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13. From Categorization to Communion

Ethnic Identity and Catholic Reconciliation in Post-Genocide Rwanda

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Abstract

The manipulation of collective identity has been a central theme in modern genocide. In the Rwandan context, postcolonial violence and the 1994 genocide were organized around the collective identities of “Hutu” and “Tutsi.” This article examines four different interpretive schools of “Hutu” and “Tutsi” identities and offers a theological analysis of the potentials and pitfalls of “Christian identity” in the contemporary Rwandan context. Drawing on both written and oral sources, the author argues that the German theologian Johann-Baptist Metz’s “memory of suffering” and the Catholic theological and pastoral commitment to “communion” can offer particular contributions to post-genocide reconciliation in Rwanda.

Keywords: Rwanda, reconciliation, genocide, Metz, Christianity

Introduction

Collective identity is central to the concept of genocide in the modern world. The man most responsible for putting genocide on the map was Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-American Jew and philologist who made it his life's work to document the history of what he termed "the crime without a name" (Power: 29). It was Lemkin who coined the word "genocide," drawing on the Latin terms "*genos*" (people) and "*cide*" (to kill). Lemkin also exercised great influence on the United Nations' 1948 genocide convention that defined genocide in terms of the targeting of collective identities of race, nationality, and religion (significant omissions here included class and political party). In the absence of collective identity, one can name human rights violations or massacres, but you cannot name "genocide."

The problem, of course, is that collective identity is intrinsically ambiguous, and genocides typically happen in part due to the manipulation and scapegoating of such ambiguous collective identities. To cite just a few well-known examples, the Young Turks classified Armenian Christians as a collective threat to the Ottoman Empire a century ago and then killed over 1 million. In the interwar period, German Nazis propagated the supposed collective conspiracy of "international Jewry," helping pave the ideological path toward the Holocaust. And it was the Khmer Rouge who classified, starved, tortured, and killed over two million of its "bourgeois" and Vietnamese opponents in 1970s Cambodia (Power). In the case of Rwanda, it was the colonial state and then postcolonial Hutu governments that alternately defined the minority Tutsi as racial elites, political leaders, civilized foreigners, wealthy upper-class landholders, and ultimately fifth-column collaborators with an invading rebel army bent on destroying all of Rwandan society.

Working from this backdrop of collective identity, the goals of this essay are two-fold. First, I will explore four ways in which the collective identities of Hutu and Tutsi have been understood in Rwanda. To echo Benedict Anderson, it is these imagined identities that have informed so much of Rwanda's poisonous history. Specifically, it is these identities around which the 1994 genocide unfolded, a genocide in which Rwanda's government, a multitude of Hutu Power militias, and over 100,000 Rwandan citizens killed over 75% of Rwanda's Tutsi population. I will further consider the ways in which official discourse in post-genocide Rwanda both publicly denies these categories and subtly reinforces them.

In the second half of the paper I will consider the potential for Christian identity to help bridge Rwanda's ethnic divide. I first examine the overarching pitfalls and potentials of Christian identity in the Rwandan context. Drawing on the work of the German Catholic theologian Johann-Baptist Metz, I will supply a theological vision for a constructive Christian identity based on the memory of suffering. Finally, I will ask what a pan-ethnic Christian vision of communion might look like as embodied in the work of four different Catholic reconciliation ministries in Rwanda.

The Ambivalent Nature of Hutu and Tutsi Identities

I recently phoned an old friend who had begun reading my book *Rwanda Before the Genocide* (2014b). "I read the first chapter," she said. "But I still don't understand the difference between Hutu and Tutsi. Can you summarize this for me in two sentences?"

“Sure,” I replied. “One, it’s complicated. Two, I’m glad you don’t think you understand this.”

Such can be the academic’s evasion when facing the inevitable depths, ambiguities, and ambivalences of any subject. But in the case of Rwanda’s much-discussed social categories of “Hutu” and “Tutsi,” my response was not simply *academese*. The history and understanding of “Hutu” and “Tutsi” are indeed complicated, and Rwandan history underscores the danger of reducing complex social realities to zero-sum dualisms. With this caveat in mind, though, one can name four broad ways in which these categories have been understood over the past century.

The first is the *racial* school. Propagated by European observers in the early twentieth century, this school emphasized the archetypal differences in height and physiognomy between Tutsi and Hutu. In this view, Tutsi were “black Caucasians” who had immigrated to Rwanda and conquered the local Hutu Bantu peoples. European theorists – including many Catholic missionaries – tended to read this supposed racial distinction through the lens of the influential “Hamitic Thesis,” a pseudo-biblical theory that attempted to trace all signs of civilization in Black Africa to an ancient race of Ethiopians and/or North African pastoralists (Sanders; Rutayisire; Speke; Czekanowski; Lugan). In the words of Louis de Lacger, an early Belgian Catholic chronicler of Rwandan history, the Tutsi had “the Caucasian type and came from Semitic roots in Asia . . . before being in this way blackened they were bronzed” (De Lacger and Nothomb: 56). Popular (if not uncontested) throughout the colonial period, the Hamitic/racial theory fell out of favor in academic circles in the 1960s even as it remained influential in radical Hutu Power discourse until the eve of the 1994 genocide itself (Longman; Umutesi).

The second school emphasized the supposed *class* differences between Hutu and Tutsi (Maquet; Codere). In this view, Tutsi represented an upper class or caste and monopolized large tracts of land necessary to graze their cattle. Rwandan society operated according to a certain “feudal” logic with Hutu farmers renting their land from Tutsi patrons in exchange for providing services. This school had a certain cache in the 1960s and 1970s, especially for those looking to apply Marxist analysis to Rwandan society (Linden and Linden). It also tended to overlook the large majorities of Tutsi best classified as “poor peasants” as well as the significant numbers of Hutu chiefs and wealthy Hutu landowners.

A third school – and I would count myself in this camp – sees these categories largely in *political* terms. Hutu and Tutsi name access to power, and it is this power differential that explains much of the social division and violence that subsumed Rwandan society in the late colonial and postcolonial eras. This power dynamic had precolonial roots; one thinks of the etymological origins of the word “Hutu” itself as not just “farmer” but also “servant,” “rural boor,” and “subordinate client” (Vansina: 134; Chrétien: 190). But the real divisions grew with German and Belgian colonial decisions to invest political power with the Tutsi, the late colonial Hutu elite movement to reverse this dynamic, and the postcolonial establishment of Hutu nationalism in Rwandan politics. In this regard, Rwanda’s cycles of supposedly popular ethnic violence originated in a zero-sum struggle for elite power, triggering a collective Hutu identity defined over and against the Tutsi scapegoat.

The fourth school has been widely adopted in post-genocide Rwanda (Amselle and M'Bokolo; Muzungu; Mamdani). In this view, the traditional Hutu-Tutsi distinction was largely one of *social occupation* – Hutus were farmers, and Tutsis were cattle keepers. In the precolonial era, Hutu-Tutsi relations were largely complementary and harmonious, and many Hutu and Tutsi intermarried and changed social status. The problems came with European colonizers and Catholic missionaries who ethnicized and racialized these formerly fluid lines, thereby hardening the divisions between the Rwandan people. For today's Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF) government, the 1994 genocide was first and foremost about identity labels; the government de-emphasizes other local and contextual factors such as fear, nationalism, greed, land envy, or the destabilizing impact of Rwanda's 1990-93 civil war (Straus). After decades of manipulating Hutu and Tutsi identities to support political violence and ultimately genocide, it is best to move beyond "Hutu" and "Tutsi," speaking instead of "Banyarwanda" national identity. For this reason, the government has banned Hutu and Tutsi labels from Rwandan identity cards and propagated an "I am Rwandan" reconciliation campaign emphasizing national identity (Clark and Kaufman).

Even in the midst of this national identity campaign, however, the government publicly commemorates the 1994 genocide as the "Tutsi Genocide." This language has shifted markedly since the mid-1990s when the emphasis lay more with the broader suffering of all of the Rwandan people. There are good reasons for this shift, particularly the desire to never forget the genocidal Hutu Power state's efforts to liquidate Rwanda's Tutsi population. On the other hand, such rhetorical shifts have also facilitated collective blame of Hutu, especially in the absence of public acknowledgement of Hutu sufferings during Rwanda's 1990-93 civil war or the post-genocide exile period in Congo. For critics, Rwanda's political reconciliation is more akin to enforced political correctness, occluding a growing environment of political authoritarianism and lingering ethnic favoritism (Straus and Waldorf; Burnet; Thomson).

In summary, then, dualistic racial and class analyses had a major historical impact on the polarization of Hutu and Tutsi identities, but most would not hold these views today. Many scholars would emphasize the political stratification that developed around these labels throughout the twentieth century. The official view in Rwanda sees Hutu and Tutsi as mutable categories of social occupation that should be consigned to the dustbin of history. However, even as official discourse "moves beyond ethnicity," it also increasingly frames the memory of genocide in ethnic terms.

Christian Identity in Rwanda: Potentialities and Pitfalls

Roman Catholic missions first arrived in Rwanda in 1900, followed shortly thereafter by Lutherans and then by Anglicans in the 1920s-30s. The Catholic Church developed a dominant role in the provision of education and social services during the first half of the twentieth century (Carney 2014b; Longman; Linden and Linden). Tutsi elites began converting in large numbers in the 1930s, and Rwanda's king dedicated the country to Christ the King in 1946. After the Hutu Social Revolution of 1959-62, Hutu conversions increased in northern Rwanda during the 1960s. By the time of the 1994 genocide, over 90% of the Rwandan population claimed some kind of Christian faith; this remains the case today. Over half of these Christians continue to identify as Roman Catholic, although Christian growth

has been driven by rising Evangelical and Pentecostal Christian communities in recent years (Pew Forum).

In a deeply Christian country like Rwanda, the potential of Christian identity to heal Rwanda's divisions should not be overlooked. There are three particular contributions. First, Rwanda's Christian denominations have not been ethnically-based or major political rivals; in this sense religious identity has not divided the people as in neighboring Uganda (Pirouet; Welbourn; Waliggo; Twaddle). In this regard, the Christian churches have potential to cross the ethno-political lines that have marked Rwandan society. Second, religious and explicitly Christian discourse plays a major role in public discourse in Africa (Gifford; Smith and Hackett). In my own fieldwork in Rwanda in 2014, Rwandan Catholic leaders repeatedly underlined the importance of "deeper religious values" for long-term reconciliation in Rwandan society.¹ In particular, many identified "Christian" with "forgiveness," seeing Christianity as the only way to overcome the natural human tendency toward vengeance. Third, authentic Christian discourse points beyond the ethnic "categorization" that has marked Rwandan political discourse, emphasizing the need to cross boundaries and even calling for the "love of enemies." Churches are also socially embedded within Rwandan villages, providing the rituals, time, and space for the dialogue necessary to slowly build long-term reconciliation.

This is not to say, however, that Christian identity exists without ambiguities in Rwanda, even beyond the inherent difficulty in defining the term "Christian." For much of Rwanda's history, the Catholic Church occupied a privileged place in Rwandan society, educating the nation's elites and benefitting from close collaboration between church and state leaders. Anglican and Protestant churches worked on the edges of society, building up an Evangelical identity counterpoised against Roman Catholicism. Since the genocide, the Rwandan Anglican Church and American Evangelical groups affiliated with figures like Rick Warren have cultivated close relations with the RPF government, reversing the traditional Catholic bias in Rwandan political culture (Rucyahana; McFadden). So the power differentials and denominational rivalries of the Christian churches can easily exacerbate rather than transcend the divisions of Rwandan society, echoing the Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole's description of Rwanda as a "mirror to the church" (Katongole and Wilson-Hartgrove).

Second, on an institutional level Christianity, and Roman Catholicism in particular, stand in need of rehabilitation in post-genocide Rwanda. Although one should not overlook the thousands of acts of Christian altruism and heroism during the genocide, the churches and their leaders are also tarnished by their active or passive complicity in the genocide. Tens of thousands died after taking refuge in Christian parishes, schools, and healthcare institutions. The *génocidaires* themselves included thousands of practicing Christians, hundreds of lay Christian catechists, teachers, and choir leaders, and, in notable cases, Catholic priests and sisters and ordained Protestant pastors. Key Catholic bishops and national Protestant

¹ In May 2014, I interviewed over 30 Christian (predominantly Roman Catholic) leaders working in post-genocide reconciliation ministries across Rwanda. I also conducted several phone interviews with Rwandan Catholic priests living in the United States. Four particular Rwandan reconciliation ministries are highlighted in the final section of this paper.

leaders were notable for their pre-genocide collaboration with government leaders and silent acquiescence to government policy during the genocide itself (Longman; Sibomana; Rittner, Roth and Whitworth). In the words of an anonymous Rwandan Catholic priest who I interviewed in May 2014, “the Church did not cause the genocide, but we didn’t help either. In that time we needed martyrs. But most – including myself – were afraid of dying. We never had the courage to speak out, so we said nothing.” So whereas the Congolese Catholic Church has earned political credibility after years of prophetic opposition to an alternatively predatory and absentee state (Prunier 2001; Oyatambwe; Kiess; Carney 2015), the Rwandan churches are still in the process of rehabilitating their own reputations.

Overall, Christian identity and Christian discourse *can* play a constructive and even exemplary role in post-genocide reconciliation in Rwanda. But the failures of Christian institutions and past Christian complicity in the genocide lend layers of ambiguity to this claim. In light of this mixed legacy, then, the key questions are two-fold. What *type of Christian identity* can contribute to the healing and reconciliation of post-genocide Rwandan society? And where do we see *signs of this identity* in Rwanda today, particularly in the Roman Catholic context?

A Reconciling Christian Identity: Remembering Suffering, Building Communion

Theologically, there are two constructive and tangible contributions that a healthy Christian identity can offer to the long-term process of post-genocide reconciliation in Rwanda. The first entails connecting Christian identity to an expanded memory of suffering, focusing on the thought of the German Catholic theologian Johann-Baptist Metz. The second draws on an ecclesiological vision of the church as communion, a metaphor that emerged throughout my interviews with Catholic reconciliation leaders in Rwanda.

Metz argues for the importance of framing Christian identity within a “memory of suffering.” Born in 1928 a year after his German contemporary Joseph Ratzinger, J. B. Metz grew up through the Nazi takeover of Germany and World War II. In turn, his theology of suffering emerged from his conviction that Auschwitz should be as important to modern Christian theology as the Enlightenment. If modernity turned theology toward the human subject, Auschwitz turned theology toward the cry of the *suffering* human subject, chastening the Enlightenment’s tendency toward a Promethean view of the human person shorn of suffering or weakness. Likewise, if the Enlightenment grounded the Christian church in history, Auschwitz grounds us in the history of the vanquished. In Metz’s words, Auschwitz forever symbolizes Christianity’s “farewell to the forgetfulness of the forgotten” (Metz 1998: 26). Finally, the crisis of authority that has afflicted modern Christianity can only be addressed through reframing authority within the “dangerous memory” of Christ’s Passion, granting authority to “those who suffer” (Metz 1980: 89, 1998: 4).

What can Metz’ theological vision offer to a Christian identity for reconciliation in Rwanda? First, there are obvious parallels between Metz’s “theology after Auschwitz” and what could be termed “theology after Nyamata” (with the massacres in Nyamata Catholic Parish symbolic of the Rwandan church’s failure to resist the genocide). In both cases, Christian theology must undergo a fundamental reorientation, taking seriously the modern experience of mass suffering and genocide (especially in deeply Christian contexts like Germany or Rwanda). Metz also writes extensively on the need to universalize the memory

of suffering. This is especially important in Rwanda given the nation's historical "top-dog/underdog" cycles of victims becoming killers (Mamdani; Tutu: 258-60) and the tendency to memorialize certain classes of victims to the exclusion of others. This is embodied by Rwandan Jesuit priest Marcel Uwineza's sense that reconciliation in Rwanda will progress when "all are remembered well," including Hutu who lost family members in the post-genocide wars in Congo (personal interview, May 2014).

Metz' vision entails a more introspective, self-critical attitude on the part of the church. Pre-Vatican II European Catholicism and colonial Rwandan Christianity both tended toward the triumphalist; the nineteenth-century "*societas perfecta*" birthed the twentieth-century Catholic kingdom in the heart of Africa (Hastings: 62). Grounding ecclesial identity not in terms of institutional power, political alliances, or numerical growth – but rather in Metz' "experience of nonidentity" of all who suffer (Metz 1998: 27) – resonates with Pope Francis' recent calls for a "Church which is poor and for the poor" (198). Finally, the suffering Christ himself offers an important touchstone in post-genocide Rwanda, in part due to the frequent timing of April genocide commemorations around Holy Week and Easter Week. In the words of Josephine Munyeli, coordinator of healing, peacebuilding and reconciliation ministries with the Christian NGO World Vision, Isaiah 53 reminds Rwandans that "Jesus is the painbearer" (personal interview, May 2014).

A second key dimension of Christian identity for reconciliation concerns the ecclesial vision of communion. This vision of communion or *koinonia* has deep resonances in Christian theology, from early Christian Eucharistic ecclesiology to the Christian vision of God as a Trinitarian community of love. Since Vatican II, the ecclesiological vision of the Catholic Church as a communion of communities has emerged in a wide variety of settings, including African Small Christian Communities (Carney 2014a).

This image of communion emerged repeatedly during 2014 interviews with Catholic reconciliation leaders in Rwanda. For example, many of those interviewed saw relationship as a central Christian contribution to national reconciliation, over and against the more juridical, adversarial approach of international tribunals and state-run *gacaca* programs (Clark; Rettig).² Such relationships were understood as the fruits of long-term, intimate, interpersonal communion facilitated through sharing life together. In the words of Philippe Ngirente, a genocide survivor and local government director of social affairs in Rusizi province, Rwanda is unique in its commitment to inter-mixing and overall refusal to separate or segregate Hutu from Tutsi (personal interview, May 2014). Given this context, many Catholic leaders saw their reconciliation work in terms of building new communion across former boundaries.

For example, lay Catholic leaders with a prison ministry group known as the Good Samaritans spoke of the explicit need for God's love to bridge identities of ethnicity, race, nationality, and class, seeing the biblical Good Samaritan as a model in this regard. In the words of Good Samaritan founder Anne-Marie Mukankuranga, "God helped me escape my bitterness and desire for revenge. This enables me to forgive them . . . Forgiveness has no

² Literally translated as "on the grass," *gacaca* was a traditional means of Rwandan restorative justice that was brought back in the early 2000s to process tens of thousands of local genocide cases.

grudge, and God's love has no boundaries" (personal interview, May 2014). One sees this vision of communion embodied in one of the Good Samaritans' affiliate groups, the Impuhwe ("Mercy") Association of Blind and Disabled Soldiers, comprised of military veterans who fought against each other during Rwanda's civil war. These soldiers now live together with their families, running farms and small businesses and advocating on behalf of other military veterans (personal interviews, May 2014).

Another example of communion emerges from the parish context. In southwestern Rwanda, Catholic leaders like Fr. Ubald Rugirangonwa and Fr. Eric Nzamwita have led a program entitled "*gacaca nkirisitu*," literally "Christian gacaca" (personal interviews, May 2014). This program brought together victims, perpetrators, and mediators for six months of catechesis and weekly dialogues on the intersection of forgiveness, Christian identity, and sacramental practice. At the end of this process, victims and perpetrators received the Sacrament of Reconciliation and then gathered with the community at Sunday Mass. Echoing ancient church penitential traditions, the priest and/or bishop performed a ritual of reincorporation including the sprinkling of baptismal water. After Mass, the entire community shared a celebratory *ubusabane* feast with the perpetrators, victims, and their families, symbolizing the community's desire to once again live together in peace and harmony. After these rituals, individual victims and perpetrators were asked to participate in the same workers' cooperatives and community associations. The tag line for *gacaca nkirisitu* – "I will never forget that you are my brother and sister" – reflects the hope that such programs will restore a lost identity of familial communion.

One could also highlight the cross-border work of Catholic Justice and Peace Commissions in western Rwanda and eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. Such trust-building activities have included youth rallies, soccer matches and episcopal meetings. In the words of Emmanuel Benimana with the Diocese of Cyangugu's Justice and Peace Commission, the goal has been to "show the unity of the church" across national borders (personal interview, May 2014). The transnational church's contribution to international communion is especially important in light of the vicious post-1996 conflicts and wars involving Rwanda, the Congolese government and an array of rival militias in Eastern DRC (Prunier 2009; Stearns; Reyntjens).

Finally, a Catholic retreat center at Ruhango in central Rwanda is known for both Eucharistic adoration and inter-personal reconciliation. These ministries emerged from the collective experience of charismatic Catholics at Ruhango who resisted the 1994 genocide, refusing to separate on ethnic grounds and ultimately protecting Tutsi refugees. With this credibility, lay Catholics and Pallotine priests undertook a reconciliation ministry in the years following the genocide. Ruhango offers Eucharistic adoration 24 hours a day, recognizing the importance of the contemplative life for the personal journey of reconciliation. Every Thursday night, dozens of facilitators guide former victims and perpetrators through an introspective process of forgiveness, spiritual healing, and dialogue. In this sense, Ruhango connects Rwandan Catholics' deep Eucharistic devotion with the restoration of broken social communion. In the words of Pallotine priest Fr. Jean-Baptiste Mvukeyehe, reconciliation entails "coming together," recognizing that "life is still possible even in the presence of those who did wrong to me" (personal interview, May 2014).

Summary

Is Christianity the only movement that can speak to issues of memory, suffering, and communion? Of course not. To cite just one example, Archbishop Desmond Tutu has eloquently described the indigenous South African value of *ubuntu*, best translated as “I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am” (Tutu: 9). These themes are not merely accidental to the Christian faith. As Metz has argued, the “dangerous memory” of Christ’s suffering passion is *the* memory that originates the Christian tradition. Likewise, the Trinitarian vision of God as a communion of loving persons is the central Christian metaphor for the doctrine of God. At times, what has been lacking in doctrinal reflection is a deeper consideration of a Christian doctrine’s social implications, especially in the area of communal reconciliation. As the above examples demonstrate, Rwanda may point the way forward in this regard.

At the same time, Rwanda’s tortuous history of collective violence in the name of collective identity will take years to navigate. In summary, Rwanda reminds us that embarking on the journey of reconciliation means adopting the identity of a pilgrim. The personal motivation is often genuine, the destination is inspiring, and deep transformation can happen on the way. But the path toward the sun is always shrouded in shadows.

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