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INTRODUCTION

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## I

**“People Came to Mass Each Day to Pray,  
Then They Went Out to Kill”***Christian Churches, Civil Society, and Genocide*

The small East African state of Rwanda gained sudden international attention in the spring and summer of 1994 when an explosion of deadly violence shook the country. The death of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana in a fiery plane crash on April 6, 1994, served as the pretext for a circle of powerful government and military officials to launch a long-planned offense against opponents of the regime. Within hours after Habyarimana's death, the Presidential Guard and other elite troops spread out into the capital, Kigali, with lists of opposition party leaders, human rights activists, progressive priests, journalists, and other prominent critics of the Habyarimana regime to be eliminated. During the next few weeks, government officials, soldiers, and civilian militia carried the violence into other parts of the country, focusing it more narrowly on one minority ethnic group – the Tutsi, whom regime supporters viewed as a primary threat to their continued dominance. By early July, when the remnants of the Habyarimana regime fled into exile in Zaire, the violence had devastated political and civil societies, killed as many as one million people, and almost completely annihilated the country's Tutsi minority. In a century that has known many atrocities, the genocide in Rwanda was remarkable for its intensity – more than one-tenth of the population of Rwanda was killed in only three months.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For details regarding the genocide, the definitive source is Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, and Paris: Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, 1999), written by a long-time student of Rwanda based on research by a large team of investigators, including myself. Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) is also useful. It is not my purpose here to enter into the debate

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Rwanda is an overwhelmingly Christian country, with just under 90 percent of the population in a 1991 census claiming membership in a Catholic, Protestant, or Seventh-Day Adventist Church.<sup>2</sup> In the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, journalists, human rights activists, scholars, and even some church officials condemned Rwanda's Christian churches for their culpability in the shocking violence that ravaged the country.<sup>3</sup> Not only were the vast majority of those who participated in the killings Christians, but the church buildings themselves also served as Rwanda's primary killing fields. As African Rights claims, "more Rwandese citizens died in churches and parishes than anywhere else."<sup>4</sup> Organizers of the

over use of the term "genocide." The carnage in Rwanda clearly qualifies as genocide by even the most restricted definitions, for example, Irving Louis Horowitz, *Taking Lives: Genocide and State Power* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997, 4th edition). For useful critical evaluations of various definitions of genocide, see Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 8–32; and Helen Fein, *Genocide: A Sociological Perspective* (London and Newbury Park: SAGE, 1993), pp. 8–31.

<sup>2</sup> Government of Rwanda, "Recensement General de la Population et de l'Habitat au 15 Aout 1991" (Kigali, April 1994) reports that 62.6 percent of the population declared themselves Catholic, 18.8 percent Protestant, 8.4 percent Seventh-Day Adventist, 1.2 percent Muslim, and 1.1 "traditional" (p. 146).

<sup>3</sup> "Archbishop Carey's Visit to Rwanda: Rwanda Church Voice 'Silent' During Massacres, Carey Says," *Ecumenical News International*, May 16, 1995; Julian Bedford, "Rwanda's Churches Bloodied by Role in Genocide," *Reuters*, October 18, 1994; Jean Damascène Bizimana, "Église et le Génocide au Rwanda: Les Pères Blancs et le Négationnisme," Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001; Raymond Bonner, "Clergy in Rwanda is Accused of Abetting Atrocities: French Church Gives Refuge to One Priest," *The New York Times*, July 7, 1995, p. A3; "Churches in the Thick of Rwandan Violence," *The Christian Century*, November 8, 1995, pp. 1041–2; Joshua Hammer, "Blood on the Altar: Rwanda: What Did You Do in the War Father?," *Newsweek*, September 4, 1995, p. 36; Gary Haugen, "Rwanda's Carnage: Survivors Describe How Churches Provided Little Protection in the Face of Genocide," *Christianity Today*, February 6, 1995, p. 52; Lindsey Hilsum, *Rwanda: The Betrayal*, Blackstone Films, Channel 4; Donatella Lorch, "The Rock that Crumbled: The Church in Rwanda," *The New York Times*, October 17, 1994, p. A4; Tom Ndahiro, "The Church's Blind Eye to Genocide in Rwanda," in Carol Rittner et al., *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches?* St. Paul: Paragon House, 2004; Thomas O'Hara, "Rwandan Bishops Faltered in Face of Crisis," *National Catholic Reporter*, September 29, 1995; Faustin Rutembesa, Jean-Pierre Karegeye, and Paul Rutayisire, *Rwanda: L'Église catholique à l'épreuve du génocide*, Greenfield Park: Les Editions Africana, 2000; Wolfgang Schonecke, "The Role of the Church in Rwanda," *America*, June 17, 1995; Dominique Sigaud, "Genocide: le dossier noir de l'Eglise rwandaise," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, February 1–7, 1996, pp. 50–1; "Sin and Confession in Rwanda," *The Economist*, January 14, 1995, p. 39; Henri Tincq, "Le fardeau rwandais de Jean Paul II," *Le monde*, May 23, 1996; Alan Zarembo, "The Church's Shameful Acts: Many Rwandans Refuse to Return to Sanctuaries Where Blood Was Spilled," *Houston Chronicle*, January 29, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> African Rights, *Rwanda: Death, Despair, and Defiance*, revised edition (London: African Rights, 1995), p. 865.

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genocide exploited the historic concept of sanctuary to lure tens of thousands of Tutsi into church buildings with false promises of protection; then Hutu militia and soldiers systematically slaughtered the unfortunate people who had sought refuge, firing guns and tossing grenades into the crowds gathered in church sanctuaries and school buildings, and methodically finishing off survivors with machetes, pruning hooks, and knives.

In Nyakizu commune in the far south of Rwanda, for example, after instigating massacres along the Burundi border to prevent Tutsi from fleeing the country, the burgomaster (leader of the local government) traveled through the commune to encourage local Tutsi, as well as the thousands of refugees from violence in neighboring communes who were passing through Nyakizu, to gather at the Roman Catholic parish of Cyahinda, promising to protect them as Tutsi had been protected in the church from ethnic attacks in the 1960s. The burgomaster subsequently personally supervised gendarmes and civilian militia who surrounded the parish complex and, over a four-day period, systematically slaughtered more than 20,000 people. The church sanctuary, the last building to be attacked, still bears the marks of bullets and grenades and the stains of blood and brains on its floors and walls. According to local officials, 17,000 bodies were exhumed from one set of latrines beside the church, only one of several mass graves at the site.<sup>5</sup> Research by Human Rights Watch, African Rights, and other groups suggests similar numbers killed at parishes throughout the country.<sup>6</sup>

The involvement of the churches, however, went far beyond the passive use of church buildings as death chambers. In some communities, clergy, catechists, and other church employees used their knowledge of the local population to identify Tutsi for elimination. In other cases, church personnel actively participated in the killing. The International War Crimes Tribunal for Rwanda convicted Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, a pastor in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, for encouraging Tutsi to assemble at his church in Kibuye Prefecture, then leading to the church a convoy of soldiers and civilian militia, who slaughtered some 8,000 Tutsi.<sup>7</sup> In April 1998, a Rwandan court condemned to death two Catholic

<sup>5</sup> The information in this paragraph is based on interviews I and several other researchers conducted in Nyakizu in 1995 and 1996 under the auspices of Human Rights Watch. For a more detailed discussion of events in Nyakizu see Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, pp. 353–431, the two chapters that I drafted for the book.

<sup>6</sup> African Rights, *Death, Despair, and Defiance*, pp. 258–572.

<sup>7</sup> Marlise Simons, “Rwandan Pastor and His Son Are Convicted of Genocide,” *New York Times*, February 20, 2003.

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priests, Jean-François Kayiranga and Edoard Nkurikiye, for luring people to Nyange parish, where soldiers and militia subsequently massacred them, then bringing in a bulldozer to demolish the church and bury alive any survivors.<sup>8</sup> Prosecutors in Rwanda have accused Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, the curé of Sainte Famille parish in Kigali, of turning over to death squads Tutsi who had sought refuge in his church. Survivors report that Munyeshyaka wore a flack jacket and carried a pistol and that he helped to select out sympathizers of the Rwandan Patriotic Front to be killed. According to some witnesses, he offered protection to women and girls who would sleep with him and turned over to death squads those who refused his advances.<sup>9</sup>

In my own research, I discovered similar stories. For example, a Tutsi woman who worked at a Catholic primary school in Kaduha parish in Gikongoro Prefecture testified that her priest, Robert Nyandwe, had himself come to take her out of hiding and turn her over to a death squad:

The priest, Nyandwe, came to my house. My husband [who is Hutu] was not there. Nyandwe asked my children, "Where is she?" They said that I was sick. He came into the house, entering even into my bedroom. He said, "Come! I will hide you, because there is an attack." ... He said "I'll take you to the CND." He grabbed me by the arm and took me by force. He dragged me out into the street, and we started to go by foot toward the church. But arriving on the path, I saw a huge crowd. There were many people, wearing banana leaves, carrying machetes. I broke free from him and ran. I went to hide in the home of a friend. He wanted to turn me over to the crowd that was preparing to attack the church. It was he who prevented people from leaving the church.<sup>10</sup>

National church leaders were slow to speak publicly, and they never condemned the genocide, instead calling on church members to support the new regime that was carrying out the killing. Based on the past close collaboration of church leaders with the organizers of the genocide and their failure to address specifically the massacres of Tutsi, many church members concluded that the church leaders endorsed the killing.<sup>11</sup> Believing that their actions were consistent with the teachings of their

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Goujon, "Two Rwandan Priests Given Death Sentences over Rwanda Genocide," Agence France Presse, April 18, 1998; "Priests Sentenced to Death for Rwanda Massacre," Associated Press, April 20, 1998.

<sup>9</sup> Bonner, "Clergy in Rwanda Is Accused of Abetting Atrocities"; Hammer, "Blood on the Altar."

<sup>10</sup> From interview conducted in Kaduha by the author on June 12, 1996, in French and Kinyarwanda.

<sup>11</sup> Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, pp. 245–6.

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churches, the death squads in some communities held mass before going out to kill. In Ngoma parish in Butare, a Tutsi priest who was hidden in the sanctuary by his fellow Hutu priests reported to me that, “People came and demanded that my fellow priest reopen the church and hold mass. People came to mass each day to pray, then they went out to kill.”<sup>12</sup> In some cases militia members apparently paused in the frenzy of killing to kneel and pray at the altar.<sup>13</sup> According to a report by a World Council of Churches team that visited Rwanda in August 1994, “In every conversation we had with the government and church people alike, the point was brought home to us that the church itself stands tainted, not by passive indifference, but by errors of commission as well.”<sup>14</sup>

Apologists for the churches have responded to accusations of church complicity in various ways. The official Catholic response has denied institutional responsibility, blaming the participation of Christians in the genocide on individual sinfulness. In a 1996 letter, Pope John Paul II stated that participation in the genocide was clearly against church teachings, and thus clergy and other Christians who participated were personally culpable, without implicating the wider church. According to the pope, “The church itself cannot be held responsible for the misdeeds of its members who have acted against evangelical law.”<sup>15</sup> Father André Sibomana, who himself offers a number of criticisms of the Catholic Church, offers a similar defense. “I don’t accept the language of generalization which states that the Roman Catholic Church participated in the genocide.... It is not the Church as such which is called into question, but its members.”<sup>16</sup>

Others have emphasized the mixed response of the churches to ethnic violence, countering the examples of involvement by some clergy and church leaders with examples of bravery and resistance by others. These authors pointed out that, although the Catholic and Anglican archbishops strongly supported the regime that carried out the genocide, other people

<sup>12</sup> Interview conducted by the author March 26, 1996, in Ngoma in French.

<sup>13</sup> This claim, made by Laurient Ntezimana in Lindsey Hilsum’s documentary on the churches and the genocide, *Rwanda: The Betrayal* (London: Blackstone Pictures, 1996), was corroborated by other Rwandans with whom I spoke.

<sup>14</sup> “Rwandan Churches Culpable, Says WCC,” *The Christian Century*, August 24–31, 1994, p. 778.

<sup>15</sup> “Pope Says Church Is Not to Blame in Rwanda,” *New York Times*, March 21, 1996, p. A3.

<sup>16</sup> André Sibomana, *Hope for Rwanda: Conversations with Laure Guilbert and Hervé Deguine* (London: Pluto Press, and Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 1999), p. 123.

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in the churches were actively involved in the democracy movement that emerged to challenge the regime in the early 1990s. The Catholic newspaper *Kinyamateka* played an important role in criticizing governmental corruption and helped to spark an explosion of free press, while the paper's editor, Father Sibomana, was among a number of Catholic and Protestant leaders who became involved in founding a Rwandan human rights movement. The president of the Catholic conference of bishops, Thadée Nsengiyumva, frustrated at his fellow bishops' quiescence, published an open letter in 1991 not only condemning human rights abuses and ethnic violence and calling for multiparty democracy, but also criticizing the churches for their refusal to show leadership. In November 1993, the Catholic bishop of Nyundo publicly condemned the distribution of arms to civilians, an early preparation for the genocide. The churches themselves had a large number of Tutsi priests and pastors, and during the genocide many clergy were killed. According to Ian Linden, emphasizing the role of church people who supported the genocide gives an unbalanced portrait of the churches:

And it would be a simple matter to attempt to balance the record by itemising the many incidents of martyrdom, heroic self-sacrifice, courage and the kind of stubborn unwillingness to take the easy way out and deny their faith.... The death toll of Church leaders, bishops, priests, ministers, and sisters was very high, between a quarter and a third of leadership. This is mostly to be explained by the way Tutsi people had not been blocked from advancement in the Churches as they had been in the rest of society, and their disproportionate presence amongst the clergy.... But a great number of Hutu Church leaders also died opposing the massacres or were killed as intellectual opponents of the Habyarimana regime.<sup>17</sup>

According to the new archbishop of Kigali, Thadée Ntihinyurwa, "Perhaps some priests behaved badly, but we have not carefully figured accounts; I deny the global responsibility of the institution." As an editorial in the Catholic journal *Tablet* states, if the church was complicit, it was also a Church of martyrs.<sup>18</sup> If the church itself suffered in the genocide, the reasoning goes, how could it be truly complicit?

A third defense of the churches emphasizes institutional weaknesses that rendered them incapable of opposing the genocide. According to this argument, the churches were themselves deeply divided along ethnic, regional,

<sup>17</sup> Ian Linden, "The Churches and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwandan Tragedy," *The Month*, July 1995, 28, pp. 256–63, citation pp. 261, 263.

<sup>18</sup> "The martyrs of Rwanda," *The Tablet*, June 25, 1994, p. 791.

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and ideological lines, creating a “fragmented” religious authority, unable to speak publicly on issues of national importance. As Linden states,

By the early 1990s the Church had no recourse against a propaganda machine that preached exclusive Hutu identity defined over and against the threat of a Tutsi invader, and, indeed, defined being Hutu ultimately as being the killer of Tutsis....It was hopelessly divided at a leadership level as well as parish level.<sup>19</sup>

Saskia Van Hoyweghen claimed that this fragmentation arises from the minimal impact that Christianity has had on Rwandan society. Despite the high rates of conversion and the magnitude of the churches’ presence in Rwanda, they lacked “intensive” power, having attracted many members for social and economic reasons without significantly shaping their beliefs. “One should not therefore be blinded by the strong side of the Church, namely its omnipresence in Rwandese social and economic life. We have to look behind membership statistics; the accounts of mass baptisms have no meaning as such.”<sup>20</sup> Drawing on Mbembe,<sup>21</sup> Van Hoyweghen suggested that the churches have reflected rather than shaped Rwandan society, as Christian symbols have been adapted to Rwandan culture. “[T]here are plenty of indications to suggest that despite the powerful outlook of the Church, the re-appropriation of Catholic symbols has always fermented uncontrolled.”<sup>22</sup> The implication of this argument is that Christianity bears no responsibility for the genocide, because at base Rwandan society was not truly Christian. Agatha Radoli, a Catholic sister writing in the preface to a book called, *The Rwanda Genocide and the Call to Deepen Christianity in Africa*, makes a similar claim:

If Rwanda, a country where 70% of the people claimed to be Christians, exhibited such an unchristian attitude in time of crisis then Christ’s message of love and fellowship has fallen on deaf ears completely. In spite of a century of evangelization, Christianity has not taken root in Rwanda and many other parts of Africa.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Linden, “The Churches and Genocide,” p. 262.

<sup>20</sup> Saskia Van Hoyweghen, “The Disintegration of the Catholic Church of Rwanda: A Study of the Fragmentation of Political Religious Authority,” *African Affairs*, July 1996, 95, no. 380, pp. 379–402. Van Hoyweghen surprisingly cites my own work in this section implying agreement with this argument.

<sup>21</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Afrique Indocile* (Paris: Karthala, 1988).

<sup>22</sup> Van Hoyweghen, “The Disintegration of the Catholic Church in Rwanda.”

<sup>23</sup> Agatha Radoli, “Preface” in Mario I. Aguilar, *The Rwanda Crisis and the Call to Deepen Christianity in Africa* (Nairobi: AMECEA Gaba Publications, 1998), Spearhead Nos. 148–50, p. viii.



As I demonstrate in this book, contrary to the claims of their defenders, the complicity of Rwanda's Christian churches in the 1994 genocide was profound, going well beyond the actions of a few individuals. An analysis of the historical role of Christianity in Rwanda reveals that, far from simply adapting to and reflecting Rwandan society, the churches actively shaped the ethnic and political realities that made genocide possible by acting to define and politicize ethnicity, legitimizing authoritarian regimes, and encouraging public obedience to political authorities. Since by any measure of participation and personal piety, Rwandans were devout and active believers, who, although not necessarily renouncing indigenous religious beliefs, nevertheless accepted many of the principles of Christian faith, Christian involvement in the genocide cannot reasonably be attributed to insufficient conversion. Rather, something in the nature of Christianity in Rwanda made it unable or unwilling to restrain genocide. The Christian message received in Rwanda was not one of "love and fellowship," but one of obedience, division, and power. Far from exonerating the churches, the resistance that some Christians presented to the genocide – and my own research indicates that a number of people were indeed inspired by their faith to challenge authoritarianism and oppose ethnic violence – demonstrates that the churches potentially *could* have opposed the genocide. If the churches were, as I contend, powerful and influential institutions that were in fact being pressured from within and without to take a stand against authoritarianism and ethnic violence, why, then, were they so deeply inculcated in the genocide? It is this question that I hope to resolve in the course of this book.

#### GENOCIDE AND RELIGION

That the Christian churches in Rwanda should be implicated in genocide is, of course, not exceptional. Religious institutions have unfortunately been involved in a number of shameful acts, including genocides, in which they provided both ideological and institutional support for those seeking to scapegoat vulnerable minorities. The long history of anti-Semitism among Christians in Europe, dating back to the Roman era and inspiring repeated massacres and expulsions from countries, created the preconditions for genocide against Jews and provided the ideological background for the Nazi doctrines of racial supremacy. Anti-Semitism practiced by Christians in Europe implicated Jews as the killers of Christ,

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in league with the devil, and as child murderers who poisoned wells and degraded society.<sup>24</sup>

Though Nazi leaders were themselves often hostile to Germany's Christian churches, Christianity nevertheless provided ideological support that made the Holocaust possible. As Doris Bergen contended, "[I]t would be inaccurate and misleading to present the Christian legacy of hostility toward Judaism and Jews as a sufficient cause for Nazi genocide. Christianity, however, did play a critical role, not perhaps in motivating top decision makers, but in making their commands comprehensible and tolerable."<sup>25</sup> Most Christians in Germany did not go as far in seeking to reconcile Christianity with National Socialism as the German Christian movement, a radical anti-Semitic faction that gained control of the Protestant churches in 1930s,<sup>26</sup> but the leadership of the major Christian denominations supported the Nazi regime and assisted in the process of genocide by, for example, supplying baptismal records that by exclusion helped identify Jews. The Vatican signed a Concordat with Hitler shortly after his rise to power in 1933, and although the German Catholic bishops challenged the regime on specific issues, such as eugenics, they, like their Protestant counterparts, maintained cordial relations with the regime until the end of the war and never spoke out against the Holocaust.<sup>27</sup>

Christian churches played a particularly important role in supporting the identification, isolation, and deportation of Jews in a number of countries under German occupation during World War II. In Croatia,

<sup>24</sup> See Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1987), pp. 23–89; John G. Gager, *The Origins of Anti-Semitism: Attitudes Toward Judaism in Pagan and Christian Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Henry Zuiker, "The Essential 'Other' and the Jew: From Antisemitism to Genocide," *Social Research*, 63, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 1110–1154; Helmut Walser Smith, "Religion and Conflict: Protestants, Catholics, and Anti-Semitism in the State of Baden in the Era of Wilhelm II," *Central European History*, 27, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 283–314.

<sup>25</sup> Doris L. Bergen, "Catholics, Protestants, and Christian Antisemitism in Nazi Germany," *Central European History*, 27, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 329–349, citation p. 329.

<sup>26</sup> Doris L. Bergen, *Twisted Cross: The German Christian Movement in the Third Reich* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Guenter Lewy, *The Catholic Church and Nazi Germany* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1964); Gordon C. Zahn, *German Catholics and Hitler's Wars: A Study in Social Control* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1962); George Zahn, "Catholic Resistance? A Yes and a No," in Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, *The German Church Struggle and the Holocaust* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), pp. 203–37; Bergen, "Catholics, Protestants, and Christian Antisemitism."