**Ecumenism in question: Rwanda’s contentious post-genocide religious landscape**

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**Abstract**

*This article illuminates the precarious uncertainty in grassroots ecumenism where highly politicised and fractious Christian churches, as well as an autocratic state regime, struggle to own, interpret, and re-align the public legacies of genocide. The relationship between the new Pentecostal churches, which arrived in Rwanda after the 1994 genocide, and the historically dominant Catholic Church is shifting and complex. Although the new Pentecostal churches criticize the Catholic Church for its complicity in the genocide, they require it as a foil against which they can make certain kinds of claims about spiritual authenticity and authority. By examining the controversies that erupted during a supposedly unifying Christian crusade, Rwanda Thanksgiving Day or* Rwanda Shima Imana*, I explore the extent to which ecumenism is possible in the post-genocide period. Far from being a trivial misunderstanding between a Catholic singer and a Pentecostal pastor, at stake during the crusade were dramatically different understandings of God’s presence in the world, calling into question the very possibility of ecumenical cooperation. These competing understandings are examined in the wider context of Rwandan politics and transnational evangelical Christian networks in order to show that ecumenism is highly dependent on the relationship between various religious denominations and the state.*

**Keywords:** ecumenism, Rwanda, Pentecostalism, post-genocide, media, religion

**Introduction**

‘Don’t blame Kizito Mihigo’, Apostle Paul Gitwaza, the leader and founder of one of Rwanda’s most powerful new Pentecostal churches, declared in front of 23,000 Rwandans at Amahoro Stadium, the national stadium in Kigali. Kizito Mihigo, a Catholic singer, genocide survivor, and unity and reconciliation activist had just finished performing one of his songs, ‘Arc-en-ciel’ (‘Rainbow’), for the very first Rwanda *Shima Imana* or Rwanda Thanksgiving Day in August 2012. Before singing, Mihigo had explained the song’s meaning, which articulated a certain understanding of God’s mercy. Gitwaza had not agreed with him. ‘He didn’t study theology like we did’, Gitwaza continued, addressing his fellow Protestant leaders sitting in the VIP section of the stadium. ‘He’s not a pastor, he’s not even a priest, the child is only a Christian singer’ (‘*ntabwo ari umupasitori, nta n’ubwo ari padiri, ni umwana w’umuririmbyi w’umukirisitu gusa*’). The event, a crusade (*igiterane*) that purported to bring together the country’s Christians in a day of thanksgiving, was attended not only by prominent Protestant leaders but also by politicians, including the guest of honour, the Prime Minister of Rwanda. Noticeably absent were high-ranking representatives of the Catholic Church and the country’s Muslim community.[[2]](#footnote-2) Rwanda Thanksgiving Day was organised by Rwanda Purpose Driven Ministries/PEACE Plan, an interdenominational Christian organisation established in the country by the well-known American evangelist Rick Warren, who, with the blessing of President Paul Kagame, had christened Rwanda the world’s first ‘purpose-driven’ nation in 2005.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Although later dismissed by one of the event’s organisers as a ‘small incident that the media blew beyond proportion’, this exchange – and Mihigo’s response to Gitwaza’s comments – became one of the most discussed ‘beefs’ in the local Kinyarwanda-language media, sparking heated discussion on websites, radio shows, and in everyday conversation. By taking this dispute – and, more broadly, Rwanda Thanksgiving Day as an event – seriously, I aim to illustrate the ongoing cleavages in Rwanda’s religious landscape, despite claims to unity and interdenominational cooperation. The 1994 genocide, which claimed the lives of roughly 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu, not only profoundly altered Rwanda’s spiritual terrain, religious leaders across denominations struggled with how to best understand and interpret its legacies. The authority of the historically dominant Catholic Church was challenged by its complicity in the violence, and in the aftermath of the genocide Tutsi pastors returned to Rwanda after decades in exile to establish new Pentecostal or *abarokore* (‘those who are saved’) churches. They criticised the Catholic Church for failing to teach about the dangers of demonic influence and the necessity of deliverance, using the Catholic Church as a foil against which to make certain kinds of spiritual claims. Yet while these new churches aimed to ‘heal’ the nation and minister to all Rwandans, they tended to be made up of specific groups of Tutsi returnees, calling into question their ability to administer a wider ecumenism – unity and reconciliation in the post-genocide era. To Catholic survivors, the Pentecostal churches’ tendency to understand the genocide in black-and-white terms did not adequately address its ambiguity, and the fact that to some the events of 1994 had paradoxically allowed for certain divine ‘fruits’ to be manifested. The Mihigo-Gitwaza debate was ultimately a conflict about power – who has the right, ability, and authority to interpret the Bible and, by extension, Rwanda’s history and collective memory.

Rwanda Thanksgiving Day also demonstrated a new alignment between religious and secular authority: the Protestant and Pentecostal churches have displaced the Catholic Church in spiritually legitimising state power. Thus the post-genocide influx of transnational charismatic networks, far from working as ‘a conduit’ for the flow of ideas, practices, and capital, is deftly managed by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)-led state.[[4]](#footnote-4) Furthermore, the Mihigo-Gitwaza controversy foreshadowed the later downfall of Mihigo. In 2015, Mihigo, once considered a RPF propagandist, was sentenced to 10 years in prison for conspiring to kill Kagame and overthrow the state. Yet even in 2012, his comments at Rwanda Thanksgiving Day hinted at a willingness to challenge, however indirectly, prevailing government narratives about the meaning of the genocide.

Ultimately, this article illuminates the questionable possibilities for unity and reconciliation in Rwanda’s post-genocide era – the focus is on uncertainties in ecumenism, primarily between Pentecostals and Catholics. In authoritarian post-conflict contexts, I see ecumenism as profoundly precarious, and dependent upon churches’ relationship with the state.

**The rise of the ‘new’ churches**

A brief history is useful to establish the present context, in which Rwanda’s churches and its autocratic government struggle with the country’s painful legacies of genocide. Rwanda was once considered ‘a model of evangelization in Africa’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Before the genocide, nearly 90% of the population considered itself Christian, with 62.6% Catholic, 18.8% Protestant, 8.4% Seventh Day Adventist, and 1.2% Muslim. Yet during the genocide, clergy, catechists, nuns, and other religious officials willingly participated in the killings and churches and parishes became ‘Rwanda’s primary killing fields’.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The church in Rwanda – particularly the Catholic Church – has a long history of collusion with power.[[7]](#footnote-7) When the first Catholic missionaries, the White Fathers, arrived in the country at the beginning of the 20th century, they actively courted the political elite, in the hopes that converting the powerful would then trigger conversions among the masses. On the ground, this strategy meant supporting the king (*mwami*) and the Tutsi elite, and contributed to reifying what were more flexible social categories associated with status and occupation into the rigid ethnic identities of Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the missionaries’ view – a view shared by colonial officials – Tutsi were the ‘natural’ rulers of the country, a lost tribe of Europeans who should rightfully rule over the simple Hutu and ‘savage’ Twa. Although poor Hutu and Tutsi were the ones who first converted, with the growing influence of the Catholic Church on the colonial state, especially after the country’s transfer to Belgian rule in 1916, Tutsi elites did convert en masse in the 1930s. Tutsi were given privileged access to education in Catholic and government schools, and, after administrative reforms beginning in the 1920s, ‘chieftancies were reserved for Tutsi’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

After the Second World War, however, new attitudes about race and social justice, and a new influx of younger missionaries troubled by increasing ethnic inequality, led to changes in church positioning.[[10]](#footnote-10) New opportunities were created for Hutu within Catholic institutions, and a Hutu ‘counter-elite’ began to form that challenged Tutsi dominance.[[11]](#footnote-11) This culminated in the so-called Hutu Revolution (1959-61), which violently thrust Tutsi from power – the monarchy was abolished and Tutsi chiefs were replaced by Hutu. In 1962, Rwanda gained independence from Belgium, and Grégoire Kayibanda, a Hutu from Gitarama, who had been educated in Catholic seminaries and had once been the editor of the Catholic newspaper *Kinyamateka*, became Rwanda’s first president. The intimate relationship between church and state intensified under the presidency of Juvénal Habyarimana, a Hutu from the north who took control of the country in a military coup in 1973. For example, Vincent Nsengiyumva, the Catholic archbishop of Kigali, was an active committee member of Habyarimana’s political party, the MRND (*Mouvement Révolutionnaire National pour la Démocratie*), and was said to be the personal confessor of Habyarimana’s wife, Agathe.[[12]](#footnote-12) Although in the early 1990s, some within the Catholic and Protestant churches participated in the nascent democracy movement and pushed for social, political, and religious reform, their voices were side-lined, especially after the RPF, a mostly Tutsi rebel group, invaded the country from Uganda in 1990, sparking a civil war. [[13]](#footnote-13) Even after massacres of Tutsi and the increasing ethnic extremism of the political climate in the early 1990s, church leadership – both of the Catholic and Protestant churches – continued to support the state.

Even more critically, after the genocide erupted on April 6th with the shooting down of Habyarimana’s plane, national church leaders did not speak out to condemn the violence, thereby leaving ‘the way clear for officials, politicians, and propagandists to assert that the slaughter actually met with God’s favour’.[[14]](#footnote-14) In some cases, Hutu death squads, believing their actions were sanctioned by their churches, ‘held mass before going out to kill’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Longman argues convincingly that the overall failure of the churches to speak out against ethnic violence and genocide can be traced back to the nature of the Christian message taught and received in Rwanda: it was not one of ‘love and fellowship’, but rather ‘one of obedience, division, and power’.[[16]](#footnote-16) While Catholic churches and their leaders may not have been directly involved in planning the genocide, they ‘played a central role in the creation and furtherance of racist ideology’[[17]](#footnote-17), and helped to exacerbate ethnic identity into reified difference. A number of priests, nuns, and religious leaders have since been convicted of genocide, both by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and other national courts.[[18]](#footnote-18)

When the RPF stopped the genocide in July 1994 and took power, the country was devastated. This devastation extended into the spiritual realm. To say that the complicity of the churches, specifically the Catholic Church, engendered a crisis of faith after 1994 is an understatement. As Jean-Baptiste, an Anglican priest and genocide survivor, told me, the genocide ‘shook the complacency of the churches; people started questioning the kind of church we’ve had’.

In the years following the genocide, the Rwandan government was ‘mistrustful and even interventionist’ vis-à-vis the established churches, and in some cases interceded ‘in their internal disputes’.[[19]](#footnote-19) In fact, Longman argues that the the RPF, wary of the potential influence the churches could wield, ‘moved aggressively to bring [them] under its control’.[[20]](#footnote-20) In some cases, churches purposely appointed pro-RPF leaders; in others, the RPF forced churches to select their favoured candidates.[[21]](#footnote-21) Overall, this hostile stance towards the mainline churches ‘created a favourable climate for the founding of independent churches’, and the government reportedly saw them as an effective way to counter the hegemony of the Catholic Church.[[22]](#footnote-22) It is within this context that Pentecostal pastors began returning to Rwanda from Uganda, Congo, Burundi, Kenya, and Tanzania to start churches.[[23]](#footnote-23) By 1996, there were at least 45 new denominations in Kigali, with many others outside the capital.[[24]](#footnote-24) From the very beginning, the Rwandan state was instrumental in creating the conditions under which these new churches could flourish.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Despite the *abarokore* churches’ claims to newness, however, it is important to point out that they were not the first to bring Pentecostalism to the country. The Pentecostal Church, known as ADEPR (*Association des Eglises de Pentecôte du Rwanda*), first arrived in Rwanda in 1940 via Swedish missionaries stationed in the eastern part of what is now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Its influence on the country’s spiritual landscape, however, was marginal as it was overshadowed by the Catholic Church. Although ADEPR might have seemed a natural ally to the new Pentecostal pastors, returnee Tutsi pastors came into conflict with the Hutu-dominated leadership of ADEPR, which saw these new pastors as a ‘threat’.[[26]](#footnote-26) For their part, Tutsi pastors were suspicious of Hutu leaders and assumed they had participated in the genocide if they had survived.[[27]](#footnote-27) In addition to ADEPR, another Pentecostal church had also existed in the country before the genocide: Rwanda Pentecostal Assemblies of God (AoG) started in 1990 in Kigali and registered with the government in 1993. One of the church’s pastors told me that by the time the genocide started, AoG had 12 congregations across the country. During the genocide, the church lost three-quarters of its members.

Furthermore, with their emphasis on personal salvation, confession, repentance, and evangelization, the post-genocide *abarokore* churches shared similarities with the earlier East African Revival of the 1930s, whose members also called themselves the *abarokore*.[[28]](#footnote-28) In the 1980s, there had also been an *Abarokore* resurgence within the Protestant churches that had been part of a wider evangelical movement that had also included the Charismatic Renewal within the Catholic Church.[[29]](#footnote-29) These popular pietistic movements had emphasised personal salvation and a strict moral code, but had ultimately been co-opted or supressed by their churches, or, in the case of the *Abarokore*, suppressed by the state.[[30]](#footnote-30) Although some members and leaders of the new *abarokore* churches told me that they saw themselves as the inheritors of the East African Revival, none of them referenced the 1980s charismatic movement in Rwanda, as few of those involved in the post-genocide *abarokore* wave had been in the country at the time. Instead, with their focus on signs and wonders, the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, and transnational connections, the new churches saw themselves as forming part of a worldwide Pentecostal movement that has swept the globe since the 1980s.[[31]](#footnote-31)

As a final note, it is worth pointing out that since the genocide, the mainline churches have for the most part shirked ‘institutional responsibility’, and the official position of the Catholic Church has been to blame individual Christians instead of admitting a wider culpability.[[32]](#footnote-32) This position was tempered somewhat in November 2016 when the Catholic Church of Rwanda apologised for its members’ involvement in the genocide. The Rwandan government was less than impressed, with Kagame questioning why the global Catholic Church had not apologised, considering the Pope has recently offered an apology to victims sexually abused by priests.[[33]](#footnote-33) Several months later, however, Kagame’s request was granted. In March 2017, Pope Francis met with the Rwandan president and asked for forgiveness for the Catholic Church’s role in the genocide.[[34]](#footnote-34) While this move was welcomed as a ‘positive step forward’ by the Rwandan government, Louise Mushikiwabo, Rwanda’s foreign minister, also stressed that ‘genocide denial and trivialisation continue to flourish in certain groups within the church and genocide suspects have been shielded from justice within Catholic institutions’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Since the genocide, the Catholic Church has been accused of helping suspected priests and nuns flee Rwanda, and preventing them from being extradited to face justice.[[36]](#footnote-36)

**New conversions**

What attracted Rwandans to these new Pentecostal churches? Some converted due to a ‘feeling of betrayal and disillusionment with the “official” church’, and they appreciated the spiritual, social, and often material support the new churches offered.[[37]](#footnote-37) Others were pulled to the churches by their emphasis on live music and expressive worship styles; others by a ‘new’ theology that emphasised a close relationship with Jesus, miracles, deliverance, and healing.[[38]](#footnote-38) As Claire, a convert to Pentecostalism who had been raped and impregnated during the genocide, told me, ‘I have seen amazing things that God has done in our daily life. We lived in a confused and traumatized life for so long but one thing I have seen is that it is only God who can carry you through trauma and hard life’. Not only had God healed all her diseases, she told me, her Pentecostal faith allowed her to have a more personal relationship with the divine. She had conversations with God in her room and was able to ‘feel Him physically’. Instead of feeling like a victim of the ‘world-annihilating violence’[[39]](#footnote-39) she had suffered, she felt transformed and in control of her life; now people were calling her ‘boss’ and asking her for financial assistance, despite her meagre circumstances.

In 2005, Kubai wrote that there were over 100 of these new churches.[[40]](#footnote-40) During my fieldwork, religious leaders claimed there were over 300. This number, however, was somehow inflated. Between 2011 and 2013, 405 religious institutions attempted to register to legally operate in Rwanda with the Rwandan Governance Board (RGB), yet only 221 were granted permission.[[41]](#footnote-41) Regardless, the turn away from the Catholic Church and embrace of Protestantism in all its forms was reflected in the most recent national census. The fourth Rwanda Population and Housing Census (RPHC4), undertaken in 2012, found that out of a population of 10.5 million, 44% were Roman Catholic, 38% Protestant, 12% Adventist, 2% Muslim, and 1% Jehovah’s Witnesses.[[42]](#footnote-42) Compared to the pre-genocide figures cited above – with Catholics at 62.6% and Protestants at 18.8% of the population – these were sizeable gains and losses. Although the 2012 census did not separate Pentecostalism from Protestantism, it is safe to assume that the rise in Protestant affiliation has been dramatically impacted by the arrival of the new *abarokore* churches.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Indeed, like elsewhere on the continent, the ‘recent explosion’[[44]](#footnote-44) of new Pentecostal churches in Rwanda influenced religious practice in the mainline churches. It was, as one Presbyterian leader told me, ‘like a big bang’. Although mainline churches had been ‘dormant’, the new churches roused them from their liturgical lethargy and many of them began introducing more energetic singing, dancing, and clapping into their services. Not only did their worship styles become more ‘charismatic’, mainline churches were also influenced by Pentecostal doctrine and began placing more of an emphasis on the Holy Spirit and the importance of deliverance.

**Blaming Catholics, ‘hiding’ ethnicity**

Although mainline and new Pentecostal churches equally aim to heal the nation and rebuild Rwandan society after the genocide, deep rifts remain between denominations. When the new churches arrived, for example, they very vocally condemned the mainline churches for their complicity in the genocide. They did so not only because these accusations were well founded, as we saw, but also because it was a useful strategy to attract new members. One Pentecostal pastor who returned from Burundi with his church in 1995 recounted how he had vigorously preached against the ‘old’ religions, condemning them for their tradition and ritual and claiming that they had nothing to offer a traumatised Rwandan population. ‘We invented ourselves like that’, he told me – with a chuckle and knowing smile – and admitted that he had exaggerated the mainline churches’ involvement in the genocide deliberately to carve out a new space for his church in what was becoming a crowded spiritual marketplace. Other Pentecostal pastors blamed the Catholic Church for not sufficiently teaching Rwandans about demons. To these pastors, the genocide had been the result of demonic possession and it was only through deliverance, a spiritual practice offered by the new Pentecostal churches, that the nation could truly be healed.

Yet, despite their flourishing, many Rwandans expressed concerns about the nature of the new Pentecostal churches. Not only were they derided for being nothing more than money-making scams – a criticism which was not helped by the frequent in-fighting between pastors once a new church had become successful – especially in Kigali, they tended to be mono-ethnic, composed of particular groups of Tutsi returnees. Certain churches were known to be frequented by Tutsi who had returned from Burundi; others by returnees from Congo; yet others by those who had come back from Uganda. In a 1997 article, van’t Spijker had warned that the new churches threatened to introduce a new division into an already deeply divided Rwandan society: ‘the organization of churches along ethnic lines’.[[45]](#footnote-45) Although in the past, ‘no church ever counted uniquely Hutu or Tutsi to its membership’,[[46]](#footnote-46) by the time of my fieldwork, the mono-ethnic nature of the new churches seemed to have become an unspeakable ‘truth’. As Jean-Baptiste explained to me:

Let me tell you something that no one will tell you, because very often we are afraid of saying it bluntly. You will find that most of the new churches, we call Pentecostals, they tend to be Tutsi in majority.

To Jean-Baptiste, because returnees shared similar experiences, culture, and language, it was unsurprising that they tended to worship together in the same churches. This reality, however, severely challenged their ability to contribute to unity and reconciliation in the post-genocide era. As he asked me provocatively, who exactly was reconciling with whom in these churches? Which demons were really being cast out?

With this complex religious context in mind, I turn now to the uncertainties of ecumenism revealed during Rwanda Thanksgiving Day.

**The new churches and the state: Kagame and Rick Warren**

How did Rick Warren, best-selling author of *The Purpose Driven Life* and founder of one of America’s largest churches, Saddleback Church in Southern California, become a visible player in Rwanda’s evangelical Christian movement? Kagame was reportedly given an autographed copy of *The Purpose-Driven Life* by one of Warren’s staff members in 2004.[[47]](#footnote-47) After reading it, the president wrote a letter to Warren declaring, ‘I am a purpose-driven man’, and invited his team to Kigali where they ‘jointly’ decided to make Rwanda the world’s first purpose-driven nation in July 2005.[[48]](#footnote-48)

According to Frank, a Rwandan PEACE Plan official, the organisation’s mantra is ‘ordinary people empowered by the spirit to do extraordinary things’. The PEACE Plan is concerned with transforming peoples’ ‘minds’ so that their potential could be unlocked. It accomplishes this through a wide-ranging training and mentorship programme. Soon after the PEACE Plan’s public launch, for example, trainers from Saddleback arrived to mentor an interdenominational group of Rwandan pastors and church leaders in all things PEACE related, from leadership and management to purpose-driven strategy and preaching.[[49]](#footnote-49) ‘We teach people to look within themselves, the church to look within itself, there are potentials there… They need just to have their mind right, their mindset right’, Frank explained. This ‘right mindset’ would ensure that Christians would never again allow genocide to happen in the country. To this end, Frank told me that the most important contribution that the PEACE Plan has made in Rwanda was uniting church leadership. Instead of working on their own projects in ‘isolation’, the country’s Protestant churches were now able to operate together under the interdenominational PEACE Plan umbrella and consider Rwanda as ‘one parish’. Significantly, this umbrella excluded the Catholic Church as its ‘structures’ made working with them too difficult.

Yet, this ‘right mindset’ that the PEACE Plan sought to cultivate dovetailed considerably with government ideology. Take, for example, the prayer offered by Warren at Kagame’s second presidential inauguration in September 2010 at Amahoro Stadium. Warren was one of three religious leaders to offer special prayers for Kagame.[[50]](#footnote-50) He was the only Protestant and the only foreigner. When it came his turn to speak, Warren greeted the 60,000-strong crowd in Kinyarwanda and, holding up his Rwandan passport, declared, ‘*ndi mu rugo*’ (I’m at home). He then invited the audience to stand, stretch their arms out towards Kagame, and join him in praying for their leader. Part of Warren’s prayer went as follows:

You have said in your word, ‘Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord’. And help all Rwandans to remember that only God is God. And when critics seek to discourage, *si bo Imana* [they are not God]*.* And when other nations pressure Rwanda to give up its values, *si bo Imana* [they are not God]. And when outsiders assume that they know what Rwandans should do, *si bo Imana* [they are not God]. Only you are God. These people know where they came from, they know what they want, and they know you are God…

Warren’s prayer is remarkable in the way that it echoes Kagame’s own stance towards his critics. Banking on a certain ‘genocide credit’[[51]](#footnote-51), Kagame frequently claims that no one has the ‘moral right’ to criticise Rwanda and his vision for the country.[[52]](#footnote-52) Alongside former British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, Warren has become one of Kagame’s most vocal Western supporters.[[53]](#footnote-53) While critics decry Kagame’s human rights abuses, a clique of powerful friends help to position the president as ‘the global elite’s favorite strongman’[[54]](#footnote-54), claiming that he has brought peace and stability to a troubled region. Warren lends spiritual legitimacy to this claim. Relying on Biblical authority, he declares that only God can judge Rwanda, not ‘critics’, not other nations, not ‘outsiders’. Kagame’s rule is ‘blessed’ and therefore above all secular authority.

In what follows, I argue that Rwanda Thanksgiving Day can equally be understood as an attempt to spiritually legitimize the RPF regime. The event suggested that any ecumenical initiative must play out according to the terms laid out by the RPF. In other words, ecumenism in the country seems to be possible only when it involves providing spiritual authority to the government’s particular vision for the country’s post-genocide development. Yet, as we will see, the crusade did not go exactly according to plan.

**Rwanda Thanksgiving Day: ‘*Yesu ashimwe*!’**

The intended purpose of Rwanda Thanksgiving Day was to bring the country’s Christian communities together to thank God for all He has done in and for Rwanda.[[55]](#footnote-55) It was not an attempt to ‘heal’ or ‘deliver’ the nation from unseen evils, as has been examined elsewhere,[[56]](#footnote-56) but rather focused on thanksgiving, taking its inspiration from Proverbs 126:3: ‘The Lord has done great things for us; and we are glad’ (*Uwiteka yadukoreye ibikomeye, natwe turishimye*).[[57]](#footnote-57) As Frank explained to me, Rwanda Thanksgiving Day aimed to instill the ‘culture of thanking God’ in Rwandans and to tell them, ‘Be positive, don’t focus on what doesn’t work, on the weaknesses within the country, focus on what God is doing and thank Him for that – and then pray for the rest’. Another PEACE Plan representative explained to me that the event had been inspired both by scripture and traditional Rwandan culture. Not only did the Bible describe the Pentecost as a day of harvest (Exodus 23:16), in the past Rwandans had celebrated a day of harvest (*umunsi w’umuganura*) in August.

Although the day-long crusade involved performances by a number of choirs, including the well-respected Seventh Day Adventist choir, Ambassadors of Christ, and the Rwanda Defence Force Army Jazz Band, to mention but a few, the culmination of the day’s activities was a number of official speeches, first by Anglican Church leaders and then by politicians. The master of ceremonies was Apostle Paul Gitwaza, head of one of the country’s most prominent new Pentecostal churches, Zion Temple Celebration Centre.[[58]](#footnote-58) The religious leaders who spoke – Emmanuel Kolini, the former archbishop of the Anglican Church and the PEACE Plan Chairman; Onesphore Rwaje, the archbishop of the Anglican Church; and Geofrey Rwubusisi, the former Anglican bishop of Cyangugu – all urged Rwandans to thank God for the country’s development and good governance.[[59]](#footnote-59) It was God’s grace, they emphasised, that had allowed the country to rebuild after the genocide. They thanked God for giving Rwanda various government programmes, including the Agaciro Development Fund, which encourages Rwandans to ‘voluntarily’ donate money to the government for unspecified national programmes; health insurance (*mutuelle de santé*); *girinka*, the one cow per family programme; *ubudehe*, a programme of community works; *gacaca*, the community courts established to try cases of genocide; and the *umurenge SACCOs* programme, which introduced SACCOs (Saving and Credit Cooperative Societies) at the level of each administrative sector (*umurenge*).

In a similar spirit, James Musoni, the Minister of Local Government, thanked God for the country’s development. ‘When you look at what the country went through and where it is today, there’s a lot for Rwanda to be thankful to God to’, he declared. ‘God has been so kind to this nation and helped rebuilt it’.[[60]](#footnote-60)

The guest of honour was Dr Pierre Damien Habumuremyi, the then Prime Minister of Rwanda. Frank told me that Kagame himself had been invited but pulled out at the last minute. ‘*Yesu ashimwe!*’ (‘Praise Jesus!’), Habumuremyi declared, using the standard Pentecostal greeting when he took his place behind the podium, much to the crowd’s delight.[[61]](#footnote-61) Habumuremyi delivered a message from Kagame. The president, he said, ‘will use all the power God gave him to continue bringing together all Rwandans’ (‘*azakoresha imbaraga zose Imana yamuhaye akomeza guhuza Abanyarwanda*’).[[62]](#footnote-62) Habumuremyi had his own message for the crowd. ‘Rwandans have now woken up and are indeed committed to building their nation,’ he asserted. ‘We have a reason to thank God, He no longer only spends daytime and sleeps in Rwanda like they used to say, God is always in Rwanda day and night’.[[63]](#footnote-63)

**A new RPF-Protestant axis?**

By aligning the country’s development and reconstruction with the will of God, the religious leaders and politicians who spoke at Rwanda Thanksgiving Day implicitly offered spiritual legitimacy to Kagame’s regime. In this respect, they echoed Warren’s prayer discussed above. It was under the guidance of Kagame and the RPF, after all, that Rwanda’s ‘miraculous’ recovery became possible. By connecting God with the RPF state, power became divinely inflected, recalling the pre-colonial dynastic kingdoms wherein the *mwami* (king) was understood as ‘the source and symbol of all authority’[[64]](#footnote-64) and ‘the eye through which God look[ed] upon Ruanda’.[[65]](#footnote-65)

We can see here too clear resonances between the Protestant-RPF axis and that formed between the Catholic Church and the Kayibanda and Habyarimana regimes.[[66]](#footnote-66) Under Habyarimana, the mainline churches, particularly the Catholic Church, ‘openly supported state goals and praised state achievements’, while the regime itself looked to the churches for ‘legitimacy’ and popular support.[[67]](#footnote-67) In this way, the mainline churches ‘helped to maintain order, integrating the population into the social system and teaching obedience to authority’.[[68]](#footnote-68) We can identify a very similar dynamic with the RPF state and the Protestant churches, despite the fact that the RPF has staked its own political legitimacy upon its supposed ‘break’ with the former regimes.[[69]](#footnote-69)

Despite this disquieting historical continuity, PEACE Plan officials proclaimed the inaugural Rwanda Thanksgiving Day an overwhelming success. A 2013 country report on Rwanda made the following pronouncement:

The relationship between the government and the church that has been established and reinforced by The PEACE Plan will continue to be an important element that weaves the country of Rwanda together. As Shima Imana continues to be celebrated for decades to come, Rwandans will participate in this newfound tradition of national unity and gratitude for the country’s destiny of restoration, greatness, and purpose.[[70]](#footnote-70)

Indeed, in 2016 it was announced that Rwanda Shima Imana would be held at the sector level, ensuring that Rwandans across the country would be reached.[[71]](#footnote-71)

Yet, as I discuss below, at the inaugural Rwanda Thanksgiving Day, the Rwandan public took an altogether different message away from the event. A heated dispute between Gitwaza and Mihigo revealed the fractious nature of the country’s religious landscape, despite outward claims to unity.

## ‘Gitwaza, Mihigo Kizito disagree on God’s mercy’[[72]](#footnote-72)

As I outlined briefly in the opening paragraph, the spat between Gitwaza and Mihigo centred on the interpretation of one of Mihigo’s songs. Mihigo, we will remember, was the only Catholic involved in the proceedings. When he arrived on stage to perform the song ‘Arc-en- ciel’ (‘Rainbow’), he first made a few comments about the song’s meaning. Since the song was composed mainly in French, Mihigo told me after the event that he had wanted to make sure that everyone in the audience understood it in the ‘right’ way. He was worried, in fact, that some listeners would assume that the rainbow he referred to was Kagame, and that he had written the song to praise the president. This interpretation would not have been surprising given the close relationship Mihigo had at the time with Kagame and the RPF. Not only was Mihigo sent to study music in Europe allegedly through the personal intervention of Kagame, his very public promotion of unity and reconciliation – particularly through the non-profit organisation he founded in 2010, Kizito Mihigo for Peace (KMP) Foundation, which held concerts and artistic events in secondary schools and prisons around the country – has often led to criticisms that some of his songs were RPF propaganda. Indeed, although Mihigo started out as a Catholic liturgical singer and composer, more recently he had turned to composing and performing songs that supported particular government programmes and policies.[[73]](#footnote-73) Yet, this close relationship broke down when Mihigo released a controversial song for the 20th anniversary of the genocide and was imprisoned, much to the shock of the Rwandan public. I will have more to say about this below.

In order to prevent any confusion about the song’s meaning and intention, Mihigo explained that ‘Arc-en-ciel’ was about God’s mercy. ‘In the Old Testament, before Jesus, the Bible clearly shows that sometimes God can be extremely angry such that he kills his people’, Mihigo told the audience. He then gave a number of Biblical examples to support his claim. In Genesis 6, God sent a flood that killed everyone except Noah and his family; in Exodus 11, God decreed that every firstborn in Egypt should be killed because the Egyptians had refused to let the Israelites go; and, in Exodus 14, God parted the Red Sea for the Israelites but then drowned the Egyptian soldiers who had pursued them.

Yet after such destruction, Mihigo continued, God showed His mercy. After the flood, God sent a rainbow to Noah. In Mihigo’s interpretation, the rainbow had been ‘a sign that He [God] was going to be more forgiving of people’ (‘*ikimenyetso cy’uko igiye kuzajya ibabarira abantu*’) and illustrated God’s desire ‘to be a merciful God rather than an angry God’ (‘*Imana Nyirimbabazi mbere yo kuba Imana Nyiruburakari*’).[[74]](#footnote-74) This mercy was manifested most clearly in Jesus, who had suffered on the cross but was then resurrected for the salvation of all mankind. ‘In this way’, Mihigo told the crowd at Amahoro Stadium, ‘Jesus is the extraordinary rainbow, He is the one I’m going to sing about so that He visits Rwanda and gives us forgiveness and peace’. He then performed the song, which was mostly composed in French, with verses three and five in Kinyarwanda. For brevity’s sake, I reproduce only the chorus and verses three and five:

**Chorus**  
*Rainbow, sign of hope*  
*Rainbow, a call to unity*  
*Rainbow, come visit Rwanda*  
*Bring us forgiveness and peace*  
*Rainbow, come visit Rwanda*  
*Bring us love and unity*

**Verse 3**  
*Come, Lord Jesus teach us to love you*  
*So that we could also love each other as brothers*  
*Teach us to forgive*  
*You will be the pillar of our life*  
*Teach us to forgive*  
*You will be the pillar of our life*

**Verse 5**  
*Our reason to love Rwanda*  
*is that our country has a testimony*  
*A testimony that tells all of humanity*  
*that love does not die*  
*A testimony that tells the whole world  
that unity is possible*

After Mihigo’s performance, Gitwaza, the master of ceremonies, took a moment to comment on Mihigo’s explanation of the song. ‘I would like to first correct Kizito Mihigo regarding what he said about God having killed people’, Gitwaza began. ‘God never kills His people, in fact, it’s Satan who kills them. When killing occurs, Satan is the one who kills, not God’. Gitwaza then went on, as we saw above, to instruct the audience not to ‘blame’ Mihigo for his comments as he was neither a pastor nor a priest.

When Mihigo returned to the stage later in the afternoon to perform another song, he responded to Gitwaza’s remarks. ‘Brother Gitwaza’, he said, ‘it seems that you did not understand what I said. I did not say that God is mean, on the contrary, I said that the side of him that is of peace and love became much more evident when Jesus arrived’. He continued, ‘At an event like this that brings together people from different beliefs, there ought not to be a person coming across as a teacher correcting everyone, because it would be like trying to bring us into his church’. ‘Me, I’m an artist from the Catholic Church, but I joined with you because I like the values of unity’, he concluded.

## 

## The controversy

In the days following Rwanda Thanksgiving Day, the event received an enormous amount of attention in the Kinyarwanda-language media.[[75]](#footnote-75) A journalist friend told me that an article about the Gitwaza-Mihigo spat was the most viewed article in the past three years on the website Igihe.com, the country’s most read website.[[76]](#footnote-76) More than 700 readers left comments. Public reaction was divided. On the one hand, some Rwandans thought that Gitwaza had crossed the line by correcting Mihigo in such a public manner. Why, they asked, did Gitwaza, a self-proclaimed ‘apostle’, think he was the sole authority on the Bible? ‘You told him for me’ (*yaramumbwiriye*), some encouraged Mihigo. Supporters of Gitwaza countered that Mihigo should not have contradicted him. As his spiritual elder, Gitwaza had only been trying to help Mihigo (*yamufashije*) and, in his own way, to make sure the audience did not leave with the ‘wrong’ interpretation.

The incident revealed the contested nature of the spiritual landscape in Rwanda, despite the PEACE Plan’s attempts to erect a united front. The Gitwaza-Mihigo conflict had not been the only moment of controversy. To non-Pentecostal believers in the audience, the fact that Habumuremyi had greeted the crowd as a Pentecostal (‘*Yesu ashimwe*!’) suggested an uncomfortable alliance between the state and the new Pentecostal churches. Catholics greeted each other with ‘*Yezu akuzwe*’ (‘Jesus is forever’) – to which the proper response is ‘*Iteka*’ (‘Forever’) – and by adopting the new Pentecostal salutation, many felt that Habumuremyi, in his role as the representative of Rwanda’s highest office, was implicitly excluding non-Pentecostals from the community he was addressing. In addition to introducing new salutations, the Pentecostal churches have also created new terms and phrases to define the boundaries of their faith. Anyone who is not Pentecostal is referred to as ‘*ntwabwo arakizwa*’, meaning he or she is not saved. In this terminology, only Pentecostals are saved, and anyone else, from Catholics and mainline Protestants to Muslims, are pagans (*abapagani*).

Mihigo’s comments suggested a more nuanced understanding of good and evil, one that did not set up a strict dichotomy – Satan kills, God does not – but rather introduced a way of looking at the world that saw good and evil as intimately connected, no matter how absolute the evil. This understanding, I suggest, reflects Mihigo’s own experience of the genocide, a testimony he often shared through his KMP Foundation. Mihigo’s father was killed during the genocide by the father of his best friend. After many years of reflection, Mihigo eventually decided to forgive his childhood friend, tracking her down and sharing a meal with her. This process taught Mihigo that Rwandans had been given a particularly powerful testimony of peace and reconciliation; because they had suffered through and survived the genocide, they knew first-hand what it was like to live without mercy and forgiveness. On a spiritual level, this embodied knowledge helped them to better comprehend the mission of Christ. As he told me, ‘the person who has suffered the most, who has endured hate much more than others, it’s he who can testify about love the most’. This suffering created not only a greater love of God, but also of country. As the lyrics in verse five of ‘Arc-en-ciel’ declare, ‘Our reason to love Rwanda is that our country has a testimony’.

To Mihigo, Rwandans who had grown up outside of the country – like Gitwaza, who had grown up in the eastern Congo – could never fully comprehend the cataclysm and complete destruction of the genocide. While the genocide may have been an absolute evil, it also, paradoxically, allowed for the possibility of new ‘fruits’, as Mihigo called them, to be born. This is what Mihigo had been getting at with his explanation of ‘Arc-en-ciel’. After the flood, there had been a rainbow. Only those who had directly witnessed and lived through the destruction caused by the flood could understand and testify to both the nature of destruction *and* rebirth, evil *and* peace. The two went hand in hand. To frame it in Christian terms, Mihigo considered the genocide ‘the cross of Rwanda’ that, although a symbol of unimaginable suffering, was also that which allows for resurrection and, in some cases, new hope and possibility.

This disconcerting sense of opportunities born from overwhelming loss was expressed to me by other survivors. Bernadette, a genocide rape survivor, told me that before the genocide her husband had often warned her that he was going to die, correctly – and tragically – reading the tense political climate at the time. Bernadette’s biggest fear was to be widowed; she had vowed to herself that if her husband died, she would hang herself. When the genocide occurred, her husband and many of her family members were killed. Although her fear was realised and she became a widow, there was a crucial difference – the genocide had made many women around her widows as well. In this way, she explained that the genocide was ‘kind of positive’ for her. Paradoxically, death – in particular, the systematic killing of men as husbands and fathers – had given her life and a new community founded on the mutual experience of loss. ‘If it [becoming a widow] had happened to me alone’, she told me, ‘I would have hung myself’.

This was an incredibly complex, poignant, and paradoxical understanding of the genocide and God’s mercy. Bernadette, who was born Catholic but converted to ADEPR after the genocide, found solace in the fact that God had at once taken away everything, but remained with her. She had lost her husband and her family, but she was not alone in her suffering; she had left the Catholic faith, but other ADEPR members became new family members. To some survivors, the fact that the vast majority of the new Pentecostal churches were founded by returnees severely limited their ability not only to minister to Rwandans who had been born and raised in the country, Hutu and Tutsi alike, but also to help rebuild the country and contribute to reconciliation.

## ‘Genocidal discourse’ and controlling spiritual meaning

If the new Pentecostal churches tried to draw interpretative boundaries around the spiritual meaning of the genocide, so too did the Rwandan state. The view espoused by Mihigo – and then ‘corrected’ by Gitwaza – that God’s mercy and, by extension, the country’s past, was more grey than black-and-white, and that, paradoxically, ‘fruits’ could be born from absolute evil, was highly controversial. Not only did it spark heated debate after Rwanda Thanksgiving Day, as we saw, it was also targeted as a type of reasoning associated with ‘genocidal discourse’ in a 2011 report issued by the Media High Council, the government body that controls and regulates Rwanda’s media.[[77]](#footnote-77) The document was an attempt to control the language journalists are allowed to use when speaking about the genocide and Rwanda’s past more broadly. One of the examples that the report highlighted was an interview given by a pastor on a radio programme broadcast on Voice of Hope for the commemoration period of April 2010. Articulating views very similar to Mihigo’s, the pastor spoke about burying loved ones who had died during the genocide. He told listeners that when burying their loved ones, they should remember that ‘there is a specific kind of blessing after the genocide’.[[78]](#footnote-78) The pastor went on to explain that God did not take one’s loved ones as bones but rather gave them new bodies that will never perish.[[79]](#footnote-79)

The report’s writers, however, did not agree with the pastor’s interpretation. ‘This might be part of encouraging and soothing discourse for believers’, they wrote, ‘but for non believers this might sound a form of disrespect for one’s relatives that were murdered during the Genocide’.[[80]](#footnote-80) Indeed, the report tells us that when speaking of remembering lost loved ones the phrase *kuzura akaboze* (‘to resurrect those who have perished’) is not to be used. *Kuzura*, with its religious associations – one would use the word to describe how Jesus resurrected Lazarus (*Yezu yazuye Lazaro*), for example – goes against the state’s attempts to construct the genocide as a secular political event. Instead, one is instructed to say, ‘to commemorate our loved ones lost in the genocide against the Tutsis’ (*kwibuka abacu bazize Jenoside yakorewe Abatutsi*). One is not to refer to the remains of the dead as ‘bones’ (*amagufa*) but rather ‘the bodies of those who died in the genocide against the Tutsi’ (*imbiri y’abazize jenoside yakorewe abatutsi*). One buries these lost loved ones not in a ‘cemetery’ (*amarimbi*) but in ‘genocide memorials’ (*inzibutso za Jenoside*). In this way, even the bodies of the dead become politicised; they gain meaning through their relationship to official state doctrine and spaces.

Although the report was ostensibly an effort to control language use and prevent genocide negationism, here we see that it was also indirectly an attempt by the state to control spiritual interpretation. A similar logic was at work, I suggest, with Gitwaza’s comments and his ‘correction’ of Mihigo. Why, we might ask, is it dangerous for survivors to claim that ‘fruits’ can come after the genocide, for pastors to argue that it also allowed for ‘a specific kind of blessing’? I suggest that both the new Pentecostal churches and the state attempt to control how the genocide is understood and interpreted not to create unity and reconciliation but rather to legitimise and shore up their own claims to power. If genocidal discourse was not a constant threat, then the state would have no reason to police freedom of speech or severely limit political opposition; if the Catholic Church and the mainline churches were not universally responsible for the genocide, then Pentecostal churches would have no moral high ground and their claims to offer believers something ‘new’ would be less convincing.

To new Pentecostals, however, the fact that Rwanda’s religious field was more open, that more spiritual options were available to believers, was a positive development. As Frank, the PEACE Plan representative told me:

In Rwanda, we haven’t reached a saturation of churches, so we need as many churches as we can to evangelise the whole Rwanda and to reach out to every Rwandan. It takes all sorts of churches to reach out to all sorts of people… But at the end of the day what matters most is are they going to church? Number two, are they getting the right message? Number three, are they transformed? Is any transformation happening in their lives? If those are not happening, then there’s a problem.

Yet the proliferation of new churches also implied the proliferation of new assertions of moral authority and claims that one’s church was the sole purveyor of the ‘right’ message. As a Muslim leader confided in me, ‘I can anticipate having a problem of religions in this country… Because everybody claims to be the right one, and everybody is just campaigning to get followers from the same 10 million [Rwanda’s population]’. How, in the end, could one measure ‘transformation’, often referred to with the Kinyarwanda verb *guhindura,* to change? If the intended goal of the PEACE Plan and Rwanda Thanksgiving Day was to change the ‘mindset’ of Rwandans, how was it possible to know if this transformation had succeeded? This, I suggest, was perhaps the most pressing question faced by all religious institutions in the country. How could they be absolutely certain that their message was the ‘right’ one and, more worrying still, that it was being interpreted as they intended it to be? In such a context, as the controversies surrounding Rwanda Thanksgiving Day demonstrate, ecumenism risked becoming a precarious – and state-directed – enterprise.

**Conclusion**

While transnational evangelical networks are highly visible on Rwanda’s charismatic Christian scene, these engagements are played out on the RPF’s terms, and spiritual leaders, both local and foreign, offer spiritual legitimacy to Kagame’s regime. Ironically, at Rwanda Thanksgiving Day, an event that was supposed to demonstrate the unity of the churches, a disagreement about God’s mercy revealed the uncertainties of ecumenism in the post-genocide period. The controversy over the Gitwaza-Mihigo spat suggested that some Rwanda survivors, both Catholic and ADEPR converts, were uneasy about the new Pentecostal churches’ claims to spiritual authority. We can see, in fact, how the black-and-white approach to morality espoused by the new churches – Satan kills, God saves – mimicked the political ideology of the RPF: it alone had brought ‘good’ governance to a country once ruled by corruption and ethnic politics. Just as the RPF constructs itself as the sole purveyor of historical truth, so too do the *abarokore* pastors equally position themselves as the true mediators of biblical truth.

In 2014, Mihigo released a song for the 20th anniversary of the genocide that further demonstrated how strictly the past was policed. In the song, ‘Igisobanuro cy’urupfu’ (The meaning of death), Mihigo sings that those whose lives were ‘brutally taken’ in acts ‘not qualified as genocide’ equally deserve to be remembered. These statements directly contravened the ‘official’ government narrative about the genocide, in which Tutsi are the sole victims and Hutu perpetrators. Although Mihigo, as we saw, was eventually sentenced to 10 years in prison for planning to kill Kagame and overthrow the government, many believe these charges were trumped up and ‘Igisobanuro cy’urupfu’ was the real reason he was imprisoned. The song has since been banned in Rwanda. Yet we might say that it hinted at an alternative understanding of ecumenism, one where Christians were called upon to place their ‘humanity’ (*ubumuntu*) ahead of their Rwandan identity. ‘Let I am Rwandan be preceded by I am a human’ (*Ndi umunyarwanda ijye ibanzirizwa na ndi umuntu*)*,* Mihigo sings in one of the song’s verses. The expansiveness of this vision – to see Hutu equally as victims of the genocide, to not allow love of country blind one to the suffering of others – seemed to contrast sharply with state and *abarokore* attempts to limit exactly who should be included within particularly forms of community.

To conclude, although recent scholarship has emphasised the creativity and potentiality of healing in Pentecostal practice – Shaw has written eloquently about how Pentecostal practice allows displaced Sierra Leonean youth to transform ‘demonic memory into Pentecostal memory’[[81]](#footnote-81) – we must also be attendant to the boundaries and limits imposed upon the ‘saved’. While the recent boom of Pentecostalism in Africa can be attributed in part to its less formal, more ‘live and direct’[[82]](#footnote-82) worship style, one of the ways it creates community is through negation and exclusion – it is equally about what one is not supposed to believe, what one is not supposed to say, and how one is not supposed to act. As much as Pentecostal practice provides a ‘relanguaging’ or a ‘renarration’, allowing believers to reshape their past to create a ‘meaningful present’[[83]](#footnote-83), these new languages and narrative techniques are neither neutral nor all-inclusive; they offer very particular vocabularies that exclude others and divergent interpretations, making ecumenism a precarious possibility indeed. These exclusionary tendencies are of course equally present in other religious denominations, but the ‘hidden’ ethnic make-up of the new churches in Rwanda make rigid boundaries between the saved and unsaved particularly problematic for the country’s efforts at reconciliation. In such a context, then, we must pay particular attention to the negativeaspects of Pentecostal practice, about who it excludes and why, and how these exclusions are performed. Equally important, however, is to examine how other Christians work to overcome these divisions, and create new communities often based, paradoxically, on the generative experience of loss. By paying attention to both of these dynamics, perhaps we can reach a better understanding of the possibilities – and uncertainties – of ecumenism in post-conflict contexts.

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1. This article is based on 16 months of fieldwork in Kigali, Rwanda between 2011 and 2013. I draw on media reports, song lyrics, personal interviews with a variety of religious figures, and my own attendance at Rwanda Thanksgiving Day. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In recent years, however, this has changed. The fifth edition of Rwanda Shima Imana, which took place in August 2016, was ‘expected to involve a big number of Muslims’. See A. Tashobya, ‘Rwanda Shima Imana Celebration to Be at Sector Level’, *The New Times* (25 July 2016), available at http://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/article/2016-07-25/202031, retrieved on 30 December 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For brevity’s sake, in what follows I refer to this organization as PEACE Plan. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A. Kubai, ‘Post-Genocide Rwanda: The Changing Religious Landscape’, *Exchange* 36, 2 (2007), p. 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. E. Katongole, *Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith after Genocide in Rwanda* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2009), p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. T. Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 4. During the pogroms in the 1960s and 1973, churches had been sites of safe haven for Tutsis. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This history is sketched out only briefly here. For a more thorough recounting see J. J. Carney, *Rwanda before the Genocide: Catholic Politics and Ethnic Discourse in the Late Colonial Era* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2013); T. Gatwa, *The Churches and Ethnic Ideology in the Rwandan Crises, 1900-1994* (Bletchley, Paternoster, 2005); E. Katongole, *Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith after Genocide in Rwanda* (Grand Rapids. Zondervan, 2009); I. Linden with J. Linden, *Church and Revolution in Rwanda* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1977); T. Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*; L. Mbanda, *Committed to Conflict: The Destruction of the Church in Rwanda* (London, SPCK, 1997); C. Rittner, J. Roth, and W. Whitworth (eds), *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches?* (St Paul, Minn, Aegis in association with Paragon House, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Yet we should also be wary of exaggerating the role of the churches in ‘creating’ ethnicity. Carney has recently argued that the Hutu-Tutsi question was not the dominant paradigm for Catholic discourse during the early colonial period. Although Catholic leaders were influenced by ‘flawed missionary anthropology’, they were not ‘brainwashed’ by it. See J. Carney, ‘Beyond Tribalism: The Hutu-Tutsi Question and Catholic Rhetoric in Colonial Rwanda’, *Journal of Religion in Africa* 42, 2 (2012), p. 193; also ‘Far from Having Unity, We Are Tending towards Total Disunity: The Catholic Major Seminary in Rwanda, 1950-62’, *Studies in World Christianity*, 18, 1 (2012), pp. 82–102. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. T. Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid., p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., chapter 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A. Des Forges, *‘Leave None to Tell the Story’: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York, Human Rights Watch, 1999), p. 246. It is also worth pointing out here that some church leaders, such as Thadée Nsengiyumva, president of the Catholic conference of bishops, did speak out against ethnic violence in the early 1990s. They were, however, the exceptions. See Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, p. 6-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. T. Ndahiro, ‘The Church’s Blind Eye to Genocide in Rwanda’, in C. Rittner, J. Roth and W. Whitworth (eds), *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches?* (St Paul, Aegis in association with Paragon House, 2004), p. 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. To name but one example, Father Athanase Seromba, the first Catholic priest to be tried at the ICTR, was sentenced to 15 years in prison in 2006. He ordered the bulldozing of his Nyange parish, resulting in the deaths of more than 2,000 Tutsis who had sought refuge at the church. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. G. van’t Spijker, ‘La Rivalité Des Alliances: Les Eglises Après Le Génocide Rwandais’, in S. Eyezo’o and J. Zorn (eds), *Concurrences en Mission: Propagandes, Conflits, Coexistences (XVIe-XXIe Siècle)*, (Paris, Karthala, 2011), p. 11. Available at http://gerardvantspijker.nl, retrieved on 4 January 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. T. Longman, ‘Limitations to Political Reform: The Undemocratic Nature of Transition in Rwanda’, in S. Straus and L. Waldorf (eds), *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Atrocity* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. G. van’t Spijker, ‘La Rivalité Des Alliances’, p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. A. Corten, ‘Rwanda: Du Réveil Est-Africain Au Pentecôtisme’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 37, 1 (2003), p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. G. van’t Spijker, ‘The Churches and Genocide in Rwanda’, *Exchange*, 26, 3 (1997), p. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Longman makes this point more broadly, noting that the RPF allows civic groups run by Tutsi returnees to operate ‘relatively freely’ as it sees them as its ‘core constituency’. T. Longman, ‘Limitations to Political Reform’, p. 27–28. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. J. Sundqvist, ‘Reconciliation as a Societal Process: A Case Study on the Role of the Pentecostal Movement (ADEPR) as an Actor in the Reconciliation Process in Post-Genocide Rwanda’, *Svensk Missionstidsskrift*, 99, 2 (2011), p. 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Although ADEPR and the new *abarokore* churches espouse similar theologies, they differ quite markedly in terms of practice. *Abarokore* routinely criticise ADEPR for being too ‘legalistic’ and old-fashioned. Not only are their services much more sombre affairs with less exuberant singing and dancing, women in ADEPR must cover their hair, wear skirts that extend below the knee, and cannot wear makeup, nail polish, or jewellery. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. D. Peterson, *Ethnic Patriotism and the East African Revival: A History of Dissent, c.1935-1972* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012); K. Ward and E. Wild-Wood (eds), *The East African Revival: History and Legacies* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2012). For a discussion of the Revival within the post-genocide Anglican Church, see P. Cantrell, ‘“We Were a Chosen People”: The East African Revival and Its Return to Post-Genocide Rwanda’, *Church History*,83, 2 (2014), pp. 422-445. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, p. 113-114. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., p. 92-3. In 1986, 300 members of several Christian sects, including the *Abarokore*, were brought to trial by the government for refusing to join the MRND and participate in state activities. Save two individuals who recanted, all were found guilty and received prison sentences of between five and 15 years. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. A. Corten and R. Marshall (eds), *Between Babel and Pentecost: Transnational Pentecostalism in Africa and Latin America* (London, Hurst, 2001); P. Gifford, *Ghana’s New Christianity: Pentecostalism in a Globalising African Economy* (London, Hurst & Co, 2004); D. Martin, *Pentecostalism: The World Their Parish* (Oxford, Blackwell, 2002); D. Maxwell, *African Gifts of the Spirit: Pentecostalism & the Rise of a Zimbabwean Transnational Religious Movement* (Oxford, James Currey, 2006); B. Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. E. Kagire, ‘President Kagame Weighs in on Catholic Church’s Apology for Role in Genocide’, *The East African* (16 December 2016), available at http://www.theeastafrican.co.ke/news/President-Kagame-Catholic-Church-apology-role-in-genocide/2558-3489322-38x8r2z/index.html, retrieved on 4 January 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. H. Sherwood, ‘Pope Francis Asks for Forgiveness for Church’s Role in Rwanda Genocide’, *The Guardian* (20 March 2017), available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/mar/20/pope-francis-asks-for-forgiveness-for-churchs-role-in-rwanda-genocide, retrieved on 1 September 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid. See also C. McGreal, ‘Hiding in Plain Sight in France: The Priests Accused in Rwandan Genocide’, *The Guardian* (7 April 2014), available at https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/apr/07/rwanda-genocide-20-years-priests-catholic-church, retrieved on 1 September 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Kubai, ‘Post-Genocide Rwanda’, p. 204–5; *Being Church in Post-Genocide Rwanda: The Challenges of Forgiveness and Reconciliation* (Uppsala, Life & Peace Institute, 2005), p 26, available at http://www.life-peace.org/wp-content/uploads/2002/06/OCR\_Being\_church\_10.pdf, retrieved on 26 July 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. This is not to imply that Pentecostal churches were the only ones concerned with healing. For a discussion of a community-based sociotherapy programme in Byumba led by the Anglican Church of Rwanda, see A. Richters, ‘Suffering and Healing in the Aftermath of War and Genocide in Rwanda: Mediations through Community-Based Sociotherapy’, in L. Kapteijns and A. Richters (eds), *Mediations of Violence in Africa: Fashioning New Futures from Contested Pasts* (Leiden, Brill, 2010), pp. 173–210. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. V. Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007), p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Kubai, ‘Being Church in Post-Genocide Rwanda’, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. E. Umurerwa, ‘Imiryango Ishingiye Ku Idini 405 Imaze Gusaba Kwemererwa Gukorera Mu Rwanda’, *Igihe* (22 October 2013), available at http://igihe.com/amakuru/u-rwanda/article/amadini-405-amaze-gusaba-ko, retrieved on 6 September 2014; A. Dusabemungu and E. Marie, ‘Rwanda-Number of Religious Institutions Increasing since the Creation of RGB’, *Igihe* (22 October 2013), available at http://en.igihe.com/news/rwanda-number-of-religious-institutions-increased.html, retrieved on 6 September 2014. In February 2012 a new law was passed (N˚06/2012) requiring all ‘religious-based organisations’ (RBOs) to legally register with the government. In order to do so, each RBO now must have its own ‘statutes’ that include, among a long list of others, its mission, activities, and beneficiaries; organisational structure and duties of each unit; administration and financial audit organs; and mechanisms for conflict resolution. The law has been interpreted as an attempt to curtail the growth of new churches and to more closely monitor their teachings and operations. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. NISR and MINECOFIN, *2012 Population and Housing Census: Provisional Results* (Republic of Rwanda, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. It should also be noted that although Islam had historically been a marginal presence in the country, accounting for 1.2% of the population before the genocide, it attracted new converts after 1994 as many Muslims did not participate in the killings and the Mufti of Rwanda even issued a fatwa forbidding Muslims from participating in the genocide. While Kubai has argued that there was an ‘emerging positive attitude’ towards Muslims in the post-genocide period, the census did not in fact reveal much movement in official statistics, with the growth of the Muslim community only increasing by 0.8%. See A. Kubai, ‘Walking a Tightrope: Christians and Muslims in Post-Genocide Rwanda’, *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 18, 2 (2007), p. 229. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. S. Van Hoyweghen, ‘The Disintegration of the Catholic Church of Rwanda: A Study of the Fragmentation of Political and Religious Authority’, *African Affairs*, 95, 380 (1996), p. 379. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Van’t Spijker, ‘The Churches and Genocide in Rwanda’, p. 253. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. T. Morgan, ‘Purpose Driven in Rwanda’, *Christianity Today* (23 September 2005), available at http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/october/17.32.html, retrieved on 9 September 2014; PEACE Plan, ‘Church Community Country: 2013 Rwanda PEACE Plan Report’, 2013, available at http://rwandaupdate.wordpress.com, retrieved on 9 September 2014. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. PEACE Plan, ‘Church Community Country: 2013 Rwanda PEACE Plan Report’. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. The other two were the then mufti of Rwanda, Swaleh Habimana, and the Catholic leader, Bishop Smaragde Mbonyintege. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. F. Reyntjens, ‘Rwanda, Ten Years On: From Genocide to Dictatorship’, *African Affairs*, 103, 411 (2004), pp. 177–210. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. One memorable example of this was Kagame’s ‘twitterspat’ with British journalist Ian Birrell in May 2011. Referring to an interview with Kagame in the *Financial Times* that had been published that morning, Birrell tweeted, ‘No-one in media, UN or human rights groups has the moral right to criticise me, says despotic & deluded [Kagame]’. Much to Birrell’s surprise, Kagame responded to him directly in two consecutive tweets: ‘Not you either…no moral right! You give yourself the right to abuse pple and judge them like you r the one to decide…and determine universally what s right or wrong and what shd be believed or not!!! Wrong u r…u have no such right..’ See I. Birrell, ‘My Twitterspat with Paul Kagame’, *The Guardian* (16 May 2011), available at http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/16/my-twitterspat-with-paul-kagame, retrieved on 26 July 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. W. Wallis, ‘Lunch with the FT: Paul Kagame’, *Financial Times* (13 May 2011), available at http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/6888f8ea-7ce5-11e0-a7c7-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3CkCc9fq5, retrieved on 26 July 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. J. Gettleman, ‘The Global Elite’s Favorite Strongman’, *The New York Times* (4 September 2013), available at http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/08/magazine/paul-kagame-rwanda.html, retrieved on 26 July 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. The event involved the participation of a number of the country’s umbrella Protestant organisations: the Protestant Council in Rwanda (CPR), the Evangelical Alliance of Rwanda, the Province of the Anglican Church of Rwanda (PEAR), and the Forum of Born Again Churches and Christian Organizations in Rwanda (FOBACOR). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. J. Asamoah-Gyadu, ‘“Christ Is the Answer”: What Is the Question?’: A Ghana Airways Prayer Vigil and Its Implications for Religion, Evil and Public Space’, *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 35, 1 (2005), pp. 93–117. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Indeed, in a Kinyarwanda song released to coincide with the event – ‘Rwanda Shima Imana’ by All Rwandan Gospel Super Stars – this phrase is incorporated into the lyrics. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Gitwaza was born and raised in the Eastern DRC and returned to Rwanda after the genocide to minister to traumatised and wounded Rwandans. In 1999, he started a church in Kigali and, 13 years later, it boasted more than 20,000 members, with branches all over the country. The Zion Temple has since planted churches internationally, including in Europe, North America, Asia, and in other parts of Africa. Van’t Spijker classifies it as a ‘church for the rich’, as evidenced by the fact that a number of prominent businessmen, politicians, and entertainers are members. See van’t Spijker, ‘La Rivalité Des Alliances: Les Eglises Après Le Génocide Rwandais’, p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. It should be noted that in April 2013, Gitwaza replaced the retiring Kolini as the new head of the PEACE Plan. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. M. Kaitesi, ‘Thousands Celebrate Thanksgiving’, *The New Times* (28 August 2012), available at http://www.newtimes.co.rw/news/index.php?i=15098&a=57582, retrieved on 26 July 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. The correct response to this is, “*Ahimbazwe*” (‘He answers’). [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. This phrase was live tweeted via the official Rwanda Thanksgiving Day Twitter account, Rwanda Thanksgiving @RwandaShima. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Kaitesi, ‘Thousands Celebrate Thanksgiving’. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. L. Dorsey, *Historical Dictionary of Rwanda* (Metuchen, Scarecrow Press, 1994), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. J. Webster, *The Political Development of Rwanda and Burundi* (Syracuse, Maxwell Graduate School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, 1966), p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Van Hoyweghen, ‘The Disintegration of the Catholic Church of Rwanda’; C. Taylor, ‘Kings or Presidents: War and the State in Pre- and Post-Genocidal Rwanda’, *Social Analysis*, 48, 1 (2004), pp. 136–42. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda*, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. S. Straus and L. Waldorf, ‘Introduction: Seeing like a Post-Conflict State’, in S. Straus and L. Waldorf (eds), *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Atrocity* (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), p. 8. For a discussion of the continuities between the ‘benevolent leadership’ of the Habyarimana and Kagame regimes, see M. Desrosiers and S. Thomson, ‘Rhetorical Legacies of Leadership: Projections of “Benevolent Leadership” in Pre- and Post-Genocide Rwanda’, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 49, 3 (2011), pp. 429–53. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. PEACE Plan, ‘Church Community Country: 2013 Rwanda PEACE Plan Report’. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Tashobya, ‘Rwanda Shima Imana Celebration to Be at Sector Level’. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. This is the title of the article about the dispute from the English version of the popular website, Igihe.com. See ‘Gitwaza, Mihigo Kizito Disagree on Gods Mercy’, *Igihe* (27 August 2012), available at http://en.igihe.com/religion/gitwaza-mihigo-kizito-disagree-on-gods-mercy.html, retrieved on 26 July 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. His song ‘Agaciro k’Abanyarwanda’ (‘The dignity of Rwandans’), for example, encourages Rwandans to donate to the Agaciro Development Fund. Another example is ‘Intare Yampaye Agaciro’ (‘The lion gave dignity’), a song composed for the 25th anniversary of the RPF in December 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. ‘Umuririmbyi Kizito Mihigo n’Intumwa Paul Gitwaza Basobanyije Imyumvire Ya Bibiliya’, *Igihe* (27 August 2012), available at http://www.igihe.com/iyobokamana/umuririmbyi-kizito-mihigo-n-intumwa-paul-gitwaza-basobanyije-imyumvire-ya-bibiliya.html, retrieved on 26 July 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. For a further discussion of Rwanda’s popular media, see A.M. Grant, ‘The Making of a “Superstar”: The Politics of Playback and Live Performance in Post-Genocide Rwanda’, *Africa* 87, 1 (2017), pp. 155-179. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. ‘Umuririmbyi Kizito Mihigo n’Intumwa Paul Gitwaza Basobanyije Imyumvire Ya Bibiliya’, *Igihe* (27 August 2012), available at http://www.igihe.com/iyobokamana/umuririmbyi-kizito-mihigo-n-intumwa-paul-gitwaza-basobanyije-imyumvire-ya-bibiliya.html, retrieved on 26 July 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. J. Uwimana, P. Mfurankunda and P. Mbungiramihigo, *Appropriate Journalistic Language in Relation to Genocide against Tutsis in Rwanda: Key Guidelines* (Kigali, Media High Council, 2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Ibid., p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. R. Shaw, ‘Displacing Violence: Making Pentecostal Memory in Postwar Sierra Leone’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 22, 1 (2007), p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. M. Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Shaw, ‘Displacing Violence’, p. 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)