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# From “a Theology of Genocide” to a “Theology of Reconciliation”? On the Role of Christian Churches in the Nexus of Religion and Genocide in Rwanda

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**Abstract:** This paper explores the role of a specific religious actor, namely Christian churches, in the nexus of religion and genocide in Rwanda. Four factors are identified that point to the churches' complicity in creating and sustaining the conditions in which the 1994 genocide could occur, leaving up to one million people dead. These factors include the close relationship between church and state, the churches' endorsement of ethnic policies, power struggles within the churches, and a problematic theology emphasizing obedience instead of responsibility. Nevertheless, the portrayal of all Christian churches as collaborators of the genocide appears too simplistic and one-sided. Various church-led initiatives for peace and reconciliation prior to the genocide indicate a more complex picture of church involvement. Turning away from a “Theology of Genocide” that endorsed ethnic violence, numerous Christian churches in Rwanda now propagate a “Theology of Reconciliation.” A modest empirical case study of the Presbyterian Church (EPR) reveals how their “Theology of Reconciliation” embraces the four dimensions of theology, institutions, relationships, and remembrance. Based on their own confession of guilt in the Detmold Confession of 1996, the EPR's engagement for reconciliation demonstrates religion's constructive contribution in Rwanda's on-going quest for sustainable peace and development.

**Keywords:** genocide; religion; Rwanda; Christian Churches; violence; peace; Reconciliation

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## 1. Introduction

In 1994, the fastest genocide in recent history cost about one million people in Rwanda their lives. The victims were mostly members of the Tutsi minority, while most perpetrators belonged to the Hutu majority. Yet both ethnic groups were predominately Christian, as over 90% of the Rwandan population claimed and still claims adherence to the Christian faith. Different from previous massacres, in 1994, church buildings were no longer respected as sanctuaries but became death traps. The human rights group “African Rights” points to the fact that “more Rwandese citizens died in churches and parishes than anywhere else” ([African Rights 1995](#), p. 865). This begs the question of the role of the Christian faith—both in its institutionalized forms as churches and in its intellectual forms as theology—in the Rwandan genocide. And it further necessitates investigations into the role religion plays in post-genocide Rwanda's current quest for national reconciliation.

This contribution from a theological perspective is based on the premise of the inherently ambiguous nature of religion that contains both conflict-enhancing traits and resources for conflict

transformation (Appleby 2000).<sup>1</sup> While much of current debate frames religion in either substantial or functional terms (Werkner 2016), this contribution embraces Jacques Waardenburg's pragmatic perspective to understand as religion what is described as religion by interlocutors and communities (Waardenburg 1986, pp. 250–55; cf. Frazer and Friedli 2015). For the purpose of this paper, this means understanding Christian churches as genuine expressions of (institutionalized) faith.

This paper seeks to shed light on the questions framed above in three consecutive steps. After a brief introduction into the context, the second part explores the role of the Christian churches and their theology before and during the genocide. Here, their institutional complicity with severe structural injustice and problematic theological aspects serving to fuel ethnic divisionism and hatred will be critically analyzed (cf. Rittner et al. 2004). A third part examines the role of Christian churches and their theology in the country's current process of reconciliation. A modest empirical study of the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda (EPR) serves to illuminate the specific strengths and weaknesses of religious actors in dealing with the legacy of the genocide while striving for a common future of survivors and perpetrators.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. The Context: Rwanda and the Genocide

In April 1994, the small East African country of Rwanda came into the focus of the world's attention when a genocide erupted and up to 1,000,000 men, women, and children were killed within three months before the eyes of a world community standing by (Dallaire 2004). While most of the victims belonged to the Tutsi minority of about 15% (Muyombano 1995, p. 30), countless moderate Hutu—who harbored Tutsi refugees or refused to participate in the slaughter—were murdered as well. Here, it is important to keep in mind that Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa (a minority of 1%) are not regarded as conventional ethnic description. Rather, these groups of people share the same culture, the same language, and often the same religion. Prior to the arrival of the colonizers—first the Germans, and after World War II, the Belgians—Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa were occupational designations. Herdsmen were considered Tutsi, while farmers were called Hutu. The name Twa referred to the profession of the potter (Bataringaya 2012, p. 22). It was the colonial powers that solidified the boundaries between the different social groups and, with their strategy of divide et impera, promoted inter-group rivalry. Richard Friedli rightly asserts a “historical responsibility of Europe” (Friedli 2000, p. 138f) in view of Africa's ethno-political conflicts, including Rwanda. A complex mixture of inter-group rivalry, social injustices, and power struggles in the churches and the state led to repeated massacres with hundreds of thousands of people killed, culminating finally in the genocide of 1994. The “fastest genocide in modern history” (Scheen 2014) not only stood out due to its brevity and intensity but also due to its preventability—still on the eve of the genocide, UN-AMIR force commander general Roméo Dallaire asked the UN for reinforcement of his meagre peacekeeping troops—and its cruelty. Many of the victims were hacked to pieces with machetes and thrown into latrines to die. In view of the excesses of systematic sexual violence during the Rwandan genocide, the International Tribunal for Rwanda ruled that rape and sexual mutilation are henceforth punishable as genocidal crimes (“Akayesu-ruling” of 1998). Another characteristic of this genocide is the fact that, oftentimes, perpetrators and victims knew each other. They were neighbors, friends, or even family.

At the time of the genocide, Rwanda was “one of the most Christianized countries in the world” (Karegeye 2011, p. 82), with over 90% of its inhabitants claiming adherence to the Christian faith. Different from other contexts, the Tutsi were not ostracized due to their religious belief. Rather,

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the problems related to “religious violence” (cf. Cavanaugh 2004).

<sup>2</sup> The empirical case study was conducted over the course of two years (2014–2016). Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with church leaders of different churches and in different functions (e.g., church president, pastor, youth leader, etc.), in addition to fifteen narrative interviews with congregants. Questions included the respective understanding of the role(s) of the churches before, during, and after the genocide, the interview partner's understanding of reconciliation, and the perceived churches' impact on the national process of reconciliation and social healing. The interviews were analyzed based on the qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2015; cf. Flick et al. 2015).

Tutsi and Hutu shared the same, Christian religion. With about half the size of Switzerland, Rwanda is one of the smallest countries in Africa, yet at the same time, it is one of the most densely populated. Notwithstanding massive economic progress in the past few years (Ammann 2015), Rwanda still belongs to the countries of low human development. For our following deliberations, it is furthermore important to keep in mind that everyday life in Rwanda, especially in the rural areas, cannot be lived individually. Rather, everyone is dependent on the mutual interaction and assistance based on family and village structures, even for everyday chores such as fetching water, tilling the fields, and harvesting. Now is the time that even long-term prison sentences for genocidaires are drawing to an end. Upon release from prison, perpetrators usually go back to their home villages, oftentimes the place of their crimes and the home of survivors. Different from the European situation after World War II, for example, there are no borders between perpetrators and survivors (Cobban 2005).<sup>3</sup> Rwanda is too small and too overcrowded for perpetrators and victims to avoid each other permanently. Given the complex emotional mixture of fear, hatred, and revenge, yet at the same time the necessity to live and work together as one nation, the quest for sustainable peace and reconciliation has become imperative. The Rwandan government under current president Paul Kagame has therefore implemented a “National Politics of Reconciliation.” As significant actors in civil society, the Christian churches play a crucial role in this national project. Yet before we turn to the churches’ role in Rwanda’s current process of reconciliation, we will explore the role of the churches in the making of the Rwandan genocide.

### 3. Complicity of the Churches? The Christian Churches and the Genocide

“Christian churches were deeply implicated in the 1994 genocide of ethnic Tutsi in Rwanda” (Longman 2001, p. 163). While during previous massacres, churches had been respected as sanctuaries, they became death traps during the genocide. It was not uncommon for a death squad in local communities to include prominent lay church people, priests, or other church employees, and at times church personnel themselves would lead the killers to the people seeking refuge in churches. Yet, genocide does not happen overnight. As John K. Roth points out, “complicity in it can include conditions—social and political, economic and religious—that have long been in the making” (Roth 2004, p. 209f.). In the following, I will focus on these conditions that allowed for the genocide to occur as I examine the roles that the Christian churches played in creating and sustaining—and, in some instances, in opposing—these conditions.<sup>4</sup>

#### 3.1. Creating the Conditions for Genocide

When considering the churches’ complicity in these conditions, four key factors stand out, the historic strong link between church and state, the acceptance and active involvement of the church in ethnic policies, power struggles within the church,<sup>5</sup> and a problematic theology.

1. Church and state in Rwanda. In order to gain a better understanding of the historic close connection between church and state in Rwanda, one needs to turn to the very beginnings of Christianity in this country.<sup>6</sup> At the Berlin Conference of 1884/1885, Rwanda and Burundi were allocated to Germany as part of German East Africa. The Germans ruled in an indirect manner

<sup>3</sup> Helena Cobban points to the complexity of the categories “perpetrator” and “victim.” “We tend to ignore the traumatization that perpetrators suffer; we ignore, also the fact that many ‘victims/survivors’ are not themselves pure innocent: indeed, frequently people who have themselves survived the torment of others go on to become enactors of torment in their turn” (Cobban 2005, p. 1136).

<sup>4</sup> The conditions discussed are neither sufficient conditions nor are they necessary conditions for a genocide to occur. Rather, they shed light on the role of the Christian churches before and during the genocide and their implications in creating conditions that allowed for a genocide to occur.

<sup>5</sup> On the first three factors (cf. Longman 2001). While Longman is compelling in his analysis, his understanding of the outer factors for church membership, such as competition for power, tends to neglect intrinsic motivational factors (Longman 2001, p. 170).

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed documentation of the colonial history of the Catholic Church (cf. Linden and Linden 1977; Kalibwami 1991).

and supported the authority of the native king, Yuhi V Musinga. While the king was a Tutsi, Maria Brandstetter points out that neither all Tutsi belonged to a hereditary aristocracy nor did exclusively Tutsi belong to the ruling class (Brandstetter 1989). It was only the colonial powers who reinterpreted social categories in terms of ethnic categories.

In 1900, the so-called White Fathers, a French Missionary Order, entered the country, tolerated by the Germans. Cardinal Charles Martial Allemand-Lavig erie, founder of the White Fathers, aimed his mission strategy at converting the ruling class first before reaching the subordinates through them (Van't Spijker 1997, p. 239).<sup>7</sup> After World War I, Belgium became the new colonial power. The White Fathers were allowed to continue their mission work, as the Belgians relied on their cultural experience. When the Belgians introduced a political reform, they appointed almost exclusively Tutsi as district chiefs. While this policy already heightened the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi, the introduction of identity cards according to ethnic groups in the 1930s cemented it. On many levels, the Belgian authorities worked closely with the Catholic White Fathers as the "missionaries sought to make churches important actors in the country's political struggles" (Longman 2001, p. 168). When King Musinga resisted conversion, his son Mutara III Rudahigwa, a devout Catholic, was appointed as successor. Gerard van't Spijker states, "There was a perfect relationship between Church and State" (Van't Spijker 1997, p. 241). King Rudahigwa was baptized in 1943. In 1946, he dedicated his country to Christ the King. Increasingly, it became recognized that church affiliation was a helpful means in reaching political power. The elite began to convert, followed by the masses. The number of Catholic Church members grew steadily, even after the proclamation of Rwanda's first republic in 1961 and its independence in 1962. In 1990, about 65% of the Rwandan population belonged to the Catholic Church.

2. The churches and ethnic policies. A second characteristic of the churches' engagement in Rwanda is their involvement in ethnic policies. Ethnicity became a crucial factor in mission strategy in order to determine the elite and target them for conversion. The missionaries based their activities on the concepts of the nineteenth-century explorers and anthropologists. The Tutsi were viewed as Hamitic and thus closest to the Europeans, as intelligent and naturally superior. The Hutu were seen as less intelligent and hardworking. The Twa were at the bottom of the racial pyramid, as they were considered "pygmoid" and more savage. Ignoring differences of region or clan, race became the central identity marker. Based on these criteria, both the missionaries and the Belgian colonial authorities gave education and employment opportunities almost exclusively to Tutsi.

After the end of World War II, the situation started to change as social democratic ideas reached the Catholic Church. A new generation of priests arose that was sensitized to the political and social injustice they perceived in Rwanda. They began to create a counter-elite by supporting young, promising Hutu. In 1959, a peasant uprising removed most Tutsi political leaders from office. Thousands of Tutsi were killed, and tens of thousands fled the country. In the wake of this revolt, Gr goire Kayibanda, prot g  of the Catholic Church, became the first president of the newly founded republic of Rwanda in 1962. Even though the political powers had dramatically changed with the 1959 revolution, and church loyalty and support had shifted from the Tutsi to the Hutu, the churches' underlying principles of participating in political power struggles and in ethnic policies had remained constant throughout the decades. Yet the embrace of ethnic policies by the churches entailed disastrous consequences. "Rwanda's Christian churches were implicated in the violence not simply because they failed to prevent it nor even because they legitimized the regime that carried out the genocide. Instead, churches helped make genocide possible by making ethnic violence understandable and acceptable to the population" (Longman 2001, p. 166).

3. Churches and power struggles. The Christian churches not only offered the Good News and eternal salvation. They were also distributors of material and earthly goods, ranging from education

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<sup>7</sup> In 1907, German Lutherans followed a similar mission strategy, being strongly supported by the German Resident Richard Kandt, who sought to counter the influence of the Roman Catholic Church. After World War I, the balance of power shifted, and along with the influence of the Germans, the Lutheran mission subsided.

and employment opportunities to health care and agricultural assistance. This translates easily into terms of power as people could also seek employment by the church in order to gain access to the goods and their distribution. Power struggles and corruption were the consequences. In this regard, Steve Bruce points out how the “hierarchical model of access to the will of God” (Bruce 2005, p. 21) makes the Catholic Church—like the Orthodox Church—especially susceptible to creating “othering” and divisions between “us” and “them.” At the same time, however, reform movements from within the church increasingly questioned the patrimonial structures within the churches, criticizing the lack of transparency and proneness to corruption. Influences from liberation theology wanted the church to become progressive agents of social change instead. The 1980s and early 1990s also witnessed substantial power struggles within the churches as conservative and progressive forces fought for influence. Conservative church authorities felt threatened by democratic and social movements. Longman concludes, “Many church leaders were ultimately sympathetic to the genocide because it could help to bolster their power and preserve their hold on office against this movement for reform” (Longman 2001, p. 175).

4. A problematic theology. The question remains, however, how the Christian message of love could be turned so easily into acts of hatred. Was the Christian religion in Rwanda a mere superficial façade? The mass conversions such as that following the baptism of King Mutara III Rudahigwa in 1931 might lead to the impression that conversion was a formal or strategical act rather than a holistic transformation of heart and mind. While this explanation holds some plausibility, it ultimately falls short. Rather, as Paul Gifford points out, “different Christianities” (Gifford 1998, pp. 325–33) exist simultaneously in Africa. Theology itself thus becomes a central factor. The brand of Christianity propagated by the White Fathers and other missionaries emphasized obedience and respect for authorities. While this is one aspect in the Christian Scriptures (e.g., Romans 13), other significant dimensions were neglected. The missionaries taught little regarding Christian responsibility for the other person. Topics such as the active love of one’s neighbor and even of one’s enemy (Matthew 5:44) went unnoticed. Christian theology itself must therefore undergo a critical hermeneutical analysis that comprises both the self-critical acknowledgement of problematic Scriptural interpretation and the quest for a more appropriate hermeneutics of relevant passages. This must include, as Jean-Pierre Karegeye points out, a “relocation of religious language” as the “strong interaction in political and religious speeches facilitated the way to genocide” (Karegeye 2011, p. 97). Religious language and theological concepts themselves need to undergo a critical scrutiny and re-interpretation.

### 3.2. *The Churches during the Civil War and Genocide*

The genocide started immediately after the plane carrying Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana, Burundian President Cyprien Ntaryamira, and other government officials was shot down on 6 April 1994. Still, no one has claimed responsibility for this act. Yet the genocide cannot be separated from the events leading up to it, especially the Civil War starting in October 1990 with the invasion of the Uganda-based Tutsi RPF, demanding political reforms and the right to re-settle thousands of mainly Tutsi refugees. Despite the complicity of the churches in creating and sustaining the conditions in which the genocide occurred, it would be shortsighted to simply blame all the churches for participation in the genocide. A closer look reveals a far more complex picture as different churches reacted differently and even within one and the same church, attitudes and action differed. Given the fact that especially the minority Protestant Churches had little experience in dealing with political affairs, the different church-led initiatives for peace by Protestant Churches seem quite remarkable.

Before I discuss some examples of these peace-initiatives, a brief outline of the role of Protestantism in Rwanda seems called for (Gatwa and Rutinduka 2014). In the 1920s and 1930s, the East African Revival, starting in Rwanda-Burundi, spread through East Africa, converting large numbers to Christianity (Peterson 2012). In its wake, other denominations besides the Catholic Church took hold in Rwanda, including Baptists, Free Methodists, and Pentecostals. As the East African Revival

focused primarily on personal conversion and spiritual life, Christian engagement in public and political matters played hardly any role. In addition to these theological reasons for Protestantism's peripheral status in the Rwandan public, there are administrative reasons, as the Belgian authorities had entrusted secondary-education solely to the Catholic Church. It was only in the 1970s that Protestant secondary schools and the Theological School of Butare (1971) were founded. Yet, compared to the dominant presence of the Catholic Church, Protestantism until 1994 was located on the periphery of Rwanda's religio-scape.

Despite its lack of experience in the public arena, the Protestant Churches engaged in multiple efforts for peace and de-escalation. A number of these initiatives were ecumenical in nature, even though "the collaboration between Protestants and Catholics was rather limited at the time" (Van't Spijker 1997, p. 244). In February 1992, Catholic and Protestant church leaders created the so-called Contact Committee, with the aim of mediation between the different political parties.<sup>8</sup> It was this Church Committee that opened the path for a multi-party government in 1992 (Gatwa 2001). The Contact Committee also supported the meeting of the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) in Mombasa, Kenya, in November 1993. Not only did South African Arch Bishop Desmond Tutu issue an urgent call for peace during this meeting, but it also provided a platform for talks between the Rwandan government and the RPF. It was again the Contact Committee that on the eve of the genocide, on 1 January 1994, organized a peace march for Christians from all religious confessions in Kigali. Thousands of Christians marched for peace in Kigali and other places such as Butare and Gisenyi.

Next to these ecumenical endeavors, two particular church efforts for peace ought to be mentioned. In December 1991, Thaddée Nsengiyumva, Bishop of Kabgayi and President of the Rwandan Episcopal Conference, issued the pastoral letter "Convertissons-nous pour vivre ensemble dans la paix"/"Let us convert to live together in peace" (Nsengiyumva 1991). The pastoral letter was both a call for the church to acknowledge its own responsibility in creating and sustaining ethnic divisions and a call for renewal within the church. During the genocide, Nsengiyumva supported the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in helping war displaced in his bishopric<sup>9</sup> as he repeatedly made public appeals for the killings to stop. He was murdered on 5 June 1994. Another peace initiative was undertaken by the Presbyterian Church through their booklet *Ukuri kubaka igihugu* ("A Constructive Truth"), issued in February 1992. In it, the Presbyterian Church called for a strong stance against the current ethnic strife. At the same time, the church also acknowledged its own failures in not speaking out clearly enough against the ethnic violence in 1959. The booklet called on all Christians to act responsibly and in accordance with the Gospel of Love with regard to issues such as human rights, ethnicity, and refugees. Furthermore, one needs to mention that it was Pope John Paul II who, during a general audience on 27 April 1994, was the first to publicly call the ethnic violence in Rwanda a genocide and demanded for it to stop.

With these examples of church-based peace initiatives in mind, the portrayal of a total "complicity of the churches" appears one-sided. Yet, as courageous as they were, these initiatives did not reflect the general attitude of the churches. In general, the churches remained silent. On 20 June 1994, after hundreds of thousands had already been killed, the Rwandan church leaders issued a joint statement, calling on the RPF and the government to stop the killings.<sup>10</sup> The statement makes no mentioning of the occurring genocide but frames the killings as acts of war and blames the RPF as the main cause for the violence. Nor does the statement include any protest against the on-going killings.

<sup>8</sup> Van't Spijker also points to the ambiguous evaluation of the Contact Committee. While some praise its endeavors for peace and negotiations, others criticize it as a pro-government tool. (Van't Spijker 1997, p. 245).

<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Thaddée Nsengiyumva's role seems somewhat ambiguous when on April 16 he issued a letter that could be understood in support of the Hutu government against the Tutsi rebellion. (Cf. Coret and Verschave 2005).

<sup>10</sup> *Mémoire des représentants des Eglises catholique et protestantes à l'intention du gouvernement rwandais, du Front Patriotique Rwandais et de la communauté internationale dans la recherche d'une paix durable au Rwanda*. Quoted in (Van't Spijker 1997, p. 248).

The overall silence of the churches in the face of mass atrocities mirrored their response to previous ethnic violence, such as the ethnic massacres between 1990 and 1993. Alison Des Forges calls them “practicing slaughter” (Des Forges 1999, p. 87), as they set the path for the genocidal violence. Rather than openly denouncing ethnic violence, most church leaders continued to call for the support of the government. Karegeye stresses how the public interpreted the support of the regime by church leaders as approval of anti-Tutsi violence. “In distancing itself from the Rwandan genocidal regime, the Church would have had the chance to cut off the moral support to political violence” (Karegeye 2011, p. 100). Yet, the fact that most churches kept their silence even when their church buildings were being desecrated led many to believe that the churches did not oppose the slaughter. The “theology of genocide” of the churches thus consisted less in preaching hatred and violence as such, but in silence and toleration (Longman 2001, p. 182).<sup>11</sup>

#### 4. Toward a “Theology of Reconciliation”? The Role of the Christian Churches in Dealing with the Legacy of the Genocide

After the genocide, the Christian churches were faced with a crisis of trust. Due to the perceived complicity of the churches, many Rwandese turned away, if not from Christianity itself, but from the established churches. This resulted in remarkable changes in Rwanda’s religio-scape. Since the genocide, the Catholic Church has lost about one third of its members. In contrast, the Protestant denominations have had a steady increase in membership. From 19% in 1990, they have doubled to 38% in 2015 (National Institute of Statistics of Rwanda 2015). Within the Protestant denominations, it is the Pentecostal branch that has gained particular momentum (Sundqvist 2011). Increasing from 8% to 12%, the Church of the Seventh-Days Advents is also experiencing a remarkable growth rate. While there have been substantial shifts within the institutionalized Christian faith, the overall adherence to Christianity has remained stable and strong at 90% of the population. As Anne Kubai points out, “religion has been and continues to be part of Rwanda’s system of meaning-making and meaning-interpretation, and hence has contributed to shaping new values, demands of propriety and interpretations of old norms that have emerged after the genocide” (Kubai 2016, p. 3). Contrary to many Western countries, the Christian churches in Rwanda assume a crucial role in all processes affecting Rwandan society. This also accords them high significance in the country’s current reconciliation process.

Following the collapse of 1994, the joint efforts and cooperation of all were required if the country was to rise out of the ashes and reach out toward development and sustainable peace. President Paul Kagame therefore decreed a “National Politics of Reconciliation” that promotes reconciliation on several levels. On a national level, Rwanda’s “National Unity and Reconciliation Commission” (NURC) offers unity and reconciliation projects throughout the country. A law was passed that bans the use of the ethnic descriptions “Tutsi,” “Hutu,” and “Twa.” Instead, the official motto “We are all Rwandan” demonstrates Rwandan unity. On the judicial level, Rwanda turned to its traditional judicial courts, *gacaca*, to face the challenge of over-crowded prisons (Friese 2010).<sup>12</sup> From 2001 until their official termination in 2012, about 11’000 *gacaca* courts throughout the country delivered judgments, with respected people serving as lay-judges.<sup>13</sup> On the communal level, education and sensitization projects and organized encounters between perpetrators and victims have been taking place. At the same time, however, concerns are voiced regarding a political environment that suppresses basic

<sup>11</sup> The term “theology” is employed in a wide sense here. It refers not only to the explicit study of the Holy Scriptures and church documents but also encompasses attitudes and action (or inaction) based in a broader sense on the deliberation of the nature of the divine.

<sup>12</sup> [ga<sup>1</sup>ʃaʃa]. The Kinyarwanda term means “grass” and refers to the place in the village where the traditional *gacaca* courts take place.

<sup>13</sup> In addition to the many positive aspects of the *gacacas*, problematic dimensions include accusations of corruption, the lack of psychosocial support of the victims, and judicial problems. (Cf. Friese 2010, pp. 73–85).

human rights such as freedom of opinion, of press, and of political opposition (Thomson 2015; Hankel 2016).

At this point, some remarks on the term reconciliation seem called for. While originally at home in religious contexts, reconciliation has long become part of political and historical discourses. Societies-in-transition oftentimes utilize reconciliation in their quest for a new beginning after violent conflict. The South African “Truth and Reconciliation Commission” is the most well-known example. With Stephanie van de Loo, I understand reconciliation as the “reciprocal process between at least two parties, who in immediate or mediate contact with each other reflect on their mutual relationship, and who aim to design this relationship in a positive and new way by mutual acceptance, as well as the result of this process” (Van de Loo 2009, p. 16). According to Fernando Enns, the process of reconciliation may include “different elements such as the confession of guilt, atonement, asking and granting of forgiveness . . . up to a newly ordered relationship” (Enns 2013, p. 24).

The Rwandan churches have been partnering with the government in the national process of reconciliation, supplementing the government’s top-down strategy with bottom-up approaches. In the following, I will utilize the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda (EPR) as a case study in order to explore the role of the Christian churches in dealing with the violent past. With about 300’000 members, the EPR is one of the smaller churches in Rwanda. However, its limited size accounts for its accessibility as a case study, in the context of which I also conducted a number of semi-structured qualitative interviews. At the same time, the EPR’s engagement for reconciliation and peacebuilding are being echoed in similar ways in other denominations such as the Rwandan Anglican Church and the Pentecostal Church (ADEPR).

Yet it was the EPR that issued the first official confession of guilt, the so-called “Confession of Detmold” of 1996 (Confession of Detmold). For twenty years, it would remain the sole public confession of a church. Only in 2016 did the Rwandan Catholic Bishop Conference issue the “Announcement Which Closes the Jubilee Year of God’s Mercy,” asking for forgiveness for the role that some of its members had played during the genocide. The Bishop’s Announcement refused, however, to address any institutional guilt but rather saw only individual members of the Church implicated. A few months later, in March 2017, Pope Francis surpassed the Bishop’s Announcement by accepting both individual and institutional guilt as he asked forgiveness for the “sins and failings of the church and its members.”<sup>14</sup>

The *Detmold Confession* (1996) begins with the acknowledgement that reconciliation must be preceded by humble confession and mutual forgiveness. “The Rwandan people will never be reconciled with each other unless each party accepts to kneel down before the suffering of the other party, to confess their own offense and to humbly ask forgiveness of their victims” (Confession of Detmold I). It is furthermore noteworthy that the *Detmold Confession* (1996) takes the complexity of the genocide into consideration by giving voice to all three parties involved, namely Hutu, Tutsi, and Western Christians. It thus resists any simplistic blame attributions. Its concreteness is a further characteristic of the Confession. The Hutu Christians confessed concrete crimes such as “torturing, raping, slitting pregnant women open, hacking humans to pieces” (Confession of Detmold II.1) and asked for forgiveness. Tutsi Christians expressed sorrow for their “blind vengeance” (Confession of Detmold II.2) and Western Christians acknowledged their responsibility for contributing “to the increase of divisions in the Rwandan people . . . since the arrival of the first Europeans in Rwanda” (Confession of Detmold III.3) and asked furthermore forgiveness for the “silence and abandon of the Rwandan people” (Confession of Detmold III.3) during the genocide.

Though highly contested both within and outside the church, this confession of guilt paved the way for the EPR’s further engagements in reconciliation (Peeetz 2015). Reconciliation still remains on

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<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis asks for forgiveness for church’s role in Rwanda genocide. Available online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/20/pope-francis-asks-for-forgiveness-for-churchs-role-in-rwanda-genocide> (accessed on 10 December 2017).

the forefront of the EPR's activities. Asked for his priorities during his presidency, Pascal Bataringaya, current president of the EPR, states, "First, evangelization and church growth, second, reconciliation. But both go together."<sup>15</sup> When looking at the EPR's engagement at reconciliation, four dimensions surface that facilitate reconciliation work: theology, institutions, relationships and remembrance. These dimensions, however, do not refer to clearly separated categories but rather overlap and interact.

The theological dimension refers to the training of pastors and church staff. Already in their theological training and education, future pastors are confronted with topics such as reconciliation, healing, and transformation. Based on the acknowledgement of their failures as voiced in the [Detmold Confession \(1996\)](#), the EPR now interprets biblical Scriptures in a manner that emphasizes love and mutual forgiveness (cf. Matthew 18). The Christian Gospel of grace provides helpful resources as the pastors spread the message and their normative implications in their parishes throughout the country. Different vehicles such as weekly sermons, group activities such as youth groups, bible study groups or women's groups, and worship songs and dances are utilized in disseminating and deepening the message of peace and forgiveness.

To facilitate reconciliation at the institutional level, the EPR founded the "Center for Training and Documentation" (CFD) in 1996. The Center aims "to strengthen the abilities of religious leaders so that they can become catalysts for full and sustainable development" ([Center for Training and Documentation n.d.](#)). Four programmes were implemented to fulfil this objective. First, a basic theological training program directed at evangelists and lay preachers without formal theological training and the continued training of religious leaders training. Second, programs designed to fight against HIV/Aids by providing psycho-social support and counselling. Third, an interreligious program for Christians and Muslims promoting dialogue for peace and reconciliation. And fourth, research and documentation. Although the Center was founded by the EPR, it "serves to promote the training of all religious leaders" ([Center for Training and Documentation n.d.](#)). The recently established "Dietrich Bonhoeffer Research Center for Public Theology," founded in 2016, supports the work of the CFD. The Bonhoeffer Center promotes theological research on the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1908–1945) for religious peacebuilding and reconciliation in Rwanda and beyond.

Concerning the relationship dimension, Bataringaya states, "The churches have something special. They walk with the people, with the perpetrators, with the victims. People feel that they are not alone."<sup>16</sup> One example of the focus on relationship building in reconciliation work is found in the village of Remera in Western Rwanda. Here, EPR pastor and trained mediator Jerome Bizimana initiated the "Lights," a peace-making group. Based on Matthew 5:14 ("You are the light of the world"), this group aims at building relationship with perpetrators and with survivors. Once these relationships are established, the "Lights" bring perpetrators and victims into direct contact with each other, in guided and regular encounters. During the entire process, the focus is on Christian topics such as forgiveness, healing, and transformation. At the same time, Bizimana supplements these Christian resources with techniques from secular disciplines, such as conflict management, mediation and trauma therapy. In addition to the emotional and spiritual aspects of their reconciliation work, the church offers micro-loans to perpetrators and survivors for joint development projects, such as bee hives or tree saplings. Examples like Remera illustrate what Jeffrey Haynes calls religious peacemakers' ability to "help build good community relations and encourage development of peaceful and constructive relations between previously warring communities" ([Haynes 2007](#), p. 62).

As a fourth dimension of the EPR's reconciliation work, one needs to mention their activities linked to remembrance. "Without memory we cannot travel the painful road to reconciliation and hope" ([Vosloo 2001](#), p. 34). Reconciliation and remembrance are intrinsically connected as reconciliation is accompanied by remembering the injustice suffered ([Schliesser 2016](#)). In reconciliation, the painful past

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Pascal Bataringaya. President of the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda. Kigali, 21 February 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Pascal Bataringaya.

links together with a hopeful future. Both the state and the churches acknowledge this connection as they cooperate in various remembrance activities, such as the annual genocide commemoration week in April. In addition, the EPR supports various remembrance projects in their own churches, including specific places and rituals. During the genocide, more than half of the EPR's pastors and church staff were killed, along with large numbers of their members. Special ceremonies commemorating the lost loved ones include prayer, worship and sermons. Through these rituals, the suffering of survivors is publicly acknowledged and accorded a legitimate place in the public realms of church and society.

As has been seen, the four dimensions of the EPR's work toward sustainable peace and reconciliation—theology, institutions, relationships, and remembrance—frequently overlap. Institutions such as the CFD and the Bonhoeffer Research Center, for example, focus on theological education while also aiming at relationship building. From these four dimensions, the following six aspects emerge as characteristics of the EPR's reconciliation and peacemaking work.<sup>17</sup>

First, the Christian message of forgiveness, healing, and reconciliation. This message can provide potent resources in dealing with emotions of pain and suffering, revenge and guilt. Religious rituals such as prayers, the Lord's Supper, songs, and sermons can help give support to traumatized victims (and perpetrators) and "help to restore meaning and dignity to human lives from which those attributes have previously been stripped, or from which they were absent" (Cobban 2005, p. 1138).<sup>18</sup>

Second, effective mobilization for peace. By disseminating the message of grace and peace and its normative implications in the parishes throughout the country, the pastors and church staff engage in what Thjeard Bouta, Ayse Kadayifci-Orellana and Mohammed Abu-Nimer call the effective mobilization of "their communities and others for peace" (Bouta et al. 2005).

Third, creative engagement with cultural norms. Socially acceptable behavioral norms in Rwanda, for instance, exclude public expressions of sorrow such as crying. The sphere of religion, however, constitutes an exception to this rule, as traumatized church members can express their emotions during church worship in song and dance, a significant step toward inner healing.

Fourth, relationship and trust building. Bataringaya's emphasis on "walking with the people" demonstrates the EPR's focus on relationship building. The capacity to generate trust and to build relationships is emphasized by Scott Appleby as a major competence of religious peacemakers (Appleby 2006). Survivors especially can benefit from the relational and existential focus as they are oftentimes socially, spiritually, physically, and materially weakened.

Fifth, religious-secular mixed approach. The EPR follows a mixed approach by combining specifically religious resources such as the Christian emphasis on forgiveness and reconciliation, prayer and worship with beneficial secular strategies from conflict management or trauma therapy. The churches thus offer "emotional and spiritual support to war-affected communities" (Bouta et al. 2005).

Sixth, holistic approach. The EPR's approach to reconciliation can be described as holistic in the sense that spiritual and emotional support are coupled with material and physical aid. The example of Remera shows how peacebuilding projects are linked with development projects, thus serving to mutually reinforce one another.

We can sum up that the EPR's "theology of reconciliation" consists of different theoretical and practical aspects, encompassing the dimensions of theology, institutions, relationships and remembrance. The theological and moral foundation of the EPR's engagement in the reconciliation process is constituted by the [Detmold Confession \(1996\)](#), lending authenticity and credibility to the

<sup>17</sup> The four dimensions—and the ensuing six aspects—that characterize the EPR's reconciliation work are based on the results of the qualitative interviews conducted and analyzed by means of the qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2015; Flick et al. 2015), observant participation and the study of relevant literature and church documents.

<sup>18</sup> While certainly there are also the narratives of those struggling with reconciliation and forgiveness (cf. Mujawayo and Belhaddad 2007), there are also the stories of those who did find inspiration and strength in the Christian message. Cf. the documentary "unforgiven" by Lukas Augstein (<https://www.lukasaugustin.com/unforgiven>).

EPR's "theology of reconciliation." By confessing concrete crimes committed during the genocide and by asking for forgiveness, the EPR takes responsibility for the guilt incurred through both their action and omission. Nevertheless, while the EPR's "theology of reconciliation" sets a clear counterpoint to the "theology of genocide" seen prior and during the genocide, one also needs to look carefully at the concept of reconciliation employed. Here, John Paul Lederach's four-dimensional concept of reconciliation is helpful. According to Lederach, reconciliation combines peace, justice, mercy, and truth (Lederach 1999). Reconciliation processes that do not pay adequate consideration to all four elements are found lacking. In view of the theology of the EPR, one finds a strong emphasis on peace and mercy, as forgiveness is consistently preached and taught. There is less focus on justice and truth, however. This impression is supported by Josephine Sundqvist's analysis of the Pentecostal Movement and its implications on the reconciliation process. She remarks "that the Pentecostal movement has barely been emphasizing justice in their reconciliation strategy or their interpretation of the concept" (Sundqvist 2011, p. 169). In a similar vein, director of the human rights organization African Rights Rakiya Omaar voices her criticism of the Vatican for exploiting the concept of reconciliation by neglecting justice. In her "Open Letter to His holiness, Pope John Paul II," she claims, "We need more truth and justice" (Omaar 1998). For without truth and justice, reconciliation can easily turn into "cheap" reconciliation that may even serve to rigidify existing injustices.<sup>19</sup> Despite this criticism, we can conclude that through their multi-faceted engagement, religious actors like the EPR present themselves as significant contributors to the nation's reconciliation process. By demonstrating the constructive resources of the Christian religion for overcoming violence, they help counter the same religion's destructive force as displayed before and during the genocide.

## 5. Conclusions

The goal of this paper was to explore the role of a specific religious actor, namely Christian churches, in the nexus of religion and genocide in Rwanda. Four factors were identified that point to the churches' complicity in creating and sustaining the conditions in which the 1994 genocide could occur, namely, the close relationship between church and state, the churches' endorsement of ethnic policies, power struggles within the churches, and a problematic theology emphasizing obedience instead of responsibility and love. Nevertheless, the portrayal of all Christian churches as collaborators of the genocide would be simplistic and one-sided. Various church-led initiatives for peace and reconciliation prior to the genocide witness to a more complex picture of church involvement. Turning from a "theology of genocide" that endorsed ethnic violence, Christian churches in Rwanda now propagate a "theology of reconciliation." The case study of the Presbyterian Church revealed how their "theology of reconciliation" embraces the four dimensions of theology, institutions, relationships, and remembrance. Based on their confession of guilt in the [Detmold Confession \(1996\)](#), the EPR's engagement for reconciliation demonstrates religion's constructive contribution in Rwanda's on-going quest for sustainable peace and development. The EPR's over-emphasis on peace and mercy in their concept of reconciliation, however, tends to go to the detriment of truth and justice.

The presence of Christianity in a country guarantees exactly nothing. In history, the Rwandan genocide takes its place in line with numerous other atrocities committed in the name of a Christian God. Yet, while the Rwandan genocide on the one hand underlines the deep ambiguity of religion and its capacity to bring out the worst in human nature, the Christian churches' contribution to the country's current process of reconciliation testifies at the same time to the potent and much-needed resources of the Christian religion for overcoming hatred and violence. As Dan Heist and Ram A.

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<sup>19</sup> Stef Jansen's observations in the context of the Balkans after the Balkan wars can serve as an example of a problematic understanding of reconciliation. He cautions that when speaking of reconciliation, we need to consider carefully the nature of the relationships of the people within reconciliation processes. For if relationships are entirely asymmetrical, for instance, due to gender, class, or urban/rural divisions, reconciliation may, according to Jansen, actually serve to "reinforce existing social patterns of inequality" (Jansen 2013, p. 236).

Cnaan conclude, “There are many ways by which people can actualize their faith. Hatred and terrorism is one way; serving people in need is another way” (Heist and Cnaan 2016, p. 13). While much of current media and academic attention is turned on the former, it is the latter that should engage more of our attention and research.

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