Rwanda: Church Role in Genocide Under Scrutiny

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Were Catholic priests and nuns complicit in mass killings, or simply helpless bystanders?
More than 50 churches in Rwanda have been turned into museums, but instead of viewing artefacts celebrating life, visitors come here to stare at bones.

They are the remains of human beings killed during the 1994 genocide in this beautiful country of endless green hills. There are the bones of adults and, heartbreakingly, also of babies and toddlers who were hacked to death. Visitors come not to see how life was lived but to remember how people were killed.

These bone museums are a silent indictment against many clergymen who were involved in the genocide, in which some 800,000 ethnic Tutsis and moderate Hutus were put to death in just one hundred days - a faster killing rate than that achieved by the Nazis in Germany.

Some of the clergy who have been accused of aiding the killers have been indicted by the Tanzania-based International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, ICTR, some by the traditional village courts called “gacaca”, and others in national courts in Belgium.

Gacaca is an age-old Rwandan system of justice conducted by communities in open-air assemblies, and more recently they have been employed to speed up the process of bringing to justice those responsible for the genocide. The word translates loosely as "justice in the grass."

The latest conviction of a person in religious orders involved a Catholic nun, Sister Theopister Mukakibibi, who was sentenced to 30 years in prison by a gacaca court on November 10.

Mukakibibi was accused of denying food, medication and care to patients at the University Central Hospital in the Butare district of southern Rwanda, and also of driving Tutsi patients out of the hospital in the knowledge that the killers were waiting.

She denied all charges and told a reporter of The New Times, a Rwandan newspaper, that her conscience did not condemn her. "So there is no need to seek forgiveness," she said.

According to Jean-Baptiste Ndahumba, president of the local gacaca court in Butare, the nun did not spare pregnant women and was also accused of dumping a baby in a latrine.

"She used to hold meetings with militiamen and had an army officer as her escort during the killings," said Ndahumba.

Meanwhile, the trial of former army chaplain Emmanuel Rukundo started at the ICTR in Arusha, northern Tanzania, on November 15.
Rukundo was Catholic chaplain in the Rwandan Armed Forces for the Ruhengeri prefecture. The chief ICTR prosecutor, Hassan Bubacar Jallow, said the prosecution would establish that Rukundo was openly extremist and showed his hatred of Tutsis in "words and action". Jallow said Rukundo was fully conscious of his authority, and abused it by promoting hatred, death and mass victimisation.

Much has been written about the role the Roman Catholic Church played in the genocide and its prehistory.

In an article written in 2005, Tom Ndahiro, a human rights commissioner in Rwanda, underscores the view that the Catholic establishment was instrumental in manipulating racial identities and creating divisions between Hutus and Tutsis. He said schools and seminaries helped disseminate racial theories, and that from 1959 these were angled towards keeping the Hutus in power. Instead of speaking out against discrimination and injustice, the church became complicit with the political regime.

Church missionaries were accused of driving a chasm between Hutus and Tutsis even in colonial times. Some critics say that towards the end of the 19th century, the White Fathers religious order promoted Tutsis on the grounds of their alleged racial superiority to Hutus.

The Belgian colonial administration put Tutsis in power in government structures and educated them at Catholic schools in Belgium. But that changed in the Fifties, when the Belgians and the Catholic Church made an about-turn to give more power to the majority Hutus. Fearing that they would lose power, Tutsis took up arms in 1959 but the Hutus fought back and 20,000 Tutsis were killed; many others subsequently left the country.

Tensions between the two groups grew until violence erupted in 1994 after a plane carrying President Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, was shot down. This incident ignited the Rwandan genocide.

William Church, the Kigali-based director of the Great Lakes Centre for Strategic Studies, has no doubt that the Catholic Church in Rwanda stands accused.

"The history of the church in Rwanda is interwoven with the state control apparatus," he said. "For 40 years this was the Catholic Church after independence. There were very few other religious organisations. The Catholic Church did the bidding of the power elite. It took part in the genocide and many leaders were part of the planners."

Since the genocide, heart-wrenching tales have emerged of how people seeking refuge in churches were handed over to Hutu militias by members of the clergy. The conviction of Mukakibibi and the commencement of the Rukundo trial have again focused attention on the church.

On November 16, a Rwandan military tribunal convicted Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka of genocide, in a trial held in absentia. Munyeshyaka, who is now in France, was accused of committing rape and aiding militiamen in the genocide. The prosecutor, Major Christopher Bizimungu, said France would be asked to extradite Munyeshyaka.

Sister Mukakibibi is the third Catholic nun to be found guilty on genocide charges. In 2001 Sister Julienne Maria Kizito and her Mother Superior, Gertrude Mukangango, were sentenced to 12 and 15 years in prison, respectively.
In a trial held in Belgium, they were accused of calling in militiamen to drive out Tutsis who had sought refuge in their convent at Sovu in southern Rwanda. They were also accused of supplying fuel to militiamen to torch a building in which 500 Tutsis were hiding. Around 6,000 Tutsis were killed in the Sovu area.

Before the court case began, Kizito and Mukangango received support from nuns and priests in Belgium, who tried to prevent them being prosecuted. This was in spite of Pope John Paul II’s remarks, made in 1996, that, “The Church cannot be held responsible for the guilt of its members who have sinned against the evangelic law; they will be called to render account of the own actions.”

In 2000, the ICTR acquitted Augustin Misago, bishop of the southern diocese of Gikongoro, of genocide charges. Among other things, Bishop Misago was accused of deliberately sending 19 Tutsi schoolgirls to their deaths at the hands of Hutu mobs.

His acquittal provoked outrage in the international community, with accusations that the ICTR had been swayed by the Catholic Church. The Vatican had issued a statement saying that the Misago’s arrest “wounds the entire church”, and a papal envoy attended each court appearance.

When it comes to the role of Christian churches in the genocide, it is not only Catholics who have been indicted. In 2003, Samuel Musabyimana, the former Anglican Bishop of Shyogwe in central Rwanda, died in Arusha while awaiting trial at the ICTR. He was accused of playing a role in the massacre of Tutsis hiding in his church. He is said to have ordered refugees to be registered according to their ethnic group, and this information was used by the Interahamwe militia to single out Tutsis for slaughter.

Musabyimana, who attended his initial court appearances dressed in full ecclesiastical garb, denied all charges. He told the court, "There is no blood on my hands. My conscience is quiet."

A pastor in the Seventh Day Adventist Church, Elizaqphan Ntakirutimana, has also been arrested by the ICTR and is awaiting trial. He was head of a church at Mugonero in western Rwanda.

Academics, clergy and ordinary Rwandans are still struggling to find the answers to how spiritual leaders could have turned into killers, or accomplices of killers.

Some dismiss suggestions that clerics willingly took part in genocide. In Nairobi, Father Jan Lenssen, a former head of the White Fathers in Kigali, rejects the accusations against the clergy.

"I know of no priest or nun who took up a rifle or a panga against the Tutsis," Father Lenssen told IWPR. "Even though some of the Roman Catholic clergy are being tried in courts in Rwanda and Arusha, I know they had nothing to do with the organisation and preparation of the genocide.

“Sometimes nuns and priests were forced to do things. And now they are being tried for having had no choice."

Lenssen says he and other clergy at the Nyerambo church in Kigali sheltered a group of Tutsis and Hutus for more than a week before the Interahamwe eventually struck. "They chased out the people in the
church and started killing them outside," he said. "We tried to intervene, holding on to those who were being killed. I don't know how I survived. There was a gun in my back. I don't remember any feelings of fear. Uppermost was to try and be of service to the frightened Tutsis."

About 50 people were slaughtered at Father Lenssen's church. The wounded people left behind were cared for by the clergy. Among them was a two-month old baby who had been shot by the militia and was dying. During the night, a distraught Tutsi woman came to ask for help, saying her child had been killed. When she saw the dying baby, she immediately recognised him as the child she thought was dead.

She put him to her breast, and the child recovered. "It was a miracle," Lenssen said.

He said that what he witnessed during the genocide was hard to forget. "On the day the killers came to my church, I knew that the God I believe in cannot be behind this slaughter," he said. "It was human sinfulness, greed and the hunger for power that caused them to kill. They were overcome by hatred."

In the months following the genocide, hundreds of Tutsis came to Lenssen for spiritual guidance. "I realised there was nothing else to do but to let them cry and talk and to let people share their stories," he said. "There is no other response to such an experience than forgiveness and love."

The most Lenssen will concede is that "I know that some clergy were forced to do things they would not otherwise have done - and sometimes their deeds were misinterpreted".

Pre-1994 Rwanda was often described as one of the most religious countries in Africa, with Catholics accounting for more than 60 per cent of the population.

Although the clergy's reputation has been tarnished by its complicity in violence, religion remains the mainstay of many people's lives. Other churches such as charismatic Christian groups seized the opportunity to win support among spiritually confused Rwandans in the wake of the genocide. Islam also appears to be winning converts among those disillusioned with Christianity.

For many years, church leaders were wary of speaking about the genocide. "There was a lot of suspicion. The different churches were accusing each other of being perpetrators," said the Reverend Fred Nyambera, executive director of the Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa.

"These past few years there have been a bigger tolerance and willingness to engage in communication. The situation is not yet perfect, but clergy from all denominations - the Catholic Church, Muslims and Protestants - are working closely together to promote peace in the country."

Nyambera said that there is also a greater willingness amongst clergy to accept that churches were complicit.

"Churches have accepted that they have a responsibility to rebuild the country," he said. "It has to be done by addressing the trauma the citizens suffered. All parishes have their own mechanisms in dealing with trauma healing, and clergy are equipped with skills to respond to those who need to be counselled."
Through bodies like the Interfaith Action for Peace in Africa, religious leaders from diverse belief systems are brought together to promote a shared understanding.

Nyambera said the growth of Islam and charismatic Christian churches these past few years is understandable, "It is happening all over Africa. The charismatic churches meet a certain need. They bring singing and dancing to the people. And they follow an easy-to-grasp doctrine. The Muslims are taking a very prominent role in rebuilding Rwanda."

William Church said that although Catholicism still has a strong base, it also represents the colonial past. "For many, especially those who returned from the diaspora, the Catholic Church represents the genocide - and rightly so," he said.

Church said that Rwandans are a practical people. "The evangelical churches are funded by foreign institutions and they pour a lot of money into Rwanda," he said. "If a church offers education, services, clothes or other items, like the new churches tend to do, the Rwandans like it very much and will attend." He said there is an urban-rural divide, and that people in less developed areas still have a strong attachment to the Catholic Church.

He described Islam in Rwanda as a faith that is quiet and contemplative. The Muslim community is well respected here and growing. "One of the best-known and favourite places to live in town is the Muslim quarter," he said. "It is patrolled by the community with the assistance of the police and is vibrant and honest. Madrassas [Islamic schools] are opening along with social services and Arab investment. This will never be a major religion of Rwanda but it will grow in power, influence and respect."

Nyambera said the church and the state need to work together as partners in rebuilding Rwandan society - but he warned that the church must guard against being manipulated by the state ever again.

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