

# SANCTIONED DISCRIMINATION: CHURCH COMPLICITY IN THE RWANDAN GENOCIDE

BY  
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Since their introduction into Rwanda in the 1900s, Christian Churches, in particular the Roman Catholic Church influenced Rwandan history by impacting its religious, cultural, and economic progress. Often Churches worked hand in hand with colonial governments to bolster each other's legitimacy. The colonial and missionary periods exacerbated the longstanding ethnic tensions that divided Rwanda between the Tutsis and the Hutus by introducing racist European theories of origin. Missionaries and church officials perpetuated these theories as they attempted to gain converts to maintain and increase their influence through alignment with government policies, thus resulting in the churches' acceptance of ethnic discrimination, which facilitated some church members' support, or at least inaction against, the 1994 government-sanctioned genocide.<sup>1</sup>

Before one can fully understand the ethnic discrimination between the Tutsi and Hutu that facilitated the 1994 Rwandan genocide, it is essential to understand the basic ethnic differences that led to cultural, societal, governmental, and educational divides. Since the fifteenth century, the population of Rwanda consisted of three ethnic groups – about 84% Hutu, 15% Tutsi, and 1% Twa.<sup>2</sup> The main differences between the Hutu and Tutsi were their occupations, social statuses, and physical features; as time wore on, marriage and politics were included as well. The Hutu were generally short, square-built farmers who claimed ownership of the land, whereas the Tutsi were tall, slender, warrior and cattle-owning people.<sup>3</sup> Despite their

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Longman, "Church Politics and the Genocide in Rwanda," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31, (2001): 163.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher C. Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994* (New York: Berg, 1999), 39.

<sup>3</sup> Julius O. Adekunle, *Culture and Customs of Rwanda* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007), 4-5.

smaller population, the Tutsi's superior military experience enabled them to suppress the Hutu and gain political control. However, by the twentieth century, most of the physical differences had dissipated due to intermarriage, and identification based on physical characteristics was far less accurate than it had been in earlier centuries.<sup>4</sup>

In the nineteenth century, racist theories of origin consumed most of Europe and spread to their colonies – including Rwanda. Such theories were supported by pseudo-scientific studies and theories, such as social Darwinism, which fueled the European superiority complex, enabling them to justify their imperialistic subjugation of other biologically or culturally “inferior” people.<sup>5</sup> The most destructive of these racist theories for Rwanda was the Hamitic Hypothesis, which asserted that the Tutsis originated outside of Africa and were descendents of the Christian Biblical Patriarch Noah, from the line of his son Ham.<sup>6</sup> This theory supported European colonization, since the claim that Tutsis originated outside of Africa justified their political success, allegedly refined and European-like features, and the resulting German and Belgian reliance on the Tutsi elite. Furthermore, the Biblical reference added a religious legitimacy to the Hamitic Hypothesis and colonialism in general.

European colonization and occupation of Rwanda began in 1880s, and by 1899, Rwanda was incorporated into German East Africa.<sup>7</sup> Around this time, the first missionaries from the Society of Missionaries of Africa, a Catholic mission commonly referred to as the White Fathers, arrived. Due to the military influence of the budding German regime, the order was able to persuade the new king to provide land grants for missions.<sup>8</sup> The colonial administration provided government and order, while the Church provided religious, educational, medical, and agricultural aid – benefits that effectively integrated the Church into Rwandan society. Both the Church and colonial administration sought to curry favor with the local leaders and elite in order to solidify their power, and each realized that the most effective way to achieve this was by working with the other. Some dubbed their close cooperation the “Holy Trinity,” composed of the colonizers’ gun and capital and the missionaries’ Bible.<sup>9</sup> United under the same goal, mutual

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<sup>4</sup> Helen M. Hintgens, “Explaining the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda,” *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 37, no. 2 (1999): 247.

<sup>5</sup> Christian P. Scherrer, *Genocide and Crisis in Central Africa: Conflict Roots, Mass Violence, and Regional War* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Publishers, 2002), 21.

<sup>6</sup> Aimable Twagilimana, *The Debris of Ham: Ethnicity, Regionalism, and the 1994 Rwandan Genocide* (New York: University Press of America, 2003), 48.

<sup>7</sup> *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches?* Carol Rittner, John K. Roth, and Wendy Whitworth, eds. (St. Paul, Minn.: Paragon House, 2004), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Lee Ann Fugii, *Killing Neighbors: Webs of Violence in Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 63.

<sup>9</sup> Twagilimana, *The Debris of Ham*, 50.

support for the government and Church became intrinsic aspects of Rwandan society.

The Church ministered to whomever it believed would garner more converts. Initially, this meant that parishioners were primarily Hutu since the Church's educational and medical facilities appealed to the poor Hutus. However, by the 1920s, the Church realized that by converting the Rwandan king and elite, it would be able to convert the people, so the Church then switched its focus to the Tutsis, who received education and administrative positions.<sup>10</sup> After the baptism of King Mutara III (Charles Rudahigwa) in 1943, Christianity spread widely and its influence was evident in the decrease of paganism, polygamy, and adultery, and the illegalization of abortion.<sup>11</sup> In addition to the governmental focus on the Tutsis, their new alliance with the Church, as well as the Church's use of underpaid Hutu laborers to construct missions, led to resentment among the Hutus and intensified the ethnic divide with the Tutsis. Then in the 1940s, the Church's focus again shifted back to the Hutus due to an influx of Flemish priests who related to the class struggles of the Hutu.<sup>12</sup> This shift coincided with the elite Tutsis' push for independence and their resulting alienation of colonial establishments, to include its ally, the Church. In addition to the Flemish priests, Tutsi alienation further encouraged the Church to educate and support the Hutus, creating an educated Hutu counter-elite in the seminaries which eventually filtered down to empower Hutus within the Rwandan clergy.

Throughout these shifts, the Church remained generally aligned with the government, though the following individuals exemplify specific instances of bilateral involvement. In the 1920s, the new Belgian colonial government conceded to Bishop Classe's support for "Tutsization" of the administration, and continued to favor Tutsis for positions.<sup>13</sup> The Belgians agreed with Bishop Classe due to the perceived "superiority" of the Tutsis, as espoused by the Hamitic Hypothesis. The colonial government took advantage of the pre-existing ethnic divides, utilizing the policy of "divide and conquer" to strengthen its control and even went so far as to print the ethnicity of citizens on their identification cards.<sup>14</sup> Then in the 1950s, Gregorie Kayibanda, a product of the Church's educated Hutu counter-elite and editor of a Catholic newspaper, rose to the position of prime minister, then president. Furthermore, prior to and during his presidency, Kayibanda

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<sup>10</sup> *We Cannot Forget: Interviews with Survivors of the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda*, Samuel Totten and Rafiki Ubaldo, eds. (Rutgers, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>11</sup> *Genocide in Rwanda*, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 43.

<sup>13</sup> Josias Semujanga, *Origins of Rwandan Genocide* (New York: Humanity Books, 2003), 79.

<sup>14</sup> Nigel Eltringham, *Accounting for Horror: Post-Genocide Debates in Rwanda* (New York: Pluto Press, 2004), 18.

was mentored by Hutu extremist Monsignor Andre Perraudin.<sup>15</sup> Another infamous example of clergy participation in the government is Archbishop Vincent Nsengiyumva's membership in the central committee of the single party prior to 1990, and his firing of the editor of *Kinyamateka* at the insistence of the government, displaying Church alignment with the Habyimana regime.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, some deny the Church's influence in the 1994 Rwandan genocide, arguing that perpetrators of the genocide came from all walks of life and a variety of religions, and accordingly, Church membership did not correlate to involvement – it was a personal decision based on political leanings, personal beliefs, ethnic tensions, and social pressures. However, considering the Church's ethnic shifts and the actions of its individual leaders, it is clear that politics and ethnic tensions were inextricably interwoven into the Church since colonial times, from the education of its hierarchy to its chosen audience. This connection undeniably influenced the message that the Church was sending to its parishioners. Since the Church had influenced government policy and political leaders, as well as the education, culture, and traditions of Rwanda, it stands to reason that it would be able to exert some authority over the actions, or inaction, of its parishioners.

The 1994 Rwandan genocide was an ethnically based, government planned, Hutu extermination of the Tutsi, which theoretically contradicted Christian values of equality and brotherhood. However, instead of stressing these values, since colonial times, the Church used the racial divide between the Hutus and the Tutsis to maintain and increase its power by shifting its support to whichever group provided the greatest advantage. This standard of behavior continued into the twentieth century, a divisive example that not only intensified ethnic differences, but also set a religious (in addition to the already established government) precedent that made racism acceptable. If the Church could discriminate against its parishioners on the basis of race, than surely it would not be against God's will to discriminate against each other.

Since colonial times, the Church was largely responsible for the establishment of the education system in Rwanda, providing elementary, secondary, and seminary schools, which caused governmental reliance on the Catholic education system, as most administrators were beneficiaries of it.<sup>17</sup> These educational institutions, which into the twentieth century were among Rwanda's best, enabled the Church to choose its students, whose

<sup>15</sup> Semujanga, *Origins of Rwandan Genocide*, 79.

<sup>16</sup> *Kinyamateka* was a journal owned by the Catholic Church. Twagilimana, *The Debris of Ham*, 90. *Kinyamateka* was a journal owned by the Catholic Church.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, *Sacrifice as Terror*, 41.

selection, and the resulting educated elite, shifted in accordance with the Church's goal of maintaining power and increasing converts.<sup>18</sup> Through these shifts and the denial of equal educational opportunities, the Church continued to promote the ethnic divide that intensified through the teaching of the Hamitic Hypothesis. Furthermore, Church teaching emphasizes the importance of unquestioning obedience to God and authority, such as the Church and the government to which it was closely aligned. In addition to educational institutions, the Church fostered strong community ties by providing medical, agricultural, and economic aid. This principle of obedience, in addition to the close-knit Church community composed primarily of Hutus (the majority in the population), made its Rwandan parishioners more readily susceptible to group-think mentality and the government organization, training, and implementation of genocide.

Since the Church's continued collaboration with the government dated back to the colonial era, the Church's education system had produced most of the prominent government figures, making it on some level responsible for shaping the political organization that endorsed the genocide. Though the constitutional separation of church and state had been established, in actuality, it was nonexistent as each continued to influence the other. As the government's power increased, the Church recognized the potential benefits of supporting government policies, as shown by the aforementioned examples of clerical involvement. As the Tutsi elite turned away from colonialism and its ally the Church, the clergy felt their power threatened, and, with the government, they turned toward the Parti du Mouvement de l'Emancipation Hutu (PARMEHUTU), whose views were espoused in Catholic publications.<sup>19</sup> From this pro-Hutu sentiment, generalizations have been made of the Rwandan Catholic Church's "unconditional support" of the government, supported by Bishop Perraudin's contradiction of Radio Vatican condemnations of genocide as "distortions of the truth."<sup>20</sup>

Debates range on whether or not Church officials explicitly preached racist ideology from the pulpits, but between the 1950s and the 1994 genocide, there was a clear shift in attitudes towards the Church. The parishes where people once sought refuge, as it was Rwandan custom to seek sanctuary in God's houses, became slaughter grounds in 1994, when people who went to Churches for asylum were massacred by the thousands as in Nyamata and countless other churches.<sup>21</sup> While some Church leaders gave their lives to protect the innocent, many others joined or turned over

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<sup>18</sup> *We Cannot Forget*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Adekunle, *Culture and Customs of Rwanda*, 18.

<sup>20</sup> Semujanga, *Origins of Rwandan Genocide*, 188.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Hatzfeld, *Life Laid Bare: The Survivors in Rwanda Speak*, Linda Coverdale, trans. (New York: Others Press, 2006), 13.

members of their own parishes, and even fellow clergymen and women to the murderous militia forces. In addition to Catholics, Seventh Day Adventist Church members, such as Reverend Athanase Seromba and Pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, were both convicted of participating in the genocide by the International Crimes Tribunal for Rwanda.<sup>22</sup> These instances of clergy support, or at least inaction against the genocide, made it acceptable to the perpetrators, as one stated that, “deep down we knew that Christ was not on our side in this situation, but since He was not saying anything through the priests’ mouths, that suited us.”<sup>23</sup>

The 1994 genocide swept through Rwanda culminating in an estimated death toll between 500,000 and 1 million full Tutsis, part Tutsis, and moderate and unsupportive Hutus.<sup>24</sup> Most victims of the genocide were killed via machete or other crude tools, which arguably made the killings much more personal. The Catholic Church was the second largest employer in Rwanda through its social, educational, and medical institutions, and with a population that is 90% Christian, Church influence through support, opposition, or inaction was inevitable.<sup>25</sup> Christians’ quest for converts and collaboration with the colonial governments at the onset of their evangelization resulted in lasting links with the government and the perpetuation of divisive ethnic policies and practices, without which the environment that facilitated the 1994 Rwandan genocide could never have existed. An interview with Eugenie Mukeshimana, a Tutsi survivor of the genocide, illustrates how deeply the ethnic divides, government obedience, and group-think had penetrated society. She described how her previously friendly Hutu neighbour refused to shelter her even though she was pregnant, telling her, “You are Tutsi.”<sup>26</sup>

Understanding that underlying motives and age-old government ties caused members of pacifist religions to carry out the extensive violence seen in the 1994 Rwandan genocide reveals the personal, social, and political links between religion and violence in Rwanda. The historical connection between the government and the widespread influence of a variety of Christian ministers and missionaries elucidates the circumstances of 1994 that led Rwandan priests, pastors, and parishioners to actively kill or allow the killing of their fellow priests, pastors, parishioners, neighbors, and former friends.

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<sup>22</sup> Phillip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed with Our Families: Stories from Rwanda* (New York: Picador, 1999), 39.

<sup>23</sup> Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak*, Linda Coverdale, trans. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 145.

<sup>24</sup> *We Cannot Forget*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> Linda Melvern, *Conspiracy to Murder: The Rwandan Genocide*. (New York: Verso, 2004), 189.

<sup>26</sup> Eugenie Mukeshimana, interview by author, June 6, 2011.