

Viateur NDIKUMANA<sup>1</sup>

## **The Role of the Church in Promoting the Duty of Memory, Reconciliation, and Social Resilience in Post-genocide Rwanda**

**Abstract.** After 32 years, Rwanda still feels the wounds of the genocide committed against the Tutsi in 1994. The question concerns the role that religions and churches currently play in the processes of peacebuilding and reconciliation. Due to the complicity of church leaders and the involvement of a large number of church members in the genocide, faith was deeply wounded and altars were seen as shattered. Temples and places of worship traditionally seen as places of refuge became sites of massacres. Many Tutsi sought sanctuary in churches, only to be betrayed and killed by those who were supposed to protect them.

Nevertheless, following the genocide, the church institutions have been engaged in the peacebuilding processes and reconciliation, focusing on the duty of memory, which is theologically and biblically justified as a redemptive act and a cornerstone of reconciliation.

The transformation of the places of worship where Tutsi were massacred into memorial sites is one of the courageous actions taken by churches to preserve memory and promote public healing and reconciliation. The decision has been

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<sup>1</sup> Viateur Ndikumana (PhD) is a Pastor in the Anglican Church. Professor of Theology and currently Deputy Vice-Chancellor in charge of Academics and Research at Kibogora Polytechnic in Rwanda. Contact: annyndikum@gmail.com.



undertaken in collaboration with the government and the genocide survivors. The Church has also played a significant role in the justice process, particularly through its support for the Gacaca courts as a suitable form of restorative justice. Considering the current context, the Church is called upon to listen to diverse voices seeking recognition of their suffering and to manage potential conflicts of memory, which may disrupt the process of reconciliation and lasting peace.

**Keywords:** church, genocide, memory, reconciliation, resilience

## Introduction

The Genocide committed against the Tutsi in 1994 profoundly tore the social fabric to such an extent that it was almost impossible to imagine the possibility of living together after a tragedy of such unspeakable cruelty. The components of Rwandan society could therefore not be reconciled so as to rebuild and develop their nation without making sacrifices and without the real political and social will to unite and reconcile the Rwandan people after many years of socio-political conflicts.

The genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda was one such event, resulting in great trauma and lifelong implications for the community since families lost their means of subsistence and a legacy of mistrust, fear, and destruction was left in its wake. The magnitude and savagery of the crimes committed were such that peaceful coexistence could not be achieved between survivors and perpetrators.

As the genocide was an extraordinarily tragic event, the vision of reconciliation and reconstruction was unattainable in the face of such terrible violence. It was crucial for the people of Rwanda to adopt extraordinary measures to achieve effective reconciliation.

Here we understand reconciliation as a process of bringing together people in post-war, post-genocide societies or people who have been subjected to social exclusion. It is also about efforts to bring together communities and societies that have experienced violent conflicts, by creating new conditions of coexistence, social healing, overcoming fear and mistrust at various levels of these communities.<sup>2</sup> This process should lead to the restoration of a peaceful coexistence, a more viable, perhaps even a more constructive

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<sup>2</sup> KRONDORFER, B. (n. y.): *Introduction: Social and political reconciliation*. State University of New York Press (SUNY Press). Available at: <https://www.uplopen.com/reader/chapters/pdf/> (last accessed on: 02/08/2025).

and productive one than the pre-conflict state of social relations. Reconciliation should not be a process with defined outcomes, nor one that occurs only once and does not recur, but rather a multifaceted and ongoing one. It is about creating space (social, political, psychological, and cultural) where people and cultures can “face the truth painfully”, take responsibility, ask for and grant forgiveness, and develop mutual trust. In the wake of such a conflict, the reconciliation process involves not only the creation of the conditions of social cohesion and togetherness but also the establishment of new social structures.

This article attempts to explore the role of the Church in Rwanda in promoting the work of memory and national identity for a lasting reconciliation and social resilience after the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. This tragedy has not only destroyed many human lives but also led to rethinking and interpreting the country’s historical narrative.

### **Wounded Faith and Shattered Altars: A Brief Review of Rwanda’s Religious Landscape in the Context of the Genocide against the Tutsi**

By 1994, Rwanda was preponderantly a Christian country. The members of Christian denominations were estimated at about 90% of the overall population, with Catholics making up roughly 60%, Protestants around 19 %, and Seventh-day Adventists approximately 8%.<sup>3</sup> According to Rwanda’s Fifth Population and Housing Census, conducted in August 2022, the country remains overwhelmingly Christian, where Roman Catholics make up the largest group with 40%, followed by Protestants and Pentecostals who together account for around 36%. Seventh-day Adventists represent 12% of the population, while Muslims make up about 2%. Roughly, 3% of Rwandans identify as having no religious affiliation. Smaller religious communities – including practitioners of traditional African religions, Bahá’ís, and Jehovah’s Witnesses – make up the remaining portion of the population. Muslims have and still form a very small minority of the population.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> MYCINSK, Cyprien (n. y.): *Génocide des Tutsi : Entre apparitions de la Vierge et diabolisation de l’autre, le rôle mal connu de la religion*. Available at: [www.lemonde.fr/le-monde-des-religions](http://www.lemonde.fr/le-monde-des-religions) (last accessed on: 09.09.2025).

<sup>4</sup> USA (2022): *Report on International Religious Freedom: Rwanda*. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-report-on-international-religious-freedom/rwanda/> (last accessed on: 10.08.2025).

The role of the Church in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi constitutes a very dark and troubling chapter in history. Some clergy and church members were complicit and even actively participated in the Genocide against the Tutsi. Churches, which were traditionally seen as places of refuge, became sites of massacres. Many Tutsi sought sanctuary in churches but were unfortunately betrayed or killed by those who were supposed to protect them. The case of Father Athanase Seromba in the Catholic Church, who presided over the demolition of his own church with hundreds of people inside, is one of the most notorious ones.

In the Anglican Church, a group of Christians was also taken from the Shyogwe missionary centre and were killed in an unknown place, while others were killed on the spot. Some genocide survivors of Shyogwe testified that the Bishop of the Shyogwe Diocese, by that time the Right Reverend Samuel Musabyimana, did nothing to help them, while it was obvious that he had been fostering a very good relationship with the government. He was later indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda for his actions during the genocide. The tribunal's indictment alleged that he had maintained contact with high-level government officials in order to arm the civilian Hutu population and to encourage them to adopt the Interim Government policy of targeting, and killing, Tutsi civilians. In his book, Timothy Longman wrote how Bishop Samuel Musabyimana facilitated violence.<sup>5</sup> Bishop Musabyimana rebutted the accusations and died in January 2003 before his trial could begin.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, the Muslim community earned praise for acts of solidarity: many mosques served as sanctuaries, and religious leaders did not engage in violence, leading to increased respect and, in some cases, conversions to Islam in the years following the genocide. According to the Hawzah News Agency – one of the news agencies known and respected in many parts of the Shia Islamic world, especially among seminary institutions and scholars – a handful of Muslims who took a stand during the hundred days of slaughter inspired thousands of Rwandans to become Muslim in what was once called Africa's most Catholic country.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> LONGMAN, Timothy (2010): *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*. Cambridge, Cambridge University. 191.

<sup>6</sup> KALIMBA, Jered (2025): *My Journey with the Shyogwe Diocese*. Kigali, RELO. 103.

<sup>7</sup> *From the Ashes of Genocide. Islam Rises in Rwanda*. Available at: <https://en.hawzahnews.com> (last accessed on: 09.09.2025).

In response to the above criticisms, Catholic bishops formally apologized for the role played by the Church, acknowledging the grievous wrongs committed by its members. The Vatican and Pope Francis also issued expressions of regret for the participation of the clergy in the genocide. On 20 November 2016, the *Conference of Catholic Bishops of Rwanda* issued a public statement across parishes apologizing for the Church's involvement in the 1994 genocide. They said, "We apologize for all the wrongs the Church committed. We apologize on behalf of all Christians for all forms of wrongs we committed. We regret that church members violated their oath of allegiance to God's commandments."<sup>8</sup>

The apology acknowledged that certain Catholics planned, aided, and participated in the genocide, including clergy members (priests and nuns). When Pope Francis met with Rwandan President Paul Kagame on 20 March 2017, he officially asked for forgiveness for the "sins and failings of the Church and its members" during the genocide.<sup>9</sup>

### **Theological Foundations of the Duty of Memory and Reconciliation**

In Old Testament theology, remembrance (*zahkor*) is a central theological imperative.<sup>10</sup> The people should remember what God has done for them, especially the liberation from slavery in Egypt. The memory of servitude in Egypt is therefore not simply a reminiscence of the oppression that Israel suffered there; it is also a commemoration.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> MARINA, Nivera Aurora (n. y.): *Pope Francis Apologizes for the Church's Involvement in the 1994 Rwanda Genocide*. Available at: <https://www.ecumenicalnews.com/article/pope-francis-apologizes-for-churchs-involvement-in-1994-rwanda-genocide/60001.htm> (last accessed on: 12.09.2025).

<sup>9</sup> HARRIS, Elise (n. y.): *Pope Meets Rwandan President, Apologizes for Church Failure during Genocide*. Available at: <https://www.ewtnnews.com/vatican/pope-meets-rwandan-president-apologizes-for-church-failure-during-genocide> (last accessed on: 12.09.2025).

<sup>10</sup> KRUGER, Ferdi P. (2025): A Homiletical-Liturgical Perspective on Memoricide Alluding to Variegated Remembered Memories. In: *Verbum et Ecclesia*. 46, 1. Available at: [https://verbumeteclesia.org/za/index.php/ve/article/view/3429/8666%20\(last%20accessed%20on%202009.09.2025\)](https://verbumeteclesia.org/za/index.php/ve/article/view/3429/8666%20(last%20accessed%20on%202009.09.2025)) (last accessed on: 14.01.2026).

<sup>11</sup> CHILDS, B. S (1962): Memory and Tradition in Israel. In: *Studies in Biblical Theology*. 37, 2. 40–66.

The Israelite associate the root *zâkar* ‘to remember’ with memory as an act corresponding to an intervention. Thus, “to remember is to represent, to present again, to make present what belongs to the past and which then becomes current”.<sup>12</sup>

The narrative of the Israelites’ journey and their exodus from Egypt establishes the rules governing the relationship between God and humanity in the Decalogue.<sup>13</sup> In general, the law always uses these two basic elements when it speaks of the need to protect the marginalized in society: the alien (Deut. 10:19), the slave (Deut. 15:15), the widow and the orphan (Deut. 16: 1–17).<sup>14</sup>

The memory of Egypt does not merely concern the territory itself but also extends to its people. The Egyptian immigrant is treated in a distinct and humanizing manner among foreigners. Scripture states: “You shall not abhor an Egyptian, because you were a stranger in his land” (Deut. 23:8). What is striking in this commandment is that even the Egyptian – the former oppressor – is to be afforded the same dignity and humane treatment as any other foreigner. He is placed on the same level as the Edomite, who is already referred to as “your brother”: “You shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother” (Deut. 23:8 cf. Gen. 25). The historical bond between the Israelites and the Egyptians is thus elevated to a kinship-like relationship.<sup>15</sup> There is no room for anger within this theological framework. The more Israel looks to the future, the more it is encouraged to purify its collective memory. One of the most important features of Jewish memory is that the Jew is never abandoned by God – even in the face of great suffering. God always hears their cry and descends to deliver them (Ex. 3:7–9). Thus, in remembering, it is ultimately God’s presence that takes precedence over the painful event. The rabbis profoundly grasped this theological dimension of memory.

The greatest strength of Judaism lies in its capacity to integrate theology into the lived historical experience of its people. God is the sovereign of history. Therefore, it is impossible to speak meaningfully to the human person without acknowledging their history and taking their past into account.

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<sup>12</sup> MARTIN-ACHARD, Robert (1988): *Mémoire de Dieu*. In: *ETR*. 63, 2. 183–197.

<sup>13</sup> CHILDS 1962, 40–66.

<sup>14</sup> PONS, J. (1988): *La référence au séjour en Égypte et à la sortie d’Égypte dans le code de la loi de l’Ancien Testament*. In: *ETR*. 63, 2. 169–182.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

In the New Testament, the Church itself is a community of memory – a memory that finds concrete expression in the sacrament of the Holy Communion, which we may aptly refer to here as the “Sacrament of Memory”: “Do this in remembrance of me.” In the Eucharist, the Church becomes the “living memory” of the liberation received in Jesus Christ, in whom there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither oppressor nor victim, nor guilty nor innocent. The fact that all these categories coexist within the Church does not denote that their pasts are erased or forgotten; rather, they are integrated and reinterpreted in the light of the memory of life’s victory over death. Here, the memory is not limited solely to the resurrection or to the passion; it is composed of both. Therefore, one should not fear telling the story of their past even though it reminds one of painful experiences within collective or individual memory. Because, in Christian perspective, the Holy Communion – the ultimate sacrament of memory – recalls the sufferings of Christ and revives the founding event of the Christian faith: the death and resurrection of Christ. It is upon the cross, the very symbol of enmity to life, that Christians anchor their shared identity.

### **The Church and the Duty of Memory in Rwanda**

After the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi, Rwanda faced the urgent task of rebuilding a deeply fractured society. In response, the National Commission for Unity and Reconciliation (NCUR) was formally established in 1999 by Organic Law No. 03/99 of 12 March 1999, as a government agency tasked with promoting reconciliation, national identity, and unity among Rwandans.

The faith-based organizations, including the churches, have significantly contributed to this effort, not only in peacebuilding activities among the population but also in offering both spiritual insight and moral credibility in rebuilding trust among citizens and in modelling Rwanda’s reconciliation framework. The Church has taken the duty of memory as an essential instrument for achieving genuine reconciliation among Rwandans. In this regard, each church has integrated the work of memory among their priorities. One of the most painful aspects of Rwanda’s tragic history is that during the genocide the criminals trampled on the foundations of Christian faith and human dignity. Killings were committed in places of worship that were then publicly

desecrated. In a country as populous as Rwanda, the conversion of churches into killing fields raises serious religious and moral questions about the value of Church teachings and practices.

Many parishes in Rwanda still bear the scars of this tragic episode in history. Several churches, especially Catholic ones, where people were brutally murdered, have been converted into memorials: Ntarama in Bugesera District, Kibeho in Nyaruguru District, Nyarubuye in Kirehe District, and the church in Nyange in Ngororero District. The Nyange memorial site is particularly significant, as the parish priest, Athanase Seromba, ordered the church to be bulldozed with over 1,500 Tutsi civilians inside.<sup>16</sup>

The transformation of these places of worship into memorial sites was the result of intense negotiations between the state and religious institutions on the one hand and between churches and genocide survivors on the other. In addition, many parishes and Christian organizations have established memorials bearing the names of victims – whether ordinary congregants or church leaders killed during the genocide.

Within the Protestant denominations, the first initiative was taken by the Presbyterian Church in Rwanda, which established the Remera Rukoma memorial in 1995, followed by that of Kirinda in 1997. Today, the majority of Protestant parishes dedicate one Sunday during the national commemoration period (April to July) for memorial activities.

On the Anglican side, the parish of Ruhanga has also been transformed into a genocide memorial. In early April 1994, many Tutsi were tragically murdered in the premises of that parish, including the pastor who refused to abandon his flock into the hands of devouring wolves. Today the parish serves both as a burial site for the victims and a sacred space of remembrance. It honours not only the thousands of Tutsi who were killed there but also the spiritual integrity and courage of their Pastor Sostene Renzaho.

At the request of the Protestant Council of Rwanda, a special liturgy has been established to guide the communities during the commemoration of the genocide. The presence of pastors and priests in these sensitive times allows the commemoration ceremonies to fulfil their important mission of healing, rebuilding, and promoting

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<sup>16</sup> BENETTI, Pierre: *Genocide Rwandais le Pape Francois Demande pardon pour l'Eglise*. Available at: [https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2017/03/20/genocide-rwandais-le-pape-francois-demande-pardon-pour-l-eglise\\_1557116/](https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2017/03/20/genocide-rwandais-le-pape-francois-demande-pardon-pour-l-eglise_1557116/) (last accessed on: 02.08.2025).

community unity, especially through the act of collective remembrance. The Church's contribution extends beyond liturgical celebrations to the realm of education. The Protestant Institute of Arts and Social Sciences (PIASS), founded by Protestant churches, has taken the question of memory seriously. Through its Research Directorate, it published in 2016 a Kinyarwanda-language volume entitled *Remembering and Healing the Wounds of Trauma after the Genocide against the Tutsi: Healing the Heart, the Body, and Historical Memory*. It is now being used as a Christian education resource on memory and trauma healing. Building on this approach, PIASS also organizes a series of trainings for pastors and their spouses, Christian leaders, and committed laypeople, equipping them with the knowledge to understand the role of memory in society and its healing potential in the process of trauma healing. These Church initiatives respond to the call of some African theologians (Engel Bert Mveng, Edem Kodjo, and Laurenti Magesa), encouraging Africans to accept their painful past and engage themselves in the present world accordingly.<sup>17</sup>

Due to the social, human, political, and legal contexts, the memory can be a key platform for the reconstruction of people's lives. In Rwanda, collective memory has, in recent years, inspired many state and community initiatives that contribute to sustainable development.

### **Church Contribution to Restorative and Inclusive Justice through the Gacaca Courts**

In the post-genocide context, the traditional justice system known as Gacaca has proven to be an appropriate and effective mechanism to ensure justice for both perpetrators and victims. Before colonialism, the Gacaca court was a common way to resolve all kinds of disputes within families and communities. The elders and other men of high integrity known as "Inyangamugayo" would sit on grass, often under a tree, and deliver their verdicts.

The primary goal of Gacaca was to restore harmony by providing justice to the victims and reintegrating criminals into the community. The Church's role, both direct

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<sup>17</sup> MAGESA, Laurent (2001): *Le catholicisme africain en mutation. Des modèles d'Église pour un siècle nouveau*. Yaoundé, CLE. 20.

and indirect, in the success of the Gacaca courts was evident. On 13 June 2002, the Catholic bishops of Rwanda issued a pastoral letter entitled *Toward a Just Justice*, urging members of the public to attend Gacaca trials and speak the truth as Christians. They called on perpetrators to sincerely apologize to their victims and for victims to be ready to forgive. The Catholic bishops wrote, “We pay tribute to the judges of the Gacaca courts, who have truly preserved the integrity of this system by avoiding anything that could taint it, such as corruption, discrimination, intimidation, or unjust and excessive punishments for victims.”<sup>18</sup>

Based on this tradition, the Catholic Church’s Justice and Peace Commission launched the “Christian Gacaca” programme, which played a significant role in reconciliation between Christian perpetrators and victims in some churches during the 1994 genocide.

Among Protestant churches, though no formal written declarations were issued, sermons across various parishes exhorted Christians to participate in *Gacaca* and to speak the truth. In some Protestant communities, pastors were even permitted to serve as *Inyangamugayo* (judges).

The involvement of Christian organizations such as the Protestant Council of Rwanda and Prison Fellowship Rwanda in prisons also played a critical role. The work in prisons has persuaded prisoners to confess and seek forgiveness from their victims.

The most significant aspect of *Gacaca* was its model of conditional, personalized forgiveness – unlike the blanket amnesties granted under military pressure in some Latin American contexts. The aim was not to erase the crimes but to expose them. Offenders were required to participate in the rewriting of the national history in order to be forgiven. As J. Pons notes that immunity had to be earned through the public confession of crimes and the acceptance of new democratic norms.<sup>19</sup>

Besides, *Gacaca* allowed culprits to participate in the duty of memory and facilitated their families to free from the burden of collective guilt. After the official closure of the Gacaca trials, the sense of distrust and guilt gradually faded, allowing for a return to peaceful cohabitation.

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<sup>18</sup> LES EVEQUES CATHOLIQUES DU RWANDA (2002): *Pour une justice qui réconcilie*. Kigali. 4.

<sup>19</sup> PONS, S. (2000): *Apartheid. L’aveu et le pardon*. Paris, Bayard. 17.

## **Rewriting the Country's History for a Shared Memory and Lasting Reconciliation**

In Rwanda, the “Hamitic theory” developed during the colonial era has deeply divided Rwandans. According to this theory, Hutu and Tutsi are two people without a shared collective memory or a common homeland.<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, contemporary research demonstrates that the so-called “races” in Rwanda are more akin to socioeconomic categories than to biological or cultural distinctions. Rwandans share a common language, culture, and traditional religion, and many Hutus and Tutsis trace their origins back to common ancestors. Historically, Rwandans lived in harmony, and patronage (a traditional relationship of mutual support) was a voluntary agreement between cattle owners and clients, not an institution of ethnic slavery.<sup>21</sup> To correct this false historical narrative – considered as the basis of the genocide ideology – was an urgent task to prevent the indoctrination of the future generations with a segregationist ideology. The Government of Rwanda decided to ban the teaching of history for over eleven years. This act was not an isolated case; similar measures were taken in other societies in the wake of wars and other tragedies. For example, after the Second World War and the Holocaust, Germany enacted specific laws to eliminate Nazism.<sup>22</sup> The process of removing Nazi ideology from public life aimed at preventing any revival of Nazism and rebuilding a democratic and reconciled society.<sup>23</sup>

In order to strengthen national cohesion, the Civic Education Institution (*Itorero ry'Igihugu*) has also been revived as a home-grown salutation borrowed from the traditional values. Through compulsory participation – particularly for young people – Itorero promotes civic values, historical awareness, and a unified national identity, emphasizing the principle of *Ndi Umunyarwanda* ‘I am Rwandan’ as a fundamental way of being that prioritizes national belonging over ethnic affiliation. This approach does

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<sup>20</sup> NDIKUMANA, Viateur (2023): Reconciliation and Rwandan Resilience after the Genocide Perpetrated against the Tutsi in 1994. In: Sully, Joe E. (ed.): *Rwanda – A Model for Haiti*. Washington, Bridge Vision. 49–68.

<sup>21</sup> BYANAFASHE, D. – Rutayisire, P. (eds.) (2016): *Histoire du Rwanda. Des origines à la fin du XXe siècle*. Kigali, Commission pour l'Unité et la Réconciliation. 77–163.

<sup>22</sup> VINCENT, Marie-Bénédicte (ed.) (2008): *La Dénazification*. Perrin, Collection Tempus. 368.

<sup>23</sup> DACK, Mikkel (2024): Everyday Denazification in Postwar Germany: The Fragebogen and Political Screening during the Allied Occupation. In: *German History*. 42, 1(March). 137–138.

not aim to eradicate identities but to integrate them into a shared sense of national identity and pride, *Rwandanness*.

Thanks to the “Ndi Umunyarwanda” programme, collective memory is being rebuilt through a “process of transformation”; which involves correcting the official historical narratives taught in schools. This historical rectification must lead to a new social contract based on the interpretation of social truth, without political bias or ideology.

### **National Heroes as the Cement of Shared Memory and Reconciliation**

Since 1995, the Rwandan government has celebrated National Heroes Day on 1 February, honouring citizens who have shown extraordinary courage in times of national crisis, often at the cost of their lives. Politically, there are three categories of national heroes: *Imanzi*, *Imena*, and *Ingenzi*.<sup>24</sup> Along with the political figures, a new category of heroes is also recognized: ordinary citizens who acted with courage during the genocide. This change means that the memorial will not only include those killed by perpetrators but also “those who resisted”, people comparable to the “Righteous among the Nations” known after the Holocaust.

These men and women, inspired by their faith or moral conviction, refused to participate in the killings and actively contributed to national unity and reconciliation – some at the cost of their lives. As J. D. Bizimana notes, the genocide committed in Rwanda was so cruel that it has caused us to overlook the extraordinary acts of courage by some Hutu.<sup>25</sup> People are haunted by the memory of the terrifying killings<sup>26</sup> that

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<sup>24</sup> In the “Imanzi” category, there are individuals who sacrificed their own lives, such as Major General Fred Gisa Rwigema, who died on the front line one day after the launch of the liberation war, and the Unknown Soldier, who symbolizes all those soldiers who lost their lives fighting for Rwanda. The second category, “Imena”, includes heroes celebrated for their extraordinary acts, such as King Mutara III Rudahigwa, Rwagasana Michel, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, the first female Prime Minister in Rwanda, killed during the genocide, and the students of Nyange Secondary School, who were killed in 1997 after refusing to obey the orders of Hutu extremists who demanded that they separate into two lines based on their Tutsi or Hutu ethnic identity. The last category, “Ingenzi”, comprises heroes who are still alive (<http://www.cheno.gov.rw/index.php?id=243>).

<sup>25</sup> BIZIMANA, J. D. (2001): *L'Église et le génocide au Rwanda, Les Pères Blancs et le négationnisme*. Paris – Montréal, L'Harmattan. 140.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

claimed the lives of their loved ones and tend to forget the risks taken by Hutu who hid Tutsi. A similar dynamic is observed in the narratives around the transatlantic slave trade, where figures such as John Newton and William Wilberforce – who struggled against slavery in the name of their faith – are not sufficiently recognized in African contexts. Many people ignore that missionary societies like the Church Missionary Society (CMS), linked to the Church of England, were born from abolitionist movements.<sup>27</sup>

Since 2015, however, there has been a significant paradigm shift in Rwanda. Each year, the First Lady of Rwanda formally recognizes the heroes under the title *Abarinzi b'Igihango* 'Protectors of the Covenant'. On 15 November 2015, the President awarded medals to 17 such individuals. Sadly, 12 were recognized only posthumously, having died while attempting to save others. Among them were five Catholic Church leaders as well. Notably, one protestant church leader is recognized at the national level.

While it is a well-documented and painful reality that some Anglican clergy and church members were either complicit in or directly involved in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, this does not represent the whole story. Despite the failure and moral bankruptcy that pervaded so many parts of the Church in Rwanda, there were also cases of extraordinary courage and morality. A number of Anglican Christians, both clergy and laity, decided to take a stand against the genocide, even risking, in some cases, losing their own lives for the sake of justice. They stood firm on the side of the victims. The stories of these individuals not only refute the claim of the Church's complete complicity in the genocide against Tutsi but also provide a glimmer of hope in the darkest period in the history of Rwanda. One of the tangible examples of moral and spiritual courage is the story of Pastor Sosthène Renzaho, an Anglican priest from the parish of Ruhanga, Gasabo District (former Kigali Prefecture). In early April 1994, as the genocide intensified, Tutsi fleeing violence in their homes and villages sought refuge in churches across the country, especially Anglican parishes. Many were brutally murdered, attacked, or handed over to rebel groups by religious or local leaders. Nevertheless, the Anglican Church in Ruhanga became a place of worship and testimony.

According to survivors, when Interahamwe and armed soldiers arrived at the Ruhanga church to eliminate the Tutsi refugees who had gathered there, Pastor Renzaho was given the opportunity to flee. He refused. He made the decision, guided by his faith,

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<sup>27</sup> ZORN, F. (1993): Le Pentecôtisme en Afrique Sud-Saharienne. In: *Foi et Vie*. LXXXIII, 3–4. 41–50.

to remain with the victims: men, women, and children who had come to seek refuge in the house of God. On 15 April 1994, Pastor Renzaho, along with those he protected and his pregnant wife, were brutally murdered in the churchyard.<sup>28</sup> Sosthene was killed in a horrific manner: he was dismembered, his body left in a state of extreme pain. His death was not just a painful death, it was an act of Christian martyrdom that was very different from the betrayal or silence of others who held similar positions in the church. Pastor Renzaho's testimony harmonizes with the words of the Gospel of John 15:13, "Greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." On 13 November 2016, Sosthene was officially honoured for his extraordinary humanity, especially for his refusal to discriminate between Hutu and Tutsi within his congregation.<sup>29</sup> Pastor Renzaho's legacy is a call to fight for justice, to raise the prophetic voice to protect the most vulnerable, and remain faithful even in times when you are facing death. Renzaho's story prompts today's church leaders ask themselves, "What kind of shepherd will I be when my flock is in great danger?"

During this period when churches and faith-based organizations are striving for effective reconciliation, overcoming tragic past and building a hopeful future, the small number of heroes represents God's love and presence in times of adversity. The Church has an obligation to preserve and spread their testimonies and make them role models for future generations.

### **The Church in the Context of the Conflict of Memories**

The conflict of memories arises when different groups, nations, or communities recall the same historical events in different ways. According to F. P. Kruger, "the beauty of remembrance lies in the fact that people's memories of the same event can differ".<sup>30</sup> However, when this beauty is motivated by resentment or a political ideology, it

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<sup>28</sup> BAHIZI, Heritier (2023): Massacre of Tutsi at Ruhanga Anglican Church, a survivor's story. *The New Times*. 10 April. Available at: <https://francegenocidetutsi.org/MassacreAtRuhangaAnglicanChurchTnT10April2023.pdf> (last accessed on: 20.02.2026).

<sup>29</sup> UNIT CLUB: Renzaho Sosthène.

<sup>30</sup> KRUGER 2025.

becomes a time bomb. The communities narrate stories from different perspectives, and competing narratives and selective memories then arise. In such cases, the work of memory is not a simple act of remembrance but a powerful political tool for a given ideology. Each community strives to legitimize its version of the narrative, knowing that the memory is essential for building a collective identity, asserting historical legitimacy, pursuing justice, and achieving international acceptance and sympathy.

In a post-conflict context, where one group feels victorious and another defeated, the issue of competing memories inevitably arises. The tensions are often nurtured by the fact that memory is a political affair deeply shaped by environmental, historical, and ideological influences, because there is a strong correlation between collective memory and broader political and social processes, according to Maria Malksoo.<sup>31</sup> In such cases, some traumatic events are denied by their perpetrators, and former victims continue to rely on their oppressed status to gain certain political and social rights or cultural respect.<sup>32</sup> This situation creates a negative form of victimhood, where the most disadvantaged benefit socially or politically from their past suffering. In Africa, post-colonial societies are grappling with the burden of colonialism and internal conflicts. In South Africa, the end of apartheid led to the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which is attempting to promote a unified national memory. Nevertheless, ethnic inequalities and disputes, images and place names indicate that the conflict of memories continues.

In Rwanda, the 1994 Genocide against Tutsi is annually commemorated. The official narratives emphasize unity and reconciliation. The debates on the remembrance of other crimes committed before, during, and after the genocide are not yet open. In Burundi, many local and international voices strive to gain international recognition of the 1972–1973 mass killings of Hutu as a genocide committed against that ethnic group. This situation leads to complaints of different memories and a feeling of historical injustices. These tensions are also compounded in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the memory of the massacres of the Banyamulenge and broader regional conflicts is fragmented and deeply politicized.

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<sup>31</sup> MALKSOO, Maria (2015): Memory Must Be Defended: Beyond the Politics of Mnemorial Security. In: *Security Dialogue*. 46, 3. 221–237.

<sup>32</sup> TODOROV, T. Z. (2001): *Les abus de la mémoire*. Paris, Arléa. 54.

The Rwandan laws criminalize genocide ideology, including denial and revisionism, which comprises narratives such as the “double genocide theory”. However, in neighbouring countries, especially in Burundi and in some parts of the DRC, competing narratives of Hutu victimhood as equal to the genocide against Tutsi are mushrooming. In DR Congo a new term, “Genocost”, has been invented to designate the genocide as a crime orchestrated for economic interests. It is an initiative and memorial campaign in DRC, supported even by the government.<sup>33</sup> It frames decades of conflict and mass atrocities in eastern DRC (and more broadly) as not just driven by ethnic, political, or territorial reasons but deeply rooted in the illegal exploitation of natural resources. On 2 August 2025, the official ceremony took place in Kinshasa, at the Genocost Memorial, in the presence of numerous political, cultural, and diaspora figures, and the President has called on the international community for the official recognition of the Genocost.<sup>34</sup>

The genocide perpetrated against the Tutsi in Rwanda in 1994 has been universally recognized, and 7 April has been established by the UN as the International Day for the reflection on that genocide. Following that recognition, the Great Lakes region is witnessing growing tensions between groups rivalling for official and international recognition of the crimes they have been victims to, claiming to be the most offended. Some groups are denying or minimizing the crimes committed against others, fuelling further suffering. Here the competing memories harden identities, making compromise emotionally and morally difficult. They exacerbate distrust and violence, as each side sees itself as the true victim. This “competition of victimhood”<sup>35</sup> undermines peace efforts, since reconciliation often requires acknowledging the other’s suffering. In the context of potential competitions between memories, the pastoral role of the Church is therefore an essential one. It starts by creating space for all voices of suffering to be heard, knowing that the genocide against the Tutsi, recognized by the international community, is an incontestable and undeniable fact in the case of Rwanda. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur’s emphasis on narrative in psychoanalysis, Tharcisse Gatwa has stressed the

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.genocost.org/2023/07/commemoration-of-genocost-2022-marked-with-events-in-drc-and-the-diaspora/>.

<sup>34</sup> CHEMAM Melissa (n. y.): *DRC Urges the World to Recognize Genocost Tied to Decades of Resource War*.

<sup>35</sup> KATTAN, E. (2002): *Penser le devoir de mémoire*. Paris, PUF. 70.

centrality of telling one's story of suffering in memory healing.<sup>36</sup> Storytelling is even more vital than speaking about reconciliation or amnesty. True healing comes through deep empathetic listening to the pain of others.<sup>37</sup> In some churches in Rwanda, spaces for storytelling are provided. Testimonies of faith and suffering – known in Kinyarwanda as “Ubuhamya” – are shared. They are often delivered during worship services or in prayer groups and recount the wonders of God in the life of a believer. The testimonies constitute an integral part of the liturgy, especially in Pentecostal and charismatic traditions. *Ubuhamya* ‘testimony’ is a public confession of God’s intervention in the believer’s life during a tragic time. It subsequently leads to a spiritual transformation and growth. In Rwanda, it has been observed that the members of churches that liturgically value the testimonies experience fewer cases of trauma and stress. Through storytelling and mutual compassionate listening, the wounded memory is purified. The practice helps to retain not only positive memories but also to recognize God’s redemptive presence in times of tragedies.

### **The Current Status of Reconciliation in Rwanda**

The National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC) has established a Barometer to measure the annual status of Reconciliation in Rwanda. This instrument specifically aims to gain a better understanding of citizens’ views on unity and reconciliation, by examining and proposing appropriate pillars, indicators, and variables to monitor the current state of reconciliation and by identifying enabling factors as well as challenges for reconciliation as stipulated by the National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation.<sup>38</sup> Each year, the study assesses the extent to which the efforts of the government, the civil society, the media as well as those of private companies have succeeded in bringing about unity and reconciliation among Rwandans since 1994. The analysis of the empirical

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<sup>36</sup> GATWA, Tharcisse (2001): *Rwanda. Églises : Victimes ou coupables ? Les Églises et idéologies ethniques au Rwanda, 1900 – 1994*. Yaoundé Lomé, CLE/HAHO. 268–269.

<sup>37</sup> LOUW, D. J. (2001): Practical Theology and Ethics with the Public and Social Process of Transformation in South Africa. The Embodiment and Enfleshment of Truth and Reconciliation. In: *All Africa Journal of Theology*. 1, 1. 39–51.

<sup>38</sup> NATIONAL UNITY AND RECONCILIATION COMMISSION (2020): *National Policy on Unity and Reconciliation*. Kigali (Rwanda). 7–9.

results is guided by six pillars, namely: understanding the past, the present and envisioning the future; citizenship, identity, and responsibility; political culture and governance; safety and well-being; justice, equity, and rights; and social cohesion.<sup>39</sup> In 2020, the study revealed that the process of reconciliation in Rwanda has made tangible progress. The results show that the level of reconciliation in Rwanda was 94.7%.<sup>40</sup> Recently, during the 19<sup>th</sup> National Dialogue Council (Umushyikirano 2024), the Minister of National Unity and Civic Engagement (MINUBUMWE) pointed out that Rwanda has made progress in building unity and reconciliation despite existing challenges of genocide denial and negationism manifested in the Great Lakes Region.<sup>41</sup> He made the revelation while presenting a report on Rwanda's Journey of Unity and Resilience, indicating that 97% of Rwandans say they are living in harmony. The Minister underlined that the rate of unity and reconciliation among Rwandans has also been increasing every year – according to a survey conducted in 2010, this rate was 82.3%, in 2015 it reached 92.5%, and in 2020 it was 94.7%.<sup>42</sup>

It is clear that Rwandans are gradually overcoming the tendency to attach themselves to narrow identities. They continue to feel proud of their common national identity and show a greater ability to make informed and responsible choices.

## **Conclusions**

When the genocide against the Tutsi took place in Rwanda, the Church failed to remain vigilant and did not act as the watchman described in Ezekiel 3:18 ff, allowing memory manipulation to become a time bomb that would later explode with devastating consequences. After the tragedy of the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, the Rwandan society and its leaders chose to take a path of reconciliation. This choice required

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid

<sup>41</sup> SABITI, Daniel (n. y.): *Umushyikirano 2024: Rwanda's Unity and Reconciliation Steadfast despite Regional Threats*. Available at: <https://www.ktpress.rw/2024/01/umushyikirano-2024-rwandas-unity-and-reconciliation-steadfast-despite-regional-threats-dr-bizimana/> (last accessed on: 09/09/2025).

<sup>42</sup> Op. cit.

exceptional resilience considering the deepness of the wounds caused by the genocide. Rwandans have drawn upon their culture and tradition to seek home-grown solutions to address the challenges of reconciliation. Today, the Church is called once again to vigilance so as not to repeat the errors of the past. Religious communities, especially the churches, are called to engage fully in the healing of Rwanda's wounded collective memory. This mission is not only justified but also grounded in its spiritual and prophetic mandate. The Church should remain attentive to the sufferings of different groups in order to steer the effective and lasting reconciliation. The duty of shared memory must serve as a constructive force in building a reconciled society and shaping a better future for all.

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