thousands of Tutsi left Rwanda. It was at this point that the Catholic Church again showed that it was involved in "ethnic politics."²⁵

Catholic bishops at the Vatican issued a statement condemning racism. However, the statement went only so far as to state that God's law and the rights of man were in opposition to these prejudices as all men are created equal. The Church declared that the government, not individuals or organized racist groups, was the only entity that could remove Tutsi from jobs and schools.²⁶ These bishops aimed their statement at the university's staff and students with no intention of making an impact on the government's actions. Not surprisingly, the government's reply was retaliatory. The government removed the Tutsi Monsignor as head of the seminary, replaced him with a Hutu soldier, and closed the convent. At this point, the Catholic Church leadership and other Christian churches moved from Tutsi to Hutu administration. The government told the Catholic Church that if it interfered, the government would take full control of the Church's operations. Subsequently, no Tutsi held a position of authority in the Catholic Church again until after 1996, even though there were still a generous number of priests who were Tutsi.

²² Safari, 881.

²³ Anthony Court, "The Christian Churches, the State, and Genocide in Rwanda," *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Missiology* 44, no. 1 (30 July 2016): 61-62. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7832/44-1-106>; Gourevitch, 58.

²⁴ Safari, 879; Lisapo ya Kama, "How the Hutu and the Tutsi Have Been Created," *African History* 8 (January 2018): 1-6.

<http://en.lisapoyakama.org/how-the-hutu-and-the-tutsi-have-been-created/>.

²⁵ Court, 63; Longman, "Church Politics and the Genocide in Rwanda," 173.

²⁶ Safari, 879, citing Ian Linden, *Church and Revolution in Rwanda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977), 8.

Church's Silence Spoke Volumes

After retaliation by the Rwandan government against the Catholic Church for interfering, the Church remained silent. The only criticism came from individual priests. One priest spoke out against the abuse of Tutsi. After several attempts on his life by government assassins, he died in a suspicious head-on car collision. Several priests wrote letters to the Catholic Church leaders expressing concerns about the ethnic quota status in the schools and businesses. They requested the Church speak openly about its objections to this practice. Still, the Catholic Church remained silent, even when thousands of Tutsi and sympathizing Hutu were forced into exile to save their lives.²⁷

Furthermore, the Catholic Church was not the only religion to keep silent about the ethnic abuse of the Tutsi and their Hutu sympathizers. Although the other Christian denominations spoke out about government corruption and related issues, they did not say a word about the ethnic abuse.²⁸ Together the Christian churches issued a statement that peace needed to be restored between the Hutu and Tutsi. They blamed both groups for the troubles, but never once addressed the killings of the Tutsi and their allies. None of the Christian churches in Rwanda “specifically denounced the ethnic massacres”²⁹ before the 1994 genocide. The Rwandan people took the church leaders’

silence as consenting to the abuse and believed that their church leaders did not condemn the massacres.³⁰ To make the situation worse, it was common knowledge that the Catholic Church, specifically the Bishop in charge of the Rwandan diocese, had family ties with Rwanda’s President.

The CDI, as a good relay of the Catholic Church, had always been very close to the Habyarimana regime. By the fall of 1994 the church was doing some soul-searching and could write: ‘The Catholic Church has been in the service of General Habyarimana’s power. This is the accusation one constantly hears against the Rwandese church. And it is unfortunately true!’ [...] The Hague conference in mid-September 1994 [...] had been an educational experience in watching some viscerally anti-Tutsi Belgian Christians at work.³¹

The ties between the Catholic Church and the government became so entwined that the Church moved its archdiocese office from Kabgayi to Kigali in 1976.³² It is because the Church chose to conspire with the government instead of demanding equality for everyone that the spiritual and moral integrity of the Catholic Church deteriorated even though the Church flourished.³³

²⁷ Safari, 881, *citing* Timothy Longman, “Christian Churches and Genocide in Rwanda,” *In God’s Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack (New York and Oxford: Barghan Books, 2001), 139-160.

²⁸ Safari, 882.

²⁹ Timothy Paul Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 180.

³⁰ Longman, *Christianity and Genocide*, 180; Safari, 881.

³¹ Prunier, 335, *citing* *Letter from the Missionaries of Africa (Lettre des Missionnaires d’Afrique)*, 12 September 1994).

³² Longman, *Christianity and Genocide*, 88-91.

³³ Safari, 874.

The Slaughterers

According to the Vatican, the Catholic Church was also a victim of the Rwandan genocide. The Vatican says that more than two hundred priests and nuns died in the slaughter. Conversely, many survivors and Rwanda's current government insist that there are still other priests and nuns who were killers. Some witnesses recalled that there were priests who had guns and shot people. Another priest had his church bulldozed while full of people crushing them to death. Other witnesses remembered that another priest, Father Jean-Baptiste Rutihunza, slaughtered Tutsi children who were disabled at the Centre for the Handicapped in Gatagara.³⁴

The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), based out of Tanzania, found the following Catholic priests, nuns, and a Protestant minister guilty of actively participating in the Tutsi genocide:

Archbishop Thaddée Ntihinuyrwa, Archdiocese of Kigali – brought in to be questioned by the Rwandan Gacaca court having accused him of leading about six hundred people into a soccer

stadium, where Hutu militia killed them; the court filed no charges.³⁵

Rwandan Catholic priest Father Jean François Kayiranga and Rwandan Catholic priest Father Edouard Nkurikiye – charged with leading about two thousand Tutsi to seek refuge in their church and then bulldozing the church; both priests were tried in April 1998 and sentenced to death.³⁶

Rwandan Catholic priest Father Athanase Seromba – charged with having his church bulldozed after he found that all inside had not died; the ICTR sentenced him to fifteen years in prison for his participation in the killings.³⁷

Rwandan Catholic bishop Mgr. Augustin Misago – charged with leading a “death squad”; acquitted in 2000.³⁸

Belgian Catholic priest Father Guy Theunis – charged with inciting the genocide by publishing magazine articles against the RPF; extradited to Belgium for prosecution. As of 2006,

³⁴ Chris McGreal, “Hiding in Plain Sight in France: The Priests Accused in Rwandan Genocide,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, April 7, 2014).

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/07/rwanda-genocide-20-years-priests-catholic-church>; Chris McGreal, *Chaplains in the Militia: The Tangled Story of the Catholic Church During Rwanda's Genocide*, (N.p., Guardian Shorts, 2014), 32, Kindle.

³⁵ Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa, “Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Rwanda: Involvement of Members of the Roman Catholic Clergy in the 1994 Genocide,” 6 March 2008, RWA102792.E.
<http://www.refworld.org/docid/49b92b279.html>.

³⁶ CatholicCulture.org, “Rwanda Priests Sentenced To Death In Genocide Trial April 20, 1998,” *Catholic World News – News Feature*.
<https://www.catholicculture.org/news/features/index.cfm?recnum=7447>.

³⁷ Marc Lacey, “Rwandan Priest Sentenced to 15 Years for Allowing Deaths of Tutsi in Church,” *New York Times*, December 4, 2006.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/14/world/africa/14rwanda.html>.

³⁸ Research Directorate, “Involvement of Members of the Roman Catholic.”

Theunis has not been officially charged.³⁹

Rwandan Catholic priest Wenceslas Munyeshyaka – although he escaped to France and is still practicing, he has been arrested and charged numerous times for assisting Hutu militia in killings and rape; convicted in absentia.⁴⁰

Rwandan Catholic priests Hormisdas Nsengimana and Athanase Nyanduei – charged with inciting college students to assist Hutu militia to kill Tutsi. Nsengimana was also believed to be one of the genocide organizers. He has never been charged as an organizer and is practicing in Cameroon.⁴¹

Former army chaplain Emmanuel Rukundo – head of the seminary in Gitarama, alerted the army to kill Tutsi seeking shelter.⁴²

Father Laurent Ntimugura – charged with murdering another priest who was Tutsi.⁴³

Sister Theophister Mukakibibi – charged and sentenced to prison for classifying Tutsi and helping militia

kill those seeking refuge in the Butara Hospital.⁴⁴

Rwandan priest Father Thaddée Rusingizandekwe, a military chaplain – accused of throwing grenades into a church, shooting Tutsi, and burning survivors; he killed another priest, Father Jean Pierre Ngoga, who was shielding Tutsi; arrested in September 1994.⁴⁵

Sister Julienne Maria Kizito and Mother Superior Gertrude Mukangango – accused of aiding the killers by giving them gasoline to burn Tutsi and then pointing out Tutsi to be killed. After a trial in June 2001, Kizito was sentenced to twelve years in prison. Mukangango was sentenced to fifteen years.⁴⁶

Seventh-Day Adventist pastor, Elizaphan Ntakirutimana – accused of watching as his parishioners were killed; released in 2006 by the ICTR after serving a ten-year sentence.⁴⁷

There are still many Catholic priests not listed here who were involved and possibly charged with genocide; however, the ICTR took the subsequent indictments in secret.

³⁹ Research Directorate, “Involvement of Members of the Roman Catholic.”

⁴⁰ Research Directorate, “Involvement of Members of the Roman Catholic.”

⁴¹ Research Directorate, “Involvement of Members of the Roman Catholic”; Vincent Browne, “Church is Accused on Rwandan Genocide,” *The Irish Times*, July 22, 1998. <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/church-is-accused-on-rwandan-genocide-1.175686>.

⁴² Research Directorate, “Involvement of Members of the Roman Catholic.”

⁴³ Research Directorate, “Involvement of Members of the Roman Catholic.”

⁴⁴ “Catholic Nun Convicted for Rwandan Genocide,” *NBCNews.com*, November 10, 2006. http://www.nbcnews.com/id/15653352/ns/world_news-africa/t/catholic-nun-convicted-rwandan-genocide/#.W95CzKfMyYU.

⁴⁵ Browne, “Church is Accused on Rwandan Genocide.”

⁴⁶ Research Directorate, “Involvement of Members of the Roman Catholic.”

⁴⁷ Lacey, “Rwandan Priest Sentenced.”

There were also many unnamed Protestant clergies accused in connection with the genocide. Some of the Catholic clergies not in prison are Archbishop Nsengiyumva of Kigali, four bishops, and eight priests. Tutsi rebel soldiers killed them for assisting the Hutu militia. Rwanda's present government refuses to allow the Catholic Church to have any power in Rwanda. The Church should have separated itself from politics a long time ago.⁴⁸

What survivors, witnesses, and killers know with certainty is that beginning as early as 1990, the Rwandan government used bully tactics and propaganda to frighten the Rwandan people into submission. On April 7, 1994, the Rwandan radio station began broadcasting speeches to deliberately incite many Hutu to kill the "Tutsi murderers" as revenge for the death of the Rwandan President.⁴⁹ Within only a few hours after the President's plane was shot down, the inciting broadcasts pushed for more bloodshed.

You have missed some of the enemies in this or that place. Some are still alive. You must go back there and finish them off. [...] The graves are not yet full. Who is going to do good work and help us fill them completely?⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Donatella Lorch, "The Rock That Crumbled: The Church in Rwanda," *New York Times*, October 17, 1994. <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/17/world/kigali-journal-the-rock-that-crumbled-the-church-in-rwanda.html>.

⁴⁹ Prunier, 26.

⁵⁰ Prunier, 26.

⁵¹ Prunier, 240. The GP was the Presidential Guard. Lieutenant Colonel Nkundiye, former commander of the GP, and Colonel Mpiranya, commander of the paratroopers, along with several

* * *

The GP was also on alert, since it immediately went out into the town and started killing.⁵¹

* * *

Their efficiency in carrying out the killings proves that these had been planned well in advance.⁵²

If at least eight hundred thousand Tutsi and sympathizers died and the killings took place in one hundred days, that calculates to eight thousand Tutsi killed every day.

Decimation means the killing of every tenth person in a population, and in the spring and early summer of 1994 a program of massacres decimated the Republic of Rwanda. Although the killing was low-tech – performed largely by machete – it was carried out at a dazzling speed: [...] The dead of Rwanda accumulated at near three times the rate of Jewish dead during the Holocaust. It was the most efficient mass killing since the atomic bombings in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁵³

The Hutu militia power carried out their plan with horrifying swiftness decimating the Tutsi and Tutsi allies.

other military officers, were found to be coordinators of the massacres on a national level.

⁵² Prunier, 242.

⁵³ Zack Beauchamp, "Rwanda's Genocide – What Happened, Why it Happened, and How it Still Matters," *Vox* (April 10, 2014). <https://www.vox.com/2014/4/10/5590646/rwanda-genocide-anniversary>; Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Picador: Holtzbrinck Publishers, 1998), 4.

Just before the killings, there was a group of radical government officials and militia in Rwanda called the Hutu Power. These Hutu extremists believed that they were superior to the Tutsi. They had trained for months, possibly years to complete the total annihilation of the Tutsi. The Rwanda radio stations encouraged these Hutu by broadcasts to kill the Tutsi. The newspaper published articles, and the people spoke publicly about killing the Tutsi. Any Hutus who did not agree with the Hutu Power's plans to kill Tutsi were publicly called out as collaborators with the Tutsi. These people were sought out as the first to be executed. Many Tutsi approached the Hutu Power leader in a plea to be spared after hearing open conversations about the Hutu Power's plans to kill Tutsi. They were told to go to the churches for protection. The Tutsi people followed these directions only to be slaughtered by the same people they believed would protect them, led by none other than the Hutu Power leader.⁵⁴

The Slaughtered and Survivors

Most Rwandans killed during these one hundred days were killed in churches or on church grounds.⁵⁵ These are the places that most people seeking help believed they would be safe. Ironically, some Catholic priests, nuns, and Protestant preachers also were killers.⁵⁶ They may not have been

swinging a machete, but they showed total disregard for human life by luring these innocent people to their deaths.⁵⁷ Emmanuel Rukundo, Roman Catholic priest and Hutu extremist, betrayed the trust of the Tutsi people seeking safety and hiding in a seminary. Witnesses stated that Rukundo pointed out to soldiers on four separate occasions where people were hiding. The Hutu militia subsequently murdered these people. Rukundo was prosecuted, tried by the United Nations tribunal, and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison.⁵⁸

At the parish of Sainte-Famille Catholic Church in Kigali, roughly eight thousand people sought refuge under the protection of Father Wenceslas Munyashyaka. Munyashyaka allowed these people into his church. He then handpicked those to be killed from a list of names.⁵⁹ Survivor, Sara Bampiriye, her husband and three small children, sought refuge in Munyashyaka's church. Her husband was shot dead just outside of the church by the Hutu militia. Bampiriye stated that the one thing that plays back in her mind was that while the Hutu militia attacked the church, Munyashyaka gave commands directly to the militia. She also recalled that he handed over girls to the Hutu militia to rape and raped some of the girls himself. After hiding for some time in the church, the RPF rescued her and her three children.⁶⁰ She stated that

⁵⁴ Athan Tashobya, "Munyeshyaka, the Priest Who Turned on His Flock," *The NewTimes* (Rwanda, October 15, 2015), 18. <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/read/193499>.

⁵⁵ Christine Schliesser, "From 'a Theology of Genocide' to a 'Theology of Reconciliation'? On the Role of Christian Churches in the Nexus of Religion and Genocide in Rwanda," *Religions* 9, no. 2 (2018): 34. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9020034>.

⁵⁶ Schliesser, 34.

⁵⁷ Safari, 874; Raymond Bonner, "Clergy in Rwanda Is Accused of Abetting Atrocities," *New*

York Times, July 7, 1995. <https://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/07/world/clergy-in-rwanda-is-accused-of-abetting-atrocities.html>.

⁵⁸ Marlise Simons, "Rwandan: Priest Guilty in Genocide," *The New York Times*, February 27, 2009. https://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/28/world/africa/28briefs-Priestguilty_brf.html.

⁵⁹ Prunier, 258.

⁶⁰ Tashobya, 18.

Munyashyaka had close ties with government and military leaders. Bampiriye further noted that before the killings, Munyashyaka carried a pistol under his church garments. His sermons were about “evil things” and that the “Tutsi cockroaches” deserved death. Munyeshyaka was aware of what he was doing because he had enough equanimity not to allow killing in the church. Munyeshyaka later escaped to France, and France refused to extradite him to stand trial. Instead, he was tried in the French court system where he was acquitted of all charges. Munyeshyaka became a French citizen and continued as an active Catholic priest.⁶¹ It was a hard blow to the survivors when the French courts allowed Munyeshyaka to go free and even more disturbing that the Catholic Church allowed him to continue practicing.

Chris McGreal interviewed Catholic priests who survived and were not involved in the killings. McGreal asked one priest his thoughts regarding the involvement of the Catholic Church and clergy in the genocide. The unnamed Tutsi priest pulled out a letter dated April 4, 1972. Eleven Hutu priests wrote the letter to Reverend André Perraudin. One of the signatures was that of the present second-highest official in the Rwandan archdiocese, Father André Havugimana. The letter called Tutsi priests *inyenzi* and liars. The letter also said that because the Tutsi were smart, they were more conniving and mischievous. These priests believed that the Tutsi wanted to remain in control in the Church because they no longer had the advantage in the government. Every page of this nineteen-page letter was filled with hateful words about the Tutsi priests. In 1973, many Tutsi priests left the Kigali archdiocese fleeing into exile. The Archbishop did not

issue a reprimand, and the archdiocese later embraced the same ways of thinking as the letter writers.⁶²

According to Prunier, another twenty-nine Catholic priests jointly wrote a letter to the Vatican. They stated that the Hutu were not responsible for the genocide of the Tutsi peoples and Tutsi supporters. The priests claimed that the RPF should shoulder all blame. They also criticized the plans for an international commission to investigate and prosecute those charged with crimes against humanity.⁶³

In addition to people fleeing to the Catholic Churches for protection, thousands of people escaped to the Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Kibuye, where Pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutimana was in charge. His son, Dr. Gerard Ntakirutimana, was practicing at the hospital operated by the Adventist Church. Dr. Gerard told many people to go to the church for protection. Instead of protecting the people, the militia slaughtered them. Witnesses stated that the mayor of Kibuye was in such a frenzied state that he ordered his followers to start killing those who were running to the church for safety. Ntakirutimana and Dr. Gerard were close friends with the mayor. The mayor also sent thousands to city hall for protection by police and soldiers. An estimation placed the number killed surrounding and inside the city hall complex at over ten thousand. The mayor sent the police and soldiers but not for protection. Instead, they slaughtered those seeking safety. One surviving refugee recalled that the people appealed to Ntakirutimana for help, but his only reply was that he had “already found a solution. You must die. [...] You must be eliminated.

⁶¹ Tashobya, 18.

⁶² McGreal, *Chaplains in the Military*, 34-37.

⁶³ McGreal, *Chaplains in the Military*, 34-37.

God no longer wants you.”⁶⁴ Ntakirutimana had no intention of protecting these people.

Jean Hatzfeld interviewed several inmates about their participation in the killings. Hatzfeld wanted to know what they saw, and whom did they see killing with them?⁶⁵ He asked them about their faith and the priests accused of being killers. The inmates told their stories in such a matter-of-fact tone that the transcripts were agonizing to read. One prisoner stated that they prepared for each day of the genocide. The organization had only one rule, and that was to kill. Another prisoner openly admitted that he was a deacon in his church. When the parish priest was not available for Mass, he conducted the services. To coincide with other statements made about the priests, another prisoner affirmed:

The white priests took off at the first skirmishes. The black priests joined the killers or the killed. God kept silent, and the churches stank from abandoned bodies. Religion could not find its place in our activities. For a little while, we were no longer ordinary Christians, we had to forget our duties learned in catechism class. We had first of all to *obey our leaders* – and God only afterward, very long afterward, to make confession and penance. When the job was done.⁶⁶

In interviews inside of Kigali’s prison, Philip Gourevitch observed that two inmates in the women’s section were nuns. They said

⁶⁴ Gourevitch, 25-29; Marlise Simons, “Rwandan Pastor and His Son Are Convicted of Genocide,” *The New York Times*, February 20, 2003. <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/20/world/rwandan-pastor-and-his-son-are-convicted-of-genocide.html>.

⁶⁵ Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak: A Report* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 142-145. A

Mass every day with the other inmates.⁶⁷ Considering the viciousness of the killings described by witnesses, few guards monitored those incarcerated in the grossly overpopulated prison. There seemed to be a quiet peace throughout the entire prison. No one tried to escape, and there was no sign of any attempt to revolt. The men’s section of Kigali’s prison was like a small, overly populated apartment complex. Gourevitch observed as he walked through the prison, that his guides moved people aside with a stick. The inmates exhibited “the famous mob mentality of blind obedience to authority ... described in attempts to explain genocide.”⁶⁸ To date, due to the overpopulation, the prisons released approximately sixty thousand killers charged with genocide.

Where Was God?

François Nkurunziza, a lawyer who lived in Kigali, spoke to Gourevitch about how he and his family survived. He discussed the mentality of the killers. He remembered the thoughts that ran through his mind while being chased, trying to escape death. Nkurunziza was lucky to have been able to escape. However, the majority of his family perished. Nkurunziza told Gourevitch that obedience is important to Rwandans. “You take the poor innocent population, and give them arms, and say, ‘It’s yours. Kill.’ They’ll

particular group of nine men who had been friends for years.

⁶⁶ Hatzfeld, 142-145.

⁶⁷ Gourevitch, 243.

⁶⁸ Gourevitch, 243.

obey.”⁶⁹ He said that the killers looked to the Hutu Power leaders to tell them what to do. Rwandans always followed authority, doing what their leader – the king or the government – told them.

Gourevitch interviewed another survivor, sixty-year-old Jean-Baptiste Munyaukore. Munyaukore stated after witnessing the killings that “God turned His back on them” and allowed them to be slaughtered. “God had forgotten us ...” During the slaughtering, Jean-Baptiste believed that the rest of the world turned their heads the other way and that God had abandoned them. Still, other survivors believe that they survived the killings only because of God’s divine intervention.⁷⁰

According to Prunier, citing Jean Chatain and Reverend Roger Bowen, interviewers asked survivors and those inside the Church organizations about bystanders. The survivors said that:

The bystanders were mostly the churches. Although, as we will see, there were admirable acts of courage among ordinary Christians, the church hierarchies were at best useless and at worst accomplices in the genocide.

⁶⁹ Prunier, 23.

⁷⁰ Jean Hatzfeld, *Life Laid Bare: The Survivors in Rwanda Speak*, Translated by Linda Coverdale (New York: Other Press, LLC., 2006), 63-73.

⁷¹ Prunier, 250, citing Jean Chatain, “Deux pretres temoignent sur les atrocites au Rwanda,” *L’Humanite* (3 May 1994). “Throughout the crisis, Fathers Vleugels and Theunis of the White Fathers sent frequent faxes to their head office to inform their Order of the developments in Rwanda. The general tone is most revealing: *there are precise lists of priests killed but nothing about the massive killings of their parishioners.* [...] The only moment when names are named is when the two Fathers can at long

* * *

Most of the priests who were killed were those who had defended human rights.⁷¹

* * *

As for the Protestant Churches, ... their attitude was little better. But at least there was an admission of guilt at a higher hierarchical level.⁷²

Reverend Bowen stated that he believed that the problems stemmed from the fact that the Anglican Church leaders and the Habyarimana government had a tight connection, and that the Anglican diocesan bishops were all Hutu.⁷³

The Presbyterian Church apologized in 1996 for not taking a more active role in preventing the massacre.⁷⁴ It took the Catholic Church until March 20, 2017, to apologize and ask the people of Rwanda for forgiveness. Even though Pope Francis apologized, there are still no indications that priests who were protected at the time of the genocide will be brought to justice. Surprisingly, some survivors managed to return to the same churches or parishes where the majority of Rwandans died. The Catholic Church assisted Tutsi survivors with coping skills and counseling to help them move

last pin a particular crime on the RPF. Then all the necessary details and particulars are given.”

⁷² Prunier, 252, quoting Reverend Roger Bowen, “Rwanda-Missionary Reflections on a Catastrophe J. C. Jones Lecture 1995,” *Anvil* 13, no. 1 (1996). https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/anvil/13-1_033.pdf. The Rev. Roger W. Bowen was the General Secretary of Mid-Africa Ministry (CMS).

⁷³ Prunier, 252.

⁷⁴ Schliesser, 45.

forward with their lives.⁷⁵ However, most Catholic Rwandans now attend Pentecostal churches.⁷⁶ The Rwandan Christians began trying to piece back some semblance of a normal life, just as the Jewish Holocaust survivors had done.

Blind Obedience

The genocide that took place during the Holocaust by Nazi Germany is a stark parallel to the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Perpetrators and survivors of both genocides made the same statements about what made them do the heinous things they did. Most surprisingly is how some survivors healed contingent on the words and actions of the killers. In a *Chicago Tribune* article, Magda Brown, an Auschwitz survivor, was interviewed about the trial testimony of Oskar Groening, also known as “the bookkeeper of Auschwitz.” What struck Brown the most was when Groening told the judge, “[i]t is beyond question that I am morally complicit.”⁷⁷ Brown stated that she was surprised that Groening admitted in open court that he was guilty of leading Jews from the trains to their deaths and other atrocities at Auschwitz.

⁷⁵ Jean D'Amour Banyanga & Björkqvist, Kaj, “The Dual Role of Religion Regarding the Rwandan 1994 Genocide: Both Instigator and Healer,” *Pyrex Journal of African Studies and Development* 3 (2017): 1-12. <https://www.pyrexjournals.org/pjasd/pdf/2017/may/Banyanga-and-Bjorkqvist.pdf>.

⁷⁶ Harriet Sherwood, “Pope Francis Asks for Forgiveness for The Church’s Role in the Rwanda Genocide,” *The Guardian* (Guardian News and Media, March 20, 2017). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/20/pope-francis-asks-for-forgiveness-for-churchs-role-in-rwanda-genocide>.

There were others tried for their crimes at Auschwitz. When asked why they participated in the killings of innocent people, their answers were the same as the killers in Rwanda. “Ordinary ... ‘susceptible human beings’” fell to the “pressures to conform, to a desire to please those in positions of authority.”⁷⁸ The literature regarding the psychological motivation of what makes an individual blindly follow orders, speaks for itself. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum interviewed thousands of “ordinary ... ‘susceptible human beings’” and in the writings of the Memorial Museum stories, are these words:

Being a leader in one’s group, [...] or community and an engaged citizen sometimes requires exercising courage in situations where it would be simpler and easier not to speak out or ‘swim against’ the tide. [...] ‘Too few people made conscious choices against evil’ when it could have made a difference.⁷⁹

This fact that the Nazi’s led ordinary human beings to commit murder compares directly to the Rwandan genocide. The Hutu Powers, like the Nazis, purposefully,

⁷⁷ Barbara Brotman, “Former Nazi Guard’s Openness About Atrocities Surprises Survivor,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 25, 2015. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/lifestyles/columnists/ct-holocaust-trial-brotman-talk-0427-20150427-column.html#>.

⁷⁸ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Ethical Leadership*, quoting Willy Brandt from Frances Henry, *Victims and Neighbors: A Small Town in Nazi Germany Remembered* (South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, 1984), viii, accessed on September 18, 2018. <https://www.ushmm.org/teach/teaching-materials/roles-of-individuals/ethical-leaders/overview/ethical-leadership>.

⁷⁹ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Ethical Leadership*.

systematically, and without conscience, trained and led the Hutu to go out day after day to violently murder the Tutsi and Tutsi sympathizers. The Hutu plotted against a specific group of people with the sole purpose of carrying out ethnic cleansing.⁸⁰

Conclusion

In conclusion, evidence shows that the Catholic Church's leadership and the White Father missionaries focused on teachings about obedience and respect to those of authority instead of teaching about being responsible to each other. It was more important to the White Fathers to convert the Rwandan people. Love thy neighbor came secondary to following the government leaders' wishes.⁸¹ The Catholic Church had ties with the government of Belgium and later with the local government in Rwanda. Collusion with the government was to the Catholic Church's advantage so that they could keep the churches and schools in Rwanda under the Vatican's control. However, there were consequences to these actions – power struggles were a constant problem mixed with political corruption.⁸²

When the Jesuit and Flemish missionaries from Belgium entered Rwanda, they focused their teachings on the poor. They were interested in feeding the poor and educating the Rwandan children so they could have a better life. These missionaries had no interest in separating the Rwandan people into ethnic groups. Today, a Hutu majority in Rwanda is governed by a

government in which Tutsi hold all of the significant positions.⁸³ Rwanda, even after the vicious act of genocide, still does not have a government fully representative of all Rwandan people. The government has, at least since 1996, discontinued identification cards that identify a Rwandan as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa.⁸⁴

As sensational as the events referenced here sound, there is no embellishment in the accounts told by the killers and the survivors. Many first-hand witnesses gave testimonies corroborating each other's statements. Each gave testimonials about what happened to them at their location during the slaughter. Killers have made apologies to the surviving victims and the families of those who perished. Surprisingly, some apologies were accepted. Nonetheless, Hutu and Tutsi, at the time of this paper, still have a fair distance to go in reconciling their past with the needs of a united Rwanda.

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⁸⁰ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, *Confront: What is Genocide?* accessed on July 17, 2020. <https://www.ushmm.org/genocide-prevention/learn-about-genocide-and-other-mass-atrocities/definitions>.

⁸¹ Schliesser, 38.

⁸² Schliesser, 38.

⁸³ Cantrell, 443.

⁸⁴ Jaelyn Nardone, "Intolerably Inferior Identify: How the Social Construction of Race Erased a Rwandan Population," *Peace & Conflict Monitor*, Last Updated: April 8, 2010. http://www.monitor.upeace.org/innerpg.cfm?id_article=707.

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