
**ADDRESSING UNCHECKED POWER: LESSONS LEARNED FROM
GENOCIDE AND ETHNIC CLEANSING TO COUNTER EXTRAORDINARY
AND ORDINARY VIOLENCE**
SANDRA SELBY

Abstract

Genocide occurs when a core group of leaders articulates a framework of meaning that transforms fear of a constructed “Other” into hatred and mobilizes state actors and ordinary people toward the Other’s total elimination. Jacques Semelin’s framework for understanding mass murder will be used as the basis for analyzing the 1994 Rwandan genocide and discussing the complicit use of power by the Church and religious leaders in the murder of more than five hundred thousand people, many of whom died inside churches. The Rwandan genocide is a chilling lesson about how ordinary people and religious institutions can use their power to conspire or resist both extreme and everyday violence.

“*Wehret den Anfängen*, Beware the beginnings.”¹

Introduction

Sociologist Robert Dahl defines *power* as the capacity to “get others to do something that they would not otherwise do.”² Power, therefore, can be used for greater good or greater ill. According to Michael Mann, more than seventy million people died from ethnic

Sandra Selby (D.Min., M.B.A.) is pastor of Furnace Street Mission and guest lecturer for pastoral care and leadership studies at Methodist Theological School in Ohio.

¹ Peter Hayes, *Why? Explaining the Holocaust* (New York: Norton & Company, 2017), 342.

² Robert Dahl, “The Concept of Power,” *Behavioral Science* 2(3) (1957): 202–203.

conflict in the twentieth century. The death toll has climbed in the twenty-first century from what Mann calls “murderous ethnic cleansing” in Chechnya, Darfur, Xinjiang, and Myanmar, among other places. This deadly violence demonstrates the capacity of ordinary people to participate in what the United Nations calls atrocity crimes (genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing)³ when fear and resentment of the “Other” are translated by unchecked power to mass violence.

In *The Dark Side of Democracy*, Mann uses the term *murderous ethnic cleansing* to encompass genocide and other racially and ethnically driven mass murder. Such ethnic cleansing is “the outcome of four interrelated sets of power networks, all of which are necessary to its accomplishment, but one of which can be regarded as causally primary.”⁴ Those networks include ideological, economic, military, and political power, of which political power typically is primary.

Religious leaders can play an important role in preventing the mass violence that can arise when those at the apex of political power construct frameworks of meaning that identify and dehumanize the Other, who is perceived to threaten their political, economic, military, or ideological interests. The recent significant rise in nationalism, nativism, hate speech, and hate crimes in the United States and elsewhere increases the urgency for religious leaders to articulate alternative frameworks of meaning that promote human rights for all persons and to denounce publicly officials and institutions that foment and abet hostility and violence. Holocaust scholar Peter Hayes quotes a German proverb as an important lesson from the Holocaust that religious leaders and others would do well to heed today: “*Wehret den Anfängen*, Beware the beginnings.”

What brings urgency for religious leaders to speak truth to power today is that, as is true in virtually all instances of genocide,

³ United Nations, “Framework of Analysis for Atrocity Crimes: A Tool for Prevention” (2014), https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/about-us/Doc.3_Framework%20of%20Analysis%20for%20Atrocity%20Crimes_EN.pdf.

⁴ Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 30.

the Final Solution of extermination of the Jews was not the original intent of the Nazi perpetrators. Instead, it was the inexorable result of an ideology intent on ruthlessly eliminating all obstacles to the political power of the party and its leader.⁵ Understanding the factors that have led to genocide and other atrocity crimes will inform religious leaders about the ways in which unchecked power can decouple persons and institutions, including religious institutions, from their basic foundations in morality and human rights.

The primary focus of this paper will be on the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the role of power wielded by religious institutions, clergy, and lay people in that genocide. To set the stage for that discussion, the paper will outline the history of the term *genocide* and its codification in international law, briefly discuss key areas of focus in the field of genocide studies, and introduce models from political science and social psychology that aid in understanding why genocide occurs and why ordinary people become perpetrators. That ordinary people become perpetrators in genocide and other atrocity crimes should serve as a clarion call to religious leaders to be proactive in addressing the narratives, power dynamics, and social pressures that can recruit ordinary people to participate in what James Waller calls “extraordinary human evil.”⁶

Genocide

Definitions of Genocide

The term *genocide* was coined in 1943 by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish attorney, as a hybrid of the Greek *genos* (people) and Latin *caedere* (to kill). Lemkin defined *genocide* in 1944 as “a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves.”⁷ Lemkin, who was Jewish, proposed the term during the Holocaust, though he viewed genocide

⁵ Mann, 7–8.

⁶ James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2007), 13.

⁷ Ugur Ümit Üngör, “Studying Mass Violence: Pitfalls, Problems, and Promises,” *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 7(1) (2012): 68.

as having a history that preceded the Holocaust by hundreds of years. While his interest in recognizing genocide as an international crime began in the 1920s, the Final Solution of the Holocaust that killed forty-nine people in his own family “crystallized the term and concept for him.”⁸ As an attorney, Lemkin was particularly concerned that international law did not have power over a nation’s actions within its boundaries and viewed treatment of minorities as an internal matter.

Dynamics of Genocide

In his book *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*, Jacques Semelin examines what Germany in the 1930s, Yugoslavia in the late 1980s, and Rwanda in the early 1990s had in common that led to mass violence. He presents a framework identifying four underlying points of view that shape the dynamics of mass murder. The first three, the core impulse, state actors and para-state actors, and public opinion and participation, converge to form the fourth characteristic of mass murder, morphologies of extreme violence.⁹

Semelin asserts that genocide springs from a “core determination that is progressively established to destroy partly or totally one or more populations defined as being hostile, useless, a nuisance, etc.”¹⁰ The core determination is fostered by the “imaginary,” the process and “framework of meaning” by which social and political actors transform anxiety into hatred through the use by people in power of rhetoric that feeds on “constant interplay between the imaginary and the real.”¹¹ Such rhetoric fixes generalized anxiety onto an enemy characterized as a cancer within the society, hence, one to be feared. According to Semelin:

Transmutation of insidious anxiety into a fear concentrated on a hostile “figure” serves as the foundation

⁸ Berel Lang, *Genocide: The Act as Idea* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), 127.

⁹ Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide*, trans. Cynthia Schoch (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ Semelin, 167.

¹¹ Semelin, 239–240.

for hatred to develop against the evil-minded “Other.”.. [such] hatred is a constructed passion, a product both of the willful action of its zealous promoters and by the circumstances encouraging it to spread. In the end the logical and dreadful outcome of this transformation of anxiety into hatred inevitably boils down to eliciting in society the desire to destroy what has been designated as the source of fear.¹²

The Other is essentialized in its total difference from “Us.” The imaginary constructs identity based on stigmatization of that difference and is radicalized by making claims of purity for Us in comparison to the Other, who is dirty, inhuman, a “cockroach.”¹³ Because the Other is a threat, urgent action is needed to maintain security. Waller views the “social death of the victims” that takes place during the psychological construction of the Other as the precursor to their physical death. At the same time the Other is being set up for destruction, the core group of powerful leaders who initiate the demonization of Other foster their own sense of omnipotence and glory.¹⁴

The core impulse for genocide that is initiated by a few powerful decision makers is implemented by state and para-state actors who organize and mobilize army, police, and paramilitary units. Those para-state actors might become perpetrators while also mobilizing and training ordinary people to participate in identifying and rounding up those to be killed or to become killers themselves. Other state actors include bureaucracies linking central to local power.

Public opinion plays a critical role in translating fear and hatred of the Other to support for and participation in genocide. “For it is one thing to launch a mass murder, and quite another to succeed in gaining society’s approval for this kind of violent interlude.”¹⁵ The rhetoric of what Semelin terms “imaginary constructs of social

¹² Semelin, 17.

¹³ Leon Mugesera, a leader in the president of Rwanda’s political party, referred to Tutsi as “cockroaches” in a 1992 speech at a party gathering.

¹⁴ Semelin, 49.

¹⁵ Semelin, 166.

destructiveness” is embedded in the collective psyche by extensive propaganda in media outlets controlled by or sympathetic to the core power group. Rumors also play an important role in influencing public opinion, inciting fear, and eliciting participation.

The final dynamic of mass murder, morphologies of extreme violence, is shaped by the particular ways in which the core impulse, state and para-state actors, and public opinion and participation evolve and converge within a particular context. Influencing factors can include territory and geography, the intensity of a war in progress, and the level of spontaneous participation by local actors.¹⁶ Semelin uses the word *extreme* not only because of the vast numbers of people who are killed, but also because of the extreme cruelty with which the murders often occur. He sees three interlocking factors that cause extreme violence: power, war, and ideology. Together, these:

draw on the depths of the imaginary...power draws on identity, war on security, ideology on purity. And if this process of destruction is accepted collectively, it is precisely because it is “grafted” on to, and feeds on, this imaginary base that every individual aspires to. It can therefore assume the dimensions of a full-blown social incandescence—that of a purifying wave of destruction.¹⁷

Semelin’s framework along with the work of other scholars will be considered in examining the 1994 Rwandan genocide, which Mann says, “more than any other case, exemplifies the first thesis of [his] book: murderous ethnic cleansing is the dark side of democracy.”¹⁸

¹⁶ Semelin, 166.

¹⁷ Semelin, 228–229.

¹⁸ Mann, 473.

Rwanda: An Overview

Place

With a population of seven million people living on land roughly the size of the state of Vermont, Rwanda in 1994 was the most densely populated country in Africa. Rwanda's landscape, described as *milles collines*, "the land of a thousand hills," is both generous in terms of agricultural productivity and protective in terms of historical defense against invaders and malarial mosquitoes that have threatened populations elsewhere in central Africa.¹⁹ Much of the population lives on hills, with daily life revolving around compounds, *ruko*, that are the basic units of family life. The productivity of the land allows for a high density of such compounds.

People

Who are the Hutu? Who are the Tutsi? These questions are ubiquitous in the Rwandan genocide literature. Mamdani views Hutu and Tutsi "as *political* identities that changed with the changing history of the Rwandan state."²⁰ While acknowledging that the peoples likely had different historical origins, he sees the task of examining the "dim history" of migratory patterns as "fruitless." Hutu predecessors were people from different ethnicities who happened to live within the boundaries of what became Rwanda. Tutsi "*may* have existed as an ethnic identity before the establishment of the state of Rwanda" and became "more and more a transethnic identity" through intermarriage.²¹

Mamdani identifies three periods in the changing identity of Hutu and Tutsi. First, during the founding period beginning sometime in the fifteenth century, Tutsi was likely an ethnic identity, while Hutu was a political identity constructed among subjugated groups within Rwanda. In the second phase, Tutsi was constructed

¹⁹ Gérard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (London: Hurst & Co., 1995), 2.

²⁰ Mahmoud Mamdani, *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 73.

²¹ Mamdani, 74.

as an identity of power, with Hutu subject to that power. Like the Hutu identity, Tutsi was also transethnic due to intermarriage. In the third phase, the colonial period, Hutu and Tutsi identities were racialized with the added dimension of indigeneity, Tutsi as the alien, minority race and Hutu as the indigenous, nativized majority race.²²

Whoever the predecessors of the Hutu and Tutsi might have been, they developed a shared language, Kinyarwanda, and a common cultural community. Hutu and Tutsi “emerged as state-enforced political identities” over time during the formation of the state of Rwanda. Key in this development of “bipolar political identities” was state centralization, with the consolidation of political power in the person of the king, Rwabugiri, in the late nineteenth century and the emergence of the army as the locus of administrative power. Another key determinant in the development of Hutu and Tutsi identities were social processes, such as clientship, that privileged Tutsi over Hutu.²³

The Germans colonized Rwanda and Burundi from 1908 until after World War I, when the German possessions were divided and Belgium assumed control. It was during the Belgian colonial period, in particular, that Hutu and Tutsi identities became racialized.²⁴ Belgians ruled Rwanda through Tutsi elites whom they viewed as superior to the Hutu. In 1933, racial identity was fixed by issuance of identity cards through which one was classified as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa (an ethnicity of one percent of the population). Tutsi, who constituted fifteen percent of the population, were identified as the rulers over the Hutu, whose name means “ruled.”

In the 1950s, as the end of colonial rule approached, the Belgians began to give the Hutu a stronger role in political and educational life, which threatened the Tutsi while empowering the Hutu. These tensions escalated until the 1959 Revolution, in which several incidents of mass violence led the Belgians to restore order, replacing about half of Tutsi local authorities with Hutu. Thousands of Tutsi left the north to settle in southern Rwanda,

²² Mamdani, 74–75.

²³ Mamdani, 74–75.

²⁴ Mann, 432.

Uganda, and elsewhere. Through elections in 1960 and 1961, the monarchy was eliminated, and the First Republic was established as the “Hutu Nation.”²⁵ The Belgians withdrew from Rwanda in 1962.

First and Second Republics: 1962–1990

The 1960s and 1970s was a period of ethnic discrimination and violence in Rwanda and Burundi. Mann says the countries were “mirror images” that exerted “power demonstration effects on each other, increasing mutual distrust between both pairs of ethnic groups...border areas were often important in fomenting trouble. Their residents felt threatened, and embittered refugees generated more perpetrators of ethnic violence.”²⁶ During this period, tens of thousands of Tutsi were killed and more than three hundred thousand Tutsi fled Rwanda and settled in refugee camps in neighboring countries.²⁷ President Kayibanda used the word *genocide* in a March 1964 speech against the Tutsi. This is probably the first time that word was used in Kinyarwanda.²⁸

In July 1973, the military led a coup, establishing President Juvénal Habyarimana as leader of a single-party dictatorship that would continue for the next two decades. With political power came wealth that was largely hoarded by the elite. Contrary to the wishes of the radical Hutu who wanted the alien Tutsi to lose their citizenship, Habyarimana allowed them to retain it, even working during the relatively peaceful period between 1979 and 1990 to promote ethnic reconciliation as long as the Hutu retained political control and the hundreds of thousands of Tutsi refugees who had fled the country stayed out of Rwanda.²⁹

Civil War: 1990–1994

In 1990, the Rwandan Political Front (RPF), an army of Tutsi refugees who had fled to Uganda in the 1960s, invaded Rwanda.

²⁵ Mamdani, 189.

²⁶ Mann, 435.

²⁷ Alison Des Forges, “Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda,” *Human Rights Watch* 171(1) (March 1999): 37.

²⁸ Semelin, 71.

²⁹ Mann, 436–438.

The resultant civil war that caused the displacement of more than a million Hutus turned the late 1980s narrative of reconciliation of Hutu and Tutsi to one of fear of a return of Tutsi domination and shifted the radical Hutu Power movement from the fringes to the mainstream. The Tutsi were no longer a “minority group within Rwanda,” as Habyarimana had called them in his conciliatory rhetoric, but an “alien” race within a Hutu nation. The imaginary in which the feared Tutsi were a hated threat that must be eliminated was being constructed around issues of identity, purity, and security.

External, destabilizing pressure came from international economic and political forces. The international collapse of coffee prices reduced Rwanda’s export earnings by fifty percent from 1989 to 1991, with devastating effects on its economy and, in particular, its farmers. Unemployment, especially among youth, skyrocketed. In 1992, Hutu Power formed a paramilitary youth militia, the *Interahamwe*, meaning “those who stand together.” Believing military defeat was imminent, Habyarimana agreed to participate in international peace negotiations with the RPF in Arusha, Tanzania, leading to the Arusha Accords of August 1993. During those negotiations, Hutu extremists who had no interest in a power-sharing agreement with the RPF began serious planning for a popular resistance movement, importing nearly six hundred thousand machetes while distributing eighty-five tons of ammunition (including grenades) to paramilitary organizations.

Mamdani cites two turning points for Hutu Power in shifting its focus from battling the enemy, the Tutsi RFP it could not defeat on the battlefield, to battling unarmed Tutsi civilians. The first was the assassination of the newly elected Hutu president of Burundi by the Tutsi-led military in October 1993. Some two hundred thousand radicalized Hutu, the “Barundi,” fled Burundi for Rwanda during the ensuing politicicide. With this assassination, “the core message of Hutu Power began to sound credible to ordinary Hutu ears in Rwanda: power sharing was just another name for political suicide. History had ruled out political coexistence between Hutu and Tutsi.” The second turning point was the death of President Habyarimana when his plane was shot down while landing in Kingali on April 6, 1994. The next day, the prime minister and

other Hutu opposition leaders were murdered. With that,

...the agenda of “ethnic reconciliation” ceased to exist. The genocidal tendency was now in a position to take over the reins of political power. The *génocidaires* were not synonymous with the army, but with a faction that cut across the army, the political, and the civil elite. They were different from other defenders of Hutu Power in the means they advocated: for the *génocidaires* were the faction who advocated genocide as the only effective—and remaining—way of defending power.³⁰

Rwanda: Genocide

The decision-making process that led up to the 1994 genocide began as far back as 1991, when a group of government, army, and business elite came to believe that defeating the RPF would require mobilization of the population for large-scale killing of Tutsi. In a November 1992 gathering of the president’s political party, the National Revolutionary Movement for Development (MRND), Leon Mugesera had announced that “the only possible action to be taken in the face of the threat of an invasion by the RPF was to throw the Tutsi in the Nyabarongo River.” He encouraged the population to rise up, finishing his exhortation by comparing the Tutsi to “vermin or snakes” and “cockroaches talking to other cockroaches.” He concluded by saying, “Know that the person whose throat you do not cut now will be the one who will cut yours.”³¹

Semelin and others agree that the genocide was planned centrally, though not necessarily with a detailed master plan. It has never been established exactly who was responsible for shooting down the plane that carried Habyarimana. To consolidate power and assume the necessary authority to institute their genocidal plan, the head of the Presidential Guard, Colonel Théoneste

³⁰ Mamdani, 216.

³¹ Semelin, 172.

Bagosora, and others in a key political and military power group called Akazu (“little house”) arranged for the murder of thousands of Hutu moderates who might have opposed what was to follow. As the genocide proceeded, militia men were moved from one location to another under the coordination of centralized authority. Meanwhile, the military and police stepped up distribution of weapons to the civilian populations.

An important actor in the process was the state bureaucracy and hierarchy that had been established in the single-party state under Habyarimana. This vast administrative structure centralized control and promoted mobilization, while establishing an extensive patronage network in which the local burgomaster had significant power over local resources and conflicts. During the genocide, the burgomasters “sent subordinates from house to house to enlist the male population, and to inform them of the appointed time when they would be obliged to ‘work,’ work being synonymous at this point with the words kill and steal.”³²

A concerted effort was aimed at mobilizing public opinion and participation in the violent elimination of the Tutsi. Hutu Power spread a massive propaganda effort through radio RTLM (Radio et Télévision Libres des Mille Collines) and the newspaper *Kangura*, funded by the “little house.” In Semelin’s view, RTLM, “which started broadcasting just a few months before the assassination of President Habyarimana, came to impose a framework of meaning on an entire country that was profoundly traumatized by four years of war.”³³ According to Mamdani:

The growing appeal of Hutu Power propaganda among the Hutu masses was in direct proportion to the spreading conviction that the real aim of the RPF was not rights for all Rwandans, but power for the Tutsi. This is why one needs to recognize that it was not greed—not even hatred—but *fear* which was the reason why

³² Semelin, 189.

³³ Semelin, 206.

the multitude responded to the call of Hutu Power the closer the war came to home.³⁴

RTLM now openly called for Tutsi extermination and recruited ordinary citizens to participate. Semelin says, “This was the first time in history that a radio station openly incited its listeners to participate actively in a slaughter, one soon to be recognized as genocide.”³⁵ However, according to Semelin:

the idea that all massacres were perpetrated by gangs of youth holding a radio in one hand and a machete in the other is pure cliché. Much of the encouragement to hunt down and kill Tutsis came from local elites including the burgomasters, their deputies, religious leaders, military and policemen who were recruited locally.³⁶

Another factor influencing public opinion and participation was the widespread rumor network, “radio bouche-bouche,” which confirmed locally what people were hearing on RTLM. “And thus fear, little by little, spread through the hills well before April 1994, with each Hutu being afraid that the arrival of the RPF could only mean death for themselves and their families.”³⁷ In this way, ordinary people adopted the popular sentiment common to genocide: “We need to kill *them* before they kill *us*.”

In the one hundred days beginning April 7, 1994, mass violence that began in the capital was spread by government officials, soldiers, and civilian paramilitary groups to the countryside, recruiting, in the process, ordinary civilians for massacres that would take place not only in the streets but also in churches, schools, and hospitals. Human Rights Watch concluded based on its research that at least half a million people were killed in one hundred days during the genocide, representing three quarters of the Tutsi population in

³⁴ Mamdani, 191.

³⁵ Semelin, 190.

³⁶ Semelin, 206–207.

³⁷ Semelin, 208.

Rwanda, in addition to tens of thousands of Hutu.³⁸ The UN estimates that more than eight hundred thousand people were killed, and one hundred fifty thousand to two hundred fifty thousand women were raped.³⁹ Scott Strauss estimates that one hundred seventy-five thousand to two hundred thousand Hutu, or about eight percent of Rwanda's "active" population (or fourteen to seventeen percent of the adult male population), participated in the killing. He further estimated that twenty to twenty-five percent of the killers were responsible for seventy-five percent of the killing.⁴⁰

Social psychologist James Waller presents an explanatory model for the factors that lead ordinary people to participate in what he calls the "extraordinary evil" of genocide. He names "three proximate constructions—the cultural construction of worldview, the psychological construction of the 'other,' and the social construction of cruelty—that converge interactively to impact individual behavior in situations of collective violence."⁴¹ In Rwanda, the means of killing was consistent with the social construction of cruelty:

The interahamwe used the following tools and methods of killing: machetes, massus (clubs studded with nails), small axes, knives, grenades, guns, fragmentation grenades, beatings to death, amputations with exsanguination, buried alive, drowned, or raped and killed later. Many victims had both Achilles tendons cut with machetes as they ran away, to immobilize them so that they could be finished off later.⁴²

Peasant-killers interviewed after the genocide said they had no prior military training. "They were simply asked, during a crisis,

³⁸ Des Forges, 18.

³⁹ United Nations, "Outreach Programme on the Rwanda Genocide and the United Nations," <https://www.un.org/en/preventgenocide/rwanda/historical-background.shtml>.

⁴⁰ Semelin, 210.

⁴¹ James Waller, *Becoming Evil: How Ordinary People Commit Genocide and Mass Killing*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2007), xvii.

⁴² Waller, 223.

to use a familiar farm tool, the machete, not to work in the fields but to go and chop up the Tutsi enemy.”⁴³ Consistent with Waller’s psychological construction of the Other that includes euphemistic labeling of evil action, perpetrators referred to the use of machetes in murder as “bush clearing” or “work.”⁴⁴ Semelin notes that many of those who were killed during the genocide were entrapped in places they sought as sanctuary.

...fugitives trying to escape massacre tended to group together in places where they thought they would be safe, as in churches. The local authorities themselves advised them to do so, like for example the Prefect of Kibuye, Clement Kayishema, who asked the Tutsis to gather in the nearby stadium of Gatwaro (ostensibly earmarked as a safe area) or Bishop Augustin Misago (Bishop of Gikongoro) who asked the Tutsis to leave his church and proceed to a site where a school was being built in Murambi. In fact, these were traps enabling the militias, police and armed forces to kill the thousands or even tens of thousands of men, woman and children gathered there more easily.⁴⁵

The assault on the Tutsi ended when Kigali fell to the RPF on July 4, 1994, after which thousands of Hutu were killed in the reprisals. A discussion of the investigatory and judicial processes that followed is outside the scope of this paper.

Who might have intervened to prevent the transition from racist invective and violence to genocide? The United Nations representative, General Dallaire, appealed to the prime minister to broadcast a radio appeal for calm, but she was assassinated before she could do so. Subsequently, UN efforts were mostly devoted to ensuring the safe evacuation of their diplomats. The United States declined to intervene, seeing the genocide as the result of ancient, internal ethnic strife. The Church might have intervened, but it had other priorities.

⁴³ Semelin, 246.

⁴⁴ Waller, 211.

⁴⁵ Semelin, 230–231.

Rwanda: Genocide and the Church

Founded in Algiers in 1868, the Roman Catholic Society of Missionaries of Africa, known as the “White Fathers,” built its first mission in Rwanda in 1898 and subsequently was granted permission by the king to expand its presence by initiating several missions scattered throughout Rwanda. The founder of the White Fathers, Cardinal Lavigerie, believed that evangelism should be focused on political leaders. As had been the case with Constantine, Lavigerie thought that when those in political power converted, the masses would follow.⁴⁶ Hence, from the beginning of Christian presence in Rwanda, the Church sought to create a strong alliance between the Church and political authorities. “The goal of the White Father leadership was not to set the church up as an alternative to the state but rather to make the church an indispensable partner to the state,”⁴⁷ a posture that continued during the First and Second Republics.

The White Fathers came to Rwanda steeped in the Hamitic Hypothesis and played a critical role in racializing divisions between the Hutu and Tutsi. Longman says the missionaries’ “own practices exacerbated the inequalities between the two groups and helped to increase the power and prestige of the Tutsi at the expense of the Hutu.”⁴⁸

By the 1930s, when the Catholic Church was an important source of education and other services and strongly imbedded within the political power structure, the Tutsi elite converted en masse, along with many Hutu. That the strategy of close alliance with political power was successful in conversions of the Tutsi and Hutu was not lost on the Anglican and Protestant missionaries who would follow. As the Hutu gained political power in the 1950s, the Church played an important role in developing a Hutu counter-elite, providing advancement opportunities for educated Hutu. One of those persons was Grégoire Kayibanda, who became editor of the Catholic newspaper and advanced through lay positions within the church, meanwhile becoming active in the rising

⁴⁶ Timothy Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 39.

⁴⁷ Longman, 56.

⁴⁸ Longman, 45.

Hutu political movement. Ultimately, Kayibanda became the first president of Rwanda.

The Church's alliance with political power and involvement in ethnic politics would continue during the First and Second Republics. According to Longman, "The entanglement of church and state and the involvement of churches in ethnic policies in Rwanda are factors that have been consistent across denominational divides as well as across time, and they are at the root of explaining why the churches became so heavily implicated in the Rwandan genocide."⁴⁹

Among the major genocides of the twentieth century, Rwanda was the only one in which religious identity did not underly construction of the Other. In 1991, ninety percent of the Rwandan population was Christian, the majority Catholic. Catholics and Protestants were both perpetrators and victims. Mamdani sees the church as "a direct participant in the genocide. Rather than a passive mirror reflecting tensions, the Church was more of an epicenter radiating tensions"; priests were "divided between those who were targeted in the killings and those who led or facilitated the killings."⁵⁰ Further, the church had an internal power struggle, with the top of the hierarchy, the bishops, dominated by Hutu, while the majority of the middle level, the priests, were Tutsi who led congregations that were primarily Hutu. Significant tension existed between those clergy and laypeople who were closely aligned with the patrimonial structure that linked Church and state and those who had been supportive of democratic reform because they held an alternative view of Church and society.

Longman's study of two Presbyterian parishes located in the Prefecture of Kibuye is illustrative. The church in Kirinda was instrumental in creating a local elite that included politicians, businessmen, and church employees who banded together to exploit the local population. Quite the contrary occurred in the neighboring parish of Biguhu where, influenced by liberation theology, the church had become a champion of social justice and

⁴⁹ Longman, 59.

⁵⁰ Mamdani, 226.

change, working through key development projects to empower the local population while resisting attempts among the elite to form a bloc aimed at preserving income inequality and exploiting the poor. Longman reports that these two different orientations to power manifested in significant differences in the role of the two parishes in the genocide.

In Kirinda, the church was at the center of the slaughter of Tutsi, with church buildings used as a location for killing and church personnel actively involved in the organization and execution of the genocide. In contrast, in Biguhu, although the Tutsi in the community were still killed, the church presented a hindrance to genocide and was itself targeted. While killing occurred in both places, the contrast suggests that greater church resistance might have had some impact in slowing or lessening the extent of the genocide.⁵¹

The Church could have intervened to stop the violence, but on April 11, 1994, “the Catholic bishops promised their ‘support to the new government.’ They asked all Rwandans to ‘respond favorably to calls’ from the new authorities and to help them realize the goals they had set.”⁵² A statement one week later asking for the bloodshed to stop, without being directly critical of the political and military authorities who were directing the genocide, had no effect. Meanwhile the Anglican Archbishop pledged his support of the government, support that continued throughout the genocide. According to Longman:

By remaining silent, even as they urged the population to support the embattled regime, church leaders gave their tacit consent to attacks on church personnel... ultimately, church leaders embraced ethnic chauvinism not only because they supported political authorities who adopted an anti-Tutsi ideology but also because

⁵¹ Longman, 29.

⁵² Des Forges, 263.

it was a means of co-opting people back into the patrimonial network.⁵³

Active resistance by the church to the genocidal plan could have mattered. In her extensive statistical analysis of the differing levels of involvement in the Holocaust among countries occupied by the Germans in World War II, Helen Fein found that “religious opposition was key in the lower levels of Jewish victimization in Belgium, Romania, Bulgaria, Athens, France, Italy, and Denmark.” Fein wrote, “Church protest was absent in virtually all cases in which state cooperation was not arrested. Church protest was also the intervening variable most highly related to the immediacy of social defense movements that enabled Jews successfully to evade deportation.”⁵⁴

According to Mamdani, “at least a quarter of the clergy” are reported to have been killed, in particular, those who had condemned the government’s use of ethnic quotas in education and civil service. “But priests were not only among those killed, they were also among the killers.” The UN Center for Human Rights found that at least a dozen priests were active killers and others supervised gangs of young killers.⁵⁵

Most of the major massacres of the genocide occurred within churches, places to which the people had gone for sanctuary. How could places of sanctuary become places of slaughter? In part, this relates to the imaginary, the framework of meaning that provided motivation for elimination of the Other in the interest of identity, purity, and security. According to Semelin, the desire for purity makes the cause of eliminating the Other sacred and absolute. The sacrificial violence of genocide “is a way of refounding the way ‘us’ lives together by sacrificing ‘them.’ In so doing, sacrificial violence resembles a purification ritual.”⁵⁶ Mamdani writes, “In the Church, there could be no middle ground, no sanctuary. Rather than a place of healing, the Church turned into a battleground for settling scores.”⁵⁷

⁵³ Longman, 312.

⁵⁴ Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide: National Responses and Jewish Victimization During the Holocaust* (1979), quoted in Longman, 15.

⁵⁵ Mamdani, 236.

⁵⁶ Semelin, 93.

⁵⁷ Mamdani, 232.

In Mamdani's view, without the two prime movers, the army and the Church, "the two organizing and leading forces, one located in the state and the other in society, there would have been no genocide."⁵⁸

Longman writes, "The Christian churches in Rwanda set themselves up as the moral authority of society, and in that capacity, they helped make genocide morally possible." Those who opposed that position and prophetically advocated an alternative vision of justice "were ostracized and eventually targeted for murder."⁵⁹ He concludes:

Religion has the capacity to prevent violence, but it also has the capacity to facilitate programs of violence and to add to their intensity. Let Rwanda stand as a warning to the world that, even as they can inspire people to act courageously and ethically, if religious institutions become too closely tied to state power, they have the capacity to legitimize abhorrent state actions. Religious groups can help people accept the unacceptable, and this is what ultimately is necessary for genocide to occur.⁶⁰

Lessons Learned for Religious Leaders

The Rwandan genocide provides important lessons for today's religious leaders. In Rwanda, the close alliance of religious authorities with political power structures and their refusal to disrupt fear-based frameworks of meaning that constructed hatred against the Tutsi Other were contributing factors to the genocidal killing that, tragically, occurred largely in churches to which the Tutsi had gone (often having been lured there by religious leaders) to seek sanctuary.

Today, religious leaders are being called to "beware the beginnings." Disturbing parallels can be found between the framework of meaning that Semelin describes in the "imaginary" underlying the dynamics of mass murder and the imaginary that

⁵⁸ Mamdani, 233.

⁵⁹ Longman, 322.

⁶⁰ Longman, 323.

is being constructed in the United States by the president and his core supporters and that is being echoed in emerging nationalist and nativist narratives in Europe and elsewhere. In Semelin's framework, repeated, hostile rhetoric against the Other (immigrants are "animals" and "criminals" who "infest our country," to quote the president of the United States)⁶¹ transforms anxiety into fear and the "constructed passion" of hatred against an identified Other. That Other needs to be put down, if not destroyed altogether, in order to protect and ensure the identity, purity, and security of the dominant group.

In Semelin's framework, the "core impulse" of the imaginary becomes extreme violence when the powerful few who are constructing the imaginary of hatred and Othering are abetted by state actors and para-state actors including military, police, and paramilitary organizations. Public opinion and participation are engaged through intensive propaganda. These three factors, operating together, converge in a "morphology of extreme violence." Mann asserts that genocide and ethnic cleansing do not occur in stable democracies with stable institutions that can counterbalance the whims of powerful leaders such as Hitler, the Young Turks, or the "little house" of Rwanda. For that reason, he believes that future instances of genocide and ethnic cleansing will occur only in developing democracies in the global south. Nevertheless, it is important to note that in the United States, hate crimes are on the increase; the FBI's Universal Crime report for 2017 showed a seventeen percent increase in 2016. A recent *Washington Post* study of hate crime statistics indicated that "counties that had hosted a 2016 Trump campaign rally saw a 226 percent increase in reported hate crimes over comparable counties that did not host such a rally."⁶² While democratic institutions in the United States may provide protection against genocide and ethnic cleansing, the potential for mass violence remains.

⁶¹ Richard Cohen and Morris Dees, "Fighting Hate and Injustice in Trump Era," *SPLC Report*, Southern Poverty Law Center 48(4) (2018): 8.

⁶² Ayal Feinberg, Regina Branton, and Valerie Martinez-Ebers, "Counties That Hosted a 2016 Trump Rally Saw a 226 Percent Increase in Hate Crimes," *The Washington Post*, March 22, 2019.

It's important to note that in the United States, hatred is apparent on both sides of the polarized political divide. A scholarly paper issued in January 2019, "Lethal Mass Partisanship," indicated that twenty percent of Democrats and sixteen percent of Republicans who were surveyed answered "yes" when asked, "Do you ever think: we'd be better off as a country if large numbers of the opposing party in the public today just died?" And, "Nearly one out of five Republicans and Democrats agree with the statement that their political adversaries 'lack the traits to be considered fully human—they behave like animals.'"⁶³

Religious leaders can play a critical role in articulating and organizing constructive involvement of the faith community in the democratic process. In addressing the destructive strain of contemporary populism that demonizes the Other, ethicist Luke Etherton distinguishes between populist democratic politics and antipolitical populism. "Populist democratic politics seeks to generate a common life as against a politics dominated by the interests of the one, the few, or the many. Populism corrupts when it wholly identifies the people with the interests of a part rather than the common."⁶⁴ In addition, "There needs to be a tensional and mutually disciplining relationship between democracy and Christianity."⁶⁵ In Rwanda, the Church did not provide that "tensional and mutually disciplining relationship."

In addressing the tendency of local congregations to pursue their outreach to the community divorced from political engagement, Etherton writes:

The congregation, as part of a moral tradition with an eschatological vision of the good, brings a wider horizon of reference and relationship to bear upon the immediate needs and demands of the *demos* (whether in the form of a union, a community-organizing coalition, or a social movement). This mutual disciplining helps ensure that

⁶³ Thomas, Edsall, "No Hate Left Behind," *The New York Times*, March 13, 2019.

⁶⁴ Luke Etherton, "Who Speaks for the People?," *The Christian Century* (June 19, 2019): 28.

⁶⁵ Etherton, 33.

both congregations and democratic politics (whether place-based or work-based) remain directed toward building a common life rather than toward authoritarian and antidemocratic ends.⁶⁶

In facilitating engagement of the faith community in democratic politics, religious leaders can play an important role in addressing systemic economic and social issues that breed isolation, alienation, and anxiety. Such anxiety is fueling the opiate crisis and the accelerating suicide rate that is devastating families and social service networks. Anxiety and alienation are also driving some, especially young white men, to seek belonging through joining white supremacy and other hate groups. Michael Kimmel describes the involvement of young white men in violent extremism as

...a crisis of meaning. More broadly, it is a crisis of connection, in which we have come to value autonomy and independence to the exclusion of our equally crucial need for community and connectedness. And now too many young men feel that the future they felt they were promised, and to which they feel entitled, has been stolen from them...They feel betrayed, as though they were the victims.⁶⁷

In Rwanda, many of the murders occurred in churches in which the Tutsi had sought sanctuary. In recent years, the sanctuary of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim houses of worship has been violated in the United States and New Zealand through mass murder by white nationalists influenced by the rhetorically constructed passion of hatred toward the Other who is not a white Christian. Lamentably, faith communities are finding they need to increase their security due to ongoing anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim rhetoric by posting armed police within their facilities during worship.

⁶⁶ Etherton, 33.

⁶⁷ Michael Kimmel, *Healing from Hate: How Young Men Get Into—And Out Of—Violent Extremism* (Oakland, Calif.: University of California Press, 2018), 232.

Rising nativism in the United States and Europe has put immigrants and refugees seeking asylum at risk. As invokers and mediators of the holy, it is imperative that religious leaders develop strategies and practices for ensuring the sanctity and safety of holy places where all people can seek sanctuary and find welcome. Bethel Church in The Hague provided a powerful witness to how religious leaders can provide sanctuary to persons threatened with deportation. Because Dutch law prohibits police from making an arrest during a worship service, Bethel enlisted the help of nearly one thousand religious leaders to conduct a continuous worship service for ninety-six days from October 2018 to January 2019, during which Bethel provided housing within church property to an Armenian family that was in danger of being denied political asylum and deported to Armenia. The worship service, which was attended by twelve thousand people over the course of three months, ended when the Dutch government changed its policy toward asylum seekers in response to the protest led by religious leaders.⁶⁸ In the United States, many local congregations are providing sanctuary to families at risk of deportation, and denominational bodies and local faith communities are partnering with numerous organizations that are providing legal and humanitarian support for children and families at the Mexican border.

Sanctuaries are also at risk as safe spaces for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) persons who have been constructed as Other by some religious leaders and denominations. Through its Reconciling Works ministry, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) is one of several denominations seeking to provide specific welcome to persons of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions. More than seven hundred fifty ELCA congregations have joined the Reconciling in Christ roster by adopting welcoming statements to provide specific welcome to LGBTQ persons.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Anna Mulrine, "Churches in Europe Act to Shield Migrants from Deportation," *The Christian Century* (June 19, 2019).

⁶⁹ Reconciling Works: Lutherans for Full Participation, www.reconcilingworks.org.

Longman states that in Rwanda, “churches played an important role in helping to make participation in genocide morally acceptable.”⁷⁰ In the United States, faith communities, clergy, and laity closely aligned with political power often abdicate their moral authority by ignoring or justifying the immoral actions and inflammatory, racist rhetoric of the politically powerful. In so doing, religious leaders might enable the mass violence that can occur when an imaginary framed around fear dehumanizes the constructed, hated Other in the name of identity, security, and purity.

Religious leaders are facilitators of meaning making. The foundational narratives of the Abrahamic traditions situate righteousness within the context of the common life; the role of the individual is to participate in building up community by living in accordance with God’s design for the flourishing of all creation. Religious leaders must counter narratives that transform anxiety into fear and hatred of the Other by offering and embodying in their advocacy and witness life-giving narratives based on faith, hope, and love. This provides a framework of meaning that promotes human rights for all persons while lifting up values of peace, inclusion, nonviolence, and commitment to the common good.

Today, religious leaders are articulating alternative values and frameworks of meaning that oppose the inflammatory, racist rhetoric coming from the White House. For example, under the leadership of Rev. Dr. William Barber and others, Repairers of the Breach is a movement of local and national partners focused on advancing “our deepest moral traditions [that] point to equal protection under the law, the desire for peace within and among nations, the dignity of all people, and the responsibility to care for our common home.” Through grassroots mass meetings, leadership institutes, and community organizing, local partners are addressing systemic racism and poverty, the war economy, and devastation of the environment.⁷¹ Like the Presbyterian church in Biguhu, Rwanda, that was a local champion of social justice and economic empowerment and refused to participate in the 1994 genocide,

⁷⁰ Longman, 306.

⁷¹ Repairers of the Breach, www.breachrepairers.org.

Repairers of the Breach serves as an example of how religious leaders and institutions can counter rhetoric that leads to violence in the name of identity, security, and purity with rhetoric and actions that lead to peacemaking in the name of equality, inclusion, and the common good.