STUDIA UBB. EUROPAEA, LXX, 2, 2025, 221-239

FAITH AND RECONCILIATION: COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS FROM SOUTH AFRICA AND RWANDA

Monica Meruțiu[*]

DOI: 10.24193/subbeuropaea.2025.2.11
Published Online: 2025-12-16
Published Print: 2025-12-31

Abstract

This article examines the role of faith leadership and religious institutions in post-conflict reconciliation, using South Africa and Rwanda as comparative case studies. It highlights how the moral authority, credibility, and ethical integrity of church leaders can significantly influence post-conflict social reconstruction and healing. In South Africa, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, guided by the moral leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, exemplified how faith-informed approaches, grounded in restorative justice and the principle of ubuntu, can foster dialogue, forgiveness, and national reconciliation. In contrast, in Rwanda, churches were implicated in the 1994 genocide, undermining their legitimacy and limiting the effectiveness of faith-based reconciliation efforts. The reconciliation processes of South Africa and Rwanda underscore the potential of faith leadership in guiding societies through division and trauma.

Keywords: *Faith leaders, Conflict resolution, Christianity, South Africa, Rwanda.*

[*]Monica Meruțiu is Assistant Professor in the International Relations and German Studies Department, at the Faculty of European Studies, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.
E-mail: monica.merutiu@ubbcluj.ro

Introduction

In times of crisis, societies often turn to figures who can offer moral clarity, solace, and a framework for reconciliation and collective healing. Christian faith leaders, such as bishops, pastors, and other clergy, frequently assume this role by framing public discourse around spiritual truths. Their contributions in crisis contexts often include interpreting conflict resolution via theological lenses, legitimizing reconciliation efforts, mobilizing support for healing, and mediating between authorities and civil society, as well as within fragmented societies marked by deep ethnic, racial, or political divisions. Sacred narratives in Christianity, biblical stories, theological concepts, liturgical practices are central tools in Christian crisis communication. Narratives of forgiveness and reconciliation provide frameworks through which communities can process trauma and reach healing.

This study contrasts South Africa's comparatively peaceful process from apartheid with Rwanda's descent into genocidal violence and its subsequent recovery efforts. In South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu exemplifies how authentic religious leadership, coupled with restorative narratives, can foster national healing. By contrast, Rwanda's fractured church response highlights the ambivalent role that religious authority can play in times of crisis.

1. Post-Apartheid South Africa: Pathways to Reconciliation

1.1 Historical Context: From Segregation to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*

Between 1948 and 1994, South Africa's apartheid system, instituted by the all-white National Party government, was a legalized state-enforced structure of racial separation and discrimination that restricted the majority non-white population to separate residential areas, public facilities, and social spaces. Rooted in a series of laws enacted after the 1948 elections, apartheid prohibited interracial relations, classified citizens into four racial categories (Black, Indian, Coloured and White), and forcibly relocated millions of Black South Africans to ethnic homelands, while reserving towns and cities for whites.[1]

[1]African Union, *AUHRM Project Focus Area: The Apartheid*, [https://au.int/en/auhrm-project-focus-area-apartheid], 27 August 2025.

Church leaders, both lay and ordained, were instrumental in the anti-apartheid resistance in South Africa. Operating through ecumenical networks, figures such as Beyers Naudé, Desmond Tutu, Allan Boesak, and Frank Chikane mobilized global ecclesial solidarity, securing international support for the pursuit of freedom, justice, and democracy.[2]

Nelson Mandela's 1994 election symbolized the formal disintegration of apartheid and the commencement of South Africa's turn to democracy. The nation was confronted with the monumental challenge of dismantling decades of institutionalized injustice without descending into cycles of revenge. Profound obstacles remained: a society deeply scarred by racial oppression, victims demanding recognition and justice, perpetrators seeking amnesty, and political leaders struggling to foster trust across entrenched divisions. Mandela's reconciliatory leadership was cardinal in preventing post-apartheid South Africa from descending into chaos; his presidency was distinguished by notable achievements and he maintained an incorruptible leadership. The post-apartheid government encompassing South Africans across social divisions, pursued a program of institutional reform and established the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* to confront apartheid's atrocities and advance restorative justice.[3]

The *Commission* which began its work in January 1996, with a mandate to bridge the nation's divided past and a democratic future by promoting human rights, unity, and reconciliation.

Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela had central roles in dismantling apartheid and advancing racial equality and justice for Black South Africans under white minority rule, although their approaches to justice diverged: "while Tutu favoured nonviolent means of resistance, Mandela was not against using armed resistance against Apartheid militants when he deemed necessary."[4]

---

[2] Peter Lodberg, "Desmond Tutu: Church Resistance to Apartheid and Injustice in Africa," in Søren Dosenrode (ed.), *Christianity and Resistance in the 20th Century. From Kaj Munk and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Desmond Tutu*, Brill, 2008, p. 261.

[3] Olufemi Vaughan, "Reflecting on Nelson Mandela's Historic Presidential Election, May 10, 1994," *Wilson Center,* 2021, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/reflecting-nelson-mandelas-historic-presidential-election-may-10-1994], 27 August 2025.

[4] Joshua Woo, "Desmond Tutu and the triumph against Apartheid," in *Vision of Humanity*, [https://www.visionofhumanity.org/desmond-tutu-and-the-triumph-against-apartheid], April, 2024, 27 August 2025.

Tutu's philosophy of peacemaking was deeply rooted in his Christian faith, which shaped his unwavering commitment to nonviolence. Central to his worldview were the principles of forgiveness and reconciliation, which he regarded as essential for restoring trust, compassion, and social harmony: "Tutu's declaration that "only forgiveness enables us to restore trust and compassion to our relationships," evokes an understanding of peace as achieved through reconciliation. "If peace is our goal," he continued, "there can be no future without forgiveness.""[5]

Archbishop Tutu's leadership of the *Commission* exemplified the integration of faith, justice, and reconciliation, demonstrating how religious conviction can shape and guide processes of national healing.

Peter Lodberg emphasizes that, for Tutu, God is conceived not as a remote or impersonal being, but an active agent in history. Through the life and message of Jesus Christ, God is seen as one who overturns structures of injustice and restores right relations among human beings. On these grounds, Tutu regarded South Africa's transitional project of national healing and reconciliation as a paradigm for the international community: if God could bring healing and transformation in South Africa, the same divine action offered hope for other regions scarred by violence and oppression, such as the Middle East, Sri Lanka, and Sudan.[6] As P.G.J. Meiring emphasizes, Desmond Tutu will be remembered for his multifaceted leadership: his role in the anti-apartheid resistance, his fearless advocacy challenging the dominance of the white minority regime, his active participation in protests and funerals of slain activists, and his ecumenical efforts campaigning internationally for sanctions against the apartheid regime.[7] His activism before and after apartheid illustrated the United Nations' concept of *transnational justice*[8], encompassing the processes by which a society confronts past abuses to ensure accountability.

[5] *Ibidem*.

[6] Peter Lodberg, *op.cit.*, p. 265.

[7] P.G.J. Meiring, "Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Justice á la Desmond Tutu," *Acta Theologica* 42, no. 2 (2022): 86–103, p. 87.

[8] Since 2004, the United Nations has defined transitional justice as "the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempts to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past abuses, in order to ensure accountability, serve justice and achieve reconciliation." [https://unric.org/en/unric-library-backgrounder-transitional-justice], 27 August 2025.

His guidance, grounded in deep empathy and religious conviction, was pivotal in leading the *Commissio*n's approach.[9]

The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* was structured around three committees: the Human Rights Violations Committee, mandated with documenting abuses; the Amnesty Committee, responsible for reviewing these submissions; and the Reparations and Rehabilitation Committee, which recommended measures of redress for victims. What distinguished the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* from many other transitional justice mechanisms was its explicit decision to place reconciliation on equal footing with truth-seeking, making healing and social cohesion central to its mandate.[10]

Moreover, Archbishop Tutu highlighted openness and transparency as defining features of the *Commission*, distinguishing it from similar bodies that operated behind closed doors, while still producing new and significant insights.[11]

The *Commission* further extended its outreach through a multimedia initiative titled *Truth Commission Special Report*. This project comprised 87 episodes that documented and broadcast testimonies from the public hearings, making the narratives of victims, witnesses, and perpetrators widely accessible. The hearings provided the faith community with a profound opportunity to confront and acknowledge wrongdoing. Archbishop Desmond Tutu articulated this moral imperative, emphasizing the centrality of truth and confession:

> The churches must say to those who know that they have a heavy burden of guilt: confess it, speak the truth, because isn't it God who says the truth shall make you free? The truth shall make you free—not so that people must be prosecuted, but so that people may be freed, so that people may be healed. Asseblief tog [Please]. God has entrusted us with the blessing of reconciliation. If we don't do it, who will? If we don't tackle it, who will?[12]

---

[9] Tsholofelo Nakedi, "Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding: Is There a Role for Faith-based Actors?," *Center for the study of Violence and Reconciliation*, January 2022, [https://www.csvr.org.za/transitional-justice-and-peacebuilding-is-there-a-role-for-faith-based-actors], 27 August 2025.

[10] Richard A. Wilson, *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, p. 97.

[11] *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Volume 1, [https://hmcwordpress.humanities.mcmaster.ca/Truthcommissions/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/SouthAfrica.TRC_.Report-FULL.pdf], 27 August 2025.

[12] SABC, *Truth Commission Special Report*,

Through such guidance, the *Commission* underscored the role of spiritual and moral accountability in fostering reconciliation and healing in post-apartheid South Africa. Apologies for past inaction were not confined to white churches but were also offered by *Christians of all the denominations*, as well as Hindu and Muslim communities, all expressing regret for failing to do more to oppose apartheid:

> Christians of all the nominations, Jews, Muslims and Hindus asked for forgiveness as Bishops, Pastors, Rabbis, Imams and other religious leaders, one after the other confessed their sins of the past. Their passivity, even complicity, but mostly their silence over the evil system of apartheid. (…)
> In the past so-called leaders of the Hindu community, and I emphasis so-called Hindu leaders, failed hopelessly and miserably in voicing their protest against apartheid. The few who did so passively and not actively, or for that matter even militantly.[13]

Representatives of historically Black churches publicly condemned the oppression imposed on their congregations under apartheid. Several also offered apologies for failing to take stronger action against the abusive National Party government, acknowledging their moral responsibility in the broader struggle for justice.[14]

At its turn, the Catholic Church acknowledged that it had mirrored the deep racial divisions of apartheid society: "Just as apartheid divided people according to colour, so did it divide the church, our church, into a black community and a white community. There was in effect a black church and a white church."[15]

The hearings culminated with the appearance of the Dutch Reformed Church (NG Kerk), "the former white state church"[16] which had historically legitimized the system of racial segregation through selective biblical interpretation. Preceding this were testimonies from representatives of its former Black, Coloured, and Indian 'daughter' churches," whose statements provided a critical contextual framework for the NG Kerk's own

[https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/tvseries/episode75/section4/transcript2.htm], 27 August 2025.
[13] *Ibidem*.
[14] *Ibidem*.
[15] *Ibidem*.
[16] *Ibidem*.

moment of accountability. A representative admitted the church's complicity, and that they had misinstructed their congregants regarding apartheid.[17]

At the closing of the faith community hearings, Archbishop Desmond Tutu observed a striking contrast with the business sector hearings, where testimonies had largely been characterized by self-justification. In this instance, however, representatives of diverse faith traditions and Christian denominations began their testimonies from a position of moral accountability, openly acknowledging their failures and expressing heartfelt remorse. Their willingness to confess wrongdoing and to seek forgiveness profoundly shaped the atmosphere of the proceedings, fostering a spirit of humility and reconciliation that set these hearings apart:

> In stark contrast really to what have taken place in the business sector hearings where on the whole you found people in a self-justifying mode. Here, extraordinarily, virtually every single one of those who testified from the different faith communities and the different Christian denominations started off from the premise that they had done wrong. They confessed and it was heartfelt that they asked for forgiveness and you know that put a different slant on things and had a significant impact on the atmosphere that prevailed throughout the three days.[18]

Tutu's long-standing opposition to apartheid, and commitment to Christian values, gave him immense credibility and his presence reassured victims that the process had spiritual depth and reminded perpetrators that confession was a moral duty, not just a legal requirement.[19] His leadership of the *Commission* drew directly from his Christian faith and reputation as a courageous anti-apartheid cleric. His spiritual and pastoral authority gave the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* moral legitimacy that extended beyond politics. The *Commission* functioned as a space for confession, reconciliation, and forgiveness, shaped significantly by Archbishop Desmond Tutu's infusion of Christian concepts of reconciliation. [20]

---

[17] *Ibidem.*

[18] *Ibidem.*

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 269.

[20] David Schalkwyk, 'Truth, Reconciliation, and Evil in South Africa', in *Truth, Reconciliation, and Evil*, ed. by Margaret Sönser Breen, Leiden: Brill, 2004, p. 5.

The *Commission* hearings reflected elements of Christian confession, with perpetrators publicly acknowledging wrongdoing and victims testifying to their suffering. Tutu emphasized that genuine reconciliation required truth-telling and forgiveness, rejecting both vengeance and silence: "True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end dealing with the real situation helps to bring real healing. Spurious reconciliation can bring only spurious healing."[21] Forgiveness, he argued, was not about forgetting but about "liberation from the cycle of hatred."[22]

Tutu emphasized the distinction between retributive and restorative justice. Unlike retributive justice, which is primarily punitive and treats the state as the wronged party, restorative justice—rooted in "traditional African jurisprudence" and "the spirit of *ubuntu*"—focuses on healing relationships, "the redressing of imbalances," and rehabilitating victims of human rights abuses and those responsible in their enforcement. Thus, justice is achieved through efforts toward reconciliation, forgiveness, and the restoration of social harmony.[23] This articulation of restorative justice placed victims and perpetrators in a relational framework rather than opposing camps, reorienting the idea of justice itself away from punishment and toward the repair of human bonds. By framing justice in this way, Tutu provided the *Commission* with a moral and cultural logic that distinguished it from conventional juridical processes and made confession, forgiveness, and reconciliation meaningful within a national project of healing.[24]

Tutu's reflections highlight the extraordinary moral agency of victims, many of whom transcended trauma to embody *Ubuntu's* ethos of shared humanity.

1.2. *Ubuntu* as a Framework for Reconciliation

Central to Tutu's approach was *Ubuntu*—a philosophy of interconnected humanity. He linked this African concept to Christian theology, interpreting reconciliation as both a social and spiritual necessity. This narrative provided

[21] Desmond M. Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Doubleday, 1999, p. 271.
[22] *Ibidem*, p. 120.
[23] *Ibidem*, p. 54.
[24] *Ibidem*.

South Africans with a language of shared destiny, countering the divisions of apartheid.

As explained by the Archbishop, *ubuntu* is "consistent with a central feature of the African *Weltsanschauung*":

> Ubuntu is very difficult to render into a Western language. It speaks of the very essence of being human. When we want to give high praise to someone we say, "Yu, u nobuntu"; "Hey, so-and-so has ubuntu." Then you are generous, you are hospitable, you are friendly and caring and compassionate. You share what you have. It is to say, "My humanity is caught up, is inextricably bound up, in yours." We belong in a bundle of life. We say, "A person is a person through other persons." It is not, "I think therefore I am." It says rather: "I am human because I belong. I participate, I share."[25]

In their book *Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference*, co-authored with his daughter Mpho Tutu, Archbishop Desmond Tutu emphasizes that in the South African lexicon, the pursuit of godly perfection is expressed through the rich and multifaceted concept of *ubuntu*. They describe *ubuntu* as a philosophy of human interconnectedness, emphasizing that humanity is a shared and relational condition. It articulates an ethical framework that seeks to ensure the well-being of others, where individual flourishing is not measured in isolation but by its capacity to enrich and sustain the broader community. [26]

Moreover, as Lodberg observes, Tutu integrates the African concept of *ubuntu* with the Biblical notion *of imago Dei*, grounding his theology in the relational nature of human beings. Drawing on the creation narrative, he emphasizes that humanity reflects God's fellowship, encompassing both unity and diversity. This relational anthropology underpins Tutu's resistance to apartheid, affirming that cultural and racial differences exist within the bounds of a shared human identity created by God. By recognizing this common divine origin, Tutu argues, differences become a source of mutuality rather than division, making apartheid—a system based on separation and hierarchy—a fundamental violation of God's design for human community: "Apartheid is a sin against God, because it favors separate development (as

[25] Desmond M. Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, p. 31.

[26] Desmond M. Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *Made for Goodness. And Why This Makes All the Difference*, Rider, 2012.

the word literally means) and not common development of a society for all South Africans."[27]

1.3. Legacy and Limitations of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*

Alongside its achievements, the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* also faced criticisms and limitations. As Meiring notes, Tutu's leadership was not without criticism. At times, his approach to guiding the process faced contestation, including from within the *Commission* itself. Critics argued that while he was appointed as chair of a parliamentary commission rather than a church body, his approach often carried overtly religious overtones. Thus, the inaugural Commission hearing (16–19 April 1996), which commenced with acts of worship such as hymns and prayers led by Tutu, drew criticism from some observers who contended that the overtly religious atmosphere was unsuitable for a body designed to operate as a juridical mechanism.[28]

A white opponent of the apartheid, who suffered the loss of his wife and child in a 1984 bombing, observed pointedly: "We are not all Christians," while adding "there is no feeling of forgiveness in my heart. There is no legal or constitutional duty for me to forgive."[29]

In addition, Tutu himself acknowledged both the criticisms and the limitations of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*. He noted that critics, "mostly though not exclusively from the white community"[30] questioned what the *Commission* had actually achieved, and in response he clarified that it aimed to contribute to a broader national project, and not to achieve full societal healing. As he outlined, the *Commission*'s mandate was to produce a comprehensive account of the gross abuses committed during the thirty-four-year period under review and to promote—though not ensure—national unity and reconciliation.[31] According to the Archbishop, the *Commission* could make only a "strategic contribution" to healing, while the enduring responsibility for reconciliation rested with all South Africans as a long-term collective endeavor.[32]

---

[27] Peter Lodberg, *op.cit.,* p. 267.
[28] P.G.J. Meiring, *op. cit.*, p. 90.
[29] Peter Lodberg, *op.cit.,* p. 271.
[30] Desmond M. Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness,* p. 164.
[31] *Ibidem.*
[32] *Ibidem.*

In addition, the integration of religion in the *Commission* reveals both its power and at times ambiguous character. As Shore and Kline observe, Christianity and religious-symbolic discourse served as a powerful truth-telling framework for victims and survivors, validated and encouraged by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and other *Commission* leaders. This discourse gave survivors a language of healing rooted in confession, forgiveness, and hope. Yet, for perpetrators seeking amnesty, the *Commission* restricted testimony to legal and forensic terms, excluding explicitly religious narratives. Such asymmetry, scholars argue, both strengthened South Africa's emerging democratic political culture, yet simultaneously contributed to the postponement of fuller social and economic reparation for survivors of human rights violations.[33] Shore and Kline further contend that religion was not peripheral but central to the South African *Truth and Reconciliation* process, describing it as "a necessary step in a peaceful transition from apartheid to democracy. Though neither a miracle nor a model, the TRC stands as an example, however flawed, of a transitional justice body that found a religious dimension of a people vital to a successful transition".[34]

Peter Lodberg highlights a deeper dimension of the *Commission*, suggesting that its very feasibility may have been linked to the fact that "most South Africans considered themselves Christians,"[35] and to the population's broad familiarity with the foundational Christian concepts it embodied.[36] Yet, he emphasizes that the authority of Tutu and other church leaders derived not solely from religious affiliation, but also from their consistent commitment to nonviolence during the anti-apartheid struggle. Lodberg highlights Tutu's awareness of the ethical complexities involved, stressing repeatedly that the *Commission* could neither compel forgiveness nor mandate reconciliation with those who had caused profound personal loss. Instead, the *Commission's* role was to provide a structured space in which truth-telling and reconciliation could occur, contingent on the willingness of the individuals involved.[37]

---

[33] Megan Shore and Scott Kline, "The Ambiguous Role of Religion in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission," in *Peace & Change* 31.3, July 2006.

[34] *Ibidem*, pp. 328–329.

[35] Peter Lodberg, *op.cit.*, p. 271.

[36] *Ibidem*.

[37] *Ibidem*.

While not without limitations and not resolving all injustices, the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* helped avert civil war, created space for truth-telling, and provided a moral framework that helped avert cycles of revenge and established a foundation for healing through shared narratives of confession and forgiveness.

Ultimately, the process demonstrated both the effectiveness and the challenges associated with faith-based communication, leaving behind a moral framework for reconciliation that continues to shape South Africa's democratic journey.

2. The Genocide in Rwanda

2.1 The Churches' Divided Response

In April 1994, Rwanda was the scene of a devastating genocides, as extremist Hutu factions slaughtered an estimated 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus in roughly one hundred days. Rwanda was one of Africa's most Christianized nations, yet amid the genocide churches became sites of violence, and religious institutions were participants in the atrocities. As documented by *African Rights*, churches and parishes became the sites of the highest civilian casualties: "'more Rwandese citizens died in churches and parishes than anywhere else. Words cannot do justice to the site and smell of Rwanda's churches during the genocide or in the aftermath of the genocide."[38] Timothy Longman points out that the churches' complicity was not limited to allowing their premises to be used for mass killings; in certain areas, members of the clergy and other church staff actively facilitated the violence by revealing the identities of Tutsi community members, and in some instances, directly taking part in the atrocities themselves.[39] Moreover, from the onset of the Rwandan genocide, churches were deliberately targeted, yet the bishops remained silent in response.[40] Some clergy, however, did condemn violence and sheltered victims, while others were complicit in massacres or failed to speak out.[41] Longman observes that even after the

[38] African Rights, *Rwanda: Death, Despair, and Defiance*, London, 1995, p. 865.
[39] Timothy Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 23.
[40] *Ibidem*.
[41] *Ibidem*.

genocide ended, certain church personnel continued to deny or minimize the severity of the crimes committed.[42]

Although individual clergy in Rwanda displayed extraordinary courage by risking their lives to protect others, many Church leaders have conceded that the institution failed during the genocide. Amid the genocide, Rwanda's church leaders largely maintained silence. The first official response of Protestant and Catholic leaders—an ineffectual call for peace issued five weeks after the massacres had begun, when hundreds of thousands were already dead—did little to mitigate the violence, and some among them were later accused of complicity. The Church emerged from the crisis profoundly fractured, as many of its leaders fled the country after the fall of the former government.[43]

This divided response and moral failure undermined the credibility of church leadership and compromised the moral authority of the Church in post-genocide reconciliation as the Church faced the difficult task of rebuilding trust in a context where survivors associated some clergy with betrayal. Local parishes and ecumenical groups attempted to use biblical imagery of forgiveness and communal healing in reconciliation programs.[44] Initiatives such as prayer services, communal confession, and grassroots reconciliation programs sought to restore fractured relationships.

2.2. Justice and Reconciliation in Post-Genocide Rwanda

Following the Rwandan genocide, the prosecution of over 120,000 alleged perpetrators was pursued through a system comprising the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, mandated by United Nations Security Council and recognized as "the first ever international tribunal to deliver verdicts in relation to genocide, and the first to interpret the definition of genocide set forth in the 1948 Geneva Convention,"[45] as well

---

[42] Timothy Longman, "Church Politics and the Genocide in Rwanda," in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXXI, 2, Brill, 2001, p. 181.

[43] African Rights, "Rwanda: The Protestant Churches and the Genocide: press release," *Reliefweb,* [https://reliefweb.int/report/rwanda/rwanda-protestant-churches-and-genocide-press-release], 27 August 2025.

[44] Phil Clark, *The Gacaca Courts, Post-Genocide Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda: Justice Without Lawyers*, Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 2010.

[45] United Nations International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, "The ICTR in Brief," [https://unictr.irmct.org/en/tribunal], 27 August 2025.

as Rwanda's national judiciary. In addition the locally administered Gacaca courts ("justice in the grass"), "an age-old Rwandan system of justice conducted by communities in open-air assemblies," [46] provided a community-based mechanism to try genocide suspects, promote truth-telling, and rebuild social cohesion.

In the years following the Rwandan genocide, church leaders have gradually acknowledged their complicity and increasingly collaborated across denominations to address societal trauma and promote peace through pastoral and community-based initiatives: "Churches have accepted that they have a responsibility to rebuild the country. It has to be done by addressing the trauma the citizens suffered. All parishes have their own mechanisms in dealing with trauma healing, and clergy are equipped with skills to respond to those who need to be counselled."[47] Ultimately, several members of the clergy were charged for their roles in the 1994 atrocities through the *International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda*, the Gacaca courts, and judicial proceedings in Belgium.

Jean d'Amour Banyanga and Kaj Björkqvist, in *The Dual Role of Religion Regarding the Rwandan 1994 Genocide: Both Instigator and Healer*, argue that religion played an ambivalent role in Rwanda—first, as a contributing factor to the genocide through churches' historical favoritism of Tutsis and discrimination against Hutus, and later as a source of support for survivors. Data from 291 Rwandans residing in Belgium indicated that survivors expected churches to engage in conflict resolution, reconciliation, and peace education, helping them recover from trauma and rebuild hope, trust, and meaning in their lives.[48] However, unlike South Africa, Rwanda's recovery was marked by suspicion toward church leaders. While some reconciliation occurred, the divided role of the churches meant that faith did not carry the same unifying power. The Church's compromised moral authority limited its capacity to serve as a credible agent of national healing.

---

[46] Stephanie Nieuwoudt, "Rwanda: Church Role in Genocide Under Scrutiny", IWPR, 2006, [https://iwpr.net/global-voices/rwanda-church-role-genocide-under-scrutiny], 27 August 2025.

[47] Stephanie Nieuwoudt, *op.cit.*

[48] Jean d'Amour Banyanga, Kaj Björkqvist, "The Dual Role of Religion Regarding the Rwandan 1994 Genocide: Both Instigator and Healer," in *Pyrex Journal of African Studies and Development*, Vol 3 (1) pp. 1-12, May 2017, p. 9.

In *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Archbishop Tutu reflects critically on the Rwandan genocide, questioning why Rwandans failed to embody the ethic of *ubuntu*, choosing instead to annihilate one another in an atrocity that devastated their nation.[49] A year after the 1994 genocide, Tutu, serving as president of the *All Africa Conference of Churches*, visited Rwanda, where he was confronted with the stark realities of the violence—an unsettling illustration of the depths of human cruelty inflicted among people who had long shared common villages, language, and, in most cases, the same Christian faith. Tutu addressed survivors and political leaders, warning against the entrenched pattern of retaliatory violence that had long shaped the nation's history. He cautioned that if justice were pursued solely in retributive terms, it risked deepening ethnic divisions, with Hutu perceiving punishment as collective guilt and awaiting opportunities for revenge. Instead, he urged Rwandans to move beyond retributive justice toward restorative justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation, insisting that "without it there was no future."[50] Although some leaders expressed skepticism about whether atrocities of such scale could be forgiven, Tutu's appeal was given serious hearing, largely because South Africa's own peaceful transition had offered a living example that reconciliation, rather than vengeance, might provide a viable path forward.[51]

Conclusion

While both South Africa and Rwanda faced the challenge of reconciling societies fractured by mass violence, the role and moral authority of the churches differed markedly. In South Africa, religious leaders—particularly Archbishop Desmond Tutu—leveraged their credibility and widespread social trust to foster reconciliation through the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, integrating restorative justice with spiritual guidance. Tutu's articulation of forgiveness as a moral imperative and the principle of *ubuntu* provided a consistent framework for dialogue and relational healing. This moral clarity helped the country begin a process of reconciliation despite decades of violence and division. In contrast, in Rwanda, churches were both sites of violence and complicity, which undermined their legitimacy as agents of moral guidance and

[49] Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, p. 35.
[50] *Ibidem*.
[51] *Ibidem*.

reconciliation; survivors often viewed clergy with suspicion, limiting the effectiveness of faith-based interventions. As a result, narratives of healing existed alongside distorted accounts of the past, public trust was weakened, and efforts at reconciliation remained fragile.

The *Truth and Reconciliation Commission* of South Africa not only guided domestic healing but also offered a visible example for other post-conflict societies. It demonstrated how faith-informed, morally credible leadership can facilitate national reconciliation. South Africa's experience revealed that when religious institutions uphold ethical standards and maintain public trust, they can serve as powerful agents of dialogue, healing, and social restoration. In contrast, Rwanda illustrates how religious institutions, when fragmented and ethically compromised, risk diminishing their healing potential. The contrast also highlights the importance of restorative approaches: South Africa's *Commission* emphasized relational justice and reconciliation, whereas post-genocide Rwanda was marked by mistrust and retributive pressures that hindered recovery.

The experiences of South Africa and Rwanda underscore important implications for conflict resolution, particularly regarding the role of faith leadership. Above all, without integrity, religious figures lose the trust required to guide societies through periods of division and trauma. Moreover, reconciliation cannot be pursued in isolation—collaborative partnerships with governments, civic organizations, and even international actors are vital to sustain long-term reconciliation and prevent cycles of retaliation.

Ultimately, the experiences of South Africa and Rwanda offer guidance beyond their national contexts. These lessons remain globally relevant, providing insight for faith leaders and policymakers involved in contemporary crises—from ethnic conflict and forced migration to social and environmental challenges—where moral authority and ethical leadership are essential for sustainable reconciliation.

Bibliography:

1. Appleby, S. R. (1999), *The ambivalence of the sacred: Religion, violence, and reconciliation*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
2. Banyanga, Jean d'Amour; Björkqvist, Kaj (2017), "The Dual Role of Religion Regarding the Rwandan 1994 Genocide: Both Instigator and Healer," in *Pyrex Journal of African Studies and Development*, Vol 3 (1) 1-12.

3. Battle, Michael (1997), *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press.
4. Boraine, Alex (2000), *A Country Unmasked: Inside South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Oxford University Press.
5. Carney, J. J. (2016), *Rwanda Before the Genocide. Catholic Politics and Ethnic Discourse in the Late Colonial Era*, Oxford University Press.
6. Clark, Phil (2010), *The Gacaca Courts, Post-Genocide Justice and Reconciliation in Rwanda: Justice Without Lawyers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
7. Curle, A. (1990), *Tools for transformation: A personal study*, Hawthorn Press.
8. Des Forges, Alison (1999), *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda*, New York: Human Rights Watch, and Paris: Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme.
9. Fox, Nicole; Nyseth Brehm, Hollie; and Gasasira, John Gasana (2021), "The Impact of Religious Beliefs, Practices, and Social Networks on Rwandan Rescue Efforts During Genocide," *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1: 97–114.
10. Hertog, K. (2010), *The complex reality of religious peacebuilding: Conceptual contributions and critical analysis*, Lexington Books.
11. Horowitz, Irving Louis (1997), *Taking Lives: Genocide and State Power*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
12. Katongole, Emmanuel (2005), *A Future for Africa: Critical Essays in Christian Social Imagination*, Scranton: University of Scranton Press.
13. Johnston, D., & Sampson, C. (1995), *Religion, the missing dimension of statecraft*, Oxford University Press, USA.
14. Lodberg, Peter (2008), "Desmond Tutu: Church Resistance to Apartheid and Injustice in Africa," in Søren Dosenrode (ed.), *Christianity and Resistance in the 20th Century. From Kaj Munk and Dietrich Bonhoeffer to Desmond Tutu*, Brill.
15. Longman, Timothy (2001), "Church Politics and the Genocide in Rwanda," in *Journal of Religion in Africa*, XXXI, 2, Brill, 2001, 163-186.
16. Longman, Timothy (2010), *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
17. Maregere, T. P. (2011), "Religion: A source of conflict and a resource for peace." *Conflict Trends*, 2011(1), 17-23.

18. Maki, Peter. E. (2008), "God and politics: An inside perspective on religious peacemaking in Iraq." *American Diplomacy*. https://americandiplomacy.web.unc.edu/2008/03/god-and-politics/, August 2oth, 2025
19. Meiring, P.G.J. (2022), "Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Justice á la Desmond Tutu," *Acta Theologica* 42, no. 2 (2022): 86–103.
20. Nakedi, Tsholofelo (2022), "Transitional Justice and Peacebuilding: Is There a Role for Faith-based Actors?," *Center for the study of Violence and Reconciliation*, https://www.csvr.org.za/transitional-justice-and-peacebuilding-is-there-a-role-for-faith-based-actors/, August 20th, 2025.
21. Prunier, Gerard (1995), *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide*, New York: Columbia University Press.
22. SABC, *Truth Commission Special Report*,
23. https://sabctrc.saha.org.za/tvseries/episode75/section4/transcript2.htm, August 21st, 2025.
24. Schalkwyk, David (2004), 'Truth, Reconciliation, and Evil in South Africa', in *Truth, Reconciliation, and Evil*, ed. by Margaret Sönser Breen, Leiden: Brill, pp. 3-41.
25. Shore, Megan. Kline, Scott (2006). "The Ambiguous Role of Religion in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission." *Peace & Change* 31.3: 309-332.
26. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, Volume 1, https://hmcwordpress.humanities.mcmaster.ca/Truthcommissions/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/SouthAfrica.TRC_.Report-FULL.pdf, August 21st, 2025.
27. Tutu, Desmond M. (1999), *No Future Without Forgiveness*. New York: Doubleday.
28. Tutu, Desmond M.; Tutu, Mpho (2012), *Made for Goodness. And Why This Makes All the Difference*, Rider.
29. United Nations International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals, "The ICTR in Brief," https://unictr.irmct.org/en/tribunal, August 27th, 2005.
30. Vaughan, Olufemi. (2021). "Reflecting on Nelson Mandela's Historic Presidential Election, May 10, 1994," *Wilson Center,* 2021, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/reflecting-nelson-mandelas-historic-presidential-election-may-10-1994, August 20th, 2025.

31. Weinberg, Ben (2015), "God in Pre- and Post- Genocide Rwanda: Understanding People's Perspectives," *Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection*, https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3058&context=isp_collection, August 20th, 2025.
32. Wilson, Richard A. (2001), *The Politics of Truth and Reconciliation in South Africa: Legitimizing the Post-Apartheid State*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
33. Woo, Joshua (2024), "Desmond Tutu and the triumph against Apartheid," in *Vision of Humanity*, https://www.visionofhumanity.org/desmond-tutu-and-the-triumph-against-apartheid/, April, 2024, August 20th, 2025.