

THE PALACE, THE PARISH AND THE POWER: CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN RWANDA AND THE GENOCIDE

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Abstract

This article describes the church and state relations in Rwanda and their impact on the genocide. Drawing on interviews conducted with three Rwandan theological students, it argues that the ambiguous role played by the church in the Rwandan genocide was a result of the lack of a clear and balanced model of church and state relations at the time. The article observes that the Rwandan church's tendency to side with the state, as a way of finding security and power to achieve its missionary goals determined the church's response to the genocide. It argues that being trapped by ambitions for power and security the church got into a series of promiscuous relationships with the state, Tutsis and Hutus that ultimately corrupted its vision and mission. Drawing on interviews¹ and literature the article concludes that the role of the church in Rwanda during the genocide was a culmination of a lack of a clear and informed model of relating to the state. It draws lessons that can be learned by other African churches in other countries on how they can relate to their governments without losing their integrity.

1 INTRODUCTION

Some consideration needs to be given to the historical relationship between the church and the state in Rwanda, and their competing interests which were the source of the conspicuous, incoherent and ambiguous behaviour of the church during the genocide. Genocide

refers to the destruction of a nation or an ethnic group (Destexhe 1995:3). This article surveys and evaluates the position of the church in relation to politics during the genocide in 1994. How did the church define its ministry during this period? Was its behaviour during this period just a reactionary one or one that is important for us to explore more deeply in order to find lessons for the future of church and state relations in Africa? Four interviews were conducted for the research with three people from Rwanda and one from neighbouring Burundi. The respondents differed in their conclusions about the way the church should have related to the state. Two of them argued that the church should not have anything to do with the state but rather focus on spreading the gospel which is its main priority. The other two argued that, had the church related to the state with a critical view, it would have avoided the genocide or rather would not have collaborated with the state and ultimately the *militias* during the genocide. The research is approached from a prophetic model of church and state relations. This model sees the church as being apart or distinct from the state whilst maintaining a mandate to contribute to political processes and the responsibilities of safeguarding Christian and human values and rights (Moyo 1995:121). However being concerned with political matters does not mean that the church has to abandon its mission and concentrate on mundane matters, but rather that it holds the two together in a creative tension (Nthamburi 2000:58). It is not surprising that Christians are perplexed as they wonder how the genocide was possible in Rwanda, a country that was hailed as the most Christian one in Africa. For instance it was in Rwanda that “the Eastern African Revival” was held between 1927 and 1942 (Kritzinger 2006). By 1994, 89.6 percent of the population was Christian, 62 percent of whom were devout Catholics (Rutayisire 1995:112).² How was it possible that people who believed in the gospel of love, peace, non-violence, equality and justice turned into ruthless killers? Where was the church of Jesus Christ, the prophetic voice, the light and salt of the earth when all this happened? What does this tragedy mean for the centuries old missionary work of the church, not only in Rwanda, but also in Africa as a whole? The answer to these questions lies in the changing relationships the church had with the state over the centuries, for example as allies of the state, kingmakers, social engineers, civil society and a haven for the oppressed and arbiters (Kastfelt

2005:83). In an attempt to address the above questions, this chapter will adopt the following typology; the genocide in Rwanda, history of church and state relations in Rwanda and lessons from the Rwandan experience. Then we shall conclude the research by making recommendations on church and state relations.

2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this article is based on archival history and oral history retrieved through interviews. I interviewed three Rwandan student pastors and one from neighbouring Burundi who had experiences of the genocide. The reasons for interviewing them were as follows: they had direct experience of the genocide whilst, at the same, time being leaders of the church. The three Rwandans were Celestin Hategizimana, Solomon Sirummwe, and Charlotte Uwantenge. The one from Burundi was Cyriaque Hakizimana). The interviewees differed on the role that should have been played by the church in the history of Rwanda including the time of the genocide. Two of them (Celestin Hategizimana and Solomon Sirummwe) argued for the church's involvement in the state, but said that it should be guided by an informed model of church and state relations. Cyriaque Hakizimana and Charlotte Uwantenge argued that the mistake came through the involvement of the church. They argued that the church should not have had anything to do with the state in the first place, but should have concentrated on preaching the gospel, without meddling in politics and the state.

All four interviewees were actively involved in Christian ministry, two (Celestin Hategizimana and Cyriaque Hakizimana) as pastors, one as a youth leader (Solomon Sirummwe) and one (Charlotte Uwantenge) a leader of a women's group, all in the period under review. Reverend Celestin Hategizimana, an Anglican priest, was pastoring a church in Kigali. Cyriaque Hakizimana was a pastor of a Pentecostal church. Solomon Sirummwe was a leader of the youth group in the Assemblies of God. Charlotte Uwantenge was a leader of the women's group at the Evangelical church. The interviews conducted with these church leaders who are also emerging scholars in their own rights are thus evaluated with a view to giving us a glimpse of the experience of church and state relations in Rwanda

during the genocide by those involved in the church at grassroots level.

As part of the methodology, a large volume of written material was consulted during this research. A number of books written from different perspectives such as Christian, historical, gender and anthropological, were consulted. Owing to lack of accessibility and language limitations newspapers and other written materials were not consulted, since the researcher is an English speaker whilst most of the material was written in French.

3 THE GENOCIDE IN RWANDA

Although the genocide came to its culmination on 7 April 1994 after the death of the Rwandan President Habyarimana, a Hutu, in a plane crash, it had been planned for months, if not years. The killing of the Prime Minister – Madam Agathe Uwilingiyamana – a moderate Hutu who was a “crusader for justice, reconciliation and tolerance, followed his death” (McCullum 1995:23). This was followed by mass killings of Tutsis and moderate Hutus that went on for over three months (from April to June 1994). The killers used guns, machetes, grenades and any other form of weapon they could lay their hands on. The Rwandan genocide³ led to the killing of over 800 000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus and the displacement of even more people from their homes. A superficial analysis of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 has led to the conclusion that it was caused by differences in ethnicity. Deep and critical analysis would identify a web of factors with power to control and influence Rwanda as the centre of the causes of the genocide. Hunger for power and control of Rwanda by different groups ranging from the colonial administrators and the church to Tutsis and Hutus, with ethnicity differences resulting from the ideology culminating in the genocide. Hugh McCullum (1995:2) also echoes these sentiments in his book *The Angels have left us*.

The popular but dangerously simplistic wisdom about Rwanda’s catastrophe is that it was a primitive, savage eruption of ethnic (or tribal) rivalry, taking its place

alongside Africa's other convulsions of mindless violence ... History supports the contention that the violence in Rwanda was about power – about wanting so much power to keep absolute power as to justify any evil.

McCullum's (1995:1) observations go further than blaming the genocide on ethnicity and do not put the blame only on the Rwandan (African) people but actually refuse to "allow the international community to shrug off its complicity". It is not only the international community that has hidden behind ethnicity as the cause of the genocide but also the church.⁴ When you concentrate on the ethnicity theory you cannot see clearly the role played by the church in the years preceding the genocide as well as during the genocide – a role that was ambiguous and at most, sinful. The church was very close to the state and, as can be expected, it clearly failed to play its role as a watchdog to the state. Instead it became the servant of the state. Meg Guillebaud (2002:206) points out "there were many abuses of human rights which went largely unprotected by church leaders". During the genocide churches failed to protect those who took refuge in their buildings. Many church leaders chased away people who sought refuge in their buildings; some church leaders went to the extreme of collaborating with the militias, calling them to kill people who were hiding in their premises. Anne Kubai (2005:99) indicates numerous accounts of priests killing members of their congregations who had sought refuge in church buildings in the belief that the "reverend men (and women) of God would protect them". The question is: How could the church of God allow itself to be so brutal? The answer lies in the development of church and state relations in Rwanda from the time of the first missionaries, colonial administrators, Tutsi and ultimately Hutus.

4 BACKGROUND OF THE TUTSI-HUTU RELATIONS IN RWANDA

The problem of ethnicity in Rwanda has its roots in the history of the origins of the three ethnic groups of Rwanda being the Hutu, Tutsi and Twa (Pigmies). European travellers, whose version of history is the dominant one, are guilty of developing a myth that led to the support for ethnic classism. European history writers noted that the

Tutsi, a Nilo-Hamite tribe from the Ethiopian highlands, migrated to Rwanda and Burundi in search of grazing grounds for their cattle in the 15th century (cf. Fegley 1993:xix-xx, 25-39). As for the Hutu, Théo Tschuy (1997:43) asserts that, although no written records are available, they came from the Cameroonian savannahs during the 11th century. Dorsey (1994:2) adds that Rwanda gained its present territory partly through conquest during the reign of the *Umwami* (king) Kigeri Rwabugiri, who had expanded the power of the Rwandan central court over both internal and external affairs (cf. Newbury 1988:1) by the 19th century (Dorsey 1994:6), and partly through peaceful assimilation. According to tradition, initial contact between the Hutu and Tutsi was nonviolent, “But there was nevertheless a long and more or less peaceful interaction as long as land was plentiful” (Tschuy 1997:41). While the Tutsi eventually achieved domination over the socioeconomic and political system, they never constituted the majority” (Dorsey 1994:5).

The forced submission of the Hutu inhabitants resulted in a “Tutsi monarchy” headed by a *mwami* and a “feudal hierarchy” or a “federal institution” called *ubuhake*⁵ of Tutsi nobles and gentry and also *uburetwa* which symbolised a status lower than the *ubuhake* (Newbury 1988:136-140). According to Dorsey (1994:7), king Rwabugiri implemented and consolidated political reforms. He also refined the patron-client relationship that would be a prominent feature of Tutsi exploitation of the Hutu and lesser nobility. To ensure his controlling power as a king, he appointed chiefs (army chiefs, land chiefs and cattle chiefs) who ruled over the Hutu in all regions (provinces and districts) and collected tithes for the kingdom. At the time Rwanda was under the administration of the German government who worked in close collaboration with missionaries from the German Roman Catholic church. This went on until the defeat of Germany at the end of the First World War, when its territories were shared out amongst the victors by the League of Nations (Rutayisire 1995:120). Rwanda and Burundi were given to Belgium to administer as colonies.

5 CHURCH AND STATE BEFORE THE GENOCIDE

Now we look at the development of church-state relations in Rwanda during the three historical eras, which is during colonial government, during Tutsi rule and during the Hutu rule.

5.1 Church-state relations under the colonial government

As in most African countries the missionaries influenced and collaborated with colonial governments. The sword and the word collaborated. It should be pointed out that the missionaries (church) played a very significant role in helping the colonial governments, first the Germans and later the Belgians, to administer Rwanda. The Christian encounter with the Kingdom of Rwanda goes right back to the late 1800s and early 1900s with the arrival of the German colonisers which almost coincided with that of the missionaries (Rutayisire 1995:112). The white missionaries believed that for anyone to convert a nation, he would need to start with its leaders whether they were traditional or colonial because this would guarantee acceptance of the mission by the subjects (Kastfelt, 2005:84). From the start the missionaries sought to establish good relations with the authorities. As a result, from the beginning the Catholic Church enjoyed a cosy relationship with the German administrators and, when the Belgians replaced the German administrators, the Catholic Church collaborated with them too. They also did the same when dealing with the African people; they forged close relations with the traditional leaders, with the Tutsi royal court, quickly becoming the second most powerful institution in the country (McCullum 1995:4). The state saw the church as a useful tool for achieving social transformation through its pacifying gospel, which could tame the sometimes rebellious African people. The church was also a key player in the shaping of the social, political, and economic life of the country. Ultimately Catholic mission stations were regarded as centres of power of Rwandan politics, a position they held for more than half a century (Jean-Pierre Chrétien 2003:253). Chrétien (2003:207) goes on to assert,

In the early twentieth century, missionary activity, which had preceded colonialism proper, became inscribed in a colonial logic. The boundaries of the apostolic vicarites corresponded to those the colonial powers laid down, and

the missions were created with the administrations and the military's blessing.

These were foundations of a model of church and state relations, which led to the absorption of the church by the state that would later determine the response of the church to the factors that led to the genocide.

5.2 Church-state relations during the Tutsi-led government

When Belgium took over the administration of Rwanda, it used the traditional structures of Tutsi chiefs to administer the country but emphasised the ethnic distinction by only educating the sons of Tutsi chiefs. This led to a much more rigid distinction between Tutsi (14%) and Hutu (85%) than had existed previously (McCullum 1995:5). The state, with the help of the church, controlled research and started an ideology that placed the Tutsi above the other groups such as the Hutu and the Twa, arguing that Tutsis had Hamitic origins from the highlands of Ethiopia. They were tall, handsome and cleverer than the Hutu. According to Celestin Hategizimana, the Twa did not count – they were literally marginalised by both the church and the government (cf. interview referred to above). This was the ideology behind the divide-and-rule strategy used by the Belgians so that they could manage to control the population. Unfortunately, as in most African countries, the Rwandan people believed these myths and distorted histories and allowed them to be the dominant ideology behind their nationhood. Instead of opposing these unchristian theories, the church allowed itself to be used by the state in applying them in the church and its institutions, such as schools and seminaries where Tutsi's were privileged over Hutus (Ndahiro 2005). Ndahiro observes, "The church ensured that some Tutsi, at least, had enough education to become administrators and to consolidate power and gain wealth" (McCullum 1995:4). Within the church itself, although Hutus could be members, they had no responsibility at all. The church is guilty of not only having been silent but also of supporting the state in planting the evil seed of ethnic classism. The question to be asked is: "Why did the church allow itself to be used by government?" The answer to that question varies but a dominant answer is that the church needed power so that it could dominate the

religious life of the Rwandan people. From this we can conclude that the church and the state were in a relationship that was devoid of a theological motivation and model. Celestin Hategizimana (2007) argues that “had the church done the work of finding a right church and state model, it would not have had this problem”.

5.3 Church-state relations with the Hutu-led government

In the 1940s both the church and the state began to shift their orientation away from the Tutsi elite toward the Hutu. There were a few reasons for the shift. First, there was the fear of communism and Islam that Catholics feared had infiltrated the Tutsi (UNAR or Union Nationale Rwandaise) which was busy calling for independence from Belgium and from domination by the church. Christopher (1987:44) asserts that “some Tutsi nationalists voiced many of the same themes: independence from Belgium”. Then the Hutu became the safer group in whose favour the Belgian administrators rapidly shifted. The Belgian Governor General Jean-Paul Harroy quickly set about the task of replacing Tutsi chiefs and sub-chiefs with Hutus. In doing so, he claimed that he was acting in the interests of the oppressed masses and advancing democracy. Second, the Catholic Church had mass conversions, since the Hutu, who are by far a majority of the population, also became a majority in their churches. Third, the Church (Catholic) considered the Tutsi monarchy to be an obstacle to extending Church influence (Eltringham 2004:37). Driven by the ambitions of declaring Rwanda a Christian nation and judging the Tutsi monarch to be an obstacle to this vision, the church wanted him removed from his position. The Hutus saw the meltdown of relations between the Belgians and the Tutsis as the decisive political support to overcome all Tutsi power. The polarisation of ethnic relations and the resulting violence came to its climax in 1959. Hutus resorted to a violent uprising against the kingdom of Rwanda, killing Tutsis and taking over the government. Under the guise of the liberation of the marginalised in 1959 the Catholic Church declared the social revolution of the Hutu (Tschuy 1997:4). The revolution ended with an interim government which was led a by a former seminarian. Celestin (2007) sees this as, “the perpetuation of the uncritical and unacceptable flirting of the church with the state”.

After the elections the first Hutu president was Grégoire Kayibanda who was a personal secretary of the Roman Catholic Archbishop André Perraudin and editor of a Catholic newspaper. Christopher (1987:45) notes “agents of the Kayibanda regime accused the Tutsis of holding a disproportionate number of jobs in schools, private sector, and Rwandan Catholic Church hierarchy”. Many Tutsi schoolteachers, priests, and others were fired and harassed. The church had the power to condemn these acts of injustice, more especially practised by one of their own, but it did not do so. Instead it collaborated with the government in the campaign to replace Tutsis with Hutus in positions of power and influence. All newspapers at the time were controlled by the Church (Lemarchanda 1970:145) and that increased the influence of the church in public affairs. The reason for the church’s failure was its ambition to control the state. It neglected its responsibility outside government, but had moved inside the government and interfered with the running of the state, which is not the responsibility of the church. It had assumed the position of a kingmaker instead of a prophetic voice.

6 THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH DURING THE GENOCIDE

Like Eusebius and other pro-Constantinian Christians, the Rwandan church looked at the Hutu president and his government as God’s chosen ones to govern a Christian Rwanda. Ironically this is the same honour they had given to the Tutsi leaders in the early days of colonisation and leadership of the *umwami* and Tutsi chiefs. Church-state relations were complicated even more by the president’s preferential treatment of the leadership of the church, showering bishops with gifts and privilege. In this way he had freedom to rule the country without any criticism from the church. The church was based in the corridors of power. Charlotte Uwantenge (2007: interview) argues that “Once the church got closer to government it lost its direction as a reconciler and voice of reason as far as socio-political issues were concerned” (same interview). The president practised favouritism not only towards the Hutus over Tutsi’s but towards Hutus from his home region in the South against those from the North. The church could have emphasised the gospel of the equality of all humanity but instead it returned the favour by offering unconditional support to the Kayibanda government even though it

was perpetuating the planting and tending of the seeds of inequality and ethnicity. The growing divisions based on ethnicity and favouritism was a ticking time bomb that both the state and the church failed to stop before it exploded in their hands. Kubai (2005:108) points out that “the Church hierarchies remained too closely linked with the ruling regime to be a credible voice of protest”. It is important to note that not all churches and church leaders took sides with the government but the church itself was divided down the middle with some offering unconditional support to the government and others opposed to it although they could not openly do so because of fear of victimisation. Kubai highlighted another complexity of the church and genocide by indicating that (Kubai 2005:97)

The 1994 Rwandan genocide that shocked the world and left the country so deeply traumatised, has been described as unique because it was not just Hutu killing Tutsi, but husbands killing their wives, uncles killing their nephews and mothers killing their children. People who knew each other well carried it out – neighbours killed their neighbours and teachers killed their students, while colleagues killed their colleagues at their places of work, including hospitals and Church premises. It remains an enormous contradiction to the Christian Message of Love.

Even women who are usually the peacekeepers in times of war in this case were not always the peacekeepers (African Rights 1995:156). The Anglican Bishop of Kigali commented, “We cannot understand the churches’ failure if we examine the genocide and why there was such desecration by people who would normally regard symbols of faith with almost superstitious reverence” (in McCullum 1995:76). It took place not only in the communities and villages but also in church premises, even under the cross, altar and baptismal fonts (Kubai 2005:99). Many people were killed in the church and sacred symbols were slashed and damaged in response to the *Batutsi* attack. Cyriaque Hakizimana (2005:interview) observed that:

The bishop missed the point that it was the church that had justified ethnicity and so people felt justified to partake

in the genocide believing that it was a godly thing to do especially in the church after receiving its blessing.

On a positive note though there were also good stories of the church's involvement in helping possible victims of the militias. Pastor Matias Bimenyimana recalls that in his church there were some born-again soldiers who rescued the people from the massacres. He notes (in Rutayisire 1995:31):

Some gave money to secure safe passage, others used faked identity cards, and still, others arrived escorted by born-again Christian soldiers, members of our church. Up to the day the government army vacated the city. Born-again Christian soldiers were still bringing people they had rescued from the massacres. They could accompany them past the road blocks, presenting them to the militia as members of their own families ... Some soldiers had gone as far as telling the militias that they would turn on them and kill them if anything happened in the church.

Bimenyimana also shared how the born-again soldiers continued to help them in many ways like bringing food, fetching water, offering protection from the militias up to the point of fighting against *Interahamwe*. He says that often the militias would come and then say to each other "These are Christians. Leave them alone." The actions of these Christian soldiers brings to light a big debate of how they understood themselves as employees of government and how they related that to their Christian faith and being members of the church.⁶ By their acts of mercy towards the possible victims and their defiance of the instruction to kill because of their Christian conviction they redeem the church. They give hope in that, even when the church had fallen into the hands of the state, there were some parts of it that remained faithful to what it means to be a community of faith, love, peace and protection. The behaviour of the church during the genocide is a very ambiguous and complex one. On the one hand the church complied with the state and on the other it supported victims of the state.

The question that can be asked is, “How could the church avoid finding itself in the middle of the atrocities that took away its credibility and right to be peacemaker and prophetic voice?” Are there any lessons for the church in Africa on how it needs to conduct its relations with the state in a way that does not compromise its core mission to the world? The answer lies in the model of church-state relations it chooses for itself. The next section seeks to respond to this question by drawing lessons from the Rwandan experiences of church and state.

7 LESSONS FOR AFRICAN CHURCHES FROM THE RWANDAN EXPERIENCE

What can we learn from the stance of the church in Rwanda during the genocide?

7.1 Critical solidarity

One can argue on two counts: the first is that the church became too close to the government. This is the first mistake that the church made: that of *uncritical acceptance* of the state. For instance, Martin Luther, in his theory of the two kingdoms, propagated a clear distinction between church and state. He argued that both the church (kingdom of God) and the state (kingdom of the world) were ordained by God but they must remain distinct from each other (in Moyo 1995:127). Luther was aware of the seductive power of the state that could easily absorb the church and jeopardise the fundamental principles of its being and mission. However Luther’s approach is limited and handicapped by not recognising the need for the church to make a contribution to the promotion of participatory democracy and good governance. The church in Africa, a continent faced with poverty, underdevelopment and bad governance, cannot stand aloof from the kingdom of the world and leave everything in the hands of politicians. Democracy is precious yet too fragile to be left solely in the hands of politicians without being protected by the citizenry and broader civil society including the church.

The church needs to make a contribution both through its members individually and as an institution. The democratic life of a country

requires the church to adopt a different approach towards the state. This is where I think the model of “critical solidarity” becomes a solution. This is the method that was adopted by the South African churches during the transition from apartheid to democracy. It encourages the church to assist government in initiatives that seek to empower people, whilst maintaining a critical distance that allows it to criticise and condemn government where it violates people’s rights. Would critical solidarity have worked differently in the Rwandan situation? Would maintaining a critical distance have prevented the church from being absorbed by the state? There is a need for all stakeholders in a country, the church included, to help the state to consolidate its systems of governance and development. Such collaboration must be guided by informed methods and strategies which are rooted in a sound theology of church and state relations and whose mandate and agenda of that theology must be to enact fundamental principles of the kingdom of God such as equality, justice, and security for all.

7.2 The whole gospel for the whole person

Both the Protestant and Catholic Church's faiths in Rwanda had weaknesses: their teaching of the Bible and of salvation remained artificial and ungrounded. They emphasised salvation of individuals from personal sin. Even the understanding of sin stemmed from a narrow moralistic view which excluded social sin and the social nature of the gospel. The danger of this, as observed by Solomon Sirummwe (2006: interview), is the fact that “the majority of Christians were not able to make informed choices and take conscious stances against injustice”. In the Protestant circles, the newly saved members disassociated themselves from the rest of the community as Rutayisire (1995:115) pointed out:

The Eastern Africa Revival gave a different perspective on the issue and conversion was rightly preached as a prerequisite for being called a real Christian. However, their legacy contained many small flaws that were to lead to the inefficiency of the Christians in times of crises. The “Balokole” (Born again Christian of the revival) movement was so heavenly-minded that it forgot that Christianity has

duties even here on earth. This led to a kind of naïve faith, often irrelevant when it came to dealing with social issues.

There was a gap between what was taught in the church and people's daily life experiences. The themes that constitute what each denomination teaches in terms of race relations can only be drawn from the behaviour of Christians as they live their lives in society. Charlotte Uwantenge (2007: interview) observed that "topics such as ethnicity, racism, and sharing were not taught as part of Christian education, but rather such themes were seen as worldly and political". The question to be asked is why it is that ethnicity became a subtle problem that was pushed under the carpet. Why did the church not condemn it in the pulpit and sacrifice it on the altars of the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion, where people become one body united with Christ in his baptism, death and resurrection (Romans 6:1). Kubai (2005:108) asserts, "The church that once supported the policy of exclusion and taught that salvation was achieved through the social hierarchy characterised the traditional Rwandan society." People in the Catholic Church were being cleansed of their sins through the penitence process but this had nothing to do with human transformation. It was the same with the Protestant churches where people had a close and individual relationship with Jesus, which however did not seem to help them to grow beyond judging people on ethnic grounds, and seeing the importance of servant-hood rather than power as taught by the gospels. Can the power of the gospel overcome the quest for political power? This demonstrates that there is a need for the church in Africa to teach a message that addresses issues concerning people's spiritual, physical, emotional and social lives such as ethnicity, power, oppression and the role of citizens in participatory democracy and good governance.

7.3 Ecumenism and prophetic vision

One of the strengths of ecumenism is that it makes the church strong and helps it to engage the state from a position of power and privilege. This is absent when it is divided. One of the factors that led to the Rwandan church's failure to resist the temptation to be

absorbed by a corrupt state was that it allowed the state to divide down the middle. One section took sides with the state and another kept a critical distance. This is possible where the ecumenical movement is not strong. The state was too close to the Catholic Church and left other churches aside, thus dividing the body of Christ. Where the church is divided it is easy for the government to make use of its weaknesses. Responding to rather critical and somewhat ruthless questions about the lack of effective involvement of the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) in promoting democracy in African countries such as Zimbabwe and Swaziland, at the World Social Forum in Kenya the General Secretary, Dr Mvume Dandala (2006), observed that:

The problem with the church, as far as democracy is concerned, is that it never speaks with one voice. Whilst some churches in these countries support the struggle for democracy others are on the side of the dictators. They are divided amongst themselves. The AACC is not a council but a conference of churches, it is an alliance, and we cannot impose on member churches on what to do. So when we intervene in this, one section of the church would invite us to intervene, whilst another would question our involvement.

Solomon Sirummwe saw members of his family being murdered in the church by fellow Christians who belonged to their church yet, at the same time, he was helped to escape unscathed by some Hutu Christians. He said he did not know how to feel about the ambiguous actions of the church. With tears streaming from his eyes, he said (Sirummwe 2006:interview):

The problem with the church is that it is a prostitute. It never sleeps with one partner but changes them all the time. It prostituted with the Rwandan government since it arrived. Over the centuries she slept with the Germans, then the Belgians, then the Tutsis and then the Hutus. Even during the genocide the church was divided; some supported the genocide and others did not support it and

even tried to save some Tutsis from the militias. I do not think I can trust the church anymore.

The above points bring to awareness the extent to which the church can be compromised by the state if it does not build a strong sense of unity across denominational lines and a common theology and strategy of church and state relations. The state has the ability to listen to and partner with the church for the good of all people but, for the church to do this, it needs to build it and become a formidable force that the state can reckon with. Christian unity is not an option but a must for the church if it is to engage the state constructively and without ambiguity. Otherwise the state will play churches against each other.

7.4 New identity in Christ

Ethnicity is one of Africa's time bombs that can go off at anytime in any of our countries. There is a need for the church to take it seriously as a threat to peace, democracy and stability. In Rwanda early anthropologists, historians, and sociologists were churchmen and they were the ones who shaped Rwanda's ethnic identities of Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa. They constructed theories of people's origins and through their so-called researches published a lot of material. The Catholic Church took a lead in this as Eltringham (2004:16) points out: "Roman Catholic Missionaries were defining Rwandans in Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa and their origins." What they did not realise was that building a society based on ethnic grounds was a dangerous measure that would come back to haunt them. Rutayisire (1995:124) asserts, "In many parts of the world today in situations of economic, social or political stress we see people falling back on their ethnic identity with often violent results." He goes on to deplore how the church missed out when he says, "Sadly, within the Church itself the mutual fears between Tutsi and Hutu were not faced up to and dealt with. Within the Anglican Church it was hard for Tutsi to advance in leadership while the hierarchy remained solidly Hutu." Ethnic identity was so deep in Rwandan society that Christians missed the message of unity in Christ. The challenge to find a deeper unity and equality across ethnic barriers was not met. Though the government has removed ethnicity from Rwandan identity documents, the church

should also teach unity in Christ, and build a society where there are no Jews, Gentiles, Tutsi or Hutu as illustrated in the scriptures (Galatians 3:25). The church has to remember that Christ broke down the walls that divided people (Ephesians 2:14). This should also be evident in schools, workplaces, and other areas such as land, finances, and leadership positions. This is what Kubai (2005:105-106) advises when she says:

The church that failed in its God-given task to transform its people from ethnic hatred to Christ must now pray and work towards ending centuries of hatred and strife, and seek to recover from the slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Christians and live according to the Christian teaching of love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

As President Yoweri Museveni (1992:42) of Uganda once wrote: “The challenges facing all African countries, are tribalism and other forms of sectarianism.” The church needs to guard against falling into the trap of ethnicity and sectarianism again.

Both Hategizimana and Hakizimana are correct in their views that the church must relate to the state but this must be informed by theologies, models and strategies that are credible and would guide the church to do this correctly and with integrity. If these are not in place then Sirummwe and Uwantenge are correct in suggesting that the church must be discouraged from engaging in matters of the state. Since, especially in Africa, the church cannot afford to leave politics to the state alone, it needs to embark on theological research and education in search of theologies and models of church and state for modern African democracies. This will resolve the dilemma of not knowing what to do. Churches need to remind themselves of the double mandate they have of preaching the gospel whilst being good stewards of creation, reminding the state that the “Earth is of the Lord and all that is in it” (Psalm 24:1).

8 CONCLUSION

In this paper I have attempted to show that the relations between the churches and state must be based on models that would allow both

the church and the state to maintain their relative autonomies. With reference to the case study of Rwanda during the genocide, it has been shown that the church is vulnerable to cooption and abuse by the state for its own self-serving interests and agendas that can, sometimes, be dangerous. The notion of critical solidarity has been encouraged here because it encourages the church to partner and collaborate with government whilst maintaining its critical distance and standing in solidarity with the poor and marginalised people of society. Ecumenism has to be promoted so that the church can speak with one voice and a single sense of purpose. I have argued that a church could fall into the trap of the state when it allows itself to be divided. Finally, I have shown that the biggest challenge faced by Africa is ethnicity which has the ability not only to tear communities apart but also to divide the Church of Jesus Christ. For the church to address this it needs to preach unity in Christ that surpasses ethnic and racial differences. The church must be vigilant about watching for any sign of ethnicity and abuse of power in government policy and hasten to challenge it. It must also guard against its own ambitions for power and control that might lead to its cooption by the state and end up jeopardising its credibility and ministry as a voice for the voiceless, peacemaker and messenger of good news to the poor and marginalised in society.

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Solomon Sirummwe, Pietermaritzburg, 23 March 2006.

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ENDNOTES

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- 1 For this paper I would like to acknowledge the assistance of four Rwandan students; Solomon Sirummwe, Cyriaque Hakizimana, Charlotte Uwantenge and Celestin Hategizimana. I am grateful for their help in this research.
 - 2 McCullum (1995:65) says that more than 90 percent of the population were baptised Christians (65 percent Catholic, 20 percent Protestants or Anglican, about 5 percent Adventists).
 - 3 The term "genocide" was used by the United Nations to describe the mass killing of people in Rwanda. Gourevitch, P. *We wish to inform you that tomorrow we will be killed with our families*; 35. London: Picador, 1999.
 - 4 Belgium, the first colonizers of Rwanda planted the seed of ethnic difference and built an identity-based colony.
 - 5 According to the Historical Dictionary of Rwanda, "Ubhake" was a cattle contract or lease, in which a powerful person, or patron, provided a protection for a weaker individual, who could be either a peasant or a herder. In Rwanda Ubhake was abolished in April 1954 by umwami Mutara Rudahigwa on the advice of the Belgian President, in a three-stage process: 1) the consent of both parties in the first year, 2) the permission of the unilateral dissolution of the contract, and 2) the termination of all other contracts.
 - 6 Pope John Paul II demanded an end to the killing some weeks after April, the Catholic leaders and some priests with the Protestants leaders produced a "peace-making document" which blamed both RPF and Government for the massacres and called them to stop it.