Grief and Denial among Rwandan Catholics in the aftermath of the Genocide against the Tutsi

Peine et déni parmi les catholiques rwandais à la suite du génocide contre les Tutsis

Pena y negación entre los católicos de Ruanda tras el genocidio contra los tutsis

Philippe Denis

Electronic version
URL: https://journals.openedition.org/assr/38889
DOI: 10.4000/assr.38889
ISSN: 1777-5825

Publisher
Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version
Date of publication: 1 September 2018
Number of pages: 287-307
ISSN: 0335-5985

Electronic reference
Philippe Denis, “Grief and Denial among Rwandan Catholics in the aftermath of the Genocide against the Tutsi”, Archives de sciences sociales des religions [Online], 183 | juillet-septembre 2018, Online since 01 January 2022, connection on 08 January 2022. URL: http://journals.openedition.org/assr/38889 ; DOI: https://doi.org/10.4000/assr.38889

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Few countries have a past as contested as Rwanda. The 1959 Social Revolution, the October 1990 Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) invasion, the preparation, outbreak, unfolding and aftermath of the genocide, and the post-genocide regime all give rise to different interpretations. As Katharine Hodgkin and Suzannah Radstone pointed out, “contests over the meaning of the past are also contests over the meaning of the present and over ways of taking the past forward” (Hodgkin and Radstone, 2003: 1). Likewise, memories, which reconstruct the past through a complex process of selection, omission and reordering guided by the orientations and concerns of the present, are also the object of contestation. This is particularly true after a war when mass trauma and power struggles reinforce each other. A growing body of scholars define this phenomenon as politics of memory. “The politics of war memory and commemoration,” write Ashplant and his colleagues (2000: 16), “is […] the struggle of different groups to give public articulation to, and hence gain recognition for, certain memories and the narratives within which they are structured.”

If the number of people killed during the genocide, in less than three months and in horrible circumstances, is disputed – between 500,000 and 1,000,000 or more depending on the interpretation of the figures of the August 1991 Rwandan census, – there is a relative consensus regarding the proportion of victims among the Tutsi themselves, namely three out of four.¹ The main debate concerns the crimes committed before, during and after the genocide by the RPF, which has ruled the country since 1994 (Des Forges, 1999: 702-735). This includes the massacre of the archbishop of Kigali, Vincent Nsengiyumva, of the bishop of Byumba, Joseph Ruzindana, and of the bishop of Kabgayi, Thaddée Nsengiyumva, of nine priests, one brother and two other people by RPF soldiers on 5 June 1994 in Gakurazo near Gitarama. Also disputed is the manner in which the government commemorates and memorialises the

¹ The Belgian political scientist Filip Reyntjens (1997: 186), one of the harshest critics of the current RPF government and of its memorialisation policies, does not dispute this figure.
genocide. In recent years, several authors critically examined the politics of memory in post-genocide Rwanda (Vidal, 2004; Jessee, 2012; Jessee 2017; Longman, 2017). Some question the centrality of the genocide, to the exclusion of any other form of violent deaths, in state-sponsored commemorations (Longman, 2017: 12).

This paper explores one aspect of the problem of memory in post-genocide Rwanda: how Rwandan Catholics dealt with the memories of the genocide in the period that followed.² By Rwandan Catholics we mean not only the bishops and the representative of the Holy See but priests, sisters and lay people inside the country and in refugee camps across the borders. Also included are the missionaries who left Rwanda in April 1994 but continued to shape public opinion afterwards. The focus is on the three months or so during which the genocide was perpetrated (7 April – 4 July 1994) and the following year. The findings are primarily based on archival documentation but they also draw on conversations with Rwandans inside and outside the country.

The question to which this paper tries to provide an answer is whether or not the Catholic Church failed to acknowledge the reality of the genocide in the period following the victory of the RPF, as a certain number of people close to the new government accused it of doing. What did Catholics say or write – or omitted to say or write – about the genocide during this period? Did they contribute – or not – to the grieving process of the genocide survivors, in a context marked by sometimes heavy accusations against their alleged silence during the genocide?

The position of the RPF government is spelled out in a 35-page-long memorandum entitled “Préoccupations sur l’attitude de l’Église catholique face à l’évolution politique du Rwanda après le génocide” (Concerns about the attitude of the Catholic Church regarding the political evolution in Rwanda after the genocide) that a group of 24 people, who in their majority declared to be members of the Catholic Church, addressed to Pope John Paul II in March 1996. The most prominent was Privat Rutazibwa, a priest from North Kivu who had been ordained in 1990 and had joined the RPF in the Ruhengeri area two years later. While recognising the positive role of the Catholic Church in social matters and the fact that a majority of Rwandans were Catholic, the document accused the bishops’ conference, the nunciature and “numerous clerics from Rwanda and abroad”³ of denying any responsibility in the succession of events which led to the genocide. They also blamed them for systematically denigrating the new government. The memorandum implied

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2. The genocide against the Tutsi has generated a flood of books, journal articles and website pages. Yet, the number of academic studies on the subject remains limited, especially on the Christian churches’ response to the genocide. See Rittner et al. 2004; Longman 2011; Rutayisire 2014a, 2014b.
that with the exception of two organisations – the Comité pour la relance des activités pastorales (CRAP) in the diocese of Butare and the Groupe de Réflexion of Kigali, a group of diocesan priests and religious coordinated by the Dominican Bernardin Muzungu – the Catholic Church of Rwanda had “opted for the status quo”.

This statement needs to be tested against evidence. The paper argues that, if a certain number of Catholic priests and bishops did indeed minimise or even deny the genocide against the Tutsi, there has been among Catholic priests and laity, especially inside the country, a much wider recognition of the horror of the genocide than is often assumed. The Catholic Church of Rwanda did not speak with one voice.

The ambiguities of the Catholic hierarchy

The massacres started in the early hours of Thursday 7 April 1994, shortly after the plane transporting the president of Rwanda, Juvenal Habyarimana, his Burundian counterpart Cyprien Ntaryiamira, and a few others was shot down by a surface-to-air missile whose source is still debated today. A few days later, some of the bishops who were in Kigali at the time, about to board a flight for Rome where they would have attended the synod of bishops on Africa, followed the interim government to Gitarama in the southern province, where it had relocated after the beginning of the massacres, fearing that the RPF might seize Kigali. One of them was Vincent Nsengiyumva, the archbishop of Kigali, a man very close to the president and his inner circle. It was from there that Thaddée Nsengiyumva, the bishop of Kabgayi, a locality close to Gitarama, issued, on behalf of the bishops’ conference, over which he presided, the first episcopal statement of the genocide period. This is an important document because it set the tone for all subsequent episcopal statements. This document was published in French in the 11-12 April 1994 issue of the Vatican-based Osservatore Romano. The bishops, the statement read, “condemn with vigour these troubles and their authors who, under pain and sorrow, act in a spirit of vengeance and go on rampage, shedding the blood of other Rwandans in the process without any concern for the leaders and nor compassion for the little children”. They praised the Forces armées rwandaises (FAR), the national army, and pledged support to the interim government.4

In fact, as early as 7 April 1994, when the bishops were still in Kigali, soldiers of the Presidential Guard had proceeded to targeted killings. Among the victims were the Prime Minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, politicians and civil society personalities, both Hutu and Tutsi, who were known for resisting the pressure of the Hutu extremists, Belgian soldiers, several Tutsi priests including three Jesuits and members of the Emmanuel Catholic Charismatic Community. It is true that RPF soldiers, stationed in Kigali under provisions

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of the August 1993 Arusha Accords, had been involved in shootings in the Remera and Kacyiru areas, but the majority of victims, in all parts of the capital, were Tutsi. Jef Vleugels and Guy Theunis, two Missionaries of Africa who sent faxes to their confrères in Belgium until their departure from Rwanda on 13 April, mentioned on several occasions that soldiers had massacred groups of Tutsi people.\(^5\) If the Missionaries of Africa knew the situation, how could the bishops have ignored it? They remained in Kigali until the 12\(^{th}\) (Sibomana, 2008: 90). Like all Rwandans, they listened to the Hutu extremist radio, *Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines* (RTLM), which multiplied the calls to murder (Chrétien, 1995).

The language the bishops used in their first statement fitted the discourse of the government, whose prime minister, Jean Kambanda, later pleaded guilty to genocide at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in Arusha. A key element of this discourse, which would be repeated by many Hutu in exile and their European supporters after the genocide, was that “angry crowds” were responsible for the massacres and that the authorities of the state did everything they could to stop them.

The Catholic bishops made another statement on 16 April, as did in subsequent weeks the bishops of Kigali, Kabgayi, Kibungo, Byumba, Gikongoro and Nyundo in their individual capacity. On two occasions, on 13 May and 22 June, representatives of the Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and Pentecostal churches made a joint pronouncement. “The leaders of the Catholic and Protestant churches in Rwanda,” a statement read by a Catholic priest speaking on behalf of the churches declared for example on Radio Rwanda on 15 May, “ask with insistence to the RPF and to the Rwandan government that by love for God and his children they put an end to the war and stop the massacres which still take place on the entire national territory. It is shamefully contradictory to systematically decimate the Rwandan population while claiming to defend its interests.”\(^6\)

These declarations had in common the fact of putting on an equal footing the interim government and the RPF with the implication that if the two could speak to each other the massacres would stop. They spoke of a war between rival armies, not of a genocide. Not once were the ethnic character of the conflict and the fact that the Tutsi population was systematically targeted and murdered mentioned in these documents (Ngomazungu, 2000: 112-135). It was as if the analyses made before the genocide, at the time of the Arusha Accords in particular, were still valid. As they had tried to do with the so-called Contact Group (Rutayisire, 1995b: 430-431; Ngomazungu, 2004a, 2004b; Longman,

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2011: 159), the church leaders positioned themselves as mediators between two equally strong groups. The specificity of the genocide was not taken into consideration. This raises many questions. As the historian Paul Rutayisire, the author of one of the first studies on the Catholic Church’s response to the genocide, put it, “the hypothesis of an ignorance of the magnitude of the disaster is hardly sustainable. The bishops were close to the men who, from Gitarama, centralised the operations, the international radios spoke about it and the refugees gathered in Kabgayi had told them what they were running away from (Rutayisire, 1995b: 418).

The statements issued in the period immediately following the genocide suffer from the same ambiguity. In all of them the bishops responded with outrage to the accusations of complicity or silence levelled against the Catholic Church by people associated with the new government and expressed concern for the disorders happening in the country. Rather than accepting at least some form of responsibility, they denounced the revenge killings committed by soldiers and survivors, the detentions without trial of people denounced for having taking part in the genocide and the illegal occupation of properties belonging to people having fled the country.

It was not until 30 March 1995 that the bishops employed the word genocide – coupled with the term “massacres” – for the first time. “We condemn and disapprove of the acts of massacres and genocide [les actes de massacres et de génocide] which marked the last year,” they wrote. “We ask all those who love peace to refuse for themselves and combat any idea of restarting such a tragedy.”7 This was their fourth statement since the end of the genocide. The first dated from 5 September 1994 when they met as a group in Butare and met Pie Mugabo, a representative of the RPF government, on this occasion (Ngomazungu, 2000: 140). The second was a pastoral letter entitled Aime ton frère (Love your brother) published for Christmas on 21 December 1994 (Ngomazungu 2000: 151-152; Ngomazungu, 2004b: 6-7). The third was a document dated of 12 January 1995 that was entitled “Concerns of the members of the bishops’ conference of Rwanda addressed to the authorities” (Ngomazungu, 2004b: 7).

The omission of any mention to the genocide was intentional. In the report he presented at a meeting of the Association of Episcopal Conferences of Central Africa (ACEAC) on 10 December 1994 in Kinshasa, Thaddée Ntihinyurwa, the vice-président of the bishops’ conference of Rwanda, spoke, in a language reminiscent of the episcopal statements issued during the genocide, of the “two power hungry warring parties (RPF and Rwandan armed forces)” and rejected as scandalous any idea of responsibility of the Catholic Church in the genocide (Ngomazungu, 2000: 148). Yet, the declaration signed by the thirty participating bishops from Zaire, Rwanda and Burundi, including

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the two representatives from the bishops’ conference of Rwanda, did mention
the term genocide in a paragraph denouncing “ethnic integralism” (*intégrisme
etnique*), the “Manichean heresy of the twentieth century.” The lack of
leadership, the document read, “led, in our region in general and in Rwanda
and Burundi in particular, to massacres of population and acts of genocide
[*actes génocidaires*] aiming at the physical destruction of human lives on the
basis of ethnic and political identity.”

If the joint document spoke of a genocide, why did the Rwandan bishops
refuse to use the term in their presentation? Another document shows that
this omission was deliberate. In a letter to a group of Catholics from Butare,
Wolfgang Schöneke, the secretary of the Association of Member Episcopal
Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA), gave the reason why the word
genocide was omitted in the message the Association addressed to the Rwandan
government after a visit in the country in November 1994. “If the bishops
did not use this word,” he explained, “that was out of respect for their host
bishops who did not use the word either in their descriptions of the tragic
events nor in their last message to the Rwandan government.”

The harshest denunciation, on the side of the Catholic hierarchy, of the
abuses committed in post-genocide Rwanda came from the apostolic vis-
tor, a Polish Pallotine priest by the name of Henryk Hoser who had been
involved in healthcare and development projects in Rwanda in the early
1990s. He was appointed by the Holy See to a care-taking capacity in July
1994 in replacement of the previous nuncio, Giuseppe Bertello, a man who
had taken a stand when the Habyarimana government allowed crimes against
the Tutsi population to happen (Rutembesa, 2000: 91-92) and whom the Hutu
priests in exile in Goma considered as subservient to the RPF (Cariou 1996,
229-230). It would be unfair to accuse the Rwandan bishops of denying
the genocide. Things are less clear with Hoser who can be described as a hard-line
opponent of the RPF government (Rutayisire, 1995: 432-433; Chrétien, 2012:
63). In a letter of 9 January 1995 to Alphonse Marie Nkubito, the Minister
of Justice, which he co-signed with Pierre Nguyên Van Tôt, an official of the
nunciature, he denounced the claims made in the government-controlled
media that the Catholic Church might have been involved in the genocide,
intimating sinister motives on the part of the Rwanda government. “It is not
excluded,” he wrote, “that these accusations aim at removing from attention
the messages delivered for a long time by the Catholic Church in favour of

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8 Wolfgang Schöneke to a member of the Comité de Relance des Activités Pastorales du diocèse
de Butare (CRAP), 20 January 1995, quoted in “Rwanda: Préoccupations sur l’attitude de l’Eglise
catholique,” p. 23: “Si les Evêques n’ont pas employé ce mot, c’était par respect de leurs Evêques
hôtes qui n’ont pas employé ce mot ni dans leurs descriptions des événements tragiques, ni dans
leur dernier message au Gouvernement Rwandais.”
peace and national reconciliation or hiding certain crimes committed against the Catholic hierarchy and the ecclesiastical personnel.”

Reconstructing the Church on a new basis

The documents quoted so far may give the impression that in the year which followed the genocide the Catholic Church of Rwanda as a whole refused to admit the existence of the genocide and rejected all responsibility for it. The situation is less simple. Inside the country a number of lay people, priests and even bishops taken individually fully admitted the horror of the genocide and tried to deal with its effects, while recognising that, on a number of counts, the political, social and judicial situation of the country left a lot to be desired. We shall see in the next section that the situation outside the country, in the refugee camps in Zaire and in Europe, was different. There attitudes of denialism abounded. Here we shall survey – briefly – the responses to the genocide in four dioceses about which archival documentation is available.

Butare

On 17 August 1994, soon after his return from Bukavu, where he had taken refuge at the end of the genocide, Jean-Baptiste Gahamanyi, the bishop of Butare, instituted the Commission de Relance des Activités Pastorales (Commission for the revival of pastoral activities), usually referred to as CRAP, to re-establish the Church in his diocese, one of the most affected by the genocide and also one where revenge killings and other forms of abuse were taking place with great intensity at the time. It was placed under the responsibility of Félicien Mubiligi, the vicar general, and included Laurien Ntezimana, a lay theologian trained in Europe, and Modeste Mungwareba, a priest who later became the general secretary of the bishops’ conference. Heir to the Service d’animation théologique (Service of theological training) or SAP, a lay education programme established before the genocide, CRAP adopted the position, from the beginning, that given the magnitude of the trauma caused by the genocide, it was pointless to think in terms of business as usual. Rather a new way of being church, less reliant on clergy, parishes and institutions, had to be invented. Lay educators would receive training and be deployed in the various sectors. Without being actively involved in the project, Gahamanyi gave it his full support. His successor, in 1997, was less enthusiastic and CRAP eventually ceased to exist.

Space constraints prevents me from doing justice to this significant project. Only two of the twelve bulletins it produced between September 1994 and December 1995 will be referred to here. CRAP was among the few church initiatives of the post-genocide period that gained approval across the spectrum of political and ideological opinions. It is mentioned with praise by the historian

Paul Rutayisire (1995: 436), by the French left-wing Catholic magazine *Golias* which campaigned for the recognition of the Catholic Church’s complicity in the genocide\(^\text{10}\) and in the document compiled by Privat Rutazibwa and other RPF-aligned Catholics in March 1996.\(^{11}\) But CRAP bulletins were also cited in *Dialogue*, a Brussels-based journal which, while reporting on the genocide and its aftermath, gave a forum to the Hutu in exile and denounced, at regular intervals, the exactions allegedly committed by the RPF government.\(^{12}\) Church documents from all quarters favourably referred to the CRAP bulletins.

The first bulletin, published on 21 September 1994, set the tone. In a “loyal appraisal” (*constat loyal*), it evoked the “contradictory feelings” of the Tutsi, “who were meant to die” but survived and, in a number of cases, wanted vengeance, and of the Hutu, “who were not meant to die” and took part “more or less or not at all” in the massacres. There was an “unanimous consensus,” it further observed, on the fact that “Christians, from all walks of life, had not been up to the mark, except for a few who stayed faithful to love which is stronger than death”. The first task was to analyse the reasons of the “Christian hurry-scurry” (*la débandade chrétienne*) and put an end to it by an evangelisation resolutely more in tune with the Gospel.\(^{13}\)

CRAP did not hesitate to criticise the Catholic bishops’ reluctance to use the term genocide. In reference to the “Message to the government of Rwanda” an AMECEA delegation issued on 21 November 1994, the fifth bulletin commented: “The word ‘genocide’ and the sad reality it designates embarrass so many people that one prefers to maintain upon everything an imprudent silence.”\(^{14}\)

**Kigali**

In the months following the genocide, various initiatives aiming at dealing with the situation sprung up in the Catholic diocese of Kigali. Many are characterised by an honest recognition of the seriousness of the trauma. Everywhere the infrastructure was destroyed and insecurity reigned supreme. One of the more pressing problems was the huge number of orphans and children in search of their parents.

On 14 November 1994, at the initiative of the bishop a group of priests met to discuss the situation (Ngomazungu, 2000: 148). The meeting was chaired by Bernardin Muzungu, a Tutsi Dominican from Kibeho who had been working in Burundi until then and who had lost many family members to the genocide. Disagreement soon emerged on the need to question the...
attitude of the Catholic Church during the genocide. The group lost many members but continued to meet. The following year it published a booklet entitled “Des prêtres rwandais s’interrogent” (Rwandan priests wonder). “The question that is being asked here,” they wrote, “is whether Christians really committed faults, directly and consciously. All agree that unfortunatety the response is positive. Given our numbers in this country, the crisis would have been impossible if no Christians had taken part in it.”

On the whole the priests adopted a less defensive attitude in matters concerning the genocide rather than the hierarchy. The proceedings of a meeting held from 29 May to 1 June 1995 at the Christus Centre in Kigali bear witness to this. Eighty-three Rwandan priests from all over the country took part in the session. Four bishops were present but they did not make any statement. There were no missionaries. The surprise comes less from the speakers who, like Oreste Incimata, a priest of the Kibungo diocese, invited the participants to take the accusations levelled against the Church “as a point of departure for a constructive reflection” or who, like the Jesuit Octave Ugirashebuya, insisted on the “duty of intellectual lucidity” but from the participants whose views were recorded – anonymously – in the proceedings. Denounced, for example, were the Church’s collusion with the temporal power, the exploitation of the ethnic problem within the Church and the lack of discernment when evil forces started to manifest themselves. “On many occasions,” a small group reported, “the Church under-estimated the danger of an emerging institution, of an ongoing diabolic idea or project such as the parties Parmehutu and CDR or Radio RTLM.” Also questioned, in one of the small groups, was “the timidity and inefficiency of our interventions; the bishops rarely take a personal stand on local situations and sometimes give the impression of sheltering themselves behind the decisions of the Conference of Bishops.” “The church statements, another small group reported, “used to come too late and did not address the real issues.”

Kibungo

The June 1995 issue of Stella Matutina, the diocesan bulletin of the Kibungo diocese, the first to be published after the events of 1994, gives an idea of how the bishop, Frederic Rubwejanga, and his collaborators dealt with the memory of the genocide. Massacres of civilians, including five priests and a seminarian, started in the Kibungo area the very morning following the

17. Ibid., p. 23.
19. Ibid., p. 27.
shooting down of the president’s plane. They culminated in Nyarubuye, on
the eastern most part of Rwanda, close to the Tanzanian border, where an
estimated 26,000 people were massacred on 15-17 April (Rutazibwa and
Rutayisire, 2007; Rutayisire, 2014). The bishop, a Tutsi, was spared but he
witnessed, on 15 April, the slaughter of 1200 refugees in a church hall attached
to his residence. On 19 April he made the trip to Gitarama, at the invitation
of the interim government which provided an escort, and on that occasion
delivered a message on radio to the members of his diocese (Ngomazungu,
2000: 115). He returned to Kibungo, this time without escort, soon afterwards.
The massacres ended at the end of April when the RPF seized the eastern part
of Rwanda, causing the flight of hundreds of thousands of Hutu people to
refugee camps in Tanzania.

That no effort was made to dissimulate the reality of the genocide in the
diocese of Kibungo is showed by the fact that in June 1995 a day-by-day
narrative of the tragedy was published in the diocesan bulletin under the
supervision of the bishop if not from his pen.21 In a word of introduction
Rubwejanga shared his wish to “entrust to memory these events which we
are still unable to comprehend in order to maintain the consciousness of the
unheard of that befell upon us [confier à la mémoire ces événements que nous
parvenons pas encore à comprendre, pour garder la conscience de l’inouï qui
nous est arrivé].” He disputed the claim that the Church should have used its
moral autority to prevent the genocide. It would not have worked, he argued,
because the Church did not have any coercitive power. He did not deny that
the Church had colluded with the Rwandan governement but added that
there had been people – he probably referred to Alois Birigumwami, the first
bishop of Nyundo – in the episcopate who expressed reluctance to do so.22

Kabgayi

Before the genocide the clergy of the Kabgayi diocese in the southern province
was one of the most independent of the country. In a document entitled
“Convertissons-nous pour vivre ensemble en paix” (Let us convert together to
live in peace), with a word of introduction by the bishop, Thaddée Nsengiyumva,
the presbyterium of Kabgayi denounced, with unprecedented frankness, the
ethnic, social and regional segregation and the corruption commonly in use
under the Habyarimana regime. It also denounced the culture of fear and
lies reigning in the Catholic Church and its reluctance to distance itself from
the government.23 Despite this, the bishop of Kabgayi was murdered by RPF
soldiers, as we have seen, together with two other bishops and a number of
priests, in Gakurazo near Kabgayi on 5 June 1994 (Linguyeneza, 1999). On 11
August Henryk Hoser, the apostolic visitor, appointed André Sibomana, as

21. “La tragédie d’Avril 1994 dans le Diocèse de Kibungo,” Stella Matutina,
12 (June 1995), pp. 6-9.
apostolic administrator of the diocese. He remained in this position until the appointment of Bishop Anastase Mutabazi in March 1996. Sibomana, who served as parish priest of Muyunzwe, south of Gitarama, was a well-known journalist and human rights activist who, as editor of Kinyamateka, a widely-read Catholic newspaper, had documented fraud and corruption committed by government officials in the late 1980s and been sent to court in September 1990 for that reason. He was a founding member and first president of a human rights organisation called Association pour la défense des droits de la personne et des libertés publiques (ADL) which denounced, in the reports it published in December 1992 and December 1993 in particular, atrocities committed by the Rwandan army and the RPF. During the genocide, after narrowly escaping arrest and death, Sibomana stayed in his parish and saved the lives of at least three Tutsi (Sibomana 2008: 96). He fled to Kibuye after the murder of the three bishops. That he named and denounced in the most explicit terms the genocide is backed by strong evidence. He was one of the few church leaders, if not the only one, who used the word genocide in a public statement during the months following the genocide. At meetings held on 20 August, 7 October and 17 October 1994, he wrote in a pastoral letter dated of 2 November 1994, “the priests reflected on the manner of preaching the Gospel in the current context of a Rwanda marked by this catastrophe of the genocide of unprecedented magnitude in the history of humankind [par cette catastrophe du génocide d’une ampleur sans précédent dans l’histoire de l’humanité].” In an interview with a French magazine in January 1995 he declared that the “smallest perpetrator [of the genocide]” should be tried “according to the law” but that no capital punishment should be allowed because that would be adding deaths to other deaths. In an editorial of Kinyamateka, the editorship of which he had resumed in the meantime, he deplored, on the occasion of the genocide’s first anniversary, the “humanitarian catastrophe” which had happened in Rwanda and was “without precedent” in the history of the African continent. “The religious leaders who, for a long time, have been preaching love and charity,” he wrote, “saw some of their flock, even the baptised, plan and execute the genocide to preserve their personal interest, with no regard for their faith.”

But Sibomana was as controversial after the genocide as he was before. Attacks against him came from various quarters. At the meeting of priests held in late May in Kigali the Jesuit Octave Ugirashabuya criticized him without mentioning his name. “Kinyamateka, he said, which is for moment

the only official organ of the Church, cannot be left to the whims of a single man: a fully responsible editorial committee must be put in place without any delay.”  

In August 1995, the French magazine *Golias* included his name in a list of “priests and pastors who took part in assassinations or encouraged assassinations in Rwanda”. Rutazibwa and his co-signatories accused him of spreading false news on the persecution of the Catholic Church in the memorandum they addressed to Pope John Paul II in March 1996. In a recent book, historian Timothy Longman refers to the rumour spread after the genocide according to which Sibomana would have instigated the forced resignation of Félicien Muvara, a Tutsi appointed to an episcopal see in 1989 (Longman, 2017: 62-63).

How does one explain that a man who had unambiguously acknowledged the genocide caused so much irritation – among people linked to the new government – that some of them went to the extent of threatening him? “For the RPF, I was and I continue to be, a suspect”, he declared in a book-interview with two French journalists in 1996 (Sibomana, 2008: 103).

The answer is that, while being a priest and, after the death of the bishop of Kabgayi, an apostolic administrator, Sibomana maintained the style and the discourse of a campaigner. As much as he denounced the human rights abuses perpetrated under the Habyarimana regime, he publicised those committed under the RPF government. A qualified journalist, he made the effort, more than any other church official, of documenting as precisely as possible the massacres committed by the RPF in his diocese. For example he established, on the basis of an investigation conducted in July and August 1994 in the municipality of Musango near Birambo, that in this area alone 216 people had been massacred by the RPF and 200 declared disappeared.

**Genocide denialism in the refugee camps**

In Rwanda few Catholics – and the same could be said of the members of other Christian denominations – made attempts to deny the genocide, no doubt because its reality was all too visible. In some church circles, the Conference of bishops for example, semantic contortions disguised the true nature of the genocide for a while but they did not amount to a denial. The situation was different in the refugee camps of South and North Kivu where close to two million people – then gradually less until the Rwandan army forcefully closed them in late 1996 – gathered under the supervision of the UN Refugee Agency.

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The defeated army and the former government reconstituted themselves and the Rwandan administrative structure with cells, sectors, municipalities and prefectures was recreated. The proportion of genocide perpetrators in the refugee population is difficult to establish, but it is clear that they exercised some form of control over the thousands of ordinary people who had fled the country in panic, terrorised by the RTLM propaganda, when the RPF had seized the country. Never disarmed, the ex-FAR troops and groups of Interahamwe militia infiltrated the western provinces of Rwanda with the avowed intention of completing the “work” undertaken during the three fateful months of March–July 1994. For them, Rwanda had gone through a war, not a genocide. At a meeting held in Bukavu in September 1994 in Goma, the High Command of the FAR described as a strategic “weakness” the fact that “the Government [was] the object of accusations of genocide by the RPF and certain countries and international organisations favourable to the RPF.”

Eighty priests and more than a hundred seminarians, according to the Conference of bishops, took refuge in Zaire. Like the government in exile, the Catholic Church recreated in the camps, as effectively as it could, the ecclesiastical structure that was in place in Rwanda before the genocide. Each camp had “parishes” served by a certain number of priests (Cariou, 1996: 230). The bishop of Ruhengeri, Phocas Nikwigize, officially retired for reasons of age, continued to administer confirmations. His former vicar general, Simon Habyarimana, was the de facto administrator of the Catholics in exile (Cariou, 1996: 244). On the attitude of the Hutu priests in exile in Goma, the diary of Pierre Cariou, a French priest who had worked in North Kivu as a missionary in the mid-1980s and who returned to Goma in August 1995 for two weeks at the invitation of the local bishop, provides first-hand information. He had no sympathy for the RPF but was unwavering in his condemnation of the genocide. During a one-day visit to Kigali at the end of his stay, he found the time to visit the genocide sites of Nyamata and Ntarama and came back from there in shock (Cariou, 1996: 251-252). He found “reductionnist” (réducteur) the sketch of Rwandan history the bishop of Ruhengeri had given him one day, without saying a word of the massacres suffered by the Tutsi population in 1959 and

31. According to an international evaluation task force, “between 10 to 15 percent of the refugees in the camps (adult and adolescent) are alleged to have participated directly in mass killing.” See Joint Evaluation of the Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, “The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwanda Experience. Synthesis Report,” March 1996, 39. However, according to a UN report quoted in “Goma-Bukavu : témoignage direct novembre 96-janvier 97,” Dialogue, 196 (February 1997), 53,7 % of the refugees had taken part in the massacres.


34. Simon Habyarimana subsequently wrote a biography of Bishop Phocas Nikwigize, which, as one could expect, presented his life and work in a very positive light (Habyarimana, 2016).
in subsequent years (Cariou, 1996: 215). On 6 August 1995, during a visit of
the refugee camp of Katale in the company of Bishop Phocas, he entered the
following comment in his diary: “Regarding the tragedy of last year, I expected
expressions of regret or remorse. Nothing of that kind! It was the Tutsi who
started it, they said. They want all the power (Cariou, 1996: 232-233).”

A letter addressed to Pope John-Paul II by twenty-nine priests on 2 August
1995 from Goma confirms the impression that, for these priests, the problem
was not the genocide, about which they hardly said a word, but a “vast
anti-Catholic movement fed, unfortunately, by some priests who actively
participated in the subversive manoeuvres of the RPF”. They described the
latter as the author of numerous atrocities and the security situation in the
country as apocalyptic. This explained, they claimed in reference to the motive
given by the Hutu extremists to justify the slaughter of the Tutsi, “the anger of
the people [le courroux du peuple]”, including “some of our best Christians”.
As a condition to their return in Kigali they insisted that the RPF ceased to “fill
Kigali with elements foreign to this city” and that one should stop “speaking
of an international tribunal where the criminals would be at the same time
the accusers and the judges”. 35 Simon Habyarimana presumably had a hand
in the drafting of this letter and in the canvassing of signatories. Seventeen of
the priests who supported the initiative – more than half of the total – were
from the diocese of Ruhengeri, an area with very few Tutsi, and therefore
little direct experience of the genocide, but, on the other hand, memories of
the vast camps or refugees who had fled the advance of the RPF during the
1990-1994 period.

One should not conclude from this document that all the priests in exile
shared the views of the Hutu extremists. Another joint letter, sent from Bukavu
on 29 November 1994 and addressed to the bishops of Rwanda, shows a
different type of reaction. “We hope that you understand the reasons which
compel us to delay our return,” they wrote, without further description of the
security situation in the camps and around the city of Bukavu. The refugees,
they commented, are “like sheep without shepherds”. In view of all the
challenges they faced they would have welcomed a visit from their bishops.
“Who speaks of reconciliation to the Rwandan people,” they added in a tone
distinctly different from that of the letter to Pope John Paul II, “should not
forget that the clergy itself must do an autocritique in the light of the Gospel
so that the Church of Rwanda no longer loses face in front of people and,
worse still, in front of God.” 36

35 “Lettre des prêtres des diocèses du Rwanda réfugiés Goma (Zaire) adressée au Très Saint
Père le Pape Jean-Paul,” Goma, 2 August 1994, in Ndorimana, 2001 : 170-175. For an analysis
of this letter, see African Rights, 1995: 906-908.
36 “Lettre des prêtres rwandais à leurs évêques,” Bukavu, 19 November 1994, in de Dorlodot,
Missionary activism

It is among missionaries, a certain number of Missionaries of Africa (or White Fathers) in particular, that one finds the clearest expression of the tendency to minimise, relativise and, in some cases, justify the genocide. Some spoke or wrote from Europe where they had returned in the meantime, others from refugee camps in Tanzania or Zaire. It was their proximity with the Hutu in exile, some of whom tended to deny the genocide, which explains the radical tone of their discourse.

The phenomenon of genocide denialism has been the object of several studies (Dumas, 2009; Chrétien, 2012; Semujanga and Galabert, 2013; Chrétien and Kabanda, 2016). The denialist narrative includes some or all elements of a series of stereotyped elements. The first is that the RPF was responsible for all the troubles in the region by invading Rwanda in October, destabilising in the process a country that until then was well managed and was free of major ethnic tension. The second is that it was the RPF which had shot down the president’s plane on 6 April 1994 with the intention of destabilising the country and gaining exclusive power in this manner. If the leaders of the RPF had wanted it, they could have stopped the genocide. The third, to which we have already alluded, is that the killings of Tutsi had been carried out by angry mobs, enraged at seeing their president assassinated. In no way could the genocide have been planned. The fourth element, which is also the most controversial, is that, during the genocide period, the RPF killed more Hutu people, in Rwanda and in the refugee camps, than the Hutu people killed Tutsi people. The difference is that the Tutsi, clever and deceitful as they are, managed to hide their crimes by dissimulating the corpses and that they successfully waged a propaganda war. This part of the narrative has been called the “double genocide” theory.

That missionaries contributed to this narrative along with Christian political leaders and development workers is well known (Saur, 1998; Chrétien, 2012: 98-100; Chrétien and Kabanda, 2016: 308-311). More research is necessary to explain this phenomenon and establish how widespread it was. We shall quote here a few examples. It would certainly be wrong to say that all Missionaries of Africa for example relativised the genocide but it is clear that some of them did.

Some missionaries had internalised the idea that the Tutsi and Hutu are two fundamentally different types of people, the former proud and arrogant by nature and the latter in need of support because permanently humiliated, to the point that they found the genocide excusable – just like the massacres of Tutsi in 1959, 1963-1964 and 1973 had been. Wolfgang Schöneke, the AMECEA secretary, in a document reproduced in the internal newsletter of the Missionaries of Africa in September 1994, stopped short of justifying the genocide as being caused by the antagonism between Hutu and Tutsi. “The Rwandan genocide is too horrible,” he wrote. “We should not either excuse it
nor justify it. But the question remains: Why has this happened? How should one explain this explosion of murderous rage? If we have a closer look at these events we find several factors: a struggle without concession for power, anger and hatred accumulated for generations, a difficult social situation and external interferences” (Schöneke, 1994: 423; De Dorlodot, 1996: 70).

As early as May 1994 the phrase “double genocide” was already in use – in the French conservative newspaper _Le Figaro_ for example (Chrétien, 2012: 95). Somehow it came to the ears of Philippe De Dorlodot, a Belgian Missionary of Africa ministering in Bukavu, a city which had witnessed between April and June 1994 the arrival of genocide survivors completely terrified and from July the exodus of thousands of Hutu refugees. After a visit to a refugee camp in Goma, he came back with the notion, based on the rumours collected there, that the RPF had committed atrocities equal to if not worse than those committed by the perpetrators of the genocide. “There are two genocides in Rwanda,” he wrote. The country “is destroyed by the extremisms from both sides” (De Dorlodot 1996: 88).

Aelvoet, De Dorlodot and Schöneke were primarily missionaries. The case of Serge Desouter was different. He was a priest, working in a parish near Antwerp at the time of the genocide, but he was also a development worker, with an expertise in veterinary science and rural development acquired when he was a missionary in northern Rwanda from 1968 to 1977 and from 1980 to 1983. This put him in contact with members of the Christelijke Volkspartij (CVP), the Flemish branch of the Belgian Christian-democratic party, and in particular with Rika De Backer, a former Cabinet minister actively involved in Christian Democrat International, an international Christian-democratic network. Since 1985 both had a hand in ACT, a Flemish development agency close to the CVP which had projects in Rwanda.

Léon Saur, a former staffer of the _Parti Social Chrétien_ (PSC), the French-speaking branch of the Belgian Christian Democrat party, has described in a book (1998) the involvement of Christian Democrat International, whose headquarters were in Brussels, in the affairs of Rwanda before and after the genocide. Juvénal Habyarimana’s MRND party was a member of Christian Democrat International. Through his links with Rika De Backer, the president of ACT, Desouter had contacts with the CVP and Christian Democrat International. All saw the RPF as a threat to a regime with which they had a long association both at the level of African politics and of rural development.

In October 1994 Desouter was part of a delegation of conservative European politicians which tried to put in place, at a meeting held in Bukavu, a political solution for Rwanda along those lines. This became, in April 1995, the Rassemblement pour le Retour de la Démocratie au Rwanda (RDR), headed by François Nzabahimana (Saur, 1998: 95-99; Chrétien and Kabanda, 2016: 310-311). Desouter described his journey to Bukavu via Kigali in his memoirs (Desouter, 2014: 355-357). Unlike Cariou he did not meet survivors of the genocide against the Tutsi.
According to the Catholic Church of Rwanda’s *Annuaire ecclésiastique* for the year 1994-1994, sixty-nine Missionaries of Africa from various nationalities worked in Rwanda on the eve of the genocide. A handful had pro-Tutsi sympathies. Most identified, to different degrees, with the Hutu cause and were spontaneously suspicious of the RPF. This was particularly true of the Ruhengeri diocese, in the north, which only had a limited number of Rwandan priests. More research would be necessary to establish with sufficient detail the Missionaries of Africa’s response to the genocide.

One thing is sure, however. Missionaries such as De Dorlodot, Schöneke and Desouter, who relativized the importance of the genocide, cannot be said to be representative of the congregation. Ironically, it was Guy Theunis, a missionary who was later accused of supporting the genocide and who spent three months in jail as a result (Theunis, 2005), who acknowledged it in the clearest terms. Unlike some of his confrères, Desouter for example, he had no hesitation in declaring that the genocide had been programmed. A typewritten document entitled “*L’Église au Rwanda: où en est-elle aujourd’hui?*” (The Church in Rwanda – how is it faring today?) which he wrote in September 1995 reveals a deep awareness of the trauma caused by the genocide. At the time, he was in Brussels, busy, among other things, with the editorship of the journal *Dialogue*, the publication of which had been transferred from Kigali to Brussels after the genocide. Meanwhile, just like his friend André Sibomana, he made a point of mentioning the crimes he believed had been committed by the RPF. “When one reads an ecclesial text coming from Rwanda, when one meets somebody who returns from there, the first impression one gets is that of people deeply affected by what happened: the programmed massacres of the Tutsi, the massacres of the Hutu elite (massacres which continue up to this day, though on a more limited scale admittedly). Some have not yet absorbed what has happened, either because they deny the reality of the genocide, or because they were deeply traumatised personally. The only thing to do in such case is to listen to them, and help them to deal with their difficulties.”

Like all Rwandan institutions, but with particular intensity given its pervasive influence in society, the Catholic Church has become a site of memory contestation after July 1994. Its members articulated the memory of the genocide against the Tutsi in very different manners. There were many Catholics among the survivors, including a number of priests. They were naturally inclined to support the memorialisation efforts of the RPF government. They fully acknowledged the horror of the genocide and insisted that

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it should be remembered and commemorated. Typical of this attitude were CRAP in the diocese of Butare, the bishop of Kibungo and the assembly of priests in June 1995 in Kigali.

More troubling was the attitude consisting of minimising and relativising the genocide. We have seen that until April 1995 the Conference of bishops – as opposed to the bishops in their individual capacity – deliberately refused to use the term genocide in public statements. So did Henryk Hoser, the apostolic visitor. One can suspect, in fact, that Hoser exercised some influence on the position of the Conference of bishops in that respect.

It was in the refugee camps, that of Katale near Goma for example, that the refusal to acknowledge the reality of the genocide was the most perceptible. The refugees, a certain number of whom had perpetrated the genocide, passed on news, true or false, of RPF atrocities to the Catholic NGO workers and missionaries who visited them.

A matter of intense contestation, up to this day, is the extent and the nature of the crimes committed by the RPF. They have certainly been exaggerated by the Hutu in exile and their friends in the West, but this does not mean, far from it, that they were all invented. The matter of the RPF crimes played a central role in the politics of memory after the genocide. Two narratives of articulation of memory, to speak like Ashplant and his colleagues (2000), never ceased to compete: one, state-sponsored and the other one, peripheral but nevertheless influential. Rwandan Catholics substantially contributed to both.

Philippe Denis
University of KwaZulu-Natal
denis@ukzn.ac.za
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Grief and Denial among Rwandan Catholics in the aftermath of the Genocide against the Tutsi

The attitude of church members and church leaders – Catholic as well as Protestant – during the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda is an ongoing object of contestation. A careful examination of the sources shows that the Catholic Church never spoke with one voice on this matter. During the genocide itself and in the period immediately following the genocide, the Catholic bishops, the Holy See and a good number of missionaries failed to recognise the reality of the genocide, adopting instead a posture increasingly critical of the new Rwandan government. By contrast, among the priests and the laity, in Kigali, in Nyundo and in Butare in particular, many clearly manifested the desire to establish the truth of what happened and to rebuild the church on a new basis.

Keywords: Catholics, denial, genocide, Rwanda, Tutsi.
Peine et déni parmi les catholiques rwandais à la suite du génocide contre les Tutsis

L’attitude des chrétiens – catholiques autant que protestants – et de leurs dirigeants lors du génocide des Tutsis au Rwanda est très débattue. Un examen attentif des sources montre que l’Église catholique du Rwanda n’a jamais parlé d’une seule voix sur cette question. Pendant le génocide lui-même et dans la période qui l’a suivi immédiatement, les évêques, les représentants du Saint-Siège et un grand nombre de missionnaires n’ont pas pris la mesure de la réalité du génocide, adoptant au contraire une posture de plus en plus critique à l’égard du nouveau gouvernement rwandais. Par contraste, parmi les prêtres et les laïcs, à Kigali, à Nyundo et à Butare en particulier, beaucoup ont clairement manifesté le désir d’établir la vérité sur ce qui s’était passé et de reconstruire l’Église sur une nouvelle base.

Mots-clés : catholiques, déni, génocide, Rwanda, Tutsi.

Pena y negación entre los católicos de Ruanda tras el genocidio contra los tutsis

La actitud de miembros y líderes de iglesia – el Católico así como el Protestante – durante el genocidio contra el Tutsi en Ruanda es un objeto de debate. Un examen cuidadoso de las fuentes muestra que la Iglesia católica nunca habló con una voz sobre esta asunto. Durante el genocidio mismo y en el periodo inmediatamente después del genocidio, los obispos Católicos, la Santa Sede y muchos misioneros fallaron en reconocer la realidad del genocidio, adoptando en cambio una postura cada vez más crítica del nuevo gobierno ruandés. En cambio, entre sacerdotes y laicos, en Kigali, en Nyundo y en Butare en particular, muchos claramente manifestaron el deseo de establecer la verdad de que pasó y reconstruir la iglesia sobre una nueva base.

Palabras clave: Católicos, negación, genocidio, Ruanda, Tutsi.