

Can the Rwandan Catholic Church Overcome its History of Politicization? A Reply to Philippe Denis

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One must always remember that the present does not flow from the past as if it were the only possible future that could have emerged from that past (Jan Vansina 2004:199).

In the aftermath of a cataclysm as horrific as the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the widespread desire for a story of transformation and redemption is understandable (Timothy Longman 2017:314).

Abstract

Scholarly interest in Rwanda ranges across all aspects of its history. A substantial body of influential research appeared particularly during the two decades following independence in 1962. These contributions together with earlier work constitute the bedrock of later research, including the intensive focus on the mass violence in Rwanda during the first half of the 1990s and its consequences for the Great Lakes region. One of the most controversial questions to emerge from the occurrences of the 1990s has been the role of the churches, and particularly the dominant Roman Catholic Church, in the violence manifesting in its most extreme form in the genocide of 1994. This article addresses the claim by the scholar Philippe Denis in his essay 'Christian *gacaca* and official *gacaca* in post-genocide Rwanda' (Denis 2019:1-27 of 27) that the Rwandan Catholic Church has played a leading role in the difficult process of post-genocide reconciliation. Denis provides us with an authoritative account of the emergence and functioning of the Christian *gacaca* and its relation to the official, state-sponsored *gacaca*. Moreover, he presents grounds for his claim that this pastoral initiative

helped to alleviate the tension that arose between the church and the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)-dominated state in the aftermath of the genocide when the institutional church was widely condemned for its silence during the genocide and even for its complicity in the genocide. The question that I wish to pose is whether, by not broadening the focus placed by the church on the problem of ethnic animosity or ‘ethnocentrism’ as the principal causal factor that ‘led’ to the genocide, Denis does not elide a range of trigger factors that should be taken into account in any assessment of both the genocide and the church’s role in it. I aim to show that, by not taking into account these important factors and their relevance for interpreting the historically close ties between church and state, Denis tends to endorse the church’s reductionist interpretation of the history of intergroup conflict and mass violence, which it attributes almost exclusively to ethnic animosity. Consequently, when in the aftermath of the genocide, the church declared that ‘ethnism’ lay at the heart of all social and political ills, moreover refusing to acknowledge its own role in propagating a state ideology of ethnic racism, it not only risked re-inscribing a binary-logic that guided its thinking and defined its role in the Rwandan politics throughout the 20th century, but also deflected attention away from its problematic assumption of moral authority to mediate between perpetrators and victims/survivors.

Keywords: Christian *gacaca*, Rwandan Catholic Church, genocide, ethnicity, ethnocentrism, ethnism

Introduction

From April to July 1994, an estimated 80 percent of Rwanda’s minority Tutsi population, along with thousands of the moderate Hutus, were slaughtered in a genocide that reminded the world that little progress has been made during the 20th century in honoring the dignity and preserving the lives of complete innocents. The crimes committed during those horrible months included the rape and mutilation of women and the brutalization of children. In a predominantly Christian country, places of worship became places of massacre. There were even Hutu clergy who participated in the killings and then there were those who opposed the killing, often at the expense of their own life. The institutional church has been implicated, either by commission or omission,

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and this question has naturally had a profound impact upon the authority and, some would claim, teachings of the church.

Denis argues that, following the genocide, the church decided to launch an innovative initiative aimed at promoting reconciliation between the perpetrators and the survivors and their families. More particularly, he argues that, by establishing the lesser known ‘conflict resolution mechanism’ (Denis 2019:4 of 27) of the Christian *gacaca*, the Catholic church aimed to bring about reconciliation within divided communities by establishing fora for perpetrators and survivors of the genocide to address a painful past.

In the sections that follow, I first provide an overview of Denis’ article, highlighting both its contributions as well as gaps that, in my view, have led him, much as it has the church, to focus too narrowly on the important role that ethnic hatred and animosity played in the manifestations of mass violence and genocide during the first half of the 1990s. In the following section, I provide a brief analysis of the vexed question of ethnic identifications in Rwandan society, from the late pre-colonial period to the emergence of Hutu ‘ethno-nationalism’ during the late colonial period, with a particular focus on the role that missionaries and the church played in the shifting landscape of social and political relations. I argue that neither the missionaries nor the church were monolithic institutions, since both were characterized by factional differences. Nonetheless, the interests of both church and state were inextricably bound up with one another – a factor that was to play a fateful role during the post-independence period when Hutu ethno-nationalism and church politics became intertwined. In the next section, I address the question of the role of the church hierarchy during the weeks and months of the genocide and its characterization of this role in the aftermath of the genocide. My purpose in this section is twofold: First, to provide an account of the institutional church’s role in the genocide, and second, to show that, without such an accounting, Denis’ analysis of the Christian *gacaca* and the church’s post-1994 discourse in general tends to recount rather than analyze statements by members of the hierarchy, when deflection was the order of the day. One of the central pillars of the church’s response to the genocide was a mono-causal explanation of the genocide linked to ‘ethnocentrism’ – a claim that Denis does not question. In the final section of the essay, I take up this theme with a view to showing that a substantial body of research exists regarding the role that ‘ethnicity’ played in the genocide. That role is anything but self-evident; moreover it must be

placed in a broader context of important contingent or trigger factors that played a major role in Rwandan politics during the first half of the 1990s. If that is the case, the church's mono-causal explanation for the genocide may not only be misleading but also counter-productive for the process of bringing about reconciliation in a deeply fractured society. Denis does not address this question, nor can he therefore assess this dimension of church policy. I conclude by highlighting my main finding that, if ethnic hatred and animosity do not provide us with a *universal* key to unlocking the causes and triggers of the genocide, then any approach to bringing about reconciliation must take cognizance of contingent factors that help us to understand how and why ethnic animosity came to play a central role in the genocide.

Overview

Denis' account of the Christian *gacaca* is set against the immediate fallout from the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, at a time when the problem of mediating between members of communities, divided along ethnic lines and deeply traumatized by mass violence (Denis 2019:11 of 27), demanded a novel approach to conflict resolution and transitional justice. Denis argues that, following the genocide, 'part of the clergy and the faithful recognized their collective responsibility in the disaster, made plans to reconstruct the church on a new basis, and created spaces for a conversation between survivors and perpetrators or their families' (Denis 2019:3 of 27). He traces the role of the Catholic Church in the emergence of an ethnic fault line in Rwanda to the mid-1950s, a period in which 'Archbishop André Perraudin, the main figure of the Catholic Church at the time, and the majority of missionaries, had put all their weight in favor of the Hutu (ethno-nationalist) cause' (Denis 2019:3 of 27). He argues that, following independence in 1962, they 'provided full moral and logistical support to the Hutu-led governments of Grégoire Kayibanda and Juvénal Habyarimana' (Denis 2019:3 of 27), the former president of the First Republic (1962-1973), being established, following the abolition of the monarchy in 1961, and the latter president of the Second Republic, being established in 1973, following a coup led by the then army chief of staff Habyarimana. Henceforth, Perraudin and the allied missionaries 'uncritically adopted the essentialist discourse describing the Hutu as perennial victims and the Tutsi, even those who were poor, as natural

oppressors, unwittingly preparing the ground for the ideology of the genocide in 1994' (Denis 2019:3 of 27). The discourse describing the royal Tutsi rule as oppressive was one element of the thinking of some of the missionaries and part of the church leadership during this period. As we shall see, there was another important element of Hutu ethno-nationalist ideology not mentioned by Denis that was carried over from the colonial period.

Despite Denis' reference to the discourse of the Tutsi oppression of the Hutu that played an important role in church politics, as Hutu ethno-nationalism emerged in the late 1950s, he does not go on to explain in explicit terms what role this aspect of Hutu ethno-nationalist ideology played in church thinking and politics during the period of the genocide (and in succeeding years for that matter). Instead, he shifts the focus to the question of 'ethnocentrism' and how the church envisaged addressing this challenge within both church and society after the genocide. He details how certain members of the church partnered with politicians, community leaders, and academics to assess the feasibility of reconstituting the traditional *gacaca* as a forum for 'dealing with the perpetrators of the genocide' with an exclusive focus on reconciliation (Denis 2019:5 of 27) – an approach that the state eventually rejected in favor of a modernized form of *gacaca* with judicial powers (Denis 2019:9 of 27). He relates that, in July 1998, a gathering of priests and bishops proposed 'an extraordinary synod on the theme of ethnocentrism as a way of preparing for the 2000 Year Jubilee...which paved the way for the organization of the Christian *gacaca* processes throughout the country the following year' (Denis 2019:9 of 27).

Denis notes the indiscriminate use of the terms 'ethnocentrism', 'ethnic racism', and 'ethnism' in pastoral texts, but does not indicate why this may be problematic or how they relate to the term 'ethnicity', itself a minefield of historical and conceptual complexities. Rather, he indicates that the 'expression' 'ethnism', widely in use today in Rwanda, is 'the best to express the ideological nature of the essentialist discourse on Hutu and Tutsi identities that eventually led to the genocide against the Tutsi' (Denis 2019:11 of 27).

I highlight this passage for two reasons: First, it sets up a binary distinction between Hutus and Tutsis that discounts the other identity markers and factors that played a significant role in defining the distinction between Rwandans prior to the genocide and perpetrator and victim during the genocide. A second and related reason is that, by foregrounding 'ethnism' as

the factor that ‘led’ to the genocide, Denis presents, or does not interrogate, a deterministic reading of Rwanda’s history that elides the complex proximate factors that contributed towards precipitating the violence in 1994. There is a substantial and controversial literature on the role of ethnicity in the genocide and, as we shall see, many scholars conclude that a *narrow focus* on ethnicity may not only be inadequate as a lens for understanding the genocide but also complicate, or even confound attempts to bring about reconciliation in the country.

Denis thus contends that, interpreting Rwandan history through the lens of ethnicity, was integral to the politics of the missionaries and the institutional Catholic Church which, rather than challenging the ideology of Hutu ethno-nationalism, supported the leadership of the two Republics (Denis 2019:3 of 27). Moreover, he argues that the Catholic Church lent its support to president Habyarimana, following the RPA¹ invasion of Rwanda on October 1, 1990 and that the Catholic Church only ‘mildly [protested] against the massacres of Tutsi civilians perpetrated by the Rwandan national army in Kigali, in the Western districts, and in the Bugesera [district] in retaliation’ (Denis 2019:3 of 27). He does not tell his readers whether the leadership of the Catholic Church *continued* to actively support the state once the interim government was established, following president Habyarimana’s assassination in the downing of the presidential aircraft on April 6, 1994, which marked the beginning of massacres lasting until the defeat of the interim government in mid-July. Instead, he refers to the reluctance by the ‘church leadership to admit its close association with the *former regime* and its blindness to the causes of the massacres’ (Denis 2019:8 of 27; emphasis added)². Here Denis refers to the ‘causes of the massacres’ in the plural but

¹ The Rwandan Patriotic Army is the military wing of the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF; *Front Patriotique Rwandais*, FPR). Habyarimana’s inner circle and MRND (*Movement Révolutionnaire Nationale pour la Développement* later *Mouvement Républicain national pour la démocratie et de développement*) party loyalists linked the invading RPF forces with the resident Tutsi population, whom they labelled as ‘accomplices’ and ‘collaborators’, thereby setting the stage for government to portray the local Tutsis as the country’s ‘principal enemy’ (Straus 2008b:25; Carney 2014:197).

² Denis (2019:8 of 27) notes that the church leaders ‘were putting all the emphasis on the Hutu priests and lay people who...had risked their lives to protect the Tutsi’ and refers to the ‘many Hutu priests and religious sisters who saved Tutsi

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does not pursue this statement to its logical conclusion of questioning the church's interpretation of causality.

Doing so would entail considering the fact that Hutu extremists planned the genocide and mobilized state resources to carry it out (Newbury & Newbury 1999:296; Straus 2008b:40). This is important since contemporary reporting often attributed the genocide to an erroneous notion of 'ancient tribal hatred' or characterized it as 'tribal warfare' (Newbury & Newbury 1999:293; Straus 2008b:17-23; Pottier 2002:64, 66). If these scholars agree that the genocide was distinguished by its 'planning, elite responsibility, and the elite's modern instruments and elements' (Straus 2008b:40) and if the motives of the ruling elites varied, much remains to be investigated at the micro-level regarding the 'mechanisms and dynamics driving the genocide. Is the planning model accurate? How did the violence spread? What led people to kill?' (Straus 2008b:40). This, too, has implications for the methodology adopted by the church's *gacaca* since, if correct, the top-down execution of a planned genocide might suggest that, at the regional and local levels, ethnicity may not have been the sole variable of the killings.

For these reasons, I contend that a focus on the role of the church in the genocide and in the post-genocide process of reconciliation must take into account the problem of explaining popular participation in the genocide. Scholars such as Straus (2008b:4-6) and Fujii (2011) argue that, what is needed, are social-scientific investigations of the regional and local or micro-level dynamics of the genocide to supplement our understanding of the political factors operating at the macro-level. Their findings do not only provide us with important insights into how the genocide unfolded but also what these findings might mean for the process of reconciliation in the context of an authoritarian post-1994 state. Thus, although these scholars do not refer to the Christian *gacaca* and although their interest often lies in questions seemingly unrelated to the *gacaca* initiatives as a whole, their findings address issues pertinent to the methodology adopted by the church

lives' (Denis 2019:3 of 27), although 'many more remained silent. Some adhered to the anti-Tutsi hysteria and assisted the killers in an active or passive way' (Denis 2019:3 of 27). In an essay about the British religious press, Margaret Brearley somewhat wryly notes that the press was inclined to underscore what she terms "'good news" stories' (Brearley 2004:172).

with its narrow focus on ethnocentrism. This is evident from two statements quoted by Denis, one with reference to the announcement in 1998 by the Rwandan bishops in ‘the fourth Jubilee preparatory letter [of] the celebration of “an extraordinary synod on the ethnocentrism that has provoked the sclerosis of Rwandan society”’ (Ngomanzungu 2004:21, quoted in Denis 2019:11 of 27), an interpretation underscored by a synodal process on ethnocentrism at which Anastase Mutabazi, the bishop of Kabgayi, declared that ‘of all the problems faced by the Church...that of ethnism goes on for ever and is at the root of all other problems. We cannot relax and prepare the Jubilee while our society is eaten up by mistrust, suspicion, contempt, vengeance, all feelings that are dictated by ethnic differences’ (Rutayisire 2014:312, quoted in Denis 2019:13-14 of 27).

If ‘all’ of the problems faced by the church and society redound to ethnocentrism or ‘ethnism’, then indeed the future looks far bleaker than the RPF government would have us believe. Despite the fact that ethno-nationalism has a long history in both church and society and its legacy continues to affect intergroup relations, if the evidence suggests that multiple factors and identity markers were involved in the genocide, then the church, no less than the state, could be heading down a perilous path. Conversely, if dialogue regarding ethnic identifications is suppressed, as the state has done in the name of its campaign to combat ‘divisionism’ and ‘genocide ideology’ (Longman 2017:164, 235; Waldorf 2011), then divisions between ethnic groups that have been *exacerbated* by the genocide, could be further inflamed. This double bind arises out of a possible over-estimation by the church of ethnicity as a causal factor of the genocide, and an underestimation by the state of the need for open dialogue about ethnic identifications and the degree to which the genocide has polarized ethnic differences. This problem arguably cannot be effectively addressed by a government that represents the narrow interests of a thinly cloaked ruling elite. For all of its undoubted policy successes, the current government’s tilt towards authoritarianism and suppression of dissent – many scholars stressing, *inter alia*, its mass human rights violations and extra-legal measures – and its prohibition of open dialogue about the question of ethnicity, suggest that it has either misread the past or propagates a historical narrative whose cynical end is to secure its own rule – and the largesse of foreign donors (cf. eg. Longman 2017:5, 7-8, 13-14, 29-31, 105-107; Pottier 2002:62-67, 109-126, 156-166; Reyntjens

2013:158-162). Longman (2017:32) refers to the ‘Janus-faced nature of RPF rule’.

Ethnicity: Colonists, Missionaries, and the Church

Ethnicity lay at the heart of Catholic politics in Rwanda during the 20th century and it largely determined the missionaries’ shifting political allegiances with Rwanda’s royal court, colonial administrators, and the proponents of the Hutu ethno-nationalism in the late 1950s. It is not possible here to present more than a few truncated summary points regarding this question at the risk of doing extreme violence to that history. Nonetheless, it is necessary to briefly address this topic in order to formulate a response to the view of both Denis and the church that ‘ethnocentrism’ or ‘ethnism’ lies at the heart of the explanation of what ‘led’ to the genocide.

Pottier (2002:13) argues that little is known about what the terms ‘Twa’, ‘Hutu’, and ‘Tutsi’ signified prior to 1860, although numerous scholars argue that these categories began to take on an increasingly inflexible nature during the rule of the last independent king or *mwami* Kigeri Rwabugiri (1867-1897) (Pottier 2002:13, 65). He argues that several institutions introduced by Rwabugiri in areas that were brought under his control, signified the loss by local lineages of their former political autonomy. These institutions included *ubuhake* cattle clientship and various forms of land clientship. However, the central institution, the hated system of labor prestation *uburetwa*, through which subjects ‘regained access to lands they had lost to Rwabugiri’, was decisive in consolidating or ‘crystallising’ social identity markers, which gradually assumed ‘a strong ethnic character before the European colonists arrived’ (Pottier 2002:13, 110; cf. Banégas 2008:4; Kimonyo 2016:14; Vansina 2004:191-192, 199)³. While the Tutsi com-

³ Vansina argues that one might ‘understand the scission of society into the Tutsi and Hutu social categories as a case of disaggregation between a ruling class and its subjects...But to interpret this cleavage only as an effect of a general social disaggregation is disingenuous. For, one should bear in mind that this rift did not directly grow out of personal insecurity or from violence in general but from the *institutionalization* of a humiliating differentiation made between Tutsi and Hutu in the exploitation of the population both within the armies and especially within the corvée labor imposed on farmers but not on herders’ (Vansina 2004:191-192;

moners were also subject to significant exploitation by the central court and its aristocracy, they were exempt from *uburetwa*, as was a small percentage of the Hutu population permitted to enter into *ubuhake* cattle contracts (Pottier 2002:13). To venture a generalization, the appropriation of land rights and exploitative labor practices animated a social distinction subsequently racialized by European settlers. *Uburetwa* played an important role in this, since it was expanded and integrated into the system of indirect rule.

Rwabugiri's oppressive and often violent rule was nonetheless mitigated by certain institutional practices. Two officials were appointed in each of the districts under central court rule, one a Hutu land chief and the other a Tutsi cattle chief, who engaged in a relation of 'reciprocal surveillance' (Pottier 2002:14). There was also an army chief appointed by the *mwami*. On the assumption that it would benefit the Hutus, in 1926, the

emphasis added). Newbury and Newbury view ethnicity as neither an 'enduring, unchanging element to social formation nor as an instantaneous, recent invention. Instead we see it as an identity contextually configured, one which can be understood only through close familiarity with the history of social relations and political power' (Newbury & Newbury 1999:294). From this point of view, ethnicity in Rwanda was neither an 'invention' nor 'primordial' (Newbury & Newbury 1999:294). Fujii argues that one must be mindful of 'assuming that state-sponsored ethnicity represents the sum total of ethnic meaning in all of social and political life', rather than one 'among many that exist at the same time' (Fujii 2009:11-12). Ethnic identifications 'are fluid and changing social constructions and they are never exclusive of other forms of belonging' (Banégas 2008:3). For Longman, Rwandan ethnic categories reflected 'status differences, even in pre-colonial times' (Longman 2017:38). Still, the categories were relatively flexible with some mobility depending on a family's economic status and intermarriage. 'The identities emerged as centralizing monarchies sought to extend their control by implanting a Tutsi aristocracy throughout the territory as representatives of the crown. Patterns of migration within the region were complex, and each group included both recent migrants and those long in Rwanda. Hutu or Tutsi were only one of a number of significant identities for Rwandans along with lineage, region, clan, and sub-clan' (Longman 2017:38; cf. Des Forges 1986; Pottier 2002:14). Pottier and Vansina reject a romanticized image of pre-colonial Rwanda as an integrated society devoid of ethnic and other divisions, articulated during the colonial period notably by the Belgian anthropologist Jacques Maquet (2018) and Abbé Kagame (Pottier 2002:110-111; Vansina 2004:199), an interpretation revived by the present-day RPF government.

Belgian authorities abolished this ‘tripartite’ or ‘trinitarian’ system, for which they substituted a single ‘chief’ and a ‘sub-chief’, each presiding over a chiefdom and sub-chiefdom respectively. Contrary to its intention, this policy left the Hutus without political representation, while efforts to rationalize the colonial administration and streamline state power, whilst simultaneously curbing the king’s power, meant that the system became more oppressive (Pottier 2002:15; Straus 2008b:210; Vansina 2004:180-195).

The six decades of European overrule, culminating in the emergence of Hutu ethno-nationalism in 1956 and 1957 and the abolition of the monarchy in 1961, were characterized by mutable interactions between the royal court and its aristocracy, Rwandan intellectuals, European academics, missionaries, clergy, and colonial administrators. Until the mid-1950s, the authority of the Tutsi court was by and large either supported or tolerated by Europeans, although Belgium favored Tutsi rule until the eve of the Rwandan Revolution (1959-1962), even establishing a system of ‘double colonialism’ by supporting the court’s campaigns to subjugate previously autonomous areas, notably in the North-West and the Hutu kingdoms of Bukunzi and Busozo. This policy consolidated a North-South divide, introducing ‘another strong identity marker’ (Pottier 2002:15).

Thus, the royal court and aristocracy, rather than being passive subjects of colonial rule, ‘played on European prejudices to their own advantage, helping develop a narrative of Rwanda’s past adapted to European racist assumptions’ (Longman 2017:39). This narrative justified the hegemony of the Tutsi elite under colonial rule, which had significant implications since, under German and Belgian rule ‘this ideologically shaped historical narrative became a basis for public policy’ (Longman 2017:39; cf. Banégas 2008:5; Des Forges 1999:36). In his contribution, Denis refers to the adoption by the church, during the latter half of the 1950s, of a discourse consistent with the tenets of the Hutu politics of ethno-nationalism. Des Forges argues that the image of Rwandan history conveyed by this ideology drew on and distorted elements of a narrative first articulated by Europeans *and* manipulated by the royal house in a collaborative exercise that would have long-term deleterious consequences for the latter. Inspired by a Victorian anthropology, influenced by social Darwinism, the so-called ‘Hamitic hypothesis’ posited that all the civilizations in ‘black Africa’ were attributable to a ‘Caucasoid’ race with roots in North-Eastern Africa. Euro-peans portrayed the Tutsi as direct descendants of this race – an interpretation of Rwandan history that

helped to justify the royal court's claim to their natural right to rulership. Moreover, as Des Forges (1999:37) contends, this 'polished product of early Rwando-European collaboration' held sway in scholarly circles until the 1960s when a new generation of researchers challenged the inherited orthodoxy, including the exaggeration of the role of the Tutsis in the formation of the state.

Conversely, the two principal features of Hutu ethno-nationalism, of which Denis mentions the second, was the contention that several centuries ago, an allochthonous race, the Tutsi, had committed the 'original aggression' by conquering the Hutus (Des Forges 1999:81), subjecting an autochthonous Bantu tribe to oppressive rule. The Hutu ethno-nationalist reconfiguration of Rwandan history can therefore not simply be dismissed as the invention of a coterie of radicals during the 1950s, however much they too distorted that history for political ends.

Several decades later, when the RPF invaded Rwanda, the MRND government revived this fallacious narrative, which helps to explain how they were able to portray an alleged Tutsi "infiltration" of the state and society' (Des Forges 1999:81); the RPF invasion of October 1, 1990; and the assassination of Habyarimana in 1994 as a reprise of history, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of the resident Tutsi population had no involvement in the insurgency and had certainly nothing to do with Habyarimana's death (Des Forges 1999:36, 81; Longman 2017:37-38). For its part, the church 'parroted' the Habyarimana government's line that the Tutsi refugees represented 'a group thirsty for power, domination and revenge' (Gatwa 2005:217).

For a number of reasons, including a concern for the autonomy of church institutions and safeguarding church authority in the postcolonial period, and an opposition to communism and secularization in the late 1950s, many missionaries switched their allegiance to the Hutu cause. Bishop Perraudin and his allies took the lead in this fateful development. Still, as Carney (2014) argues, during this tumultuous period, the 'church' cannot be viewed as a monolithic institution. He cites many instances of clerical rivalries and policy contests, notably between Perraudin and Aloys Bigirumwami. The latter was appointed as Belgian Africa's first indigenous bishop in 1952. Carney argues that Bigirumwami's analyses of Rwanda's social and political developments were often at odds with those of Perraudin and his White Father allies (Carney 2014:4, 70, 91-100, 117, 119, 150, 154-155; cf.

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Kabanda 2008:61-68, 86; Longman 2010:74, 76; Pottier 2002:125). Nonetheless, the ascendant clerical advocates for Hutu interests and rights neither withdrew from ethnic politics nor challenged the royal history of Rwanda, that is,

the Tutsi conquest and subjugation of Hutu. Instead, they challenged the results of that history. While for an earlier generation of missionaries...the Tutsi's supposed natural superiority justified their rule, for the younger missionaries influenced by Catholic social democratic ideas, the Hutu were not an inferior race but an exploited underclass (Longman 2010:76).

Neither generation 'questioned the significance of ethnicity as a political issue', nor did they 'question the church's involvement in ethnic politics' (Longman 2010:76; cf. Des Forges 1999:36-38).

To sum up. While there is scholarly consensus that the colonists racialized ethnic categories, there is also a growing consensus that 'ethnicity', by some definition, played a role in the late pre-colonial Rwandan polity and in its relations with conquered peripheral territories. It is also accepted that ethnicity was a central pillar of early missionary perceptions of the social and political history of the kingdom. Although most missionaries switched their allegiance during the latter half of the 1950s, embracing the cause of Hutu rights under the influence of social democratic ideas, they did not break out of the straightjacket of a binary interpretation of ethnic relations, which had once benefited the ruling Tutsi elite, whose dominance was justified by a 'Rwando-European' collaboration that portrayed the Tutsis as a non-indigenous, superior race. The notion of Tutsi in-migration and conquest did not, therefore, emerge *ex nihilo* from Hutu ethnic nationalist ideology. When the Hutu nationalists, with support from missionaries, did challenge Tutsi rule in the late 1950s, this pernicious account of Rwanda's history became the touchstone of an ideology that cast the Tutsis as a foreign race, subjugating and exploiting the Hutu majority. Following the Rwandan revolution, the majoritarian democracy cemented the dominance of the Hutu. This resulted in the exclusion of the Tutsis from most positions of power and influence, leaving them defenseless during periods of oppression and mass violence. The legacy of Tutsi influence in the church was nonetheless still evident as late as the early 1990s when an estimated 70 percent of clergy, religious

brothers and sisters, were Tutsis, whereas seven out of nine bishops were Hutus (Des Forges 1999:43). This, together with progressive Hutu voices in the church, partially account for the large number of church personnel who fell victim to the genocide. Many of the Hutu bishops had direct ties to the ruling MRND party and to members of the presidential clan, both during Habyarimana's rule and following his assassination on May 6, 1994. We are turning to this topic now.

The Bishops and the 'Interim Government'

The formation of the interim government in the wake of Habyarimana's assassination was an involved affair. For one thing, the extremists could only seize the initiative by capturing the state. A faction within the military led by Col. Théoneste Bagosora maneuvered to gain the upper hand by securing the support, or at least acquiescence, of a majority of the military commanders. Bagosora's first proposal to take power himself was rejected from all quarters, but he subsequently managed to install a regime composed of extremists posing as a legitimate government, a tactic which enabled him to secure the approval of the army, the UN representative, and the international community (Des Forges 1999:6, 12; cf. Guichaoua 2015:323-324). In other words, the small group of extremists surrounding Bagosora achieved their goals by 'proxy' (Guichaoua 2015:230).

This 'ad hoc government', as Guichaoua refers to it, called for 'national unity', which aimed at mobilizing and marshalling the resources within the 'armed forces, civil service, political parties, mass media, civil society, [and] citizenry' to implement the genocide (Guichaoua 2015:230, 231)⁴. The interim government was therefore not a conventional civilian

⁴ There is no consensus regarding the date when the planning of the genocide commenced and exactly how this process unfolded. According to Guichaoua, one view is that even if massacring the Tutsis was considered as an option by the Hutu extremists, as a defensive maneuver to stave off an RPF military victory, it is unlikely that Hutu party leaders who signed on to the Arusha Peace Accords could have imagined international acquiescence in the face of genocide. Instead, at 'that time, the genocide was mostly a warning alarm rather than a strategic plan, even among those who anticipated the reprise of the war and prepared for the inevitable by mobilizing and training militias' (Guichaoua 2015:230, 231).

institution, although it proved extremely efficient in deploying the resources of a highly centralized, hierarchically structured state (Des Forges 1999:11). Still, prior to April 20, the organizers had ‘substantial’ but not yet complete control of the state (Des Forges 1999:8-9). Divisions remained within the army officers’ corps, officialdom, and party circles, with some opposition to both the planning and the execution of the genocide (Longman 2010:190). In this context, the silence of most of the bishops is particularly striking.

It is perhaps inevitable that a history of the Rwandan Catholic Church would take the 1994 genocide as one of its key referents, and the charge by many scholars and survivors that the institutional church played a direct or indirect role in the genocide, whether by commission or omission, has been widely discussed in the literature (Carney 2014; Des Forges 1999; Gatwa 2005; Kabanda 2008; Kimonyo 2016; Locke 2004; Longman 2010; Ndahiro 2004; Petrie 2004). John Roth has teased out the meaning of ‘complicity’, which he notes, implies being an ‘accomplice’ without necessarily counting as ‘the instigator, mastermind, or main perpetrator of the crime’ (Roth 2004:209). Nevertheless, an accomplice does play a direct, if subordinate role.

The question of the nature and extent of church support for ‘the authorities’ is not straightforward and there are considerable difficulties when faced with the task of disentangling the role of individual members of the hierarchy. Interpreting the role of the bishops is also complicated by the fact that allegiances shifted, there were internal tensions, while silence during the

Straus questions the current consensus, interpreting hardliner behavior ‘as evidence of a scrupulous plan to commit genocide’. He cites the constraints faced by hardliners, especially the fact that moderates occupied key government posts and that segments of the military were aligned with the moderate opposition. Moreover, the RPF had stationed a battalion in Kigali and international scrutiny had increased. This meant that the extremists’ power had ‘eroded’. This is important since ‘in that context they invested in alternative measures and institutions to keep power’. Still he does not interpret statements by extremists as ‘evidence of meticulous planning for full-blown, countrywide extermination of Tutsis but rather as evidence of contingency planning and a frame of mind that could lead to genocide’ (Straus 2008b:43), a view broadly shared by Guichaoua (2015:231-233). Longman (2010:186) contends that, by no later than the latter half of 1993, plans for the genocide had been put in place – a view shared by Des Forges (1999:4-5).

genocide was in certain instances determined by circumstance. Carney (2014:197) argues that the role of the church in the violence preceding and during the genocide was multifaceted and it is neither correct to exonerate the church from corporate responsibility nor to ‘blame the church’ for the genocide. Moreover, he cites several occasions between 1990 and 1993 where the church intervened to promote a multi-party democracy and mediate between the warring parties, the governing MRND, and the RPF (Carney 2014:197; cf. Gatwa 2005:206-210; Kabanda 2008). However, in a long-standing practice, following the RPF invasion of Rwanda in 1990, Rwanda’s bishops supported the government, citing national security as their motive (Carney 2014:197).

Gatwa argues that the role of the church hierarchy in legitimizing the Habyarimana regime was twofold: First, there was individual participation in the organs of the ruling party from the national level through the ranks to committees and councils of prefectures and communes; and second, all church institutions and offices were integrated into ruling party structures, so that these institutions were regarded as a ‘cell or base organ of the party’ (Gatwa 2005:127). There were early indications of this in the Second Republic. In 1976, Vincent Nsengiyumva replaced Perraudin as archbishop of Kigali and primate of the church. At this time, Nsengiyumva was named a member of the central committee of the MRND, a post he held until 1990 and which ranked him second to Habyarimana in the political hierarchy, ahead of cabinet members (Gatwa 2005:128-129)⁵. He was also confessor to Madame Agathe Habyarimana (Linden 2005:xvii). In the early 1990s, Nsengiyumva explicitly invoked the ethno-nationalist narrative of an invading Tutsi army, inciting suspicion that they were acting in conjunction with a ‘fifth column’ of resident Tutsi collaborators. This was to be one of the principal justifications for the genocide directed by the Hutu extremists. When episcopal statements did censure political and ethnic intolerance, ‘the bishops failed to name or condemn the Tutsi massacres unfolding across Rwanda between late 1990 and 1993’, creating a precedent for the weeks and months

⁵ Gatwa (2005:129) notes that he was also the Chairman of the *Commission of Social Affairs* of the party that was responsible for multiple governmental sectors including ‘Education, Health, Demography and Family Planning Programmes, Social Development, Employment, Sports, Religious Affairs, and Church-State Relations’.

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of the genocide; and when killings were mentioned, the ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ were portrayed as equally responsible, setting up an ethnic calculus that ignored the fact that the conflict was being waged by two parties and not two ethnic groups (Carney 2014:197).

Once the genocide began, the church did not speak with one voice, if it spoke at all, and even when Pope John Paul II declared, at the First African Synod on April 10, four days into the massacres, that an ‘unspeakable drama’ and ‘fratricidal massacre’ was taking place, Rwanda’s bishops remained silent (Brearley 2004:170). According to Des Forges, six days into the slaughter, the Catholic bishops pledged their support to the new government and asked Rwandans to ‘respond favorably to calls’ from the government to help them achieve their goals. They also requested the armed forces to provide protection for all, ‘regardless of ethnic group, party or region’. As the massacres continued, the bishops intended to publicize a statement qualifying their initial unconditional support for the government but were not permitted to broadcast the statement (Des Forges 1999:245). A vague statement on April 27 by Vincent Nsengiyumva, by which time the major massacres had already taken place, denounced ‘grave troubles’ which had cost many innocent lives. However, even at this point, he failed to establish a link between the genocide and the interim government: ‘Collectively, the bishops did not address the violence until May 13, and even here the bishops attributed responsibility to both the RPF and government, describing the massacres as “tragic events” rather than “genocide”. In the meantime, the bishops accompanied the interim government when it moved from Kigali to Gitarama’ (Carney 2014:198).

Archbishop Augustin Nshamihigo of the Episcopal Church refused to sign this letter⁶. Although it expressed ‘condolences’ to those who had lost relatives, it urged an end to the war and massacres, appealed to the United Nations, and urged Christians to refuse participation in the killings. However, it did not mention ‘the ethnic nature of the violence nor labelled the massacres genocide, and they implied that the RPF and the government were equally responsible’ (Longman 2010:191).

The ‘church’, not to speak of the broader Christian community, was not a monolithic institution and there were dissenting voices in the early

⁶ Four Catholic and five Anglican bishops and the leaders of the Presbyterian, Free Methodist, and Pentecostal churches signed the letter (Longman 2010:1919).

1990s and during the genocide. Longman notes that some of the earliest targets of the genocide included progressive voices in the church, like that of Bishop Wenceslas Kalibushi (Longman 2010:189). Des Forges cites the example of Bishop Frédéric Rubwejanga, who sought local military assistance to protect the Tutsis under attack at the St. Joseph Centre in Kibungo (Des Forges 1999:247). Still, there is little evidence that the national leadership intervened at the regional and local levels to censure clergy who were directly involved in the genocide, either as organizers, instigators, collaborators, or bystanders. Longman argues with reference to the months prior to the genocide that, for a variety of reasons, ‘at the local level if not in the national arena, many laity, church employees, and pastors and priests became involved in the creation of militia and other “self-defense” preparations that set the stage for the genocide’. Moreover, because the leaders of the Catholic Church, and not only the latter, had called for ‘national solidarity’, expressing support for the Habyarimana regime and opposition to the RPF, people at the local level interpreted Hutu nationalist agitation as consistent with church doctrines (Longman 2010:185). However, the most important dimension of church involvement was its role in the ‘ideological and political legitimization’ of government policies of violence aimed at eliminating real and imagined opponents. The institutional church’s practice of ethnic discrimination, its involvement in ethnic politics, its close alliance with the state, and its promotion of obedience to the state, had the cumulative effect of implicating church personnel from the national to the regional and local levels in the creation of ‘an environment where good, practicing Christians could kill their neighbors without feeling that they were acting inconsistently with their faith’ (Longman 2010:191).

Carney relates how, in mid-April, when the killings were in full swing, Perraudin, from the comfort of his Swiss retirement, decided to give an interview. Far from reassessing ‘his basic conceptual paradigms from the early 1960s’ (Carney 2014:199), he simultaneously condemned the violence, blamed Tutsi exiles for the ‘abuses’ that the Hutu militias visited upon Tutsi peasants, and expressed his empathy for the Hutu perpetrators whose actions he attributed to anger at the assassination of Habyarimana and fear of a return to slavery, thereby invoking one element of a well-worn Hutu ethno-nationalist historical narrative, the other being his ‘lingering pseudo-Hamitic biases’ that portrayed the Tutsis as a ‘smarter and shrewder race’ (Carney 2014:199) with European features. He even cited an analogy between Swiss

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peasants and their urban counterparts. His assessment of the violence betrayed a ‘dualistic’ understanding of Rwanda’s group identifications, which had its origins in the colonial period and was cultivated during the post-colonial period by secular and religious leaders (Carney 2014:199). The juxtaposition of population groups defined in racist terms based on long-discredited European anthropological conceptions of corporate race identity thus survived in the mind of one of Rwanda’s most influential 20th-century White Fathers who in 1955, after being appointed Vicar Apostolic of Kabgayi at the age of 41, became the most powerful churchman in the country (Carney 2014:4).

Perhaps Perraudin’s reflections were little more than an unfortunate adjunct to what was transpiring in Rwanda at the time, although his words would not have gone unnoticed in Rwanda. However, his legacy, which Carney argues cannot be reduced to these negative sentiments, is a reflection of one important strand of thinking in the church, which played a role in the alignment of members of the church leadership with Habyarimana’s government and its successor; and if that history is itself complex and not subject to simplistic attributions of complicity or guilt, these aspects of Perraudin’s thought were shared by bishops close to the Habyarimana clan and the genocidal government and influenced the thinking of some church leaders following the genocide (cf. Kabanda 2008:95-98).

Denis argues that some members of the church hierarchy, both in Rwanda and in exile, demonstrated their reluctance to admit any responsibility for their part in the genocide, even if that responsibility lay in silence before and during the genocide. Even the admission that a genocide had taken place was, on Denis’s account, not universally forthcoming and it was often halting (Denis 2019:3, 8, 10, 12 of 27; cf. Kabanda 2008). Under these circumstances it seems at least reasonable to ask whether the institutional church *at that time* could have served as an appropriate venue for promoting reconciliation between perpetrators and survivors or their families. It is no doubt a fact that, after the genocide, many church members acted with integrity and compassion in the midst of great suffering. Still, questions remain about the bishops encouraging the faithful to ‘tell the truth in all circumstances’ (Denis 2019:22 of 27), given the past track record of the institutional leadership. Moreover, if ‘forgiveness was the key’ (Denis 2019:14 of 27), is it not reasonable to ask what such process would entail? How is one to interpret a statement by Alice Karekezi that, ‘[e]mbedded in

the Christian *gacaca* is the notion that, once an individual has confessed certain sins, it is the “divine obligation” of those personally offended or the general congregation to forgive the sinner’ (Karekezi 2001:34, quoted in Denis 2019:14 of 27).

It is not a matter of doubting the capacity to forgive or the willingness of the survivors to extend such forgiveness although, as Locke (2004:34) argues, ‘too often the Church finds itself caught up in the language and processes of forgiveness and reconciliation without having taken the harder, first steps of remorse and penance’. Moreover, in the case of genocide, prescriptions must take into account the state of mind of the survivors, who for the most part had been left unmoored in a hostile environment, having lost everyone and everything dear to them. As Locke argues, ‘dispensing forgiveness is a power, according to the Christian Scriptures, that Jesus gave to his apostles’ (Locke 2004:34) – but what about the victim? ‘Victims rightly ask if anyone has the right – not to mention the power (!) – to forgive the acts of perpetrators of genocide except those against whom the acts were directed’ (Locke 2004:35). What is the meaning of ‘divine obligation’ in this context?

Furthermore, a synodal process that organized ‘assemblies during which experts and other resource individuals [who] would give input on topics such as the history of Rwanda, traumatism, healing, reconciliation, non-violence, and human rights’ (Denis 2019:14 of 27) would have needed to approach the subject matter in an ‘appropriate sociocultural’ context (Ingelaere 2016:16). For one thing, around the time that the church’s *gacaca* was conceived, Rwanda’s public institutions had ceased to teach history, instead propagating an official historical narrative (Freedman, Weinstein, Murphy & Longman 2011). The latter – a distortion of Rwanda’s history – was being imposed, extending a cycle of politicization unbroken since the arrival of Europeans in the late 19th century. Denis does not raise this question. Arguably, however, it goes to the heart of the problem. To what extent did the church align itself with this ‘new’ narrative? To the extent that it had, it would merely have been recycling an interpretation that has come under sustained criticism by specialists in the field (Guichaoua 2015; Longman 2017; Pottier 2002; Straus 2008b). Some experts were involved in designing a new history curriculum in the 2000s. It would be interesting to know, as I have been unable to source any information on this, whether any of them were involved in the Christian *gacaca*.

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Similarly problematic is the finding, as related by Denis, of a survey commissioned by the Archdiocese of Kigali in 2001. One of its findings was that ‘none of them [perpetrators] had killed at the request of the church. However, “the passivity towards the genocide showed that most Christians did not have a lived and committed faith”’ (Archidiocèse de Kigali 2001:17, quoted in Denis 2019:16 of 27). Whatever the findings of this particular survey of respondents, which may be accurate as far as it goes, research regarding the role of the clergy is not yet conclusive. Conversely, the notion which crops up in the literature time and again, that ‘passivity towards the genocide’ and indeed acts of genocide were signs of the absence of a ‘lived and committed faith’, is problematic (Longman 2010:197). Who was demonstrating a lack of a lived and committed faith? The attribution of this failing to ordinary Rwandans, even to those directly implicated in the genocide, effectively, however unintentionally, deflected responsibility from an institution, which for generations had inculcated in the faithful a blind obedience to the state, practiced ethnic discrimination, had fallen silent at times of mass violence and oppression, and in most instances, cultivated close personal ties with the governing party and its coterie of ethno-nationalist extremists. Longman (2010:197) argues:

The fact that people could desecrate church buildings and kill even at the foot of the altar or in the sacristy is not evidence of a lack of respect for Christianity or a shallowness of Christian faith. Instead it reveals the nature of Christianity in Rwanda as a politicized, conservative, discriminatory faith. While there were other visions of what Christianity should be that some people in Rwanda were actively advancing, the genocide helped to eradicate those other possibilities and to reassert churches as authoritarian institutions allied to an authoritarian state.

Had institutions such as the Catholic Church demonstrated ‘greater courage, compassion, and integrity’ (Longman 2010:197), the genocide could in all probability have been stopped, even after it had begun, if the church had unequivocally raised its voice along with other actors in Rwanda and in the wider international community. One of the characteristics of the Rwandan genocide is that silence enveloped the killings, as hate propaganda was spewing from the airwaves and tens of thousands of people, many of whom

under duress, were taking part in one of the most horrific assaults on humanity in the 20th century. These cannot be described as ‘individual sins’ compared to all other sins.

It may be that the church has set itself on a different path, beginning the process of reckoning with its own past, although commentators such as Kabanda found strong evidence to the contrary in the late 1990s (Kabanda 2008). To my mind, the question is whether the institution at that time had the moral authority to mediate between perpetrators and survivors. Moreover, the impression conveyed in Denis’ essay that exclusive emphasis was being placed on the role of ethnocentrism in the genocide, suggests that the calamity was being framed by a binary logic that was insensitive to the array of trigger factors that played an important role in the violence, reducing the actions and motives of the perpetrators to ethnic hatred and animosity; ethnicity, that is, viewed as a ‘catch-all explanation for those who wish to neglect recent political economy and social processes within Rwanda’ (Newbury & Newbury 1999:293). The evidence suggests that this approach is flawed.

Reset: Popular Participation and Reconciliation

Explanations for the Rwandan genocide commonly follow two contradictory tracks that both focus on ethnicity. Early reports about the genocide often invoked the discredited notion of ‘ancient tribal warfare’ with its racial overtones (Pottier 2002:9), which Banégas (2008:3) terms the ‘primordialist approach’. This interpretation still influences public opinion and part of academia. A second approach attributes the violence to the legacy of the colonial period which ‘created *ex nihilo* an ethnic cleavage where social concord had previously reigned in the “land of milk and honey”’, which Banégas terms the ‘instrumentalist approach’ (Banégas 2008:4). While not rejecting the instrumentalist interpretation outright – as we have seen ethnic identifications had already begun to emerge during the closing years of Rwabugiri’s rule – Banégas (2008:4) stresses the ‘intense production of ethnicity, often accompanied by the active invention of tradition’ during the colonial period, engendering the category of ‘tribe’ in an attempt to rationalize colonial administrative practices. With that in mind, Banégas (2008:6) poses a question:

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If ethnic categories don't exist in and of themselves, but are merely colonial and postcolonial artefacts, how can we explain their capacity to mobilise such intense political and social passions? If ethnicity is first and foremost instrumental, produced by 'ethnic entrepreneurs' of Hutu Power and Radio Mille Collines, how can we explain that people responded *en masse* to the call to murder? In other words, why does ethnicity 'work'? The instrumentalist argument does not allow us to go beyond the Olsonian paradox of collective action.

With these and other questions in mind, a growing number of scholars argue that we need to better understand the dynamics at the regional and local levels in order to explain how the genocide spread so rapidly, engulfing most of the country, and involving a significant proportion of the population. Nonetheless, problems already arise in this formulation. First, the genocide did not spread with equal speed and intensity across regions and locales. Resistance to calls, threats and instructions to participate was strong in places, especially in the central and southern parts of the country where Tutsis were integrated into society and many Hutus initially refused to participate in the killings, hid and protected their neighbors, and often fought off attacks with their Tutsi countrymen (Jefremovas 1995). Resistance was also strong among Hutus who had been sympathetic to the opposition. Only when 'military and civilian authorities resorted to public criticism and harassment, fines, destruction of property, injury and threat of death did these Hutu give up their open opposition to the genocide' (Des Forges 1999:11). In other areas, notably in those areas where the support for Habyarimana was overwhelming, little inducement was needed to trigger the massacres (Des Forges 1999:11; cf. Newbury & Newbury 1999; Straus 2008a:174). Straus (2008a:174) adds that Hutus did not always respond to calls to participate in the same way, as 'intra-ethnic competitions for control' were often an important trigger of the violence. It is therefore inappropriate to criminalize the entire Hutu population or to portray submission necessarily as a sign of acceptance of the genocide or support for the extremists. Breaking out of a crude schema distinguishing undifferentiated perpetrators from their victims, especially along strictly ethnic lines, is therefore a starting point for explanations about how and why the genocide came about.

In an influential book with the title, *Perpetrators, victims, bystanders: The Jewish catastrophe 1933-1945*, the founder of the Holocaust

studies, Raul Hilberg, famously distinguished between perpetrators, victims, and bystanders (Hilberg 1993). His theoretical interpretation is often, and wrongly, characterized as positing a distinction between three discrete categories. To be sure, the Nazi genocide is the classic example of a genocide in which target groups – Jews, Sinti and Roma, homosexuals, and individuals with mental disabilities, amongst others – could be defined by a single identity marker, at least in accordance with the Nazi ideology of racial superiority. Still, the Holocaust is the paradigmatic example of a genocide about which little is uncontroversial. The aptly named *Historikerstreit* – a rancorous debate amongst German historians in the 1980s – is a classic example, as is Daniel Goldhagen’s book *Hitler’s willing executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (Goldhagen 1996) of which the central thesis is that German society in the 1930s was pervaded by ‘eliminationist anti-Semitism’ – ‘with regard to the motivational cause of the Holocaust...a monocausal explanation does suffice’ (Goldhagen 1996:416) – a view rejected by a majority of historians of the Third Reich. How, Goldhagen asked, could the Holocaust have been possible if a majority of Germans were not possessed by a visceral hatred of Jews? This is one of the most vexing questions, considering the scope and systematic execution of the genocide. As many historians have shown, the chilling fact is that, in certain circumstances, ‘ordinary men’ (Browning 1992) are capable of the most heinous acts.

In the most general terms, therefore, understanding the category of perpetrators entails asking a question that was already the subject of deep scholarship in Holocaust studies: Were *all* Rwandan perpetrators necessarily driven by deep-seated ethnic hatred and animosity? Even if ethnicity did play an important role, which it did in 1994, could ethno-nationalist sentiments inexorably have ‘led’ to the genocide in the first place? There is a wide consensus that the genocide was not inevitable (cf. Guichaoua 2015; Newbury & Newbury 1999:296), at least not until the extremists gained the upper hand and the violence gained momentum (Straus 2008b:226). Even then, concerted action by the church and international actors could have prevented/stopped the massacres. As Des Forges argues,

shattering bonds between Hutu and Tutsi was not easy...In addition, to make ethnic identity the predominant issue, Habyarimana and his supporters had to erase – or at least reduce – distinctions within the

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ranks of the Hutu themselves, especially those between people of the northwest and of other regions, those between adherents of different political factions, and those between rich and poor... Through attacks, virulent propaganda, and persistent political manoeuvring, Habyarimana and his group significantly widened divisions between Hutu and Tutsi by the end of 1992 (Des Forges 1999:4; cf. Longman 2010:197; Straus 2008b:225).

All of this transpired, as Des Forges argues, shortly before a successful RPF military advance in 1993 and a peace settlement favoring the latter. These developments confronted the Habyarimana regime with an imminent loss of power, heightening the concerns of the Hutus previously not supportive of Habyarimana and the presidential clan. In neighboring Burundi, a democratically elected Hutu president was assassinated by Tutsi soldiers in October 1993. This touched off a series of massacres in that country, animating the fears of many domestic Hutus, reinforced by state propaganda – not clearly and forcefully challenged by the church – that invoked the specter of a conquering Tutsi army that had no interest in sharing power (Des Forges 1999:4-5; cf. Gatwa 2005:187-188; Straus 2008b:29-31). These are just some of the developments that were destabilizing Rwandan society, sewing confusion and chaos, a lethal combination that the extremists were only too willing to exploit in their political battles to wrestle control of the state. As Banégas (2008:7) states, ignoring contingency means ‘sliding into cheap historical determinism’.

The Rwandan case in which Hutu *genocidaires*⁷ were pitted against Tutsis may at first appear to be a classic example of a binary ethno-racial logic, especially in light of the fact that there was widespread participation in face-to-face acts of genocide. Yet this assumption presents us with numerous challenges. To begin with, as Fujii (2011:8) argues, it is a facile exercise to draw a simplistic distinction between perpetrators and victims since it is not

⁷ The number of perpetrators at sub-national level is the subject of ongoing research. Straus estimates that between 175,000 and 210,000 or seven to eight percent of the active adult Hutu population was involved, with ‘perpetrator defined as someone who participated in an attack that killed another person, even if the individual did not himself kill’ (Straus 2008a:174; cf. Longman 2017:42). This figure has been disputed.

possible to posit ‘static’ categories as explanatory tools. Doing so would mean that ‘membership in these categories is assumed to be exclusive and stable. In this scheme, a perpetrator cannot also be a rescuer; and once a perpetrator, always a perpetrator’ (Fujii 2011:8). Moreover, actors in the genocide did not belong to a single category. Rather, ‘they often moved back and forth between categories, or straddled multiple categories at the same time’ (Fujii 2011:8; cf. Des Forges 1999:11). It is not a matter of rationalizing responsibility for participating in the massacres; rather, a synchronic snapshot of perpetrators would confound our understanding of the dynamic nature of both the genocide and the actions and variable motives of the perpetrators. It would also discount the problem of addressing the fact that ethnic division and animosity – or the exacerbation of these sentiments – were in certain instances *consequences* of the genocide rather than its proximate ‘cause’ – a fact that has direct implications for the process of reconciliation. As Banégas (2008:9; emphasis added) argues, the

importance and nature of popular participation in the 1994 genocide is not only retrospective. *It determines to a large extent the future of the reconciliation process in Rwanda and the orientations of a regime whose security policy is founded on the certitude that it must govern a fundamentally criminal population.*

This caveat might have governed the approach to various initiatives aimed at reconciliation, but this was not always the case, particularly not with respect to the state-sponsored *gacaca* (Longman 2017:109-134; Webster 2011:189-193). This has potentially grave implications, not only for peace in the region, but also for the future of social relations in Rwanda and the attainment of a political settlement most attuned to the need to break out of the straightjacket of cyclical conflicts that *produce* and *reinforce* divisions, including those between ethnic groups (Straus 2008a, 2008b). These arguments should give us pause, especially for those who seek to address the problem of the deeply fractured and traumatized state in which Rwandan society now finds itself.

If these arguments are correct, then ethnicity could be a somewhat blunt, or at least inadequate tool with which to understand the triggers and dynamics of the genocide. Therefore, if the Tutsis were overwhelmingly the victims of the genocide and if many of the extremists and perpetrators ‘on the ground’ did harbor a genuine hatred for Tutsis, a number of scholars have

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shown that their motives were often multiple, shifting, and varied. So too were the incentives. Authorities provided food, small financial rewards, and promises of pillaged farm animals, property, and above all, land. Local elites stood to benefit from the theft of consumer goods and appropriation of small businesses (Des Forges 1999:11; Pottier 2002:64). In a poor, land-hungry country, these incentives had a powerful draw. Amongst the ruling elites, motives also varied, including a visceral hatred for the Tutsis. Yet the genocide was also viewed by some as an opportunity to preserve or reassert their political power.

Banégas argues that there were important ‘fluctuations’ in the manifestation of the violence, which do not allow for a totalizing or generalizing interpretation of the role of ethnicity in the bloodshed. He rather suggests that a consideration of ‘local chronologies’ may better enable us to ‘relativise the importance of the ethnic factor in the triggering of the massacres, and to sharpen the explanatory variables of hatred’ (Banégas 2008:8). He also finds that the killings did not unfold everywhere in the same way or at the same time. In Rwanda, there were local and regional variations that most scholars have noted. In a passage worth quoting at length, Banégas (2008:8-9) contends that these differences

enable us to emphasise the weight of other variables in triggering violence, in particular historical proximity to the Kigali regime or, conversely, certain traditions of dissidence. We also know that the North-South cleavage was as important as the ethnic factor in the historical structuring of violence. In the same vein, we should pay closer attention to sociological variables which enable us to refine the rough model of ‘ethnic conflict’ (why, for example, was it in some areas the administrative elites which were the first affected, whereas in others, it was the economic elites?).

Of course, as Banégas states, one could argue that all of this is ‘idle intellectual speculation’ in the face of so much violence. Yet if it can be argued that ethnic hatred does not provide us with a general or comprehensive explanation for what ‘led’ to this genocide, we are left with the question of how to explain popular participation in the genocide.

Where does this leave the question of ethnicity? Straus argues that, if we do not take into account the role of war, state power, and group pressure

to participate, we cannot understand what happened in Rwanda; that it was under given social, economic, political, and historical circumstances that Tutsis could be portrayed by the extremists as ‘alike’, as the enemy, as a ‘fifth column’, as collaborators, as traitors, as *inyenzi*, etc. (Straus 2008b:226; cf. Straus 2008a, 2015:54-56; Newbury & Newbury 1999). The policy to totally exterminate the Tutsis emerged haltingly at a time of emergency and instability, even if planning for the genocide is attributable to extremists who identified the target in ethnic terms. Yet others were also targeted, including Hutu moderates, government opponents, and moderate clergymen who opposed the government and plans for the genocide and its execution. How do we explain the majority of ordinary Hutus who only participated under duress, for the most part not in the actual killings? (Longman 2017:42).

In addition to war and a general state of insecurity, other factors such as Rwanda’s long descent into economic chaos during the late 1980s and growing population pressure played a role (Pottier 2002:10; Straus 2008a:178). With the points already noted, the cascading crises meant that threatened elites, some of whom were driven by political opportunism rather than extremist ideological views, were able to reframe their existential crisis ‘from class struggle to ethnic struggle’ (Pottier 2002:10; cf. Newbury & Newbury 1999). On this view, the bloodbath ‘was a distinctly modern tragedy, a degenerated class conflict minutely prepared and callously executed’ (Pottier 2002:9). It is perhaps a question of whether, rather than politicizing ethnicity, the engineers of this calamity ethnicized political conflict – which are not quite the same things. Perhaps it was both.

Therefore, as Fujii (2011:11, 12) argues, one needs to keep in mind ‘the dynamism of actors and their actions during violence...how contexts, identities, and motives shift or transform through the unfolding of violence across time’ and the ways in which ‘people cope during a crisis, when existing orders have been upended or are threatened’ – circumstances common to wars when ruling elites may come to view generalized violence as a last resort. Under these circumstances, instigators of genocidal policies can elect to inflame cleavages in society that mostly correspond to real and/or perceived threats, with government calls to ‘national unity’ serving the twofold purpose of mobilizing the Hutus and branding the Tutsi minority and Hutu opponents of the regime as a threat to national security and the freedom of the Hutu majority. Conversely, local actors and those who direct them are not devoid of agency. If the creators of, what Fujii calls a ‘script’, are usually

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threatened national elites who seize on genocide as the most effective way of preserving their power, those at the local level have myriads of interpretations of the ‘script’. Some support the project, while others may find it easier to go along, and others for yet different reasons (Fujii 2011:12, 13; cf. Straus 2008a:175).

Longman argues that the actions or inactions of church personnel were similarly subject to variable motives and dynamics. The motives of some within the leadership included sympathy for some radical Hutu extremists, proximity to the government, the threat posed by the RPF invasion, threats to their own authority, and the inclination to follow ‘wherever the political winds blew, in the tradition of Lavigerie’ (Longman 2010:184-185). At the regional and local levels, the motives of church personnel were similarly variable.

Findings by some scholars overlap with those of Fujii. Straus argues that, at the micro level, several factors came into play, notably self-protection in a time of domestic violence and war and fear of a return to Tutsi domination (Straus 2015:275; cf. Gatwa 2005:153; Des Forges 1999:76-78). With the assassination of president Habyarimana, responsibility for which was never established, perceptions and fears surrounding the advance of rebel forces, intra-ethnic pressure, enforced compliance under threat of violence or death, and the role of local elites in communicating orders from above enforced by the army, militia, and young thugs, helped to trigger and drive the killings (Des Forges 1999:6, 9; Straus 2008a:176-177; Straus 2008b:227; Straus 2015:273-275). Community leaders and in certain instances clergy ‘assured Hutu that they were justified in attacking Tutsi as a measure of “self-defense”’ (Des Forges 1999:10). Again, this does not rationalize the genocide, as Straus (2008b:228) argues, but it is an attempt to understand the ‘dynamics that led ordinary civilians to become perpetrators’. Moreover, situations matter. He cites the famous findings by social psychologists Milgram and Zimbardo in two experiments that demonstrated that men are prone to comply with instructions, given the ‘right’ circumstances, that they can change and ‘transgress normal codes of behaviour and commit violence’, that they ‘tend not to be rabid ideologues, sadists, or abnormal men’ (Straus 2008b:228), even when transgression involves perpetrating genocide. This finding is supported by research about the Nazi genocide (Arendt 1965; Browning 1992, 2004; Petrie 2004). Hatred of another ethnicity or religion is not a prerequisite for harming the other: ‘The argument runs contrary to the

common wisdom that individuals commit ethnic violence because they have deep-seated animosity toward ethnic others' (Straus 2008b:229).

Straus (2008b:175) contends that, in the Rwandan countryside, intergroup relations before the genocide were generally benign as, during times of peace, people were living in communities that were successfully integrated. In his research he found that people were generally aware of their ethnic belonging and of the history of ethnic violence, although this awareness 'did not precipitate violence':

The awareness of ethnic difference became salient and the basis for violence only in particular circumstances – in a context of uncertainty fuelled by war and assassination and of state orders to attack Tutsis... Most men chose to participate in the killing after face-to-face mobilization and in a real situation of war and crisis (Straus 2008b:230-231).

If these findings are valid, then they have clear implications for the process of reconciliation, including the methodology adopted by the church's *gacaca*, which created fora for dialogue between perpetrators and survivors or their families. If social relations between Tutsis and Hutus prior to the genocide were not characterized by generalized animosity, and if, as Catherine Newbury and David Newbury argue (Newbury & Newbury 1999:295), Rwandan society was much more complex than a binary logic would suggest, with longstanding practices of social integration in all spheres and at all levels that cut across class distinctions, binding families and individuals, then accounting for the role of 'ethnocentrism' in the genocide means broadening the scope of variables rather than adopting a narrow 'instrumentalist' argument that attributes the genocide to a historically determined ethnic conflict.

To be sure, as Denis argues, the church gradually acknowledged that it had to reform its practices and teachings, given its historical role in discriminating against the minority Tutsis and its part in the genocide, from the silence of bishops to the acquiescence or active participation by some church personnel at regional and local levels. However, to view ethnic animosity *a priori* as the cause of the genocide, blinds the process of reconciliation to additional factors, notably the fact that the genocide was directed by a coterie of extremists that had to seize control of the state under

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conditions of war and instability as a prerequisite for directing and executing the extermination. If there was a need to address the very real animosity within a portion of the population prior to and following the genocide, doing so presupposed placing this period in a proper historical context. Addressing the genocide through the lens of ethnocentrism could be regarded as appropriate, given the mass violence perpetrated by Hutus against their Tutsi countrymen. However, this too would occlude the fact that the earliest victims of the massacres were Hutu moderates and opponents as well as Tutsi elites, known to be sympathetic to the cause of moderation and dialogue. The seizure of power by the extremists was the outcome of a political process, one that included exploiting an ethnic identity marker as an instrument of a state policy aimed at preserving the political power of an extremist Hutu elite. Moreover, inflaming nationalist ethnic sentiments and driving a wedge between Rwanda's ethnic groups were preconditions for executing the genocide. The opportunity for doing so presented itself in the early 1990s under conditions of civil war and generalized fear, fueled by extremists, that a RPF victory, with the aid of resident Tutsi 'traitors', meant a 'return' to subjugation by a 'foreign' (refugee) Tutsi minority. This does not mean that ethnic hatred and animosity were not important factors in this genocide, but it does mean that the causes and triggers of genocide and the violence that preceded it are irreducible to these sentiments.

Conclusion

If ethnic hatred and animosity were important factors in the 1994 genocide but do not provide us with a *universal* key to unlock the causes and triggers of the genocide, then any approach to bring about reconciliation between the perpetrators and survivors must dispense with the notion that the ills of that society can be effectively addressed solely by revisiting the question of 'ethnocentrism', whether in the church or in the wider society. Although ethnic polarization did play a crucial role in the genocide, what needs explanation is how and why ethnicity came to play such a prominent role. I have argued that there is a body of research that has identified a complex array of contingent circumstances, factors, and triggers that need to be taken into account if we are to understand how ethnic identifications could be mobilized into a political conflict and the ensuing genocide, moreover that

there was nothing inevitable about this development. Focusing on the horror of the mass killings does not help us to answer important questions, including what triggered and drove the genocide and why so many people took part in the massacres. If this was a modern, state-sponsored genocide directed by an extremist elite engaged in intra-ethnic struggles for power, in part responding to a civil war that threatened to upend the prevailing order, the history of ethnocentrism in the church, state, and society can only provide us with a partial explanation for how the genocide came about and why it took the form that it did. If that is the case, then it can also only go so far in guiding initiatives aimed at transitional justice. In fact, if the research findings that I have highlighted, are accurate, the absence of widespread ethnic hostility amongst ordinary Rwandans during periods of peace bodes well for reconciliation, even after a calamity such as genocide. What then are the implications of the church's focus on ethnocentrism for the society?

We have already seen how Denis characterizes the more negative attitudes and responses of members of the church's hierarchy in the wake of the genocide, their reluctance, and the hesitancy of the institution to take responsibility for their part in the genocide, or even to acknowledge that a genocide has taken place. This is troubling in itself, given evidence that this was the attitude of much of the church's leadership during the genocide, when its silence and periodic obfuscations contributed towards the interim government's capacity to execute the genocide. Yet there was an additional problematic tendency within the church, which manifested itself, for example, during the celebration of the 2000 Jubilee when 'the Catholic bishops made a first step towards a full confession' (Denis 2019:19 of 27). Rather than offering prayers for the victims, the 'bishops asked forgiveness for "those who prepared and executed the genocide and the massacres, who deliberately shed the blood of others, who killed by vengeance, who blindly followed orders and who could not discern what was contrary to the Gospel"' (*Kinyamateka*, 1546, February 2000:7, quoted in Denis 2019:19 of 27).

The diagnosis seems to be problematic in as far as it evokes a lack of discernment of the Gospels as an explanation for popular participation in the genocide when it was the same institution, still addressing a prayer to God – 'not the victims, explicitly at least' (Denis:2019:19 of 27) – that failed to condemn the organizers of the genocide or speak on behalf of the victims as the genocide was unfolding. It did not even follow the example of Pope John Paul II who, four days into the slaughter, at least flagged them as 'fratricidal

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massacres'. Gatwa affirms Elà's observation that 'the Church should make the Gospel heard out of respect for human beings' (Elà 1985:8, quoted in Gatwa 2005:225). Instead, the bishops, at least in the early years following the genocide, did not acknowledge the 'need for confession and repentance in the name of the Catholic Church as an institution' (Gatwa 2005:229; cf. Kabanda 2008). The precedent for this had been established following earlier genocides, notably by the Vatican following the Holocaust, however different the historical contexts were.

In his account of the mass violence preceding the genocide, Longman notes that the bishops, in their letter for Lent in 1993, acknowledged all manner of things, but it 'completely fails to address the institutional nature of the violence...Instead it approaches the problems as manifestations of personal sin, of which all people seem to be equally guilty' (Longman 2010:173). However, would not addressing the role of the institution be a prerequisite for involvement in the difficult process of reconciling a deeply traumatized society? Denis does not adequately account for this. By prevaricating even after the genocide, its moral authority was in question – this too Denis does not interrogate. Even by foregrounding ethnocentrism or the ideology of ethnic nationalism, did the church not yet again prevaricate, deflecting attention away from its role in stoking ethnic division and animosity? As I have argued, Denis follows the church's lead in this regard. The risk of pathologizing a social identity marker when all the evidence suggests that the majority of Tutsis were killed in the early massacres conducted by 'relatively small groups of militia members, soldiers, and police' (Longman 2017:129) was real. Added to this, despite the fact that most of the complicit adult male population was coerced into participating in 'patrols and manning barricades' (Longman 2017:129), Longman (2017:130) describes government claims that several million were involved in the killing, as 'ludicrous'. Conversely, by denying any 'historical validity of ethnicity', the RPF government leaves 'no room for any kind of ethnic identification' (Freedman *et al.* 2011:301; cf. Eltringham 2011). Ethnicity matters, but how and why? Reaching back into the past is part of that reckoning, but that is no substitute for the church reckoning with its own role in 1994, for its complete failure to 'discern what was contrary to the Gospel' (*Kinyamateka*, 1546, February 2000:7, quoted in Denis 2019:19 of 27). Furthermore, the universalization of Hutu guilt by the state had several motives, notably to justify the concentration of political power in the hands of a predominantly returnee

Tutsi elite, often to the exclusion of the survivors and to distract attention from the war crimes it had committed between 1990 and 1994 (Des Forges 1999:734; Longman 2017:128-130; Peskin 2011). Although the latter was *not* part of a genocide against the Hutus – the double genocide thesis has been widely rejected by scholars – the government was eager to quash any open discussion about these crimes. The RPF wished to cultivate its image as an inclusive, multi-ethnic national government. It did so by silencing opponents and imputing guilt to the Hutu majority – with exceptions. In short, the government politicized the genocide. Taken together with its exercise in ‘re-imagining’ (Pottier 2002) Rwanda’s history, the opportunity to re-integrate Rwandan society was frustrated. Longman cautions that the ‘process by which societies collectively develop and accept myths about the past that become their national history is not benign...The construction of historical narrative...has a coercive nature’ (Longman 2017:35). Whatever their intentions and however much they may differ in nuance, both the state and the church are embarked on such an exercise. In the case of the church the door appears to remain open. In the case of the state, the outcome is predetermined. Let us hope that renewed violence is not.

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