

The Debate on the Church's Guilt in Post-genocide Rwanda¹

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the question of the church's guilt for the Rwandan genocide, which claimed an estimated 800,000 mostly Tutsi lives between April and July 1994. It argues that, despite the courage of many believers who sheltered Tutsi people, the churches as churches have a responsibility, either by commission or omission, for the slaughter. Karl Jaspers' distinction between criminal guilt, in the sense of being tried and found guilty in a court of law of breaking the law, and moral guilt, understood as a sense of responsibility and guilt which no amount of criminal or political propitiation can appease, helps to establish what the churches should repent for. They were, in the light of these definitions, not criminally but morally guilty. Under the colonial regime, they uncritically embraced the Hamitic theory, which described the Tutsi as strangers, superior in all respect to the Hutu. At the time of independence they gave credence to a discourse presenting the Tutsi as perennial oppressors of the Hutu 'majority', and did not object to state-driven discriminatory policies against them. If they called for peace during the genocide, the church leaders, Catholic as well as Protestant, never condemned for what it was the Tutsi extermination programme carried out by the interim government before their eyes. By their silence, they made it easier for the genocide to happen. A significant number of clerics actively took part in the killings. The general synod of the Presbyterian Church made a confession of guilt in 1996. The Catholic bishops did also, in 2000 and in 2016, but only for the failings of the church members involved in the genocide, not for the church as a church. Other crimes were perpetrated during this period, but they were of a totally different nature. All should be recognised. A full and unconditional confession of the church's guilt would enhance its credibility in the discussion on the Rwandan past and in this way increase the chances of peace and reconciliation in the country.

On 6 April 1994 at about 8.30pm, the plane carrying Juvénal Habyarimana, the president of Rwanda, Cyprien Ntaryamira, the president of Burundi, and several other dignitaries was shot down from a still unidentified spot by a surface-to-air missile in Kanombe near Kigali. All the occupants died. In the following hours, the Presidential Guard and Hutu extremist militia known as Interahamwe started

1 This article is part of research conducted since 2015 in Rwanda and various European countries on the Rwandan churches' memory of the genocide against the Tutsi. See Philippe Denis, *The Rwandan Genocide and the Christian Churches. Between Grief and Denial* (Melton, Woodbrige: James Currey, forthcoming).