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# The Dual Role of Religion Regarding the Rwandan 1994 Genocide: Both Instigator and Healer

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## ***Abstract***

In 1994, Rwanda experienced a genocide in which an estimated 800,000 people were killed during a little more than 100 days. Basically, Hutu hardliners killed Tutsis but also Hutus who were Tutsi sympathizers. This study explores the complex role of religion regarding the 1994 Rwandan genocide and its aftermath. On one hand, there is evidence to suggest that religion played a crucial role in helping to create the conditions which made the genocide possible in the first place. This argument is presented through an analysis of existing literature and documents on the matter. The churches of the former colonial times, both Catholic and Protestant, favored the Tutsis and discriminated against the Hutus, thereby laying the ground for the future catastrophe. On the other hand, seemingly paradoxically, religion has also played a central role in the trauma healing process among the genocide survivors. This second argument is presented through interviews with 291 respondents (141 men and 150 women) belonging to the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium. Even though more people died while seeking shelter inside churches than anywhere else during the 1994 genocide, this study found that religion was the most important coping mechanism used by these survivors.

**Keywords:** Religion, Rwanda, church, genocide.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1994, Rwanda experienced a genocide in which an estimated 800,000 people were killed during a little more than 100 days. Basically, Hutu hardliners killed Tutsis and Tutsi sympathizers among the Hutus. Although the genocide was triggered by the shooting down of President Juvenal Habyarimana's plane on April 6, the tragedy was obviously preceded by a long history of oppression and conflict between the two ethnic groups. The present study examines the complex role religion has played in this catastrophe: first as an instigator and enhancer of the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis, and later as a coping mechanism and healer of the pain and suffering induced by the genocide.

Throughout history, religion has been important for the Rwandans. Until the eve of colonialism, Rwandans believed in *Imana* (God), a supreme being; they also called him *Rurema* (the Maker), or *Nyagasani* (the one who has luck). There was also a strong belief that spirits of the dead (like *Ryangombe* and *Nyabingi*) mediated between Rwandans and the *Imana*. At the same time, they feared that the spirits of the dead could come back to haunt the living. They could also consult the spirits of the dead to solve their problems. In cases of brain disorder or madness, some Rwandans still believe that they may be caused by malevolent forces, disobedience of a dead person in the family, witches, poisons, sorcerers, or demons. When these forces were considered malicious, they could worship them, sacrifice to them, or recourse to divination. The Christian church disapproved of such pagan practices and actively encouraged the Rwandans to embrace a new and "civilized" Christian culture (Sebasoni, 2000, pp. 40–43; De Lame, 2005, pp. 109–110).

However, traditional beliefs still endure to some extent (Bangwanubusa, 2009, p. 19; De Lame, 2005, p. 110). According to a census carried out in 1978, out of 7.8 million Rwandans, more than 90 percent were baptized Christians; 65% identified themselves as Roman Catholics, 22% as Protestants, and 5% as Adventists. There were a small number of Muslims and Animists (Tutu, 1994, p. 65; Patte, 2010, p. 1116; Bangamwabo *et al.*, 1991, pp.164–168). However, other accounts provide slightly different figures. Based on the World Christian Encyclopedia, in 2001, 83% of the Rwandan population belonged to Christian religious groups, 9% were African Religionists, and 8% were Muslims (Patte, 2010, p. 1117). In the 2005 census carried out by the Republic of

Rwanda, 93% of the population belonged to Christian religious groups, with the Catholic Church attracting almost half (49.5 percent) of the population (Republic of Rwanda, 2005, p. 39). Even though more people died while seeking shelter inside churches than anywhere else during the 1994 genocide, religion remains an important part in the life of many Rwandans.

## THE ARRIVAL OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN RWANDA AND ITS TEACHING POLICY

Rwanda was first evangelized by the Society of Missionaries of Africa, founded in 1868. The society, commonly known as the White Fathers, was led by Bishop Jean-Joseph Hirth. The White Fathers arrived in 1900 from Uganda, where there had been intense religious persecutions. Impressed by the strong monarchy and the large population of Rwanda, the White Fathers met with King Musinga, who authorized their presence in Save-Butare (Patte, 2010, p. 1116; Rutayisire, 1987, pp. 17–19). The White Fathers formulated a plan to occupy the territory before the arrival of the Protestants and the Muslims. Their work was facilitated by the German colonial authorities, particularly resident Richard Kandt, who saw a factor in the expansion of Christianity for promoting pacification, as well as a barrier against Islamic influence (Gatwa, 2005, p. 60).

To an increasing extent, the responsibility for the conversion process came into the hands of the Catholic mission's administrators (Monseigneurs Hirth, Classe, and Gorju). The missionaries were responsible for converting and training what they called "elites", i.e. the Tutsi aristocracy. As elsewhere in Africa, the Catholic missionaries adapted their own principles and biblical interpretations to convert the Rwandan population. Monseigneur Lavigerie, the founder of the missionary, promoted the idea that to implant Christianity successfully in a society, missionaries should focus their efforts on converting the political leaders first. Lavigerie's argument was that if chiefs and kings could be converted to Christianity, their servants would naturally follow. However, this principle has had far-reaching consequences both for the Catholic Church in Rwanda and for Rwandan society in general. To the missionaries, the Tutsis seemed tall and elegant, with refined features and light skin, in some ways closer in appearance to Europeans than to their short, stocky, dark compatriots (Hutus). The missionaries argued that the Tutsis were probably a pastoralist Hamitic group from Somalia or

from Ethiopia who had conquered the inferior local populations and brought civilization. They hypothesized that the Tutsis were not really African, but a Hamitic or perhaps even Semitic group from the Middle East, perhaps even a lost tribe of Israel (Longman, 2010, pp. 42–44; Bartov & Mack, 2001, pp.140–146; Malkki, 1995, p. 29).

The missionaries' interpretations of Rwandan social and political structures were influenced by the Hamitic hypothesis, and they saw a superior race in the Tutsis, whose relationship with the Hutu masses was one of the conquerors ruling over the conquered. Because missionaries regarded Hutus and Tutsis as distinct races, one Hamitic and the other Negroid, the missionaries failed to recognize the regional variations in the application of the terms, the flexibility in the categories, and the serious divisions within each category. The missionaries assumed that all chiefs were Tutsi, and their servants were Hutu. They ignored the presence of Hutu kingdoms and the presence of Hutu chiefs even in the Rwandan kingdom proper, as well as the numbers of Tutsis who were not chiefs, such as the poor nomadic Tutsis in northern Rwanda (Bartov & Mack, 2001, pp.140–142; Longman, 2010, p. 44). Their teachings insisted on identifying distinct categories of the population in racial terms. All Tutsis were seen as natural-born chiefs, while all Hutus, including their chiefs, were viewed as slaves who were destined to be dominated (Uvin, 1998, pp. 16–18; Bartov & Mack, 2001, p. 164; Prunier, 1995, pp. 25–26).

However, church-state relationships were not always good. King Yuhi V Musinga (who reigned from 1896 to 1931), for example, disliked the power of missionaries and frequently opposed the church. Nevertheless, the missionaries still sought his approval. At the same time, they cultivated supporters within the royal court, using their influence to spread the Catholic teachings in the struggle for power within the court, and they maintained good relations with the colonial rulers. When they had developed a sufficient backing within the court, the missionaries actively interceded with the Belgian administration to remove Musinga from power and to replace him with his pro-Catholic son Mutara III Rudahigwa. From that time, the missionaries maintained excellent relations with king Rudahigwa, who ruled until his death in 1959. Under his reign, the church increased their church membership (Bartov & Mack, 2001, pp. 141–142; Prunier, 1995, 35–36; Kamukama, 1997, pp. 26–27). During the colonial period, the Catholic Church worked hand in hand with the German and Belgian authorities, and after independence, there has been a remarkably high degree of political interlinking between the church and the state (Tutu, 1994, p. 3; Destexhe,

1995, p. 41; De Lame, 2005, p. 54). To justify the maintaining of Tutsi domination, missionaries and colonizers advanced an ideology that displayed their unique qualities of ruling strategies. They supported the exclusion of Hutus from opportunities and power. According to the missionaries, evangelism was to be directed above all at the Tutsis only (Longman, 2010, p. 45; Malkki, 1995, pp. 27–29).

In 1917, the Catholic Church began to recruit native Rwandan clergy; missionaries exclusively selected from the Tutsi population to become priests, nuns and brothers that played an important role in interpreting Rwandan history and culture. Two well-known intellectuals were Historian Alexis Kagame and Bishop Aloys Bigirimwami, whose anthropological and historical texts, based mostly on oral tradition, strengthened many of the concepts of strict ethnic separation and Tutsi political dominance. According to father Kagame, Tutsis were Hamites who were born to rule other tribes in Rwanda (Gatwa, 2005, pp. 71–74; Bartov & Mack, 2001, p. 146). His scholarship created a history of Rwanda that fit European assumptions and advanced Tutsi interests.

As a consequence, this interpretation of history became widely accepted by Rwandans of all ethnicities, and following the transfer of power from Tutsi to Hutu after the 1959 revolution, Hutu leaders used the historical account of centuries of ethnically based exploitation to inspire support among the Hutu masses (Bartov & Mack, 2001, pp.145–146; Kamukama, 1997, pp. 20–24; Prunier, 1995, pp. 50–54; Tutu, 1994, pp. 3–4). In the colonial period, the opportunities of most Hutus were further limited by the discrimination introduced in the Catholic schools, which represented the dominant educational system throughout the colonial period. The Tutsis who had resisted conversion became increasingly enrolled in the Catholic mission schools.

To accommodate and further encourage this process, the church adjusted its educational policies and openly favored Tutsis and discriminated against Hutus. With some exception, Hutus only received the education required for working in mines and industry. The education they received was considered inferior, since they were taught in a different system, and the language of instruction was Swahili (Sellström *et al.*, 1996, pp.26–27; Uvin, 1998, pp.16–17; Tutu, 1994, pp.3–4; Longman, 2010, p. 48). Hutu women were not allowed to have an education at all. By the early 1930s, government schools were phased out and the missionaries assumed full control of the education system.

The system they created had two tiers. The tendency was to restrict admission mainly to Tutsis, especially to the upper schools. But where both Tutsi and Hutu children were admitted, there was a clear differentiation

in the education meted out to each. The Tutsis were given a superior education and taught in French in separate schools. Their education was to prepare them for administrative positions in government, even at the lowest grades (Tutu, 1994, pp.3-4; Longman, 2010, p. 48; Mamdani, 2001, pp. 89-90).

## **PROTESTANT CHURCHES AND THEIR TEACHING STRATEGY**

Like their Roman Catholics colleagues, Protestant missionaries in Rwanda held similar beliefs that the Tutsis were 'natural-born chiefs' who were an intellectually and morally superior race to the Hutus and the Twas. Therefore, Tutsis had to be given priority in education and employment so that the church could increase its control over the future elite of the country (Gatwa, 2005, pp. 146-147; Prunier, 1998, p. 33). Protestant missionaries (of the Germany Bethel missions) arrived from Tanzania in 1907 and established a series of stations before being replaced by missionaries from the Society of Belgian Mission, which came from Congo in 1916. Anglicans and Seventh-day Adventists from Uganda, Danish Baptists from Burundi, and Methodists and Swedish Pentecostals from Congo successively arrived between the 1920s and 1940s (Patte, 2010, p. 1116; Gatwa, 2005, pp.76-82).

However, Protestant Evangelism was seriously disrupted by the First World War, and new large-scale Protestant missionary efforts did not begin again until the 1930s. In addition, the Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal, and Adventist missionaries sought the favor of the state, both in its European and Rwandan embodiments. They also taught obedience to authority as an important Christian value (Bartov & Mack, 2001, pp. 142-143). Nevertheless, whereas the Catholics established close ties with the state, the Protestant missions attracted socially marginalized individuals (Hutus) who saw these missions as an alternative to changing their ethnic status. Regardless of their position to the outsiders, the Protestants did not base their appeal on the rhetoric of agitation. Rather, Protestant leaders envied the Catholics privileged position and sought as much as possible to follow their lead in seeking support and cooperation from the state (Gatwa, 2005, pp. 77-79).

## **THE HUTU MAJORITY COMES TO POWER**

The few Hutus who received a formal education discovered an avenue for enlightenment and advancement. Education gave rise to an elite middle

class among the oppressed (Kamukama, 1997, p. 25; Bangamwabo *et al.*, 1991, pp. 139-144). The strategy of segregation imposed by both Belgian administrators and clergy caused a lot of conflict which also led to civil wars. Between 1952 and 1959, when the Belgian political reforms threatened the intermediary position of the Tutsi oligarchy in the colonial state and provided some limited autonomous political space to the Hutus, (which challenged the privileged position of the Tutsis), political violence between the Tutsis and the Hutus escalated (Lemarchand, 1970, pp. 145-154; Sellström & Wohlgemuth, 1995, p. 11). On 24 March 1957, Gregoire Kayibanda (Hutu), who had been secretary to the Roman Catholic Archbishop André Perraudin and editor of a Catholic newspaper "*Kinyamateka*", created the Hutu Social Movement (PARMEHUTU-Partie du Mouvement de l'Emancipation Hutu). This movement demanded the abolition of class privileges, access to all jobs, schooling for all classes and freedom of expression (Bangamwabo *et al.*, 1991, pp. 151-152; Kamukama, 1997, pp. 28-29; Tutu, 1994, pp.4-5; Sellström & Wohlgemuth, 1995, p. 12).

In the 1950s, the Roman Catholic Church and the Belgian administration abruptly switched their allegiance from the Tutsi minority to the Hutu majority, and tried to push through reforms (Dorsey, 1994, p. 9; Kinloch & Mohan, 2005, pp. 174-175). The ethnic division upheld by the colonizers and the church produced much bitterness and led to a Hutu revolution in 1959 (Lemarchand, 1970, p. 145; Tutu, 1994, p. 4; Kamukama, 1997, pp.28-31; Sellström & Wohlgemuth, 1995, p. 11; Bangamwabo *et al.*, 1991, pp. 165-168; Adelman & Suhrke, 1999, p. 5). The revolutionary Hutu ideology pictured the Hutu peasantry as a subordinated and exploited class that had to rise against its Tutsi masters (and, indeed, against all Tutsis in general) to attain liberation (Cook, 2006, p. 3).

By 1961, the Catholic Church was overtly connected with the dominantly Hutu republic. Protestants were less contaminated with ethnicity; nevertheless, some denominations were quietly known as Hutu- or Tutsi-dominated (Tutu, 1994, p. 4; Bartov & Mack, 2001, pp. 148-149; Longman, 2010, p. 42; Kinloch & Mohan, 2005, p. 175). Between 1960 and 1962, violence erupted and spread: 10,000 Tutsis were killed, and another 120,000 fled to neighboring countries as refugees (Kinloch & Mohan, 2005, p. 175; Prunier, 1998, p. 53; Kamukama, 1997, p. 32; Luck, 1999, p. 583; Mann, 2005, p. 438; Destexhe, 1995, pp. 43-44; Adelman & Suhrke, 1999, pp. 62-63; Tutu, 1994, p. 5; Union Africaine, 2000, pp.17-20; De Lame, 2005, pp. 57-60). Rwanda became a Hutu nation, and Tutsis were marginalized and excluded from key positions (Tutu, 1994, p. 6; Bangamwabo *et al.*, 1991, p. 62; Straus, 2006, p. 23 & Malkki, 1995, pp.

30–31). In brief, the church involvement in the ethnicity of Rwanda has generally been negative; the policy of the church during the colonial times was characterized by the “divide and rule” principle of the colonial governments. Accordingly, some church leaders were involved in the extremist actions that consumed Rwanda in 1994 (Adelman & Suhrke, 1999, pp.86–87).

The experience of the churches in Rwanda in 1994 is an experience of a failed understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Relatives killed their own relatives, neighbors killed their neighbors and students killed their teachers; while they were gathered in the churches, schools and other places normally considered sacred. It needs to be asked why the Catholic and Protestant churches failed to protect those who were killed. Why did the Rwandan church leaders fail to influence the international community, as well as their own communities, when soldiers and civilians gathered to slaughter their own church members?

In addition, it needs to be remembered that among the priests, nuns, and pastors, there were those who helped in gathering the faithful inside churches before participating in the killing, raping, and torturing of their brothers and sisters (Hammond, 1996, pp. 24; Aguilar, 2009, p. 6).

## THE GENOCIDE AGAINST ETHNIC TUTSIS AND THE AFTERMATH

On 6 April 1994, President Juvenal Habyarimana was returning from Tanzania where he had attended peace talks to secure a ceasefire between his government and the rebels (the Rwandan Patriotic Front). At 20:30, three missiles were fired at the presidential plane as it was approaching Kanombe military base in Kigali. The plane crashed in the grounds of the presidential palace and all on board died: President Habyarimana, Burundian President Cyprian Ntaryamira, several senior members of the presidential staff and members of the French crew operating the plane. The Rwandan government blamed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) and the Tutsis for killing the president. In retaliation, Hutu extremists (*Interahamwe*) started to kill Tutsis and Hutu sympathizers of Tutsis (Destexhe, 1995, p. 31; Tutu, 1994, p. 12; Kamukama, 1997, p. 88; Dallaire, 2003, pp. 223–224; Kinloch & Mohan, 2005, pp. 187–188; Cook, 2006, p. 221).

Although it is not yet known who was behind this assassination, it is clear that it acted as the catalyst for the eruption of violence which led to the great tragedy (Destexhe, 1995, p. 31; Prunier, 1998, p. 229; Kamukama, 1997, p. 63).

The massacre started in Kigali on 7 April 1994 and spread throughout the country as groups of militia were sent to different areas to coordinate the killings with government personnel. In little more than 100 days in 1994, more than 800,000 Rwandans were butchered in one of the most intense genocides in the twentieth century (Union Africaine, 2000, p. 121; Aguilar, 2009, p. 23; Prunier, 1998, p. 265; Tutu, 1994, p. 13; United Nations, 2001, p. 7; Dallaire, 2003, p. 375; Hinga *et al.*, 2008, p. 49; Anderson & Menon, 2009, p. 54). The 1994 Rwandan genocide of Tutsis has been analyzed from a wide variety of perspectives. Anthropologists and historians, for example, have analyzed the reasons why certain forms of violence perpetrated against innocent civilians, while others have looked at the role played in the genocide by state authorities and church leaders.

Scholars argue that the genocide placed people in incredibly complex moral and social situations (United Nations, 2001, pp. 7-25). During the genocide, some Tutsis were denounced by those who knew them personally: pupils were killed by their teachers, shop owners by their customers, neighbors killed neighbors and husbands killed wives in order to save them from a terrible death. Tutsis were denounced by their colleagues who wanted their jobs or killed by people who wanted their property, while others were saved by unknown Hutus disgusted by the violence (Destexhe, 1995, p. 31; Prunier, 1998, p. 257; Cook, 2006, pp. 182–183). Frequent intermarriage had produced many Hutu-looking Tutsis and Tutsi-looking Hutus.

In towns and in some rural areas, Hutus who looked like Tutsis were very often killed despite their denials which were seen as a typical Tutsi deception (Prunier, 1995, p. 249). The Hutu killers (*Interahamwe*) turned against their fellow Hutus who tried to save Tutsis, and the vast majority of Hutus abandoned their homes and fled the country to the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) as a result of the propaganda-inspired fear of RPF reprisals (Destexhe, 1995, p. 33; Mugerwa, 2000, p. 7; Anderson & Menon, 2009, p. 54). The situation was so difficult that a Hutu husband might have had to give all his money to be allowed not to kill his Tutsi wife and her relations when they were stopped at a militia roadblock (Prunier, 1998, p. 265). Moreover, many women and girls who survived the genocide had been widowed, raped, beaten, had their arms and legs cut off, forced to kill their own children and infected with HIV/AIDS. Their hearts and minds were therefore severely traumatized (Union Africaine, 2000, p. 171; Anderson & Menon, 2009, p. 54).

Furthermore, many scholars agree that the “divide and rule” policy of the churches in colonial times had had a negative influence in Rwanda (Adelman & Suhrke, 1999, p. 87). Because of these policies, many Church leaders

were very close to the political power during the Habyarimana regime, and they were perceived as being close to the hardline Hutu extremist ideology (Tutu, 1994, p. 67; Adelman & Suhrke, 1999, p. 86). As a result, there were priests and pastors among those who participated in killing their brothers and sisters in the genocide (Tutu, 1994, p. 69; Prunier, 1998, p. 253; Adelman & Suhrke, 1999, p. 87; Hammond, 2002, p. 24; Mann, 2005, p. 464; Anderson & Menon, 2009, p. 63). Some scholars posit that some Christians left the church, saying that God was no longer there because so many Rwandans had died in the churches which they had been taught to believe were sanctuaries and safe havens from violence (Tutu, 1994, p. 69; Prunier, 1998, p. 253; Adelman & Suhrke, 1999, p. 87; Hammond, 2002, p. 24; Mann, 2005, p. 464; Anderson & Menon, 2009, p. 63). Moreover, demographers estimate that the male fatality rate was 50 percent higher than the female rate. Still, Tutsi women were killed during the 1994 genocide in great numbers, as they were not perceived as innocent non-combatants. Nevertheless, rape substituted the slaughtering of women to a great extent (Mann, 2005, p. 464).

According to some studies, unlike the Nazi's conception of the Jews, Hutu extremists did not appear to have felt that the Tutsis posed a biological threat to them. Rather, they simply argued that virtually all Tutsis were supporters of the RPF. A former member of the *Interahamwe* explained that "they did not have a role in exterminating all Tutsi, but it was said that every Tutsi cooperates with the RPF" (Valentino, 2004, p. 185). This opinion was encouraged after the RPF began recruiting heavily from the Tutsi civilian population in Rwanda in late 1992. In addition, Hutu refugees who fled to Zaire (DRC) in 1994 are said by scholars to have been in a difficult situation in 1996–1998, when the Rwandan army (RPA) launched an invasion to bring them back to Rwanda (Cook, 2006, pp. 225–230; Anderson & Menon, 2009, pp. 54–55). The UN report argues that there were systematic attacks, particularly killings and massacres perpetrated against members of the Hutu ethnic group. Numerous serious attacks on the physical or psychological integrity of members of the Hutu group were also committed, with a very high number of Hutus shot, raped, burnt, or beaten (United Nations, 2010, 512–513).

Therefore, the refugees who were turned back to Rwanda by force experienced severe emotional trauma due to witnessing their relatives' deaths. Scholars continue to mention that the intensity of the violence that the refugees experienced in the DRC was terrifying and inexplicable (Anderson & Menon, 2009, p. 54). Therefore, many Rwandans in Belgium today are burning with anger, hatred, deep frustration, and dashed hopes (Nowrojee, 2005, p. 4).

In other contexts, some scholars have suggested that the origins of the genocide are rather to be found in the regime's peasant ideology, which existed long before 1990: "obedience both to the political authority of the state and to the social authority of the group" (Destexhe, 1995, p. 25; Mann, 2005, pp. 240–241; Cook, 2006, p. 3). Cook argues that when revolutionary leaders espouse a mono-ethnic peasant ideology to legitimize their power and want to hold on to that power at all cost, genocide may become their ultimate strategy (Cook, 2006, p. 3). Furthermore, many scholars argue that education is the only key factor leading to the development of understanding, positive attitudes, and values (Luck, 1999, p. 225). According to the United Nations (2001, p. 25), the literacy rate is very low and Rwandan education is poor (Sellström & Wohlgemuth, 1995, p. 9).

The 2002 census shows that the level of education in Rwanda has remained at a rudimentary phase: "some 60% of the population aged at 15 years and above can read and write a text in at least any one language (which was not specified). Another 4.4% can only read, while 35.6% can neither read nor write. In urban areas of the country, the proportion of literate residents is higher than in rural areas (76.7% against 56.6%). Men are more literate than women (66.5% against 54.7%)."

Overall, 31% of the resident population in Rwanda has never been to school, and those who have attended but are now out of school constitute 45% (Republic of Rwanda, 2005a, pp. 46–47). Such an alarmingly low literacy rate is likely to have contributed to the genocide. It was easy for the propagandists of ethnic division to reach the general populace. Many scholars argue that the main agents of the genocide were ordinary peasants who were among the frustrated uneducated people (Bangwanubusa, 2009, p. 20; Prunier, 1998, p. 247; Destexhe, 1995, pp. 30–31; Kinloch & Mohan, 2005, pp. 25–26; Cook, 2006, pp. 163–164).

Furthermore, as political scientists point out, the state can be defined by its monopoly of legitimate organized violence. In a time of war, people who refuse to carry out orders to commit violent acts may be shot (Prunier, 1998, p. 245). This legitimization of violence from the state leadership was a crucial factor in the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

At all ages and in all circumstances, the middle-range of leadership plays a crucial role in making ordinary people carry out the will of the top leaders. In the Rwandan genocide, this certainly was the case (Bangwanubusa, 2009, p. 12). This idea agrees with Prunier's argument that "...there had always been a strong tradition of unquestioning obedience to authority in the pre-colonial kingdom of Rwanda. This tradition was of course reinforced by both the German and Belgian colonial administrations. When the highest authorities in

that state told you to do something you did it, even if it included killing” (Prunier, 1998, p. 245).

Destexhe (1995, p. 34) states that obedience helps in fostering a feeling of group belonging, and reduces any feeling of guilt. He continues to say that it effectively dehumanizes the killers who find certain solidarity in their actions. In Rwanda in 1994, killing simply became normal as a result of economic personal rivalries, and a culture of fear or obedience (Sandström, 2005, p. 48; Cook, 2006, p. 168). However, scholars note that the Hutu reaction to RPF attacks was one of future outcomes rather than of obedience to a feared existing authority (Cook, 2006, p. 169). In addition, the cultural belief in a supernatural power probably played an important role. Alongside the supernatural power, there is a strong perception that the king, in exercising power, is doing the just thing.

In other words, kings never rule merely by brute force; they justify their rule by political formulae (divine right or the sovereignty of people), which are frequently accepted by those they rule (Prunier, 1998, p. 245). Ordinary people just surrender to the exercise of power by the king. Religious societies tend to accept rule by the elite on the basis of political formulae. Rwanda falls into this category, wherein the Church has played a major role through a number of missions throughout the country, jointly with previous administrations (Rutayisire, 1987, pp. 27–32).

## INTERVIEW RESULTS

A total of 291 respondents (141 men and 150 women) belonging to the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium filled in a questionnaire and were interviewed about their experiences of the genocide and its aftermath. The respondents had come to Belgium either as refugees or on other grounds after the 1994 genocide. At the time of interview, they were staying in different locations of Belgium: Brussels, Aalst, Liege, Leuven, Charleroi, Limburg, Luxembourg, Namur, Turnhout, Soignies, SintNiklaas, Tielt and Vervières. The participants were selected according to the following criteria: the respondents should be above 22 years of age; they should be native Rwandans or born as a consequence of rape during the 1994 genocide and its aftermath; they should speak the local language, Kinyarwanda, and have a residence permit in Belgium. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. The data was analyzed using inductive or “open” coding (Bernard, 2006, p. 493). The results of the quantitative part of the study will be presented elsewhere. The qualitative results will be thematically presented as follows:

### Traumatization due to the genocide and its aftermath

A trauma is a pathological reaction to an experience of cruelty, and it speaks of the painful link connecting people’s present to their past. Trauma concerns both individuals and communities. People may suffer the consequences of trauma for a long time after it took place. The Rwandans in Belgium still feel traumatized 22 years after the genocide against the Tutsis and its aftermath. Many of them spent time as refugees in another African country, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) where they were severely traumatized when they were forcibly repatriated back to Rwanda by the Rwandan army; some were imprisoned without any reason or criminal record. Therefore, some of the Rwandans in Belgium have lost the love for their home country. Many have sleeping difficulties due to recurring thoughts about relatives who died in the 1994 genocide. Many Rwandans live in fear to approach persons whom they think may have participated in or encouraged the genocide. There is still hatred among Rwandans in Belgium for people who do not have the same ethnic background, and there is a lack of trust, because some think that others may be spying on fellow Rwandans on behalf of the current Rwandan government.

Many Rwandans in Belgium lost one or many members of their families: siblings, parents, wives, husbands, children, neighbors, friends, and property. There are numbers of women who were raped during the genocide and its aftermath. In addition, there are also some children who were born due to rape during the genocide; their mothers do not love them and they do not know their fathers; their mothers were raped by several people. Many stepfathers treat these children differently from their own children, and many times they do not assist them at all. There are some mothers who have been contaminated with sexual diseases like HIV/ AIDS and uterine cancer. During genocide remembrance days in April, these children are often insulted by their mothers who remember being raped, and say that they do not want to see them around. Children who were born because of rape wish that the Belgian authorities would arrange possibilities for them to meet with other children in the same situation, and help them to find their biological fathers by use of DNA tests.

### Religion as a healing mechanism

Religion has been successfully used as a coping and healing mechanism for genocide survivors among the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium. The fact that religion may be helpful for severely traumatized people is not new *per*



se. For instance, Niemeyer, (2001) argues that certain types of religious and traditional coping seem to be strongly related to stress-related growth. He found that over 80% of approximately 300 adults who had suffered traumatization after a traumatic event said that their religious and spiritual beliefs helped them to cope with their bad experience (2001, p. 193). Findings from a study conducted in Sri Lanka about survivors from the 2004 tsunami suggest that religion may provide a larger perspective, offering meaning in the face of terrifying events. The study showed that religion and traditional ritual allowed individuals to overcome their suffering. Maercker *et al.*, 1999, p. 253).

According to a study of residents of Oklahoma City, it was revealed that religious coping was strongly related to growth-related coping after a bomb attack that took place there in 1995 (Maercker, 1999, p. 253; Synder, 1987, p. 121). Furthermore, traditional and religious healing rituals and storytelling events have been reported to be an effective means of dealing with traumatic memories of wars and genocides also in Africa (Bolton, 2001; Jackson, 2005; Utas, 2009, pp. 26-28; Tiilikainen & Peter, 2011). The consequences of the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath led to high levels of individual and social trauma due to the deaths, degradation, and destruction of families, and the disadvantages of being a woman in a patriarchal culture. Most international organizations working with the Rwandan case base their trauma counseling on a Western model. As such a model disregards Rwandan culture, many traumatized Rwandans have turned to traditional and religious healers for help.

It has been frequently observed that traumatization may shake one's religious faith or, alternatively, lead to its rebirth. Sometimes both occur following traumatization (Schiraldi, 2000, p. 332). Moreover, certain types of religious coping seem to be strongly related to stress-related growth. For Christian believers, the conviction that God is always good may bring hope and encouragement, even when people are inclined to be discouraged and without hope. Religious or spiritual beliefs may serve as an important method of coping with traumatic events. Studies by Balk (1991) and Gilbert (1992) found that religion was a significant source of renewed meaning and comfort for some of the teenage and adult participants in their studies.

In this light, religion may be used as a source for gaining insight and encouragement (Wright, 2003, p. 417). It has been found that religiously committed adults are more satisfied with their life and marriage, they are mentally and physically healthier, live longer and are less stressed, and less likely to commit suicide or abuse drugs (Schiraldi, 2000, p. 333). It has been shown that trauma

victims often turn to others for emotional and social support (Figley, 1985, p. 27). Thus, some Rwandans in Belgium have turned to pastors and priests to heal their spiritual wounds.

Cultural competency skills are essential to effectively treat any medical condition, especially psychiatric disorders, because of the interplay between culture and concepts of health or illness, expression of distress, and healing beliefs and practices. Across all diseases and illnesses, culture determines the local expression of symptoms, illness attributions, coping, locally sanctioned treatments, as well as the acceptance of treatments, either western or non-western (Friedman *et al.*, 2007, p. 425). Trauma treatment requires an understanding of the way the world works in a social and cultural context (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009, p. 277). Africans generally find it difficult to believe that western psychiatry could help them to cope with trauma. As such, few Rwandans have turned to psychologists for treatment and help.

Bolton and Tang (2004) describe an ethnographic approach that may assist in developing and implementing post-disaster mental health programs in non-western settings by incorporating knowledge about local views of mental health and health problems. They point out that "madness" in some African cultures is considered to be caused by curses, violation of a taboo, sorcery, or offended ancestors. The researchers affirm that these forms of madness tend to cause acute illnesses that respond well to indigenous healing methods. Therefore, in order to be cured from this kind of madness, patients should contact a psychologist who knows their culture. Alternatively, they should turn to traditional and spiritual healers for consultation. According to Rwandan traditional beliefs, collaboration with the healers could lead to more effective preventive measures and improved methods of patient care, particularly in encouraging them to pursue prescribed rules.

### **Reconciliation among the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium**

Reconciliation is the mutual acceptance by members of formerly hostile groups of each other. Such acceptance includes positive attitudes and actions to the extent that circumstances allow and require (Figley, 1985, p. 27). Reconciliation must include a changed psychological orientation and a crossing of people's boundaries towards each other. For it to take place, perpetrators and their family members who may not have been directly engaged in violence also need to be healed. In addition, to establish a strong reconciliation, individuals and institutions need to acknowledge their own role in the conflict of the past, and they should accept and learn

from it in a constructive way so that it will not occur again. They must also put an end to aggression and determine the conditions under which the disputing factions will live together in harmony (Clark, 1987, pp. 20–25).

Reconciliation means the restoration of the bonds of friendship and affection between people who are divided by strife, enmity, or even crime. It means a transformation of relationships, which are normally linked to a change in feelings, attitudes and opinions. Therefore, the culture of suspicion, fear, mistrust and violence must be broken down, and opportunities for individuals to hear and to be heard should be provided. Furthermore, healing and reconciliation need to go hand in hand, especially when the ethnic groups that have been involved in the conflict against each other must continue to live together. Thus, for reconciliation to take place and result in lasting peace, both victims and perpetrators need to be healed (Staub *et al.*, 2005, p. 5).

To be reconciled means getting on with each other again as friends. A culture of respect for human rights and different opinions needs to be developed in order to create a context whereby each citizen becomes an active participant in society and feels a sense of belonging (European Ecumenical Assembly, 1997, p. 4). Reconciliation seeks to restore each of the parties' sense of worth through the apology-forgiveness cycle, thereby freeing them from the threats that each presents to the identity of the other. Reconciliation is not only an academic concept but a process which usually includes reasonable attempts to achieve unity between former adversaries.

## JUSTICE

Reconciliation does not replace but adds to justice. As such, justice is always the prerequisite for true reconciliation, whether among races and religions, workers and owners, women and men, people and nations (European Ecumenical Assembly, 1997, pp. 4–5). In 2005, the Rwandan government re-established the so-called *Gacaca* courts (a traditional, community-based method for resolving conflicts) to bring about justice and reconciliation at the grassroots level. The *Gacaca* trials served to promote reconciliation by providing a means for victims to learn the truth about the death of their family members and relatives. It also gave perpetrators the opportunities to confess their bad actions, show remorse, and ask for forgiveness in front of their community members. However, it has been claimed that the Rwandan *Gacaca* system has increased the witnesses' feelings of insecurity and vulnerability; the system had led to many attacks against survivors, witnesses and judges,

because the trials have given the impression, to some people, that the traditional tribunal was working in the interest of one side only, and it was not leading to true reconciliation (Moghalu, 2005, p. 3; Kapteijns & Richters, 2010, p. 180).

*Gacaca* courts encouraged false accusations, unfair trials, corruption of judges and intimidation of witnesses; furthermore, they were characterized by a weak defense, sometimes even a total absence of a defense counsel, and political pressure. Reconciliation may succeed if justice reaches all Rwandans who participated in any kind of killings during the genocide. Since some of the Rwandan churches were engaged in conflicts that led to the bloodshed of the 1994 genocide, respondents said that the churches should be active in conflict solving and reconciliation, and peace education. The genocide survivors need to be healed from the wounds of trauma; they need to recuperate hope, trust and meaning of life, through listening and counseling.

Since trauma healing is a very important part of any process of reconciliation, the *Gacaca* courts would be more effective if they took into consideration restorative justice as well as trauma healing mechanisms to the genocide victims and perpetrators. According to research by the Nation Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) on the role of women in reconciliation and peace-building in Rwanda ten years after the genocide, a major obstacle for peace building and reconciliation is formed by the multitude of orphans, widows, widowers and handicapped people who are still angry at what they call their enemies (Republic of Rwanda, 2005a, p. 7). A later study conducted by the National Unit and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) showed that 28.9% of Rwandans still adhere to an ideology of genocide, and if they get a chance, they might participate in a genocide again (Republic of Rwanda, 2015, p. xv).

## Religion as a means for trauma healing and reconciliation among Rwandans in Belgium

For many Rwandans in Belgium, healing, love and forgiveness are important ways of dealing and coping with their trauma. As a result of their religious convictions, some Rwandans in Belgium have tried to forgive those who brought trauma into their lives, but to “love their enemies” is still very difficult. Indeed, although some Rwandans have been able to receive meaningful counseling by Belgian psychologists, there are still many who are traumatized. This is the reason why most Rwandans in Belgium rather rely on their religion than on psychologists to help them to cope with their trauma. The respondents expect the Belgian authorities to teach the Rwandan immigrants about genocide and its

consequences to prevent it from happening again. In addition, they feel that the Belgian government should discuss with the Rwandan government about annual genocide remembrance, so that such days may be reduced or, if possible, abolished altogether, since people are especially angry at others during the remembrance days; some are accused of still harboring genocidal ideologies.

Furthermore, they feel that Belgium, as the main Rwandan colonizer, has the responsibility to explain to other nations about the roots of the Rwandan genocide and the role Belgium played in it. The respondents stated that Belgium left a heavy colonial imprint on Rwanda, economically, socially and culturally; the colonial power created ethnic tensions through its initial preferential treatment of the Tutsis followed by a switch of allegiance to the Hutus in the run-up to Rwanda's independence in 1962. Thus, Belgium could have aided in truth-telling and by installing true justice to all Rwandans. In addition, the Belgium authority should have provided training and seminars to all Rwandan asylum seekers about how to be healed from trauma, and how to forgive and live in peace with each other. Moreover, they felt that Belgium should help the genocide survivors in Rwanda, and help in the establishment of Rwandan associations for those who do not have any representation (the Hutus).

### **CONCLUSIVE REMARKS: THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH-TELLING FOR RECONCILIATION**

Regarding peace and reconciliation, this study showed that Rwandans in Belgium are still, to a large extent, ethnically divided and feel hatred toward individuals from the other ethnic group. They should be able to communicate and interact with each other; nevertheless, this seems to be difficult, since there are still different opinions about the genocide among both Tutsis and Hutus. Some feel to have lost trust altogether, and are fearful of Rwandans of a different ethnic background. Ethnicity still rules their hearts. Furthermore, the study revealed that many Tutsis still believe that all Hutus have killed or participated in the genocide against the Tutsis, and this belief is a severe obstacle against reconciliation.

Therefore, in order for peace and true reconciliation to be established among the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium, people should tell the truth about what happened to them; likewise, those who participated in the killings should report themselves to the court. Those who killed should ask for forgiveness from the victims. Some respondents argue that the leaders of political parties, church leaders and other Rwandans in Belgium should meet at events like *umuganura* and discuss, without hypocrisy, the future

of Rwanda. They should meet in different associations and churches, and talk about what really happened in order to prevent it from happening again.

In addition, the respondents argued that reconciliation may succeed if justice reaches to all Rwandans who participated in any of the killings.

This study shows that for true reconciliation to be achieved, all Rwandans of different ethnic backgrounds should be able to sit together and accept their wrongdoings during the genocide and its aftermath. All prisoners who did not kill anyone or did not participate in the genocide in other ways should be released. Reconciliation means mutual acceptance by members of formerly hostile groups of each other. Such acceptance includes positive attitudes as well as positive actions that express these attitudes to the extent that circumstances allow and require. Moreover, acceptance must include a changed psychological orientation toward the other group. It was felt that reconciliation among the Rwandan diaspora in Belgium will take long to achieve, albeit there are already individuals who have been able to reconcile with the people who killed their relatives.

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