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Genocide in the Church: A Reconsideration of Rwanda¹

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Often tattered and bloodstained, the few remaining Rwandan ID cards used in the 1994 genocide stand as a haunting remnant of the colonial era in Africa. They were first issued by the Belgians to identify Tutsis so that they could buy property, gain acceptance into secondary schools, attend universities and seminaries, or secure posts within the government which accounted for the vast majority of paid employment. In 1994, however, they were used as a gruesome winnowers fan for the wholesale slaughter of Tutsis. These cards are a record of how

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an entire society became so consumed by the fear of a Tutsi invasion that the only viable option seemed to be the complete annihilation of every Tutsi and sympathizing Hutu in Rwanda. These cards also stand for a church that was not only powerless to stop the genocide, but had a disturbing role in formulating the ideology that eventually convinced so many Hutu to participate in the genocide. There are far too many stories of priests, nuns, and bishops who became active and passive genocidaires. In 1994, Rwanda was 75% Roman Catholic and the church had a powerful and pervasive presence. The genocide in Rwanda has raised dangerous questions about the role of the church in the Rwandan genocide. Was this a case of a few bad apples who renounced their Christian mandate to make peace and love one's enemy, or was it a systematic failure that allowed fear and racism to be insinuated into the very fiber of the Rwandan church. This work is an attempt to understand the role of Catholic Social Teaching on the emerging Hutu ideology of the 1950's. The goal of this analysis is not to blame or exonerate. It is an attempt to identify the key factor that made the genocide both thinkable and possible. The Catholic Church was not alone in its embrace of scientific taxonomy of human beings that emerged during the 18th and 19th centuries. Other genocides of the 20th century depended heavily on scientific racism to isolate target groups, but the way this particular science was combined with a Eurocentric understanding of theology and the Bible was unique to Rwanda. This kind of internal reflection has not occurred within the Church. Instead, there was an initial burst of institutional denial of culpability, followed by more than a decade of pervasive silence. Many Rwandans hear this silence as contempt. This is especially true in the light of the Vatican's recent apology offered by Rome (19 March 2010, Benedict XVI) to the Irish victims of sexual abuse by priests. Yet the Vatican continues to be silent on Rwanda. This inattention to the Rwandan genocide may even

point to the kind of racism that is examined in this study. If the Church does not examine how race played into the genocide, then it is vulnerable to next genocide. Saying ‘never again’ is not enough. This analysis proposes a way to accept responsibility and make progressive changes to the Catholic world-view, especially in terms of scientific race and theological racism. If this work is done, the Church will be able to oppose and defuse genocidal ideology, instead of waiting until the fires of violence and fear overwhelm it.

CONTAINING THE GENOCIDE

There have been very few voices from within the church who have ventured to understand the Rwandan genocide in a Catholic framework. In March 1996, Pope John Paul II delivered a letter to the Rwandan people stating that, “The Church... cannot be held responsible for the guilt of its members that have acted against the evangelic law; they will be called to render account of their own actions. All Church members that have sinned during the genocide must have the courage to assume the consequences of their deeds they have done against God and fellow men.” This was the first time that the Vatican publicly addressed accusations against priests. Since then, the Vatican has not issued any additional comment on the Rwandan genocide. Ian Linden is a prominent Catholic Scholar who spent decades studying the role of the Church in Rwanda. His 1977 work, *Church and Revolution in Rwanda*, is an invaluable source of information about the church in the decades after independence from Belgium and the rise of the Hutu Church in Rwanda. But in 1977, the tone was one of positive revolution and anticipation of stabilization. After the genocide Linden published a short chapter where he discussed the causes of the genocide. On the issues of involvement, Linden confronts “the charge of complicity”. On one hand he quotes a personal interaction with a missionary who

asked “What did we do wrong that this should happen?”² But this question is not answered by Linden. Instead he creates a kind of balancing act that he calls the “Divided Church”. “It would be a simple matter of balancing the record [of atrocities] by itemizing the many incidents of martyrdom, heroic sacrifice, courage, and the kind of stubborn unwillingness to take the easy way out on the part of some Rwandan Christians.”³ In this moral construct the good neutralizes the bad and we are left with a position very similar to the Pope John Paul II. Linden concludes, “whatever the judgment of complicity, it does not apply to the whole church, which was also the church of martyrs.”⁴ He goes on to reduce the number of proven cases of priestly involvement and discuss the priests who died defending their church members. These are stories of great sacrifice and love, but they distract from confronting the institutional involvement in the construction of the genocide. While Ian Linden is a high profile and renowned Catholic scholar, he wrote very little on the genocide. But there is another Catholic scholar who is not as well known articulates and expands on the official stance of the Catholic Church and the Rwandan genocide. A more detailed discussion of this work is useful in understanding how the church has classically viewed Africa.

Mario Aguilar’s 1998 book, *The Rwanda Genocide and the Call to Deepen Christianity in Africa* is perhaps the only sustained work from within the church that directly addresses the genocide. Faced with the church’s historical entanglement, it is understandable why the Catholicism would rather not deal with Rwanda - the stakes are very high indeed. But silence

² Reconciliation of the Peoples, p. 50.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

and selective/protective memory can have even more corrosive effects if not confronted. The papal silence coupled with Aguilar's orthodox defense comes from a view of colonial and ecclesiastical history that does not recognize the complexity of the church's involvement in Rwandan society during the colonial period, through the Hutu revolution, and then into the genocidal ideology that came to dominate Rwandan society.

Aguilar's argumentation is not subtle or shy. Because of this, it is an intriguing window into a mindset that does not accept institutional responsibility for the genocide in Rwanda. His work is intended to show the church in the best possible light. In this interpretation of Rwandan history, there are four distinct factors which caused the genocide and none of them implicate the Catholic church.

Genocide, for Aguilar, is a pre-colonial phenomenon which was in Africa before the White Fathers (French Catholic Missionaries) first came to missionize this part of Africa in the 19th century CE. He makes reference to the Nuer conquest in the Great Lakes region and speaks of the Nuer 'displacement' of Dinka and Anauk peoples.(Aguilar, 1998, p. 20) Later, in the same paragraph he references ethnic cleansing and genocide in the former Yugoslavia. The implication is that the tactics of the Nuer tribe are equivalent to the ethnic cleansing strategy used by the Serbs in Kosovo and genocidal actions in Bosnia-Herzegovina. It also assumes that any African group is interchangeable with another. Apparently, one example of an African tribe that engaged in ethnic cleansing, implicates all African peoples as violent. This is one of the more durable stereotypes from the colonial period: Africa was, and continues to be, a violent continent. More importantly, Aguilar insists that the seeds of the Rwandan genocide are deeper than the colonial and ecclesiastical presence. He asserts that the White Fathers who came to Rwanda and Burundi in the late 1800s faced a violent and oppositional population. The

difficulty they had was not due to any colonialist agenda, so the narrative goes, it was because the society itself was inherently violent and uncivilized. “The truth is that many conflicts that have taken place since the independence of most African countries are a sign that a flag and/or a territorial boundary did not unite peoples to the extent that they could consider themselves as *one nation*.”(Aguilar, 1998, pp. 22-23) The wording here is important. He is not saying that colonizing Africa was the problem. Nor does he consider the profound implications of the restructuring of African societies around artificial political boundaries and imported European forms of centralized government. For Aguilar, the failure lies in the heart of the African people themselves. The colonial agenda was simply not strong enough to overcome the violent tribalism that he believes is inherent in the African people.

If the church failed it was because it did not achieve its goal. The case of Rwanda provides the best example of the church’s effort, even if it was eventually overwhelmed. “On the surface, Rwanda portrayed the most successful work of evangelization in Africa. Based on Cardinal Lavigerie’s advice that conversion starts with the leaders then the subjects, the White Fathers managed to make an impact that extended to all realms of life turning Rwanda into a Catholic country. The social doctrine of the Church and its ideas played a significant role in modeling the intellectual idea of Hutu leadership and their demands for equality and social rights.”(Aguilar, 1998, p. 38) Oddly, this quote could come from any number of more critical scholars who see the church’s colonial agenda as one of the chief factors that led to the genocidal ideology in Rwanda. Aguilar, however, sees this as evidence of the church’s divine effort to bring the gospel to this region. The White Fathers came to build “Gods Kingdom on earth”(Aguilar, 1998, p. 45). On the surface, Rwanda looked like a success, but underneath this

shiny exterior was the larger problem of evil that Aguilar referenced earlier. In his interpretation of the 1994 genocide, Aguilar asserts that the people of the church were the only thing holding back the wave of violence.

Christians must pay tribute to, and recognize God's Presence in the lives of many Christians who saved lives and encouraged others. There were also many missionaries, priests, and sisters who found it extremely difficult to leave their communities and their places of worship. Amidst the despair of genocide, many people sacrificed their lives for others and became martyrs of service and love. However, many priests and religious (men and women) had to flee in order to save their own lives. It was only after they were gone or were murdered that the mass killings began. (Aguilar, 1998, p. 5)

Far from being responsible for the genocidal ideology in Rwanda, Aguilar sees the church as the only force that staved off the killing back as long as it did. Rwanda is portrayed as a burning building. The worst that could be said of the men and women who served the Rwandan church was that they fled Rwanda. According to Aguilar, once the presence of Christ was gone from the country, literally all Hell broke loose. This is an extremely simplistic paradigm of good and evil. There is no reference to the complexities of actual history. In this black and white cosmos, it is easy to defend the church, because the foundational working assumption is that the church is always on the side of good. Once its presence left Rwanda, evil and genocide had free reign.

In order to maintain the church clearly on the side of good, Aguilar neutralizes reports that implicate the church by referring to those who died protecting Tutsis. In answer to a report that the "Churches did nothing in the face of gross human rights violations" (*The International Response to Conflict and Genocide: Lessons from Rwanda*, 1996) he counters with a document that lists the priests, nuns, and religious people who died in the genocide. (Rights, 1995, p. 922) For him, these individuals, not the others, define the church precisely because they fit into his definition of the church. Those individuals, who participated in the genocide, even though they were technically members of the church, do not define it. This circular argument is designed to

perpetuate the working assumption that the church is not defined by the people who participated in this atrocity.⁵

For Aguilar, the reason for the genocide to Aguilar is very simple. “The truth, however, is that in every country or community of the world, there are two realities which can either merge or confront each other. These are: concern for humanity and a total disregard for human dignity and values.”(Aguilar, 1998, p. 22) In this dichotomy, the church stood, and continues to stand, on the side of dignity and value while the Rwandan people seem to have allowed the disregard for humanity to consume them in the genocide. It was not that the church did anything misguided in Rwanda. Rather, the fault for the genocide lay with the Rwandans themselves. In this way Aguilar is not novel, but his approach to assessing the causes of the genocide leads to a stark conclusion about the Rwandan people and their relationship to the genocide. “It [the genocide] has also been a real test of how deep the Christian and Gospel values are among the Hutu and Tutsi.”(Aguilar, 1998, p. 9) In this simple statement, Aguilar juxtaposes the church with the Rwanda people. By grouping Hutu and Tutsi together, he is implying that both groups hold responsibility for the genocide. In fact, this understanding of good and evil as mutually exclusive opposites demands that Rwandans, to wit Africans, be grouped together so that the Catholic Church can be the other group. This concept of good and evil are consistent throughout his work. The measure of the goodness of the Rwandan people is measured by how ‘deeply’ they

⁵ It should be made clear that Aguilar is not the only scholar who perceives a bifurcated world of insiders and outsiders. Those who condemn the church can be equally binary. They have simply written off the entire church as an active participant of the genocide. The Catholic Church has responded by denying any structural accountability.

absorbed and incorporated what the Catholic missionaries were offering. This metaphor has allowed the church to protect itself from any corporate responsibility for the genocide.

THE CHURCH IN RWANDA

An examination of Catholic missions to Africa reveals a particular understanding of hierarchy and race that led the church, along with the Belgian colonists, to endorse the Tutsi as the divinely ordained rulers over the Hutu. This endorsement of the Tutsi as leaders within Rwanda was supported by the Belgian's use of indirect rule in their colonies. It also fit well with the missionary model used by the White Father Mgr. Classe, who came to Rwanda in 1901 and served as the Bishop of Africa from 1922 until 1945. He advised the Belgian colonists after it was taken from the Germans after WWI. He took his model from the late antique and medieval church's conquest of Europe. For most of its history the church has embraced the idea of empire (4th- early 20th CE). In this model, missions focused solely on the ruling class. Converting the king and the ruling elite insured that the rest of the population would follow suit. This top-down approach was enhanced by the 'science of race'. The Tutsi were favored by the Belgians because they were thought to be genetically closer to European stock than the majority Hutu.

We have letters from local bishops in Rwanda, early in the 20th century, who worried about showing too much preference for the poor at the expense of the ruling class. In a letter to Superior General of the White Fathers in 1911, Father Leon Classe advises that: "Without the Chiefs we will not have the people in a serious manner. Without them, that is, without the social regime that will be fortified. We will give Catholicism a situation of inferiority, condemning it to face continually the difficulties of oppression."(Linden & Linden, 1977) This approach, however, was not always met with enthusiasm from Rwandan chiefs. Not all chiefs were Tutsi.

Many, especially in the northwestern parts of Rwanda were Hutu. They tended to see the missionaries as threats to their regional power. Many of the Rwandan leaders were openly hostile to the European presence, both clerical and governmental. The fortunes of the church changed dramatically in 1930 when the Rwandan King Mutera III converted to Catholicism. In the blink of an historical eye, Rwanda became a Catholic nation. In the decades that followed, the church's allegiance to the politics of Tutsi power in Rwanda became an easy target for those who had caught the spiritual wind of liberation and social justice that was blowing out of Europe. In an ironic twist, this fixation on Hutu liberation would put the church in a very compromised position in the decades leading up to the genocide in 1994.

During the first half of the 20th century CE, the dominant thrust of the church leadership (bishops and Monsignors) had been toward the throne. Despite this formal policy, there had always been a more grassroots concern for the general population. This was usually expressed by the European missionaries and teachers who worked in the mission fields. These competing concerns acted as counter weights. They could complement each other quite well. If the church was politically influential, it was possible to build schools, roads, and clinics. This allowed the White Fathers on the ground to engage in the local ministries of aid, education, and infrastructure improvement. But this relationship also had its tensions.

This is an important distinction because it highlights the political mindset of the upper echelon of the church in Africa. In many ways the Catholic attention to the ruling classes in Rwanda is understandable, given the fiercely independent nature of Rwandan chiefs coupled with the competing Protestant missions. Even if we can look back and see the destructive consequences of 'civilizing the heathen', there is no reason to doubt the original intentions of the

local missionaries to do what they believed was good. Neither should we assume that missionaries on the ground agreed with the more political maneuvers of their superiors. There is a short entry from a 1904 diary of a White Father missionary which has been used as an illustration of how the White Fathers were co-opted by this political top-down agenda: “We want only to raise and affirm the authority of the king...we want to be always his friends...we will have people pay tribute”(Rutayisire, 1987, p. 3). There is more irony than endorsement in this diary entry. It is more likely that he was complaining to his diary that his job was turning him from a priest into a political errand boy. This difference in the clerical hierarchy is important to consider when looking at the Rwandan church from its inception through to the 1994 genocide. It was never one theology, one approach, one ideology. The recognition of the distinction between the administrators of the church and its priests and nuns is crucial because it helps to explain why the church flipped its allegiance from Tutsi to Hutu in the 1950s and was subsequently unable to stop the rising anxiety created by Hutu extremism. At the grassroots level, the Hutu cause had been fed, even nurtured, by Catholic Social Teaching.

In colonial Rwanda, the modus of the executive church was the historical top-down approach, but as the century progressed there was a growing awareness of social issues. The rise of Catholic Social Justice was initiated by Leo XIII’s Rerum Novarum in 1891 and rearticulated forty years later in Pius XI’s 1931 Quadragesimo Anno . During the first half of the 20th century, this teaching was becoming more renown in Roman Catholic seminaries and the Catholic ethos around the world was changing. Even if Rerum Novarum arose from European social upheavals and the growing popularity of secular (aka Socialist) workers’ unions, this does not mean that the principles put forth did not resonate for those missionaries and priests working in a very different social context in Rwanda. The influence of this body of teaching on the church in Rwanda is one

that is usually acknowledged in passing. There has not, however, been a sufficient acknowledgment of the role of Catholic social justice principles in Rwanda.

Catholic missionaries and priests in Rwanda saw in Rerum Novarum and Quadragesimo Anno an opportunity to apply the principles of social justice to a real and ready situation. It is easy to see how they could use the principles of liberation to benefit Hutu who had been oppressed and burdened by seventy years of colonial rule. But in their enthusiasm and passion, they did not measure the implications of ignoring the racial underpinnings which remained invisible. In their verve to bring the kingdom of heaven to earth, they did not consider what would happen if the social reversal really worked. In most cases, those who fight for the poor or the oppressed are fortunate to see even the smallest political or social success. The passion for reform is usually tempered by established elites with a vested interests in maintaining the status quo. In Rwanda, however, the church was ill-prepared for the power vacuum that occurred in 1959. The following 35 years tells the story a church that was pulled by degrees into league with Hutu extremists who systematically distorted the teaching of the church to increase their political power. The church, which had once been so influential, became powerless to effect substantive, structural peace. Because of the growing pressure to disavow their alliance with the colonists, the Rwandan church, embraced with the Hutu government and cut away its ties to the Tutsi. And Rwanda moved deeper into nightmare.

‘RACING’ INTO RWANDA

This examination is not an attempt to amass historical evidence to overwhelm the claims of institutional innocence by the church. This article does not give a detailed account of the role

of Catholic Social Teaching and the Hutu ideology that emerged in the 1950s. Time and space simply do not allow such a detailed endeavor. It is accepted that Juvenal Habyarimana, Rwanda's first president in 1962, was considered the father of the Hutu revolution. His ideas and political agenda soon became an ideology of revenge and ultimately genocide. It is also well documented that Habyarimana was steeped in Catholic Social Teaching. In it, he found a religious justification to suppress the Tutsi and aggrandize the Hutu. Even if we might conclude that Habyarimana and those that followed him were misguided in their interpretation of the tradition, it is clear that they leaned heavily on the Catholic Social Tradition. It endorsed majority rule democracy (which favored the Hutu majority), and the ownership of property as the highest form of human dignity (which vilified the current African system administered by Tutsi elites under the Belgians). It affirmed God's desire that the church lift up the poor and vulnerable (which depended on the stereotype of Tutsi dominance and Hutu servitude). It even built on the church's fear of communism (which oddly took the form of a Tutsi communist conspiracy). The aim of this particular study will focus on one crucial, almost invisible, factor that made this corruption possible: The use of race as a scientific/social category.

For this study, especially, when we look at Rwanda and Africa, race was an accepted reality within the church and throughout much of western culture. From the dawn of the scientific age, race became a way to sort peoples of the earth into a hierarchical structure that promoted the European phenotype as the higher, more divine, form of human existence. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, race became *la rigueur scientifique*. What this study hopes to show is that race has never been a neutral scientific concept. For reasons that will be discussed below, Christianity embraced this 'scientific' construct and it became part of the fabric of the missionary effort in Africa. More troubling perhaps was the way that race was combined

with the Catholic Social Tradition to promote Hutu liberation in the name of social justice. The construct of race was crucial to the Hutu movement, but it was also perhaps the single most important factor that facilitated the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. This discussion has implications for how we understand the role of Catholic Social Teaching in the decades leading up to the genocide as well as how we speak about ethnic differences in the future. The experience of Rwanda reveals the dangers of using race as a scientific basis for any kind of social engineering, whether secular or divine. The single most important factor that influenced, ney infected, Hutu ideology was something that went completely unquestioned during this crucial time: Scientific racism and the Hamitic hypothesis.

LOOKING BACK AT HAM

The Hamitic Hypothesis was, and still is, a very simple idea used by colonists, scientists, and theologians to assert European dominance in the natural order. The core of the problem goes back to Genesis 9. According to Genesis, so the hypothesis goes, there are different races of people on the earth. Some were mentioned in the biblical account and others were outside the divine narrative. This hypothesis was applied directly to Rwanda. The Tutsi people were assumed to have been descended from Noah's son Ham, via Ethiopia. Even though they were condemned to serve Noah's other two sons, Shem and Japeth, they were still technically included in the bloodline of Noah and therefore were of a 'higher order' than the Hutu people. The 'other' people not mentioned in Genesis created problems for some, but because the Hutu were not part of the Adamic bloodline, they were thought to be of a lower human order than Tutsi; created to be ruled, not to rule. In its simplest hierarchical order the Hamitic Hypothesis went

like this: God – Europeans – Tutsi – Hutu – Apes. The Hamitic ‘hypothesis’ united science and religion.

If there is anything that the church in Rwanda could have done to prevent the Hutu ideology from becoming such an effective genocide, it would have been to publically, politically, and theologically oppose the idea that white Europeans were of superior racial stock because God had created them to have dominion over the earth. Yet the church did nothing to challenge or dismantle this assumption. In the noble effort to ensure that those groups who were once oppressed could now be enfranchised, the church maintained the scientific understanding of races. Unwittingly, it is also endorsed the implicitly hierarchical foundation that is woven into this distinctly European/Christian world-view. Confronting the increasingly unstable, outdated, and anecdotal concept of scientific race is an area where the larger church, especially within the Catholic Social Tradition, could lead western culture out of this destructive colonial legacy.

The central factor that weakened the Catholic Social Tradition in colonial Rwanda was its ‘scientific’ understanding of race. Looking back, it is clear that the science of the 19th and early 20th centuries is more the reflection of a colonial western imperialism than actual science. Colonial science assumed that external differences in appearance indicated moral and genetic differences that corresponded to the divine hierarchy called the great chain of being. As the science of genetics progresses into the 21st century it is becoming increasingly apparent that the word ‘race’ is a remnant of outdated science. There are many aspects by which we can judge the success of a culture – family, happiness, relationships, art, religion, negotiation, language, human dignity, etc. – but the West chose to call technological achievements ‘civilization’. The West concluded that these achievements – industry, agriculture, travel, weaponry, and detergents -

indicated cultural and therefore racial superiority. Scientific racism confirmed what Freud already suspected; that soap is the measure of civilization and cleanliness is next to godliness.

It is clear that the Church of the 1950s functioned under the assumption that Africa, and the world for that matter, was striving to be like us: civilized and occidental. It was, therefore, the job of the church to make sure that it was included in the civilizing process to prevent Africa from breaking into godless socialist countries (XII, 1957, pp. 21-22). Even today the Church uses the language of race even as it tries to fight racism. In the 1979 pastoral letter of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, the concept of racism is directly addressed in its American context. It is an admirable step that begins to work through our tragic history, but there is still a blindness to see the church's role in Hamitic 'hypothesis' and the structural racism that undergirds it.

Let all know that it is a terrible sin that mocks the cross of Christ and ridicules the Incarnation. For the brother and sister of our Brother Jesus Christ are brother and sister to us. As individuals we should try to influence the attitudes of others by expressly rejecting racial stereotypes, racial slurs and racial jokes. We should influence the members of our families, especially our children, to be sensitive to the authentic human values and cultural contributions of each racial grouping in our country.(Bishops, 1979)

In this quote the bishops have pitted social justice against the social pressures that push people to racism. The assumption is that racism is inherently negative. This statement is asking Christians to continue to think of people in racial terms without being racist. But the destructive origin and legacy of western colonial racism no longer allows us to make the distinction between race and racism.

While this shows that there are parts of the church that are willing to look critically at cultural racism. It has not seriously considered the church's historical role in racism. For example, this letter is addressed to all Christian people and calls American culture to atone for

the cultural racism that “has been part of the social fabric of America since its European colonization. Whether it be the tragic past of the Native Americans, the Mexicans, the Puerto Ricans, or the blacks, the story is one of slavery, peonage, economic exploitation, brutal repression, and cultural neglect.”(Bishops, 1979) The assumption of both the 1979 letter against racism in America and the overall silence concerning the genocide in Rwanda is that the problem lies in the culture, not the church per se. In the wake of the genocide in Rwanda, the church has been understandably wary to admit any structural culpability. If we were to translate the 1979 letter to the current Rwandan context we would be asking all Rwandans to “acknowledge a share in the mistakes and sins of the past... [You] have allowed conformity to social pressures to replace compliance with social justice.”(Bishops, 1979) Not only does this document fail to acknowledge the role of the Church in American slavery, it becomes even more dangerous to apply the same principle to Rwanda where Catholic clergy went beyond a tacit approval of the status quo. This is a delicate subject for the church. The stakes are very high when it comes to Rwanda. But there may be a way to both highlight the underlying cause of the genocide and apologize for its role in the genocide without undermining the entire structure.

So far, the aim this work appears to show how the Catholic Social Tradition, which is defined by concern and care for the disenfranchised, was used to justify and condone the racial separation, suppression, and elimination of the ethnic Tutsi. Yet it would be an exaggeration to say that the Catholic Social Tradition was responsible for the formation of racial/ethnic Hutu ideology. The example of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda reveals an aspect of the tradition that has not been previously noted in scholarship. An honest consideration of the role of race and the language of racial categories may allow the Roman Catholic Church to connect to the genocide in a new way. It might also spark a discussion about the ways we think and speak about race.

MOVING FROM BAD SCIENCE

There is precedence in the Roman Church for reflecting on, even apologizing for, the role of the church vis a vis the knowable world. This is based on a principle laid out by St. Augustine to determine trump in issues of dispute between science and religion. In a discussion on the existence and/or immortality of the soul, Augustine admits freely that when it comes to the soul he makes no divine claim to the truth on the subject. He urges his critics not to take his word as the ultimate truth. His attitude toward the accumulation of knowledge through human endeavor is open, even inviting. In 1992 John Paul II quoted a passage from Augustine to give a formal allocution on the *Galileo case*.

For if reason be found contradicting the authority of Divine Scriptures, it only deceives by a semblance of truth, however acute it be, for its deductions cannot in that case be true. On the other hand, if, against the most manifest and reliable testimony of reason, anything be set up claiming to have the authority of the Holy Scriptures, he who does this does it through a misapprehension of what he has read, and is setting up against the truth not the real meaning of Scripture, which he has failed to discover, but an opinion of his own; he alleges not what he has found in the Scriptures, but what he has found in himself as their interpreter. (Augustine, *Epistula* 143)

In this papal allocution John Paul provided a model for how the heliocentric church could atone for its treatment of Galileo when it held geocentrism to be an article of Christian faith. It is a model for how the church might be able to correct its dependence on wrong-headed, even toxic, science. Toxic is an accurate description of the ideology that came from the wedding of science and the Hamitic hypothesis. It supported the exploitation of millions of Africans from the 17th-20th centuries CE as well as the rapacious exploitation of its natural resources.

John Paul II acknowledged that “the geocentric representation of the world was commonly admitted in the culture of the time as fully agreeing with the teaching of the Bible, of which certain expressions taken literally seemed to affirm geocentrism. The problem posed by

the theologians of that age was, therefore, that of the compatibility between heliocentrism and Scripture.”(II, 1983) Rwanda had the same problem. There were no voices that refuted the Hamitic science. There is a haunting similarity between the culture of that day and the way the Bible was used to confirm, even build, this hierarchy of races. This, in turn, allowed European Christians to convince themselves that they were the essential players in God’s work to civilize Africa. Regarding Galileo, John Paul goes even further: “The majority of theologians did not recognize *the formal distinction between Sacred Scripture and its interpretation*, and this led them unduly to transpose into the realm of the doctrine of the faith a question which in fact pertained to scientific investigation.”(II, 1983) This was exactly what happened with the Hamitic ‘hypothesis’ during the colonial period,

But as John Paul asserts: “In fact the Bible does not concern itself with the details of the physical world, the understanding of which is the competence of human experience and reasoning. There exist two realms of knowledge, one which has its source in Revelation and one which reason can discover by its own power.”(II, 1983) In 1992, Pope John Paul was looking back at a time when the church was vehemently antagonistic toward any scientific progress that did not mesh with church dogma. It was thought to be heresy. Similarly, the early modern Church with its pre-Copernican geocentric orientation resembled the colonial Church in Rwanda with its Hamitic Hypothesis. During the colonial period, it was thought to be a fact of nature that there were different strata of human beings; some closer to the divine ideal, others closer to lower animals such as apes. As genetic science progresses and is challenging inferior concepts of race. The church now faces a choice.

The question is whether it is possible for the Catholic Church to look back on its support of the Hamitic ‘hypothesis’ of racial superiority with historical honesty. The issue of race may

open a Pandora's box not only for the church but for the West and its inferior treatment of those people who were, and still are in many ways, thought to be a lower, simpler, more base orders of homo sapiens. The church has a responsibility to move forward on the issue of race. John Paul II encourages such progress. "The seriousness of scientific knowledge will thus be the best contribution that the Academy can make to the exact formulation and solution of the serious problems to which the Church, by virtue of her specific mission, is obliged to pay close attention, problems no longer related merely to astronomy, physics and mathematics, but also to relatively new disciplines such as *biology and biogenetics (italics mine)*. Many recent scientific discoveries and their possible applications affect man more directly than ever before in his thought and action, to the point of seeming to threaten the very basis of what is human."(II, 1983)

The church could use the example of Rwanda to show how racial constructs were used by the unscrupulous to divide Africans into racial categories and fit them into a divine hierarchy. If the church were to repudiate the use of any racial category, and the hierarchy embedded within, this would help to protect Catholic Social Teaching from again being exploited and distorted as it was in Rwanda following the events of 1959. The science of the 19th and 20th centuries was distracted by its zeal to sort and classify and distorted by a fear of the unknown and unexplored. This fear drew conclusions from external physical differences, including things like skin color, jaw lines, or nostril size, which are a product of geography, not divine action, let alone a divine hierarchy of being. Because the concept of race arose from modern science it is not possible to make the distinction between cultural race and scientific race. When people say race, they think scientifically, not culturally. And even if they say they are only making a cultural distinction too many believe those distinctions to be genetically determined. What we are coming to understand

scientifically is that our biological connections are far more profound and meaningful than the cultural expressions of our shared human drives. Replacing race with ethnicity is an effective way to acknowledge difference without dangers of hierarchy or colonial science that comes with the word race.

This study has been an attempt to show how the social justice teaching of the church was able to be turned against itself. The support of racial categories was a crucial factor that made Catholic Social Teaching vulnerable to the violence (physical, economic, and social) that came with the victor's justice of the Hutu Revolution. In Kigali in April 1994, Pastor Mugamera watched as his wife and six children were butchered in front of him. As he later reflected on the reasons why the genocide occurred, he accurately identified the underlying problem.

Why did the message of the gospel not reach the people who were baptized? What did we lose? We lost our lives. We lost our credibility. We are ashamed. We are weak. But, most of all, we lost our prophetic mission. We could not go to the president and tell him the truth because we had become sycophants to the authorities. We have had killings here since 1959. No one condemned them. During the First Republic, they killed slowly, slowly, but no one from the churches spoke out. No one spoke on behalf of those killed. During the Second Republic there were more killings and more people were tortured and raped and disappeared; and we did not speak out because we were afraid, and because we were comfortable. Now there must be a new start, a new way. We must accept that Jesus' mission to us to preach the gospel means we must risk our lives for our brothers and sisters. The bible does not know Hutu and Tutsi, neither should we."⁶

He articulated the fear that ran through the church as well as its uncomfortably close association with the dujour political power in Rwanda. Can Catholic Social Teaching find a new way to express human diversity - ethnicity - without using the inherently hierarchical and competitive concept of race? And can the larger church re-examine the effects of its past endorsement of the

⁶ Quoted in Cara Hauck, *The Angles Have Left Us: The Rwanda Tragedy and the Churches*, 2007 p. 75.

Hamitic tradition which was based on shoddy science and self-serving motives? The church should never have 'known' Tutsi and Hutu in the colonial/pseudo-scientific sense and it should never again.

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