CHURCH POLITICS AND THE GENOCIDE IN RWANDA

BY

TIMOTHY LONGMAN
(Vassar College)

ABSTRACT

Christian churches were deeply implicated in the 1994 genocide of ethnic Tutsi in Rwanda. Churches were a major site for massacres, and many Christians participated in the slaughter, including church personnel and lay leaders. Church involvement in the genocide can be explained in part because of the historic link between church and state and the acceptance of ethnic discrimination among church officials. In addition, just as political officials chose genocide as a means of reasserting their authority in the face of challenges from a democracy movement and civil war, struggles over power within Rwanda's Christian churches led some church leaders to accept the genocide as a means of eliminating challenges to their own authority within the churches.

For three months in 1994, the Christian churches of Rwanda served as the country's killing fields. When ethnic and political violence ignited in the country following the death of President Juvénal Habyarimana in a mysterious plane crash on April 6, thousands of members of the minority Tutsi ethnic group sought refuge in Catholic and Protestant parishes. But death squads surrounded the churches and systematically slaughtered the people within, tossing grenades through church windows, firing into the crowds with rifles, then finishing off the survivors with machetes, pruning hooks, and knives. One human rights group asserts that, 'more Rwandese citizens died in churches and parishes than anywhere else' (African Rights 1995: 865).

Less than a decade later, few visible reminders of the violence remain. The bricks of some churches are still pocked by bullet holes, and in a few places the blood stains will not wash off the walls and floor, but the bodies have been buried, the buildings repaired, and on Sunday mornings the churches are once again filled with worshipers singing, praying, and reading the Bible. For some Rwandans, however, the country's churches stand as reminders of the violence that decimated

their families. The image of bodies piled at the altar does not easily
fade from the minds of those who survived the carnage, and, for some,
churches can never again serve as a place of refuge. As one young
woman told me, 'I was Presbyterian before the war. But I cannot go
back to church now. Not after what happened there. Not after what
church people did.'[1]

In the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, many people inside and
outside the country have struggled to comprehend the involvement of
Rwanda's churches in the violence. Many Christians in particular have
wondered how such carnage could have taken place in one of Africa's
most Christian countries, how the population could have become so
willingly involved in such deplorable acts in a country where more than
90 per cent of the population were members of Catholic or Protestant
churches. As critics of Rwanda's churches have pointed out, not only
did church buildings become the sites of massacres, but most of the
killers were Christian, and even some pastors and priests participated
in the slaughter. Critics have condemned Rwanda's church leaders for
supporting the genocidal government and failing to denounce the vio-
lence (cf. Africa Rights 1995; Zarembo 1995; Des Forges 1999: 245-
248). As Alison Des Forges (1999) states, 'church authorities left the
way clear for officials, politicians, and propagandists to assert that the
slaughter actually met with God's favor' (246).

As I will attempt to explain in this article, understanding the involve-
ment of Rwanda's churches in the genocide requires looking not sim-
ply at the relationship between the churches and the state but at the
nature of churches as institutions. Christian churches in Rwanda were
not only closely allied with the state and involved in battles over state
power, but they were themselves important arenas of political struggle.
Churches had substantial resources and significant influence in the
society. They could confer high status on individuals and provide oppor-
tunities for a select few to enrich themselves. As a result, the contest
to gain power and influence within the churches was often quite intense,
and, from the beginnings of Christian mission in Rwanda, these power
struggles involved ethnicity as an important factor. If churches became
implicated in Rwanda's genocide, it was not simply because church
leaders hoped to avoid opposing their governmental allies but because
ethnic conflict was itself an integral part of Christianity in Rwanda.
Christians could kill without obvious qualms of conscience, even in the
church, because Christianity as they had always known it had been a
religion defined by struggles for power, and ethnicity had always been
at the base of those struggles.[2]

Political Analysis of Religion

Political scientists have generally approached the analysis of religious groups in one of two ways. Scholars focusing on social conflict have commonly looked at religion as an aspect of identity that defines the individual as part of a social group and thus mediates the individual's relationship to other social groups and to the state. In certain places and at certain times, religious identities become politically salient and are grounds for political mobilization and contestation. While conflicts in places such as Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and India may have little to do with theological issues, the polarization of identity along lines of religious community and the struggle between communities for political power is at the heart of the confrontations. Much literature on genocide approaches religion from this perspective, seeing it as an attribute used to define members of certain groups as a social 'other' and to justify their exclusion from society (cf. Beuken and Kuschel 1997; Ludden 1996; Sells 1996; Melson 1992; Zukier 1996).

In Rwanda, however, religious affiliation is not a significant organizer of group identity. Ethnicity and region are far more significant as ascriptive identifiers, and religious affiliations do not reinforce but rather cut across these lines of division. Christian churches did play an important role historically in helping to define ethnic identities in Rwanda, but religion itself is not an important identity.[3] Conversion from one Christian church to another is relatively common and uncomplicated, and many families contain members of more than one church and may also include Muslims or people who continue to adhere only to indigenous religions. In contrast to genocides in other contexts, Tutsi in Rwanda were never ostracized for their religious beliefs, practices, or background nor were they isolated as infidels.[4]

A second common approach to religion within political science treats religious groups as interest groups, much like labor unions or women's federations, in which like-minded people come together to increase their political power. This approach defines politics narrowly as the struggle over state power and regards religious groups as politically significant only insofar as they influence state personnel, institutions, and policies. This approach to religion dominates the pluralist analysis of religious groups in western societies and is found as well in much of the recent literature on civil society in Africa and elsewhere (cf. Fowler 1985; Walshe 1995; Haynes 1996; Constantin and Coulon 1997; Monga 1996).

While more useful than the identity approach, this pluralist approach is not sufficient for understanding the involvement of Rwanda's churches

in the 1994 genocide. Religious groups in Rwanda clearly did act as
interest groups. Church leaders were prominent public figures with con-
siderable influence in the political arena, from the national to the local
level. The leaders of the Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Baptist
churches were all close associates of President Habyarimana and his
government, and local pastors and priests were often closely allied with
local burgomasters and communal councilors. The churches clearly
played an important part over a long period in helping to organize
support for the regime and adding to its legitimacy.

At the same time, national church leaders were not directly involved
in the planning and execution of the genocide. Research does not
include among the members of the core group of military officers and
government officials who planned the genocide even the Catholic arch-
bishop, well known for his anti-Tutsi attitudes and his cozy relation-
ship with the regime (cf. Des Forges 1999: 96-140; Prunier 1995: 166-
174). While some local level church officials were directly involved in
preparing and carrying out the genocide in their communities, most
critics have condemned the churches not for their actions but rather
for their *in*action, for 'not doing more to halt the bloodshed' (Shillinger
2000). Churches are accused of 'sins of omission', failing to act in the
face of evil, rather than actively supporting or facilitating the genocide.

As I will attempt to show, however, Rwanda's Christian churches
were implicated in the violence not simply because they failed to pre-
vent it nor even because they legitimized the regime that carried out
the genocide. Instead, churches helped make genocide possible by mak-
ing ethnic violence understandable and acceptable to the population.
What Doris L. Bergen writes about the churches in relationship to the
Holocaust in Germany can be applied to Rwanda as well:

> Christianity . . . did play a critical role, not perhaps in motivating the top decision
> makers, but in making their commands comprehensible and tolerable to the rank-
> and-file—the people who actively carried out the measures against the Jews as
> well as those who passively condoned their implementation. . . . Christian anti-
> Judaism was certainly not the sole factor, but without it, the Holocaust could not
> have occurred as it did (Bergen 1995: 329-330).

Similarly, while churches were not the chief organizers of the Rwandan
genocide, their long practice of teaching obedience to authority and of
engaging in ethnic politics made it possible for Rwandans to ignore the
principle of sanctuary and participate in the killing of Tutsi without
feeling that their actions were in conflict with church teachings. In fact,
the organizers of the death squads in many local communities included
not only prominent lay church leaders but sometimes priests, pastors,

Catholic brothers, catechists, and other church employees, and the fact that death squads attended mass before going out to kill or that killers paused during the massacres to pray at the altar[5] suggests that people felt their work was consistent with church teachings. Far from being mere passive bystanders, Christian churches provided essential support for the slaughter.

To understand how Rwanda's churches became so profoundly implicated in the 1994 genocide requires, I contend, analyzing Christian churches as inherently political institutions. Rather than treating the state as the center of all political action and assessing only the role that churches played in influencing state policies (or being influenced by them), churches should be regarded as political institutions in their own right. Naomi Chazan has noted that we need an understanding of politics in which the state

> is no longer viewed as the sole magnet of social, economic, and political exchange. It constitutes merely one of many possible foci of social action. . . . Politics, power and control are not of necessity coterminous with the state. Politics, the competition for access and control over resources, takes place well beyond the narrow public domain in African countries. Power—the capacity to control resources— and authority—the right to do so—may legitimately be vested in local social structures as well (Chazan 1988: 123).

If we accept Harold Lasswell's (1936) classic definition of politics as the struggle over 'Who gets what, when, how,' then churches in Rwanda are clearly political institutions, because they play a major role in distributing resources. With important international connections and an ability to raise funds internally, churches have substantial wealth to distribute, and those who have held positions of power in Rwanda's churches have used their ability to determine who gets jobs, scholarships, development assistance, and other benefits to advance their personal interests. The competition for power within the churches has involved all the intrigue, rival alliances, patrimonial relationships, and ethnic discrimination of other Rwandan political institutions. Not only did the historic political engagement of churches help to impart moral sanction to arguments for a 'final solution' to the 'Tutsi problem', but the genocide itself figured into the struggles for power within the churches.

Churches as Political Institutions in the Colonial Era

Three key principles established during the colonial period continue to shape the nature of church social engagement within Rwanda.[6] First,

from their arrival in Rwanda in 1900, missionaries sought to make churches important actors in the country's political struggles. The leaders of the Missionaries of Africa (better known as White Fathers), the dominant Catholic missionary order in Rwanda and Burundi, believed that sympathetic state leadership was necessary to facilitate the conversion of the population. Thus, they initially urged their missionaries to do everything within their power to appease both local chiefs and the royal court and to focus their conversion efforts on the elite (Kalibwami 1991: 174-181; Linden and Linden 1977: 29-30). Once the focus on elite evangelization had begun to bear fruit in the 1920s, the missionaries moved beyond merely appeasing existing political leadership and began actively to promote the selection of Catholic candidates as chiefs. In 1931, the White Fathers were the driving force behind the dethronement of King Musinga and his replacement by his pro-Catholic son, Rudahigwa, which sent a powerful message to the population that affiliation with the Catholic Church was a key to gaining political power. The elite began to convert in large numbers, and the masses soon followed. Protestant missionaries, wishing to emulate Catholic success, sought similar influence in the selection of chiefs, and Protestantism soon became an ancillary route to social advancement that also served to attract adherents (Linden and Linden 1977: 152-219; Des Forges 1972). Christian churches were thus established during the colonial period not simply as allies of the government but as important players in contestation for state power.

A second principle that can be traced back to the origins of Christianity in Rwanda is the active engagement of churches in ethnic politics. Ethnicity was an important element that affected missionary understandings of exactly who should be considered elite and, thus, who should be targeted for conversion. The missionaries who arrived in Rwanda and Burundi understood the local populations according to then contemporary conceptions of race and nationality that viewed the world's population as divided into neatly defined, hierarchically ranked groups with specific innate characteristics. Ignoring the importance of region, clan, and other social divisions in Rwanda and Burundi, missionaries considered Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa as the most consequential social identities and understood them to be rigid racial categories.[7] They regarded the Twa as a 'pygmoid' group, less intelligent and more 'savage'; the Hutu as Bantu, simple, solid and hardworking; and the Tutsi as Hamitic, more closely related to Europeans and naturally more intelligent.[8] Although we know today that the missionaries' conclusions about Rwandan society were inaccurate, because they misunderstood the nature

and origins of the identities that they saw as ethnic and racial, their observations nevertheless profoundly influenced subsequent European engagement in Rwanda and Burundi and ultimately reshaped social reality in the two countries. Ethnic labels gained significance in practice as they became a basis for German and Belgian colonial administration. The implementation of indirect rule and the centralization of the political systems, which eliminated Hutu chiefs and autonomous Hutu kingdoms, effectively excluded Hutu from political opportunity, while the listing of ethnic labels on identity cards issued to all residents served to eliminate the previous flexibility in identity (Lemarchand 1970: 63-79; Newbury 1988: 23-179; Prunier 1995: 5-40).

More significant for understanding the later involvement of churches in the genocide than their role in influencing the development of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa as ethnic identities is the way in which churches accepted engagement in ethnic politics and discrimination as legitimate. Both because they saw Tutsi as the established elite who needed to be appeased and because they believed in the natural superiority of Tutsi, missionaries initially offered educational and employment opportunities overwhelmingly to Tutsi. As Tutsi themselves entered the priesthood, some used their positions to further advance the interests and prospects of their ethnic group. Most significantly, the court histories written by the priest Alexis Kagame helped justify Tutsi rule over Rwanda (Linden and Linden 1977: 73-185; Rutayisire 1987; Vidal 1991). Following the Second World War, a new breed of Catholic missionary, influenced by social democratic philosophies, questioned the inequalities in Rwandan society and began to foster a Hutu 'counter-elite,' providing education and employment to promising young Hutu. When a peasant uprising in November 1959 drove most Tutsi from political offices, the Hutu counter-elite fostered by the missionaries stepped out of their church functions to assume political leadership, including Grégoire Kayibanda, who had served as editor of a Catholic newspaper and leader of a Catholic consumers' cooperative and went on to become prime minister, then president (Linden and Linden 1977: 220-281; Lemarchand 1970: 119-260). While the 1959 revolution led to a dramatic shift in the structures of political power in Rwanda, as Hutu assumed nearly all state offices, and marked a partial shift in church support from Tutsi to Hutu, the basic principles of the churches' participation in political struggles and engagement in ethnic politics remained consistent.

The third element of the political nature of the churches that can be traced back to the colonial period is less widely recognized in the literature. As in most of Africa, Christian missionaries in Rwanda sought

to attract converts not simply through the power of their message, but also through various material incentives. Both Catholic and Protestant missionaries established schools and health centers, introduced new crops and farming techniques, and began money-making projects to attract public interest. Hence, from the inception of Christianity in Rwanda, local parishes were much more than spiritual centers (Linden and Linden 1977: 33-114; Kalibwami 1991: 171-195; Twagirayesu and van Butselaar 1982: 15-67). Churches possessed substantial independent resources which they distributed in much the same manner as chiefs, obtaining support from the population by providing them with consumer goods, seeds, health care, and other amenities.[9] The spiritual resources of the churches became increasingly important as well, as people turned to the churches and their leaders to dispense the powers of healing, protection, and salvation.[10] People aspired to employment within the churches as priest, catechist, teacher, or lay leader because it brought not only social status, but also power in the form of influence over the distribution of resources and opportunities, and as church membership, resources, and activities expanded, the prominence of the parish within local communities grew, as did the competition for power within the churches.

In short, churches as they developed in colonial Rwanda were centers of political contestation where people struggled for influence and access to resources. Churches had patrimonial structures and factions that competed for power, and, though church groups were often involved in struggles over state power, the status of churches as political institutions should not be understood exclusively in relationship to the state, because the primary political struggles within the churches concerned the distribution of power *within* the churches themselves. In these struggles for power, ethnicity was a major factor from the outset. Tutsi were given privileged positions in both Catholic and Protestant Churches and fought to preserve their dominance, but the churches also provided limited opportunities to Hutu at a time when Hutu were excluded almost entirely from the state sphere. The battle for Hutu empowerment began in the churches, before spreading into a fight for control of the state, and the struggle over the ethnic distribution of power remained more pronounced in the churches after independence than in other public spheres.

Church Patrimonialism in Independent Rwanda

Despite the revolution that drove Tutsi from power, the social position of the churches in Rwandan society remained fairly constant after

independence. Whereas missionaries had been instrumental during the colonial period in the consolidation of Tutsi power and the replacement of the king, after independence the churches played an important part in the consolidation of Hutu power, and the new president was once again a leader hand-picked by Catholic Church officials. The church changed its dominant loyalty from Tutsi to Hutu, but it continued to engage overtly in ethnic politics. While the majority of Catholic priests and Protestant pastors remained Tutsi, Hutu quickly occupied most church leadership posts. Although a Tutsi was named bishop in the Catholic Church on the eve of independence, another Tutsi bishop was not installed for more than thirty years, and a similar Hutu monopoly on leadership positions developed in the Protestant churches. At the same time, the churches were among the only public institutions where Tutsi continued to have a strong presence. Whereas Tutsi were removed from nearly all government and military posts, they could still serve in positions in the churches. A paradoxical attitude toward ethnicity produced a tension in the churches, since Hutu credited the churches particular the Catholic Church—with supporting the Hutu accession to power and they joined the churches in larger numbers than ever before, and yet the church that they encountered (their priests and teachers) was Tutsi. When anti-Hutu ethnic violence in Burundi inspired a backlash against Tutsi in Rwanda in 1973, church schools and other church institutions were among the primary targets, as Hutu mobs drove out Tutsi teachers and students whom they accused of preventing the completion of the Hutu revolution (Reyntjens 1985: 499-509; Kalibwami 1991: 539-549).[11]

After Juvénal Habyarimana deposed Kayibanda in a 1973 coup, he sought to ease ethnic tensions by enforcing a policy of 'equilibrium' that officially limited Tutsi enrollment in schools and public employment to their proportion of the population. In practice, few Tutsi were allowed in the military or civil service, and the churches remained among the only possible opportunities for Tutsi who wanted suitable employment. Yet all of Rwanda's churches remained dominated at the top by Hutu, and Habyarimana developed a close working relationship with the national leadership of the churches. Until forced to resign by the Vatican in 1985, the Catholic archbishop of Kigali was a member of the central committee of the ruling party, the *Mouvement Révolutionaire National pour le Développement* (Revolutionary National Movement for Development, MRND), and he served as the personal confessor of Habyarimana's wife. The president of the Presbyterian Church served on the regional committee of the ruling party in his home region, and

in the Anglican church both the Bishop of Kigali and the Bishop of
Shyira (later named Archbishop) were vocal in their support for the
regime. As a result, while the state effectively quashed ethnic conflict
within its sphere of control (basically by offering protection for Tutsi
in exchange for their acquiescence to a circumscribed social position
that would appease the Hutu), ethnic tensions within the churches
remained more conspicuous. Tutsi could become pastors and priests,
but the most important church offices were not generally open to them.
The most scandalous example of church ethnic discrimination occurred
when the Vatican appointed Felicien Muvara, a respected Tutsi priest
and scholar, as bishop in 1988 but he resigned just before being installed,
apparently under pressure from the archbishop who objected to a Tutsi
becoming bishop.[12]

A full understanding of political conflicts within the churches, how-
ever, requires looking beyond the national level to the local parish. As
I have argued elsewhere, 'churches are loosely organized and decentral-
ized institutions which can be exploited for diverse purposes' (Longman
1998a: 67). While in theory most churches are highly hierarchical and
centralized institutions, in practice the various manifestations of the
churches function with considerable autonomy, a fact that is particu-
larly apparent at the level of the parish. While the pastors and priests
are named by bishops or other national church leaders and can be
moved at will, in practice they have great freedom over the activities
and organization of their parish. In the local community, especially in
rural areas, churches represent an imposing presence, frequently offering
more employment and having more resources to distribute than the
state. As a result, priests and pastors are powerful figures, and local
struggles for power may actually center around the church as much as
they do the state.

The historic parish of Save (pronounced *sah-vay*), where I conducted
field research in 1992-1993 and follow-up research in 1996, can serve
as an example of the breadth of operations of a typical large parish,
many of which are found in the country. The Save parish, located
within walking distance of the city of Butare, had over 45,000 baptized
members in 1992, divided into 135 basic Christian communities, sub-
parish-level groups for prayer, Bible study, and community action. The
church supported eleven primary schools, three secondary schools, a
literacy center, a large health center, a nutritional center, and several
economic projects, including a silo for beans and grain. To run these
programs, the church employed a large number of people. The four
parish priests and ten catechists dealt primarily with the spiritual affairs

of the church, including associations for women and youth and several
religious organizations, such as the Legion of Mary. To assist with the
educational and health programs, several orders of brothers and nuns
had monasteries within the parish, with a total of 63 nuns from three
orders and 23 brothers from three orders. The first and largest Rwandan
order of sisters, the Benebikira, was based at Save. The church employed
many lay people as well, particularly as teachers and health workers.[13]

With such extensive programs, so many employees, and the resources
needed to support them (derived from international donors, church
offerings, fees, and some government assistance), the Save parish was
a major source of economic, social, and political opportunity for peo-
ple in the surrounding area. People interviewed from the parish claimed
that they found the church more accessible than the state and thus
were much more likely to turn to the church when they needed assist-
ance. The church is where they went to have their children educated,
to cure their illnesses, or to receive aid when times were tough, and it
was where they turned for spiritual strength as well, not only in Sunday
mass, but in weekly prayer in their basic communities and in other
church associations. At the same time, while most people turned to the
church merely for assistance in their daily struggle to survive, a small
number were able to use the church to raise substantially their social
status or to enrich themselves. As a result, there was considerable com-
petition for power within the parish. The priest who served as head of
the parish before 1993, the curé, managed to accumulate substantial
personal wealth and employed a number of members of his family in
the parish. The curé, like other priests, maintained his position and the
access to wealth it provided by appointment of the Bishop of Butare,
in whose good graces he had to remain to preserve this desirable office.
In turn, other people in the parish maintained their positions by pre-
serving good relations with the curé. The parish and each of the basic
communities had a committee to oversee their operation, including the
distribution of economic assistance, academic scholarships, and other
expenditures. While in theory these positions were elected, in practice
the curé exercised great influence over who was selected, and those
who served the church, even in a relatively minor position as member
of a basic community council, could use their positions for personal
gain, since they helped to determine who would get economic assist-
ance. The curé, along with other church personnel such as the head
of the Benebikira, school principals, and medical directors, held con-
siderable power to determine who was hired as teachers, secretaries,
nightwatchmen, gardeners, and custodians, to name but a few of the

numerous paid positions within the parish. In an economy where salaried employment was extremely difficult to obtain, the ability to hire and fire was an important source of power. The curé could furthermore determine whether parishioners were in good standing and thus eligible to have a church marriage or to have their children baptized.

The situation that I am describing is that of a patrimonial structure in which bishops and other church leaders at the top used their powers of appointment and funding to secure support from subordinates at the local level. The priests and pastors they appointed to positions were like clients who owed them a debt of gratitude and obedience. Failing to please their superiors could result in the transfer of clergy to less attractive positions. Yet, within the parishes, the priests and pastors acted in turn as patrons, using their authority and resources to attract their own clients. A number of variables structured these patrimonial systems, including ethnicity, family, and community of origin, but the systems also depended on loyalty and alliances, and within each church there developed rival alliances that sought to advance the position of their members.

To understand how the churches ultimately became involved in the genocide requires recognizing not only the competition for power within the churches but also the ways in which the patrimonial method of distributing church power came into question in the early 1990s. In Save, for example, while the patrimonial structure gave the curé and a few other parish leaders considerable power and forced people dependent upon them to offer them deference, as well as bribes and kickbacks, it also created considerable public resentment. While people I interviewed in Save recognized that the church there did help orphans, widows, and single mothers, many complained that only those who paid bribes or had family connections were assisted. Frustration with what they perceived as corruption led some people to question the spiritual legitimacy of the Catholic Church. The Protestant churches near Save—Baptist, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist, and Presbyterian— had attracted a substantial number of discontented Catholics. For example, one man who converted to the Seventh Day Adventist church had formerly been the head of a basic Christian community in the Save Catholic parish and was alienated in part by the patrimonial system in which he participated:

> When I was Catholic, I worked for the Church helping the poor. We gave them clothes, food, blankets, and even that house over there of a widow was built with help from the church. I'm the one who advised them that there was a woman who needed help.

> In reality, I myself profited as well. People gave me beer, money, or came to work in my field so that they could stay on the list.[14]

While some people expressed their frustration with corrupt parishes like Save by leaving, many others, not only in Save, but in Catholic and Protestant parishes throughout the country, sought to reform the churches from within. Some pastors, priests, and others within the churches had been influenced by liberation theologies to see the churches as instruments of social change, and they increasingly questioned the morality of patrimonial structures both in society at large and within the churches. People influenced by other theological movements, such as the charismatic *Abarokore* movement in the Protestant churches and the Marian movement in the Catholic Church, also questioned the immorality they saw within the churches and presented an alternative vision of church life. As church economic development programs increased, they also became an important source of opposition to church corruption. As Peter Uvin (1998) has effectively demonstrated, development assistance in Rwanda frequently did more to reinforce existing social inequalities than to help the poor, but churches were among the first organizations to embrace the more effective principles of sustainable development. With the relatively modest size of church projects, the active intervention of donors, and a theologically based commitment on the part of many church development workers to assist the least fortunate, church projects were more likely to realize the goal of empowering the masses. International church partners, like the Dutch Reformed Church and the American group Catholic Relief Services, used their financial power to urge reform within the churches, both in the area of development and in church operations. In addition, many people who were excluded from the state sphere—both Tutsi and progressive Hutu—found a haven in the churches, where they felt they had a better chance of gaining influence.[15] These developments in the churches in the late 1980s and early 1990s led not only to significant church support for democratic reforms in Rwanda, but also produced substantial pressures for reform *within* the churches that challenged the established system of church authority. 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.

The Churches and the Genocide

The complex conditions and events that led to the genocide have been well documented elsewhere.[16] Although initial press reports depicted

the violence as an almost inevitable consequence of primordial social divisions, in fact, as Des Forges argues, 'this genocide was not an uncontrollable outburst of rage by a people consumed by "ancient tribal hatreds"' (Des Forges 1999). Problems of overpopulation, poverty, and gross income disparity created a disaffected population, susceptible to manipulation by extremist elements,[17] but ultimately, 'This genocide resulted from the deliberate choice of a modern elite to foster hatred and fear to keep itself in power' (Des Forges 1999). Feeling their control of society threatened by both political and military challenges, a coterie of Hutu politicians, military officers, and businesspeople chose genocide as a strategy to eliminate opponents and regain popular support. An unpopular peace accord with the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), the assassination of the Hutu president of Burundi by Tutsi military officers in October 1993, and ultimately the death of President Habyarimana and the renewal of war with the RPF made the idea of a 'Tutsi threat' believable. By sanctioning ethnic discrimination and exclusion and urging support for the organizers of the genocide, Rwanda's Christian churches helped make the slaughter of the country's Tutsi minority morally permissible.

In the years leading up to the genocide, churches contributed both to the movement for democratic political reform and to the conservative reaction, which relied heavily on ethnic scapegoating. After winning strong public support during his first decade in office by maintaining order and attracting international investment, President Habyarimana found his popularity deteriorating by the mid-1980s. Intensifying population density contributed to problems such as over-cultivation and declining soil fertility and increasing landlessness. The price of coffee, Rwanda's chief export, collapsed in the mid-1980s, contributing to the hardship of farmers but also threatening the economic position of the small middle class. In this context of scarcity, official corruption became increasingly irksome to the population. In 1988, the Catholic monthly newspaper *Kinyamateka* helped inspire the emergence of a free press by speaking out openly about the enrichment of public officials and exposing the serious economic problems in the country, including a famine in the south. The many new newspapers and journals that appeared in the next several years helped channel public discontent with the regime into calls for democratic reform. The democratic movement in Rwanda was never more than a loose congeries of journalists, civil society activists, politicians from the former Kayibanda regime, and others frustrated at the continuation of authoritarian rule, but, by early 1990, a range of groups and individuals, many of them

affiliated with the churches, were calling for respect for civil rights, the legalization of opposition parties, and free and fair elections. Many Tutsi joined in this protest, because of frustration over their continued political exclusion, as did southern Hutu, who objected to the domination of the government and military by Hutu from Habyarimana's home region in the north. Church support was key to the foundation of several human rights groups, and pastors, priests, and lay church leaders actively supported farmers' cooperatives, women's groups, student associations, and other organizations that began to push for civil rights, government accountability, and democratic constitutional changes. Even the Catholic bishops, generally close allies of the regime, issued a three-part letter in advance of an October 1990 papal visit that denounced corruption and regional and ethnic discrimination and called for free speech. Under this growing pressure, Habyarimana announced that he would institute reforms to democratize the system, but an invasion in October by the RPF changed the political equation, both adding pressure for reform and providing a basis for Habyarimana to regain public support (Newbury 1992; Reyntjens 1994: 103-104; Longman 1997).

Over the next four years, Habyarimana and his supporters operated along two political tracks. On the one hand, they followed through on the President's promise to implement structural political reforms, which served to undercut their opponents and appeased their critics both at home and abroad. Habyarimana announced in July 1990 that Rwanda would become a multi-party democracy and that he would create a commission to determine the best means to accomplish this transition. In June 1991, the national legislature adopted the new constitution proposed by this commission, which created a post of prime minister and changed Rwanda from a single-party to multi-party state. Over the next several months a number of new opposition parties emerged, the three largest of which formed a coalition to pressure Habyarimana to name a multi-party 'government of national unity'. When Habyarimana appointed an MRND prime minister who named a cabinet in which all but one minister was from the MRND, the former single party, the opposition coalition organized a protest campaign. In March 1992, Habyarimana agreed to name a prime minister from an opposition party and to divide cabinet positions evenly between his supporters and the opposition (Reyntjens 1994: 103-117; Prunier 1995: 127-150).

At the same time that they offered these concessions, Habyarimana and his allies sought to undermine the reforms, delegitimize the opposition, and regain popularity largely through a strategy that I call 'organ-

izing chaos' (Longman 1998b). Supporters of the regime sought to
sow disorder in the society to discredit the democratization process.
Soldiers and members of the MRND, particularly its youth wing, the
Interahamwe, broke up opposition party rallies and harassed opposition
politicians and civil society activists. After the multi-party government
took office, the soldiers and MRND youths participated increasingly in
simple criminal activity, such as armed robbery, which contributed to
a sense of general insecurity. Allies of the regime also sought to raise
ethnic tensions by organizing massacres of Tutsi in various parts of the
country, beginning immediately after the RPF invasion in October 1990.
As the war with the RPF expanded, a group of extremist Hutu asso-
ciates of the president and his wife turned increasingly to fostering
ethnic paranoia among the Hutu masses so that they could portray
themselves as the defenders of Hutu interests and the opposition as
dupes of the Tutsi. The extremists warned that a conspiracy of Tutsi
both inside and outside the country was seeking to reverse the 1959
revolution and again subjugate the Hutu population. With the RPF
attacking Rwanda, displacing hundreds of thousands of people, the idea
of a Tutsi conspiracy seemed reasonable to many Rwandans.[18]

The peace accord signed between the government and the RPF in
Arusha, Tanzania, in August 1993 became a rallying point for reac-
tionary forces. They argued that the accord gave too much power to
the Tutsi and the RPF and sold out Hutu interests. In the next few
months, many Hutu politicians deserted the opposition and allied with
the president, leaving Tutsi as the most conspicuous opponents of the
regime. The murder in October 1993 of Burundi's first Hutu presi-
dent, Melchior Ndadaye, by Tutsi troops attempting a coup, reinforced
fears in Rwanda that Tutsi could not be trusted, and the thousands of
Burundian Hutu refugees who arrived in Rwanda contributed to the
growing anti-Tutsi sentiments. At some point during this period, a group
of extremists linked to the president drew up plans for genocide of the
Tutsi living in Rwanda as a way of eliminating opposition and unify-
ing the Hutu behind their regime. The death of President Habyarimana
on April 6, 1994, served as the spark to put these plans into motion
(Des Forges 1999: 96-179; Prunier 1995: 159-212).

The role that churches played in supporting the emergence of the
democracy movement in Rwanda in the early 1990s, with many of the
activists coming out of church organizations, has been widely recog-
nized (cf. Reyntjens 1994: 166-170; Prunier 1995: 132-133), but the
pressures that arose for democratization *within* the churches have received
less notice. Just as President Habyarimana and his associates found their

hold on power challenged by opposition activists who exposed their corruption and questioned their authority, church leaders from the national to the local level found their own authority under question. Lay movements like the *Abarokore* movement and the Marian movement that emerged in response to the apparitions of the Virgin Mary at Kibeho challenged the clergy's monopoly on religious teaching and ritual. Successful development projects reduced the dependence of the poor on patrimonial structures and created a group solidarity that provided the support necessary to oppose injustice. Progressive intellectuals who found support in various sectors of the churches for human rights activism and other causes criticized the wider church structures and national leadership for failing to assist them. Various voices within the churches called for greater empowerment of the laity and organized challenges to the existing church authorities. Even the chair of the Catholic Conference of Bishops, Thadée Nsengiyumva, issued a pastoral letter in January 1991 that accused the Catholic Church of being a 'giant with feet of clay,' unwilling to use its power for good, and called upon the church to reform its own structures.[19] In the Save parish, increasingly vocal discontent with the operations of the parish seem to have been a factor in the bishop's replacement of the curé with a Tutsi priest in 1993.

Church support for the 1994 genocide can be better understood within this context of church authority structures under challenge. National church leaders had a close, mutually beneficial working relationship with national political officials, just as local pastors and priests often had a close relationship with local authorities. Church personnel had a vested interest in preserving the political status quo and resisting reforms, not simply because of personal ties with political officials, but also because of the benefits they gained from their cooperative relationship with office holders. Yet it was the direct challenges to their own authority within the churches that made church leaders truly sympathetic to the idea of a 'Tutsi menace' that associates of Habyarimana began to promulgate after the 1990 invasion by the RPF. Because they owed their power at least in part to ethnic politics within the churches, church leaders perceived the threats to their power partially in ethnic terms. With Tutsi and moderate Hutu apparently trying to wrest control of church structures, national and local church leaders were easily convinced of a grand conspiracy to reverse the 1959 revolution— which would include reversing their own control of the churches. In ultimately supporting the genocide, church personnel understood the attack on Tutsi and their allies as a struggle in part to protect churches

from attacks on their structures and as an attempt to preserve their own power.

During the period of pro-democracy mobilization, church leaders took a mixed public stance. On the one hand, hoping not to lose their own legitimacy with church members, they acknowledged the need for greater democracy and respect for civil rights in the country, but at the same time, a number of leaders made clear their strong support for Habyarimana and their opposition to the RPF. During the build up to the genocide, a few national church leaders spoke out— for example, the bishop of Nyundo who warned in November 1993 of arms being distributed to civilian militias—but most continued a close alliance with the regime. None of Rwanda's churches specifically denounced the ethnic massacres that took place periodically between 1990 and January 1993. Des Forges (1999: 87) discusses these attacks as 'practicing slaughter', since they established the pattern eventually used in the genocide. This was certainly true for the churches, since the silence of church leaders in the face of attacks even on church personnel and buildings set the pattern of later church response to ethnic violence. Because they did not speak out against the anti-Tutsi violence and the growing propaganda being broadcast throughout the country, but on the contrary displayed their own anti-Tutsi prejudices, the church leaders' continued call for support of the regime in a time of war was interpreted by the public as an endorsement of the anti-Tutsi message. With the long history of church alliance with the government and the continuing practice of ethnic discrimination within the churches, many Rwandan Christians came to believe that organizing to defend against potential Tutsi treachery was consistent with well established church practice. As a result, at the local level, many church employees and lay leaders became members of the militias that were organizing to defend the country from the supposed Tutsi menace. In communities like Save, most of those who attacked the church buildings where Tutsi were gathered were themselves members of the parish.

When the genocide began, some individuals in the churches took courageous stands, even risking their lives to save those threatened, but the majority of people in the churches gave tacit or even open support to the genocide. Church officials lent credibility to those organizing the genocide by calling on their members to support the new government. A month into the violence, after most of the major massacres were already finished, the Catholic bishops and leaders of Protestant churches did issue a joint call for the restoration of peace and security, but they treated the violence as a mere product of the war, accus-

ing each side equally, without ever using the term genocide or even alluding to the systematic slaughter of Tutsi civilians (Des Forges 1999: 25-248; African Rights 1995: 862-930). The church officials never specifically invoked the principle of sanctuary nor condemned the desecration of church buildings. It is not surprising, then, that most Rwandans believed that their church leaders supported the massacres.

Knowing the position of church leaders and the history of ethnic politics in the churches, many of Rwanda's Christians became involved in the killing without offending their religious beliefs. Individuals used the violence as a means of asserting their personal power, and this included people seeking to improve their positions within the churches. Clergy and other church leaders were often killed by members of their own parishes. Leaders of militia groups or roadblocks became powerful figures who could exercise authority in the churches as in other spheres of social life, and conversely powerful people in local communities often asserted their power by leading such groups. Evidence that I gathered in 1995-96 in the prefectures of Gikongoro, Butare, and Kibuye is consistent with reports from other sources throughout the country that a number of clergy and other church employees lured people into churches knowing that they would be killed, turned over Tutsi to be killed, and themselves participated in or even led the security patrols that served as death squads.[20] Several priests have been found guilty in Rwandan courts of participation in the genocide, and a regional leader of the Seventh Day Adventist Church, Elziphan Ntakirutimana, has even been extradited to stand trial at the International Criminal Tribunal in Arusha (African Rights 2000). Many clergy did not participate directly in the violence but took part in the local and regional security committees that were set up to organize roadblocks and militia patrols.

Church personnel involved in the violence justified the killing as a defensive action made necessary by the RPF invasion. They saw the death of Tutsi civilians as an unfortunate necessity of the war, because of the legitimate concern of Hutu for their safety. Even once the genocide was over and the genocidal regime was driven from power, some church personnel refused to acknowledge the nature of the offenses that had taken place. In August 1994, a group of priests wrote to the Vatican from exile in Congo to defend their position:

> To speak of genocide and to insinuate that only Hutus killed Tutsis is to be ignorant that Hutus and Tutsis have been each others' executioners. We dare even to confirm that the number of Hutu civilians killed by the army of the RPF exceeds by far the number of Tutsi victims of the ethnic troubles (quoted in African Rights 1995: 906).

Exiled leaders of the Presbyterian church made the same argument more than two years later at a 'reconciliation' meeting held in Namibia.[21]

Concluding Thoughts on the Theology of Genocide

Christians around the world who have heard the accusations against the churches in Rwanda have tended to dismiss the reprehensible actions of clergy and other Christians as evidence of the superficiality of Christianity in Rwanda.[22] Such a response not only ignores the long history of Christian violence conducted in the name of God, from the Crusades to the repeated persecution of Jews, but it also overlooks the ways in which Christianity in Africa has been shaped by the colonial experience. Arguments by scholars such as Lamin Sanneh (1990) about the innovation Africans used in adapting the Christian message to their own cultures notwithstanding, the nature of missionary work as part of the colonial project affected not only the structures of the Christian churches established in Africa, as I have described above, but also the Christian message. In Rwanda, missionaries emphasized obedience and respect for authorities and for power structures. Christians were taught to follow strictly the rules of the faith as well as the orders of their social superiors and their government. Missionaries showed through example that Christianity allowed Machiavellian manipulations in the struggle for influence and accepted ethnic discrimination. Even after independence, Christianity in Rwanda remained predominantly a legal-istic religion that emphasized authority and obedience and continued to practice political maneuvering and discrimination. While the churches did not preach ethnic hatred and murder as such, charity and love for fellow humans had never been the dominant message, and supporting the genocide was ultimately consistent with the theology that Christians had been taught.

As Paul Gifford (1998) has emphasized, 'different Christianities' exist simultaneously in Africa (325-333). Rwanda was not unique in having competing voices within its churches, some preaching a conservative theology of obedience while others called for churches to become agents of progressive social change. In the Rwandan case, however, the conflict between the alternate voices within the churches became highly politi-cized, as conservative forces sought to protect both their personal power and their vision of the church against the growing power of the voices seeking to democratize the churches. This conflict, as much as the strong church-state alliance, helps to explain why churches became involved in genocide.

What the Rwandan case suggests for the study of religion and politics in Africa is the need to take seriously political conflicts within churches. Churches are not politically relevant only in relationship to the state. With their extensive resources, myriad programs, and wide geographic reach, churches play a major role in many African societies in determining the distribution of wealth and opportunities, the structure of class divisions, and the nature of ethnic power relations. Individuals and groups use churches to promote their interests, and the results of political competitions within churches can have wide-reaching implication for the broader society. The struggle to democratize churches has been an important element of the political reform movements that have swept across Africa in the past decade but has gone almost unnoticed by political analysts. The Rwandan case shows the danger of such neglect.

NOTES

1. Interview in Kigali, March 1996.

2. Much of the research for this article was gathered during field research in Rwanda in 1992-93 and 1995-96.

3. I have written extensively elsewhere on the role of churches in shaping ethnic identities, cf. Longman 1999 and Longman 2000.

4. This fact distinguishes the Rwandan case from Europe under Nazi occupation in which Jews were demonized in part as Christ-killers, or Turkey in which Armenians were targeted as infidels, or the religious targeting of Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo. While the actual belief of those targeted was not politically relevant, religious imagery and appeals were used to exclude and isolate members of the targeted groups, who were accused by their very nature of offending sacred values. In Rwanda, religion was not a factor in defining identity as religious affiliations cut across ethnic lines.

5. As recorded in an interview in Ngoma, Butare, March 26, 1996, and in the film by Lindsey Hilsum, *Rwanda: The Betrayal*, Blackstone Films, Channel 4, 1996.

6. The colonial history of the Catholic Church is well documented by Linden and Linden 1977 and Kalibwami 1991.

7. While the precise meaning of the terms in precolonial Rwanda and Burundi remains a matter of academic debate, research suggests that usage of the terms Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa showed considerable regional variation and that the categories were relatively fluid. For example, Newbury (1988: 74-94) and Gravel (1968) demonstrate that, in opposite sides of the Rwandan Kingdom, Hutu families who acquired cattle and clients would be considered Tutsi within a few generations, while Tutsi families who lost their cattle and clients would eventually be considered Hutu. Lemarchand (1994: 42-43) points out that in Burundi the ruling elite were the Ganwa, considered neither Hutu nor Tutsi, a fact which Europeans almost completely ignored.

8. Sanders 1969 offers an excellent analysis of the development of racial ideas regarding the 'hamitic hypothesis.' See also, Prunier 1995: 5-16 and Chrétien's article '"Vrais" et "faux" Nègres: L'idéologie hamitique', in Chrétien 1987.

9. As Linden and Linden write, 'Both Hutu and Tutsi chiefs were able to translate their spiritual authority into a temporal sway over their parishioners. Members of an Abbé's family tended to settle around his mission or to find employment there, and as

Father Superior he was able to build up a network of clients, often becoming a confidant of the local chief...' (223-224). They argue that from early on missionaries were integrated into Rwanda's patron-client system, with converts attaching themselves to the missions like clients, expecting protection and assistance from the missionaries, whom they viewed as patrons (50-72).

   10. On the idea of spiritual power, see Ellis and ter Haar 1998.

   11. Significantly, in Burundi, where Tutsi continued to dominate the government, church leadership remained overwhelmingly Tutsi, particularly in the Catholic Church.

   12. Based on interviews conducted in Butare and Kibuye in 1992-93, including with Muvara, and in Nairobi 1999. See also Muvara 1990.

   13. This portrait is drawn from interviews conducted in Save and Butare, December 1992-April 1993, and from diverse church documents found in archives in the cathedral in Butare, including 'Statistiques Annuelles Diocèse Butare 1990', printed by the diocese.

   14. Interview in Save, 5 February 1993.

   15. I have written about these developments in greater detail in Longman 2000, chapter four.

   16. The best source on the genocide is the comprehensive report written by historian Alison Des Forges (1999) for Human Rights Watch based on research gathered by a research team in which I participated. See also, Prunier 1995.

   17. Uvin 1998 provides the best analysis of the economic factors behind the genocide.

   18. On the ideology of the genocide, see Des Forges 1999: 65-86 and Chrétien 1995: 139-208.

   19. For more details see Longman 2000.

   20. Some of these findings are presented in Des Forges 1999, others in Longman 2000.

   21. Interview by telephone with Kigali, December 1996.

   22. The Vatican, for example, has treated the failings of the church in Rwanda as individual not institutional failings. A 1996 letter claimed that 'The church itself cannot be held responsible for the misdeeds of its members who have acted against evangelical law.' (Quoted in 'Pope Says Church is Not to Blame in Rwanda', *New York Times*, March 21, 1996, A3).

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