

Focused on reconciliation: Rwandan protestant theology after the genocide

Transformation

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Abstract

During the 20 years since the Rwandan genocide a number of younger Rwandan theologians have reflected on the terrible events that ravaged their country in 1994. They have presented PhD theses at different universities in Africa and Europe. Four of these deal explicitly with the 1994 genocide. The basic main question of this review article is how these theologians are looking to reconstruct the broken Rwandan society. This analysis reveals that, while exploring a variety of subjects, each of these theologians is looking for a way in which reconciliation may be achieved in Rwandan society, which has been torn apart by the consequences of the genocide. This article indicates the main issues put forward by these scholars and highlights what they have in common and to what extent they differ.

Keywords

Churches and genocide, reconciliation, Rwanda

Introduction

In the years after the Rwandan genocide of 1994, during which 800,000 people, mainly Tutsi, were killed within three months, a stream of publications have been produced with analyses of the history of Rwanda and the political developments that preceded the massacres. A great number of these publications raised the question as to how it was possible that this culmination of cruelties could occur in a country that was known as one of the most Christianized countries of Africa. The question has often been raised as to what the character of the Christian mission in Rwanda was, along with the attitude of the Churches and its leaders. Most of this research has been done by anthropologists, historians and political scientists from Western universities who are not Rwandans.¹

It is interesting, however, to also hear in what way Rwandan Christians are reflecting on their country's recent history, and the role of the Churches before, during and after the genocide. In the last 10 years, Rwandan scholars have produced a number of outstanding publications on these questions. In this article I review four theological dissertations written by young Rwandan Protestant theologians, who are deeply touched, hurt and wounded by what has happened in their country and Churches, and who try to answer these questions, raised above, and particularly try to show a way forward for the Churches in this post genocide period.²

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This article offers an introduction to the aims and findings of these post genocide Rwandan theologians, followed by a short reflection and some conclusive comments.

Tharcisse Gatwa on ethnic ideology in Rwanda

Tharcisse Gatwa presented his dissertation on Christian Ethics in Edinburgh in 1999.³ The book received worldwide attention, and is quoted in all major studies on Churches and the Rwandan genocide that have appeared since. Tharcisse Gatwa was the General Secretary of the Rwandan Bible Society until 1994 when he fled the country. He is presently the research coordinator of the Protestant University in Butare, the Protestant Institute of Arts and Social Sciences (PIASS).

In his analysis of the relations between the Rwandan ethnic groups in 20th century Rwanda, Gatwa states that it was originally not ethnic groups but clans that constituted the Rwandan people's identity. The way of looking at the different ethnic groups like Hutu, Tutsi and Twa was introduced and cultivated by Westerners who arrived from the beginning of the 20th century. Particularly the Roman Catholic Missionaries, active in the country from 1900, applied the Western anthropological concepts of the end of the 19th century to the people living in Rwanda. They took for granted that the Batutsi were descended from a superior race, the Caucasian and Semitic races, who could exert their domination on the inferior races. This has favored a polarization of Rwandan society for which the Roman Catholic Church bears a serious responsibility. This colonial construct of ethnic consciousness was reproduced by the post-independence politicians. It worked as 'a poisonous plant', with the implicit support of the church hierarchies. Gatwa characterizes the attitude of the churches in the post-independence period 1960–1990 as 'a quiescent presence'.⁴ 'The fact that the churches subscribed to the myths of ethnic identity exposed their incapacity to manifest the body of Christ in love, compassion and reconciliation.'⁵

Protestant churches were quiet during the regime of President Habyarimana (1973–1994), as this president gave them a statue of honor they had not had before. As a result, these churches became 'blind to the practice of injustice, as they wittingly endorsed their incorporation into the ruling party.'⁶ As the Church leaders in the last decennia of the 20th century chose to be loyal to the regime, they refused to advocate the repatriation and reintegration of the refugees who had left the country during the political unrest around independence (1959–1961) and later. Thus, legitimizing the regime, these church leaders were affected by an absence of prophetic theology. The refugees, mainly Tutsi, organized themselves politically, and formed an army that attacked the country in 1990. This heightened the tensions that ultimately lead to genocide planned by radical Hutus in 1994. The churches were too closely related to the endangered regime to raise an independent voice.

This thesis about Rwandan society before the genocide deduces what *reconciliation* means: the setting up of a new paradigm of living together, overcoming the negative impact inherited from the misconceptions about people's identity.⁷

Gatwa reveals his education as a journalist through including an interesting chapter on the media.⁸ Gatwa states that, though the churches had substantial access to national print and audio media, during the massacres and the genocide church leaders persistently failed to provide moral guidance, to acknowledge and to condemn the genocide. He stresses the severe state control on the media, and condemns it in strong terminology. In this chapter he develops an ethic for journalists: telling the truth without fear. The establishment of responsible journalism enables the liberation of society from a corrupt system.

Dealing with the Churches' responses to the crises of the 1990s, Gatwa states that the Churches in general accepted the status quo. The Roman Catholic Church risked being the mouthpiece of the regime, and the Protestants were seduced by state misinformation.

Speaking about the Church–State relationships and reconciliation after the genocide, Gatwa mentions the statement of repentance of the Presbyterian Church: ‘the Church is ashamed of having been incapable of opposing or denouncing the planning and the execution of the genocide’.⁹

As a model of reconciliation Gatwa mentions the meeting of Rwandans from different ethnical backgrounds and Europeans in 1996 in Detmold, Germany. The participants – Rwandan Tutsi, Hutu and Europeans – spontaneously came to a mutual confession and acceptance of the pain of the victims of the ‘other side’. This mutual confession brought about the common experience of reconciliation, later known as the *Detmold Confession*.

Gatwa on reconciliation

Gatwa sees reconciliation as a basic attitude of Christians, pervading the life of the church. The Church community, *koinonia*, should aspire to create a new paradigm of living together. This attitude gives the Church a prophetic voice. Churches have ‘the enormous task of persuading the government to create a democratic and moral culture that will enable society to overcome the legacy of years of violence.’¹⁰ Working for reconciliation implies numerous aspects such as the healing of memories, sharing the pain of the ‘other’ in situations where there are victims and perpetrators and filtering out negative effects in Rwandan culture like the submissive attitude towards authorities (*kubaha abategets*). In the post genocide situation, it also implies paying tribute to the martyrs who sacrificed their lives. If we do not remember and pay tribute to them they will have died in vain.¹¹

Ndikumana Viateur: Collective memory and identity

The subject of Ndikumana Viateur’s doctoral thesis is directly connected with the genocide. Viateur Ndikumana is an Old Testament scholar, who presented his thesis at the Faculty of Protestant Theology of Yaoundé, Cameroun in 2007.¹² He is the Vice-Rector of the Protestant University PIASS in Butare.

In 1994, some pastors and Christians justified the extermination of an enemy by genocide based on the text of Deuteronomy 25, 17–19, that they read in connection with I Samuel 15.

Deuteronomy 25, 17–19 reads as follows:

Bear in mind what Amalek did to you on the journey after you left Egypt, how without fear of any god he harassed you along the way, weak and weary as you were, and cut off at the rear all those who lagged behind. Therefore, when the Lord, your God, gives you rest from all your enemies round about in the land which he is giving you to occupy as your heritage, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. Do not forget!¹³

In I Samuel 15, 2–3 we read:

This is what the Lord of hosts has to say: ‘I will punish what Amalek did to Israel when he barred his way as he was coming up from Egypt. Go, now, attack Amalek, and deal with him and all that he has under the ban. Do not spare him, but kill men and women, children and infants, oxen and sheep, camels and asses.

Using a literal and fundamentalist interpretation of this text, some extremist Hutu identified themselves with Israel, seeing the Tutsi as Amalek, and by doing so justifying the genocide of the Tutsi as a God given order. Ndikumana is not a historian and his purpose is not to analyze who have acted during the genocide to justify the killings by the God given command to annihilate the

Amalekites, nor which pastors referred to the story of Amalek in this context. As a close observer of the genocide he simply mentions that this argument was used, and as an Old Testament scholar he is searching for an answer to the basic questions of this research: how is it possible that in the book of Deuteronomy, where loving one's neighbor is stressed (Dtr. 10, 19), God could order a genocide? Also, why does this law to exterminate Amalek concern only the Amalekites, whereas Israel has had many nations as enemies, such as Egypt, Edom and Moab? Looking for answers, Ndikumana discovered that the book of Deuteronomy should be read as the result of the theological thinking of the Jewish community in exile in the Persian period of the Middle East, 539–332 BC. This was the first period in which the notion of the people of Amalek was presented in Jewish literature. There are a number of reasons why it is doubtful if the people of Amalek ever really represented a historical reality: the Old Testament scriptures are not clear on the question of where to localize the people of Amalek; the great prophets of Israel do not mention Amalek; and finally, in non-biblical literature there is no mention found of the people of Amalek. In contrast to Amalek, the historical enemies of Israel enumerated in Deuteronomy 7, are sometimes mentioned in a positive way: the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5 stress the need for hospitality to strangers, and Deuteronomy 23 suggests the possibility of the integration of the Edomites and the Egyptians with the Jewish people. Amalek, however, is always presented as the symbol of evil, the enemy of Yahwe.

Besides Deuteronomy, in every period of the history of Israel one finds stories about Amalek as the enemy to be overcome. The culmination of this is in the book of Ester about Haman, the Amalekite, who is the archetype of 'the enemy of Israel'. In the history of Judaism, Amalek is actually everyone who preaches anti-Semitism.

Bearing this in mind, the special emphasis on the need to remember and not to forget in the periscope of Deuteronomy 25, 17–19, has a particular meaning: "Bear in mind" (Dtr. 25, 17); "Do not forget" (Dtr. 25, 19) ... the possibility of Evil!

This brings Ndikumana to his main thesis: the history of Amalek is the theological construction of the deuteronomist. The Deuteronomic law to exterminate Amalek should be read as an exhortation to unity based on a painful memory, and to underscore the importance of the collective memory of a community inviting it to display actions of grace.

The relevance of Deuteronomy for the Rwandan situation

In the final chapter Ndikumana applies this concept to the Rwandan situation. The collective memory of Rwanda has created the identity of the people of Rwanda. 'In the Rwandan crises, it is evident that the manipulation of history has played an important role. The collective memory is the self-chosen privilege (*la chasse gardée*) of the victors or conquerors, who use the collective memory to legitimize their ideology, and to re-enforce the dictatorial powers.

On the one hand the extremist Hutu, eager for power, repeatedly spoke of the oppression of the Hutu masses by the Tutsi monarchy. On the other hand, certain Tutsi groups fostered feelings of supremacy (*imfura*) over others. At the time of ultimate crisis, this has led to the genocide. The people and their acolytes who planned the genocide made extensive use of the broad presence of legends and myths to refresh the negative memory of the Rwandan kingdom that was falsely attributed to all Tutsi.

In this discourse, the Church remained silent, thus becoming implicated in the injustice based on the manipulation of history.

The Church should bear in mind that the evil of history should be remembered, for the sake of healing for all members of society. Selective memory may create animosity. If the memory of an evil event should serve the healing of society, it is necessary to relate it to healing in the light of the

Gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation. Christians should be conscious of the Pascal event, which invites remembering the liberating act of God that is revealed even in the experience of evil. The Christian who participates at the Eucharist is not like a historian who regards history from a distance, but is performing an introspection that leads to his/her proper engagement. Through the Eucharist it is possible to overcome fear and discover hope.

Ndikumana on reconciliation

When Ndikumana speaks of reconciliation, he speaks of dealing with the past, being careful when building up a collective memory, in such a way that it opens up understanding of the present and gives hope for the future. Why should we remember? Do we remember history in order to find a reason to take up our machetes, our arms, or do we remember in order to place the acts of salvation of God in the centre of our existence? There is reason to ask the question: How is it possible to control a painful memory without losing one's Christian identity? The answer is that remembering should not lead to feelings of vengeance or animosity, but open up towards a common future.

Here Ndikumana formulates some critical questions. All commemoration, as a translation of the Hebrew word *zèkhèr*, including the collective commemoration of the genocide organized by the State in April every year, should be a creative process to enrich the future. If people forget their history they can easily be manipulated.

Ndikumana mentions that in Rwanda memorial monuments of the genocide are erected where not all of the population recognize themselves. He mentions as well that those people who resisted the genocide are not always taken into consideration, or sometimes seem to be forgotten.

In commemorating the past, it is not the diabolization of the enemy but the struggle against evil that should be the central theme. This is what Ndikumana labels: a positive memory, with reference to what the French philosopher and theologian Paul Ricoeur has called *Katharsis partagé*.

The best summary of the book is perhaps given in its last sentence: 'The Church is the pre-eminent place of memory where the victim who is heard may build a better future in company with the guilty person who is confronted with his responsibilities.'¹⁴

Samuel Cyuma: Conflict resolution in South Africa and in Rwanda

Samuel Cyuma is a Rwandan pastor who had to leave his country in 1994 and now lives in the United Kingdom, where he ministers in the United Reformed Church in England and Wales. He submitted his PhD thesis at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies (OCMS) in 2005.¹⁵ The African Studies Association of the UK awarded the thesis the Audrey Richards Prize for the best thesis submitted during 2004–2006.

Cyuma compared the process of healing started in South Africa after Apartheid with the efforts in Rwanda to deal with the past after the genocide. After the change of power from the white Apartheid regime to a Parliament democratically chosen through general elections, the South African government saw its task to create unity in the middle of divisions along lines of color, power and wealth. They created a commission of Truth and Reconciliation (TRC).

By exploring the history of South Africa's Apartheid and its end, and the role of the mainline churches therein, Cyuma shows how this TRC, while being an institution created by the government, was inspired by Christian thinking and behavior, not least by the presence of its president, the Anglican Archbishop Tutu. Cyuma does not hide his disappointment that churches in general in South Africa have failed to develop their own programs towards reconciliation.

Analyzing the method used by the TRC, Cyuma mentions the healing process that was developed, when it created a 'safe space' to tell the truth. The TRC emphasized that reconciliation could

be achieved through both telling the stories and being heard. In this context he speaks of ‘the Christian leavening of the African culture of truth telling’.¹⁶ The TRC investigated fearlessly without manipulation from the State. ‘In holding both the oppressor and the oppressed to account, it called for an attitude of dialogue and mutual care in the future.’¹⁷

In a broad analysis of the Rwandan conflict, Cyuma points out that the conflict was driven by the desire for wealth and resource control, which led politicians to exploit long lasting differences between ethnic groups in order to seize or remain in power. Apart from the differences between Hutu and Tutsi, also the 1990 invasion of the Rwandan Patriotic Front army and the antagonism between the Hutu from the North and the Hutu from Central Rwanda played a decisive role in the chaotic situation just before the genocide.

Cyuma observes that the Churches played an ambivalent role and lacked a proper prophetic theology. However, in the years before the genocide, particularly from 1991, the mainline churches of Rwanda had implored politicians when their leaders created a committee that started mediation between the political parties within the country and organized meetings to negotiate between representatives of the rebel invasion army and the legal government.

In contrast to South Africa, the Rwandan government that was established after the genocide, stressing that reconciliation is impossible without justice, decided not to institute a Truth Commission, but to opt for popular verdicts on the grassroots level: *gacaca*. Cyuma does not deny the qualities of this program, but stresses that it is not a solution towards a genuine national reconciliation. Conflicts have been approached only at a local level, while the resolution of conflict between political rivals, political leaders of different orientations and histories, has been avoided. This leaves the basic conflicts unresolved and a national reconciliation still hindered by the current political regime. The author painfully illustrates that the influence of the churches has diminished or been avoided or opposed.

Cyuma on reconciliation

Apart from these more descriptive passages, Cyuma also speaks extensively on the meaning of reconciliation, as a central notion of the Christian faith, basing himself on the Catholic theologian Robert Schreiter and the South African Desmond Tutu. According to them, Churches should work to develop their active role in dealing with the reconciliation process. Real reconciliation, however, is not only a product of spirituality but also of strategy.

Churches ought to be among the state’s partners in reconciliation, as Churches can build a safe common future of effective justice and truth telling. In this context Cyuma also mentions the Detmold Confession that was described by Gatwa. He stresses that safe places of truth telling should not only be victim centered, but that also perpetrators should be taken into account.

One of the author’s remarks in passing is that fear and suspicion between Rwandans inside and outside the country at the time of the research were experienced as an obstacle to gathering his material.¹⁸ This shows how far removed the Rwandan community still is from reconciliation, even among those who, prior to 1994, belonged to the same church community.

Pascal Bataringaya: Reconciliation as central focus

The title of the thesis by Pascal Bataringaya that was defended in 2012 at the Faculty for Protestant Theology of the Ruhr University in Bochum (Germany) makes immediate use of the word reconciliation: *Reconciliation after the Genocide*.¹⁹

Pascal Bataringaya studied theology at the Faculty of Protestant Theology of Butare, where his Master’s thesis was on issues of conflict solving and non-violent action. He is presently the President of the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda.

Bataringaya is impressed by the fact that human society on all levels is characterized by conflicts that often lead to violence. This brings him to the question: how is it possible to solve conflicts in a peaceful way? In looking for an answer to this question he refers to two African bishops, Desmond Tutu and Festo Kivengere, a fearless Anglican Bishop in Kampala, Uganda, at the time of the dictatorship of Amin, a strong promoter of non-violent resistance. He then concentrates on the question: which incentives may be found in the ethical thinking of Bonhoeffer for conflict solving in Rwanda?

Festo Kivengere, the Ugandan bishop under Amin, stated simply: 'Bullets may kill but may not heal'. His position was clear: Violence creates violence. Killing the leader of violence, leads to violence.²⁰ This plea for non-violence contrasts in a certain sense to the ethics of Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was involved in an attack on Hitler.

Bataringaya struggles with the fact that while Bonhoeffer in his book *The Cost of Discipleship* (1937) proposed a strict ethic of non-violence, he nevertheless some years later was involved in an attack on Hitler. Bataringaya finds an answer in considering that Bonhoeffer saw as his personal task that in following Christ he had to take up sin, to be involved in murder, for the sake of freedom and peace for others, and as an act of resistance against the violation of human rights. Bataringaya sees taking one's responsibility in society as the basic notion in Bonhoeffer's ethics. He quotes Bonhoeffer, stating that one of the possibilities of responsible behavior in society may be 'to throw a spanner in the works of the state'.²¹ Living peacefully with a corrupt government and a corrupt Church is not real peace.

Where reconciliation has a prominent place in the title of his book, Bataringaya does not go into detail on the essence or definition of reconciliation or discuss who should be reconciled with whom. He mentions three realms of reconciliation: reconciliation with the past, reconciliation with the present, reconciliation with the future.²² It is a shame that he does not elaborate on this at length.

In his conclusion Bataringaya underlines that distancing oneself from one's responsibility in society is not a Christian attitude. The Church should be active in conflict prevention, conflict solving and peace education, and actions of reconciliation. In doing so, African traditions of conflict solving should also be taken into account. He mentions *gacaca* as a particular precious Rwandan tradition for conflict solving by sessions of wise men in a local community. Bataringaya presents *gacaca*, which was applied to the problem of the administration of the jurisdiction to tens of thousands of suspects of collaboration of genocide, as the proof that Rwanda is capable of solving its own problems. In contrast to the findings of Samuel Cyuma, Bataringaya states, without any analysis or argumentation, that this justice of *gacaca* is comparable to the TRC in South Africa.

Reconciliation: A long way to go

Surveying these four theological dissertations, the first thing to observe is that Cyuma, Ndikumana and Bataringaya all give many quotations of the book of Tharcisse Gatwa. His research proves to be a rich source for the knowledge and ideas of the history of the Churches before and during the genocide. However, these three researchers are not engaged in a dialogue with one another. Their books have appeared during the same period, independently from each other. All books offer a richness of ideas and approaches, and a dialogue between the authors would be promising. This dialogue still has to be started.

The second observation is that despite the differences in subjects, one of the underlying questions of each study regards the calling of the Churches to consciously work toward reconciliation. When combined, these studies offer a deep theological reflection on this task of the church. Gatwa brings forward the example of the Detmold Confession with its mutual confession of

Hutu, Tutsi and Europeans. Reconciliation may occur when there is openness for mutual confession of failures, which provokes feeling the pain and sorrow of the other.

Also Ndikumana mentions this exceptional role the Church may play in reconciliation as he explicitly mentions that the victim and the offender may build a new future. Cyuma also sees reconciliation as a central message of the church. He is the most explicit of the four on this matter.

When Gatwa explains that the Church should work for a real *koinonia*, Ndikumana expresses in a nutshell what others have been saying about story-telling, which is preferred over ‘speaking about reconciliation’.

In these studies on the churches and genocide, I feel all the authors’ great disappointment with the attitude of the Church in the past. Failures were made by church leaders who did not properly instruct the population, or by early missionaries who had invented divisions within the population. On the other hand, I read great expectations from the church. Reading this, I ask myself if the role of the church in the past has been as decisive as is often stated and if its possibilities in the actual situation are not overestimated. Has the church really the position ‘to persuade the government to create a democratic and moral culture’, as suggested by Gatwa? Were the politicians really listening to the church in the crucial period during independence of the country, or, on the contrary, were the Churches obediently following the politicians in their interpretation of Rwandan history? Anyhow, all four researchers, each in their own way, stress the need for the church leaders to be independent from the State. Each of them offer perspectives for the development of concrete actions at both parish and national level.

As such, these studies offer a rich source for a fruitful dialogue on reconciliation in the new Rwandan context, as well as across geographical boundaries. In this context it is worthwhile to listen to the hopeful suggestion made by the now UK based Samuel Cyuma, in the last sentence of his book: the Churches should also lead a dialogue engaging Rwanda’s nationals, both within and outside the country. Considering this, one might conclude that there is still a long way to go before arriving at reconciliation.

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Notes

1. Carney (2014); Longman (2010); Mamdani (2001); Prunier (2005); Reyntjens (1994).
2. Some other dissertations, for which the research had sometimes already started before the genocide, or that do not particularly deal with the genocide, are not taken into account in this article: Kalimba (2005); Musemakweli (2003); Ntuhinyuzwa (2002); Rwandyindo (2009).
3. The book was published in French (Gatwa, 2001). The English translation appeared in 2005 (Gatwa, 2005).
4. Chapter 4: The Churches: A Quiescent Presence, 1960 to the 1990s, in Gatwa (2005: 106–148).
5. Gatwa (2005: 33).
6. Gatwa (2005: 138).
7. Gatwa (2005: 105).
8. Chapter 5: Ethnic Ideology and the Media in the 1990s: A Case Study, in Gatwa (2005: 149–180).
9. Gatwa (2005: 227).
10. Gatwa (2005: 255).
11. Gatwa (2005: 254).
12. The book was edited in 2012 (Ndikumana, 2012).
13. The quotes from the Bible are taken from *The New American Bible*.
14. Ndikumana (2012: 258). Translation GS.

15. The research was published in 2012: Cyuma (2012).
16. Cyuma (2012: 152).
17. Cyuma (2012: 157).
18. Cyuma (2012: 297).
19. Bataringaya (2012).
20. Bataringaya (2012: 82, 95).
21. Bataringaya (2012: 131).
22. Bataringaya (2012: 182).

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