

## **“We Wish to Inform You”: Canadian Religious Reporting of the Rwandan Genocide**

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On 18 October 1994, Father Claude Simard, a Canadian priest of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, asked the intruding Rwandan soldiers if he might pray. The Quebec priest counted the Rwandans as his own people, and was one of the few foreigners who refused to leave when the slaughter began. And he survived, becoming one of the few missionaries to witness the massacre that left 800,000 Rwandans dead. When the post-pogrom government allowed reprisal on Hutus, Father Simard protested this new crop of murders, a bitter fact that had brought the Rwandan Patriotic Front soldiers to his dining room table. They ended his life with hammers as he bowed in prayer. Father Simard was among the nine Canadians who perished in the genocide and one of the many more who, since the 1960s, were closely involved in the religious and economic development of Rwanda. Religion opened the door for this fledgling post-colonial African nation to receive economic advantages. Canadians like Dominican Père Lévesque helped found the country's only university, the National University of Rwanda, where a new generation of Rwandan elites benefited from Canadian religious, educational and political networks. As a stable and efficient country with a small military force, this central African nation became the jewel of Canadian aid programs. As a largely Christian country, with 78% professing some denomination of the faith, it was also the pride of Canadian religious communities – particularly of Catholics and Adventists, the largest Protestant denomination in Rwanda.<sup>1</sup> But as Rwandans turned on their Tutsi minority, the upwards of \$300

million that had built up Rwandan infrastructure now looked like Canadian fuel to the fires of the genocide.

This paper seeks to examine how Canadian Christians interpreted the genocide and their own churches' role in it, as told in the primary denominational periodicals of the Canadian religious press. In using Catholic, Mennonite, and Adventist denominational publications, I examine how these religious communities reported and interpreted the atrocity within the context of being both Christian and Canadian. Difficult questions pressed in. Was this "just another" story of Africans killing Africans, Hutus killing Tutsis, or believers killing believers? In other words, did denominations interpret themselves primarily as fellow Christians, implicated in a missionary legacy that made genocide possible? Or, was the story told to Canadians as Canadians, benevolent citizens eager to spread an empire of "humane internationalism" to a world of inhumane outsiders?<sup>2</sup> Each community first saw itself through the eyes of its own religious body, bounded by its media access, theological interests, and church hierarchy. As the decade wore on, however, these denominations began to reinterpret Rwanda as more than a Christian problem, but a Canadian failure. Alongside other Canadians, the failure of Canada's role as multilateral peacekeeper pressed religious communities to reevaluate how religious and national goals could work in tandem.

### ***Rwanda as a Christian Problem***

News pundits generally summarized the events of 1994 as a result of political failure, economic downturn, or tribalism surfacing since time immemorial. Yet the Rwandan genocide, unlike other holocausts in the twentieth century, arose not simply between religious communities but within them. As Timothy Longman writes, "In most communities, members of a church parish killed their fellow parishioners and even in a number of cases, their own pastor or priest."<sup>3</sup> And this tragic politico-religious reality was based, in part, on the history of missionary work that preceded it. Since the early 1900s, missionaries' longtime focus on converting political authorities yielded trickle-down conversions, making the country "one of the most Catholic societies in Africa."<sup>4</sup> In fact, in 1945, Rwanda was officially declared a Catholic country and a tacit marriage between the Catholic Church and state power began to emerge.<sup>5</sup> As a result, during the social revolution of 1959, wherein the Hutu majority assumed power over their former Tutsi overlords, the church

accepted the inversion rather than question the social script upon which it was established. Hence, the silent alliance between church and state helped Hutu leaders gain power as easily as it had once helped their Tutsi counterparts. For years after independence this relationship between the Catholic Church and state power remained strong.

With the ascension of President Habyarimana in 1975, himself a “devout Catholic,” the church had become the most powerful non-governmental authority in the nation, further fortifying this reciprocal union between the Catholic Church and state power. The president leaned on churches for political support and the church yielded, even allowing high-ranking clergy to serve on the state’s one-party Central Committee. The church duplicated the tribalism mandated by the government and disallowed Tutsis from regular positions in church leadership. Given this political milieu, when massacres of Tutsis erupted in the early 90s, presaging the eventual genocide, the churches’ ensuing silence appeared promising to the political authorities. Yet, Tutsi believers still trusted in the independent power of the church, and sought despairingly to take refuge in its walls once the genocide began. According to most reports, as this sad predicament played out, more people were killed in church buildings than anywhere else. In a country where almost eighty per cent professed to be Christians, its churches failed not simply to oppose the genocide but, as the World Council of Churches report wrote, “the church itself stands tainted, not by passive indifference, but by errors of commission as well.”<sup>6</sup>

### ***Canadian Churches and the Public Face of Aid***

As the media began to report the emerging tragedy, Canadian Christian charity poured out for Rwanda in epic proportions. The Canadian Catholic Organization for the Development of Peace (CCODP) along with other international relief agencies sprang into action after seeing the heartbreaking footage of hundreds of thousands of Hutu refugees fleeing into neighboring countries.<sup>7</sup> “Aid to Rwandan Crisis Pouring In,” the *Catholic Register* proclaimed, as pleas for money and reports of refugee relief work.<sup>8</sup> Their “Development and Peace” program provided \$8 million over the next six years for emergency relief programs. The Mennonite Central Committee, the humanitarian wing of Mennonite Canadians, launched a similar initiative with “Operation Healing Rwanda,” a multi-million dollar effort to help the refugees.<sup>9</sup> The Mennonite press followed

the operation's every move with sustained attention as photos, maps, and special reports spurred this small denomination into supporting MCC's lead. In a special report a year after the genocide, the MCC summarized its efforts as follows: \$7.8 million of charity funding provided the resources needed to operate four camps of up to six thousand refugees near Bukavu in southern Zaire.<sup>10</sup> Clothing, blankets, seeds, and cooking supplies accompanied tons of Canadian food stuffs and two six-person teams of Mennonites from North America, Europe, and Africa.<sup>11</sup> According to the same report, North Americans had donated \$2.2 million and the Canadian International Development Agency provided matching funds. At the same time, the Seventh-Day Adventists also launched a rapid humanitarian response through Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA). ADRA oversaw numerous health initiatives aimed at saving the lives of Rwandan refugees in Goma and Bukavu through the construction of numerous clinics, schools, hospitals, and the training of 2000 health workers. They also assumed the gruesome task of burying the thousands of bodies that washed up on the shores of Lake Victoria.<sup>12</sup>

As the sheer size of this endeavor demonstrates, the misery of the refugees' plight did not go unnoticed. With over a million refugees in these camps, comprising nearly a third of Rwanda's Hutu population, the world watched in horror as the spectacle of the genocide transformed into a raw display of televised suffering. Having narrowly escaped the slaughter of thousands in their own country, the straggling survivors arrived only to find the refugee camps rife with cholera, water contamination, and gangrened wounds – a hell so perfect that, to the international community who watched, it eclipsed the misery left behind. Though the world had waited in silence as Hutu Power had done its worst, the power of these images prompted it to spring to life in response to the refugee crisis, becoming “the largest most rapid and most expensive deployment by the international humanitarian-aid industry in the twentieth century.”<sup>13</sup> Led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Catholics, Mennonite and Adventist agencies joined the more than a hundred relief agencies that followed in its wake to offer what aid they could give.

As the front lines of the RPF pressed into Hutu Power heartlands, millions of the fleeing Hutus poured into refugee camps. At times, whole communities herded as radio broadcasts convinced them that the Tutsi-dominated invading forces would not separate the guilty from the innocent. With the vast majority of Hutus having participated in the slaughter, many felt it necessary to lam or receive the brutal retaliation of

the Tutsi forces. Killers like Alphonse, a Hutu farmer speaking with an ADRA reporter, described the fear of encroaching retribution: “we were so disappointed we had failed. We were disheartened by what we were going to lose, and truly frightened by the misfortune and vengeance reaching out for us.”<sup>14</sup> Attempting to respond to this crisis, however, the fact that these refugees “were people who had killed or had been terrified into following the killers into exile” put humanitarian organizations in the odd predicament of now feeding the perpetrators of the previous genocide – even while it had left the straggling Tutsi community in Rwanda to fend for itself during the explosion of violence earlier that year.

With such a complicated situation, religious communities in Canada struggled to convey the simplicity of its humanitarian goals with the complicated nature of this tangled humanitarian failure. In many ways they fell prey to the same prejudices of the secular media causing them present the narrative of this pogrom with purely political, rather than religious, dimensions.

#### ***Canadian Catholic Press on Rwanda***

As Canada’s largest and most influential newspaper for Catholics, the *Catholic Register* was an obvious choice for this study. Its sizable circulation and internet presence gave this periodical, owned by the archdiocese of Toronto, a vested interest in presenting a Catholic viewpoint to the almost thirteen million Canadians who call themselves members of the Church. It was this uncritical loyalty that tended to craft the Catholic media’s presentation of the tragic events.

The *Register’s* coverage of the genocide was late in coming. Weeks after it first began, news of “ethnic and political violence” in Rwanda appeared only as an appendage to a report on a Synod of African bishops.<sup>15</sup> Five weeks after President Habyarimana’s assassination, signaling the start of the slaughter, Canadians heard their first Catholic explanation of the events – a complicated “massacre,” as the Vatican called it. Described by the dissimulating Rwandan ambassador to Canada, it was cloaked as the spontaneous acts of misguided youth.<sup>16</sup> Due to the *Register’s* delay in reporting, the genocide was nearly over almost before Catholic Canadians could read comprehensive coverage of the events.

Even after the slaughter transpired, the *Register’s* coverage thinly described what had taken place. Tutsis, butchered or surviving, received minimal coverage in the *Register*. For the first two months of the

genocide, the victims and perpetrators remained unspecified. In an ironic twist, those killed for their ethnicity were reported without it, as generic “Rwandan” deaths.<sup>17</sup> Though the language was condemning, it did not venture beyond the general: they were conveyed as “acts of violence,” “fratricidal massacres,” “tragedies,” and “tribally motivated killings” that seem to have no history, no beginning and no end.

Yet throughout the genocide, Canadians heard the pope decry the violence in Rwanda with a clear, strong voice. On 23 April 1994 the *Register* first reported the crisis through John Paul II’s call on Rwandans to end “ethnic and political violence in Rwanda where tens of thousands were reported killed or wounded in early April.”<sup>18</sup> Moreover, he was forthright in using the term “genocide,” a word forbidden to American diplomats as it could trigger binding political action by the United Nations.<sup>19</sup> The pope called it “a real and true genocide for which unfortunately even Catholics are responsible.”<sup>20</sup>

Despite the strong denunciation of the Roman Curia, for the *Catholic Register* Rwanda proved to be difficult story to tell. Early indications that the church intended to be transparent about its role in the genocide soon sputtered and finally stopped. Though the pope made special mention of Rwanda’s Catholicity, overestimating that seventy per cent claimed the church as its own, when it came to describing the genocide itself he depicted it as an inherently political struggle brought on by exacerbated ethnic tensions.<sup>21</sup> It was a political problem and the church called for political solutions by means of the intervention of the United Nations or the RPF to create safe zones for refugees. Even as reports began to surface of complicity by church leadership and laity, Vatican sources kept an eerie silence, and the *Register* offered little analysis of its own. Catholic news briefs cited Catholic chapels as massacres sites without comment. Though church officials begged the seventy-five per cent of native priests that fled the country to return, they remained silent as to why these priests might join the *genocidaires* in fleeing rather than stay. Even while the startling admission by RPF radio that their soldiers had killed the Archbishop of Kigali and several bishops under their protection – revenge for their alleged part in the genocide – met with outrage and condolences. No analysis of why Catholic clergy were facing retaliatory deaths came to print.<sup>22</sup> The Canadian Catholic press blithely maintained that “church officials had done everything in their power to save lives and protect people and fled the country only when their own lives were in danger.”<sup>23</sup> With the same composed naiveté, two months after the RPF effectively

ended the genocide, the *Register* cheerily reported that church officials were calling for business as usual. Reports waxed poetic and inspirational as Canadians read about reunited families, charity concerts, and relief efforts. “The Church in Rwanda Must Rebuild,” a headline read. And a visit from the CCOOP reiterated that, “the church can play its logical role in the reconciliation effort.”<sup>24</sup>

For the next few years, Canadians heard little about the aftermath of the volcanic unrest that had exploded in the Central African nation. Short updates were vague, confusing and tended to downplay the situation. Reports stated that Hutu refugees still waited in camps over the border, possible victims, possible perpetrators, but gathering to pray for reconciliation in their country.

Eventually, however, the truth of the atrocity and the role the church played in the killings began to manifest. Almost five years after the genocide, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, along with national courts from Rwanda, Switzerland, and Belgium, began to try some of the hundred thousand jailed Rwandans awaiting trial. From 1997 to 2001, about twenty priests and nuns were indicted on counts of genocide, setting off an intense volley of diplomatic negotiation, finger pointing, and publicity campaigns. Finally in 1998, the *Register* reported its first gruesome details of a Catholic priest’s involvement in ordering his church’s demolition with two thousand Tutsis huddled inside. The report included an addendum from a Vatican spokesperson, saying that *any* guilty party should be brought to justice.

However, when the Rwandan courts indicted Bishop Augustin Misago, making him the highest-ranking Catholic official to be charged with genocide, the Vatican went on the offensive and the *Register*’s coverage took a decisive turn. A flurry of reports from the Vatican news agency described it as a “defamatory campaign” designed by the Rwandan government to discredit the Catholic Church.<sup>25</sup> The paper followed the trial of the bishop with persistent attention as Misago stood accused of helping to plan the genocide and giving up three priests and thirty students to their killers. The *Register*’s favorable coverage of the bishop seemed to be vindicated when, in June 2000, he was acquitted. Picturing a triumphant bishop outside the courtroom, the paper reported the Vatican’s joy as well as a reminder that the trial had proven to be merely a political act, proving to exculpate the Catholic Church.

Any sustained relief for the church was short-lived, as a report commissioned by the Organization of African Unity pushed the Vatican

into a delicate balancing act. When the 296-page report, "Rwanda: The Preventable Genocide," was presented at the UN by Ambassador Stephen Lewis of Canada, it forced Catholics to face questions about the participation of church leadership in the pogrom as well as prompting a critical revision of their missionary legacy. As for the *Register*, it offered a lengthy rebuttal to the report, noting that the slain Archbishop, Vincent Nsengiyumva, had been reprimanded by the Vatican prior to the genocide for his political involvement while reminding readers that, though Bishop Misago had been charged with genocide, he had been exonerated. Official explanations noted that, "Though the killing was particularly thorough in the Misago's district," the paper reported, "the bishop was away from his diocese when the slaughter started."<sup>26</sup>

Adding to the increasing onslaught was the mounting attack on the White Fathers, the founding Catholic missionary order present from the first days of Belgian colonial rule. Gerald Caplan, Canadian academic and New Democratic Party (NDP) political strategist who authored the study, had singled out the White Fathers as being key players, saying they had "created a whole demented, racist mythology."<sup>27</sup> "White Fathers have been involved in reconciliation efforts in Rwanda for the last six years," retorted a White Fathers superior.<sup>28</sup> Angered pundit, Stephen Lewis, argued that "no apology has yet come from the French government or the Catholic church," indicating that the Vatican continued to dismiss the Catholic Church's intimate involvement in the brutality.<sup>29</sup> But *The Register* countered by stating that the pope had, in fact, apologized, continuing to stress the point that the post-genocide church helped to lead the way in reconciliation.

Commendably, the Catholic press did not shirk from reporting the difficult ensuing trials of Catholic clergy. Two nuns supplied the gasoline that burnt seven hundred Tutsi men to death in a locked garage, while a priest was convicted of bulldozing his own church in order to kill the Tutsis hidden inside.<sup>30</sup> Several months later, when the nuns were found guilty, the *Register* reported several explanations by Catholic officials. Calling the genocide a "situation of great confusion," it questioned the fairness of the trial in both the "singling out" of these nuns for punishment and holding it in a "country so far from Rwanda."<sup>31</sup> In explaining the actions of the Catholic Church, the press often quoted a papal address that "all members of the church who sinned during the genocide must have the courage to face the consequences", but also that "the Catholic Church cannot be held responsible for the sins of its members." In doing so, the

press alternated between arguing that the church had taken responsibility, and that it need not take responsibility. While the Rwandan problem may have been a Christian problem, it was not a problem of the Catholic Church itself, only individual Catholics.

Given this checkered coverage, *The Catholic Register* appears to have steered a middle course with regard to its depiction of the events, when compared to the notably conservative magazine, *Catholic Insight*, which seemed more besieged, refusing to drop ‘allegedly’ when describing the convictions of two priests for genocide.<sup>32</sup> It also linked Caplan’s unflattering portrayal of the Catholic Church to his pro-choice sympathies. Accusations of a difficult missionary past in Rwanda were roundly dismissed as being without evidence, owing to the fact that the Magisterium teaches the unity of all humanity. Only an article written February of 2007 reported the sentencing of a priest without disclaimers, unflinchingly describing Fr. Athanase Seromba’s attempts to kill Tutsis in his own church, first by grenades and fuel, only to order a bulldozer to demolish the church at the structural weak points he pointed out when the first option failed.<sup>33</sup> *The Catholic Register* typically resisted inspirational fodder and assumed the heady task of reporting international news with Catholic content. However, it displayed great reluctance in examining the genocide as an inherently Christian problem. What little attention it gave was mostly devoted to the defense of the clergy. While it successfully demonstrated the gravity of the deaths of the eighty percent of the total Tutsi population, it offered Canadian Catholics few resources for understanding how those working shifts on death squads could pause daily for mass.

### ***Mennonite Religious Press on Rwanda***

The two largest Mennonite conferences, MB and MCC, each with around 35,000 members, produce the most widely-circulated Canadian news sources from a Mennonite perspective – the *Mennonite Brethren Herald* and the *Canadian Mennonite*, preceded by the *Mennonite Reporter* (which ended in 1997). Designed to be a denominational magazine, it contains heavy international content, as well as inspirational stories and local news. While it is biweekly and clearly not imagined to replace secular newspapers, it remains a primary source of information on how Mennonites address the world’s problems, particularly through the Mennonite Central Committee.

The Mennonite press described the genocide through the eyes of their relief workers, peering into Rwanda from the Congo's hilly borders. The tragedies Mennonites witnessed were not a Tutsi minority hacked down on every street, but the millions of destitute pouring into an already fragile center of Mennonite faith. As Rwanda's western neighbor, it is home to the world's second largest Mennonite community and as such Rwanda's crisis surfaced as tangentially related to "brothers" and "sisters" in the faith. As they saw Rwanda from the sidelines, their depiction of the genocide remained narrow at best. Long after all major powers and humanitarian agencies had uttered the word "genocide," the Mennonite press continued to call it a "civil war," or "tribal violence." Like the Catholic press, the ethnic targets of this holocaust were often unreported. More disturbing was the tendency to view the genocide as a "tragedy between the Hutus and the Tutsis" – as if genocide is an act that demands two willing parties. As late as 1997, the *MB Herald* published a long, descriptive letter about the 1994 crisis, alleging "both Hutus and Tutsis have taken part in the killings."<sup>34</sup> Unlike other denominational publications, the Mennonite press offered sparse historical contextualization or even an overall portrait of its grim reality. Coverage read more like an inventory of donated items and funds to the refugee camps than a comprehensive explanation of a complicated slaughter. As such, causal explanations seemed haphazard. While later reports suggested that the genocide had political roots, the earliest reports suggest that spontaneous violence brought about by the president's assassination. It was as if Rwandans were susceptible to timeless tribal conflict. Some described the Hutus and Tutsis as being "in conflict for decades"; still others believed the Hutu Power propaganda that suggested Tutsis shot down the plane themselves.

Overall, the Mennonite religious press wrote about what it knew best, compassionate action. The vast majority of reports documented aid to the refugees, assuming them to be the original victims. Though depicted as replete with the sorrow of the time, the Mennonite periodicals also conveyed these moments as the start of a new collaboration. In their pages, the organization and maintenance of refugee camps became a shared project between Zairian and Canadian Mennonites, as Canadian Mennonites found themselves working side by side with another robust Mennonite community from the other side of the world. Their involvement in overseeing refugee camps in eastern Zaire had been a bittersweet celebration of shared Mennonite goals.

As the decade wore on, reports continued to describe Congo as the primary casualty of suffering begun in Rwanda.<sup>35</sup> But in doing so, they also resisted the impulse of other Christian communities to treat Rwanda as a problem with an easy solution. While some reports waxed inspirational claiming – a year after the bloodshed – celebratory accounts of Hutu and Tutsi youth working side by side, most did not. As pacifism is a key article of Mennonite faith, refugee camps became fertile ground for reconciliation as an alternative Christian response to violence. Immersing themselves in peace and reconciliation programs, they assumed the long drudgery of unravelling “timeless” problems.

While MCC’s initial response to the crisis led them to assume direct oversight of refugee camps, MCC soon transitioned to a “bridge-building” role of peacemaking and reconciliation, settling in for the years of gritty work ahead. In doing so, Mennonites appeared to be among the first to recognize the significance of their Christian commitments particularly as grounded in peacemaking. Mennonite Brethren official, John Redekop, described Christianity at war with itself as an “incomplete gospel”: “the widespread scandal of Christians physically fighting fellow Christians brings shame on the followers of Jesus and cripples their witnessing.” He argued that Mennonites fill the great need to bring about reconciliation among Christians, “especially among those who have allowed national, ethnic, linguistic or tribal identity to become primary.” While past missionaries brought a gospel that was too “vertical, emphasizing one’s relation to God but not to others,” Mennonites could bring a “horizontal” gospel, thick in community relationship.<sup>36</sup>

While the Canadian Mennonite press largely glossed over the difficult reality that the refugee camps brimmed with killers, a few hints suggested that the Mennonites’ role in the Congo put their Christian convictions to the test. As Eric Olfert, director of MCC in Africa, observed, food relief efforts were intended to be linked with peace and reconciliation. However, the Congolese army had failed to disarm the refugees, making MCC camps the new homes for rogue Hutu militias. Though some relief agencies withdrew in seeing rampant militarization, Mennonite peace workers continued to feed soldiers. Ongoing Hutu attacks against the new Rwandan government converted Mennonites’ goodwill efforts into launching pads of military action.<sup>37</sup> Their moral dilemma grew with time as refugees themselves became human shields for the Interahamwe, leverage useful even years after the genocide.

For Mennonites, the story of Rwanda was told about and from the

refugee camps in which they worked. In telling the story of the Rwandan genocide from the borders of Zaire, the Canadian Mennonite press elided the centerpiece of the story – the story of the Tutsis, dead or surviving left behind. But what they saw, they remembered. In one cataclysmic moment, millions of Rwandans flooded in Mennonite lands. Their response reflected their belief that with a truly nonviolent Christianity, one of lasting peace and reconciliation, this tragedy could be ended once and for all.

### ***The Adventist Press and Rwanda***

For a Canadian perspective on Adventist issues, believers turned to the monthly *Canadian Adventist Messenger*. Coupled with its American sister-publication, the *Adventist Review*, Adventists fortified their religious convictions with the global perspective of the official General Conference. Though both publications offer internationally-minded and comprehensive coverage, its mandate to “inspire, educate and encourage” led more liberal Adventists to found *Spectrum*, as a “candid but loyal” alternative.

Naturally, the Adventist press was quick to report their own tragic suffering, elaborately describing the events of the early days of the genocide as they unfolded. Of particular concern was the status of Adventists’ Rwandan infrastructure with hospitals, schools and missionary centers at sudden risk. Initially, Adventist Rwandans were assumed to be the victims. The news and church officials watched Rwanda closely for signs of hope, eager to share each inspiring story of survival to a waiting world. Though fixated on Rwanda itself, the press eagerly reported Adventist Church leadership in the international community. Robert S. Folkenberg, General Conference president, joined the outcry against the slaughter and called upon the United Nations to restore peace in Rwanda.

Before the civil war touched down on Rwandan soil, the small nation had been hailed by Adventists as “Africa’s Adventist Island.”<sup>38</sup> This central African nation was a rare success for the Adventist community, with over 300,000 baptized believers claimed for the church. But while the Canadian Adventist press signaled escalating ethnic violence, particularly as it encroached upon the established infrastructure of hospitals, schools, and missionary outreach centers, like other religious denominations they were more interested in growth and numbers.<sup>39</sup>

Until the genocide, the Adventist Church in Rwanda had been one of the fastest growing in the world, with one in twenty-seven Rwandans

claiming this ecclesial affiliation as their own. For this sectarian denomination, eager to establish mainstream credibility, this high concentration of converts to the faith quickly proved to be a lamentable numbers game. The burgeoning number of Adventist converts had to be counted among the one million Hutus accused of killing their pastors, neighbors, and friends. As J. J. Nortey, president of the Africa-Indian Ocean Division, observed, "I understand that perhaps 90-95% of our members were Hutus and lived mainly in the northern section of the country."<sup>40</sup> While early reports speculated that Adventists were less likely to have joined the fray, Adventists found they could claim no abstention from the collective guilt. Even in the Adventist areas, Nortey admits, "the killings were as bad as those in the rest of the northern region."<sup>41</sup> With approximately 99 per cent of Tutsis slaughtered in the northern "Adventist ghetto," some 10,000 killed in total, Adventists struggled to account authentically for the 100,000 Adventist Rwandans who fled into exile. Only *Spectrum*, the beleaguered left-leaning Adventist periodical, dared to say why: "Some of the 10,000 to 40,000 Adventists killed in the Rwandan genocide died at the hand of fellow Sabbathkeepers,"<sup>42</sup> leading many of the participants in this killing to flee out of fear of the witnesses left behind.

As the decade wore on, Adventist officials struggled to acknowledge that the church itself was found wanting. The Canadian Adventist press could not explain the failure of Adventist belief to make a difference. At times, the failure of Rwanda appeared to be largely the result of tribalism, at times the international community, and at times Christianity itself. The General Conference president issued a strong response as he spoke to Adventist pastors in Rwanda: "I have come to one conclusion – the gospel did not fail. The cross of Christ did not fail, the Holy Spirit did not fail – we failed! You and I failed! We, as pastors, failed. Christian clergy and priests and pastors failed!"<sup>43</sup> The true failure, he argued, is the failure of an inauthentic Christianity, "the result of unconverted people who carried the name of Christ."<sup>44</sup> While the press reported church officials' grief that Adventism brought an incomplete Christianity to Rwanda, confession did not come easily. As the editor of *Spectrum* argued, "No Adventist is known to have confessed to any killings."<sup>45</sup>

Over time the Adventist church, like others, appeared eager to leave the past behind them and trade grim reports of refugee suffering for inspirational accounts of fresh progress. But the uncomfortable role of Adventist pastor, Elsaphane Ntakirutimana, in the genocidal slaughter of thousands of men, women, and children in Rwanda continued to revive the

issue of the church's culpability. On 12 April 1994, around 2,000 Tutsis fled to the headquarters of the Adventist mission where they hoped they would be spared. The president of the mission, Pastor Ntakirutimana, along with his son refused to treat the wounded and conspired with Hutu militiamen to promote their imminent deaths. Seven Tutsi pastors assumed leadership within the condemned compound and wrote the following letter to the president:

Our dear leader, Pastor Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, How are you! We wish you to be strong in all these problems we are facing. We wish to inform you that we have heard that tomorrow we will be killed with our families. We therefore request you to intervene on our behalf and talk with the Mayor. We believe that, with the help of God who entrusted you the leadership of this flock, which is going to be destroyed, your intervention will be highly appreciated, the same way as the Jews were saved by Esther. We give honor to you.<sup>46</sup>

One survivor remembers the pastor's response: "Your problem has already found a solution. You must die." While the General Conference officials clearly distanced themselves from commenting on the innocence or culpability of their mission president, the pastor's conviction by United Nations Crimes Tribunal became a drawn out spectacle enacted on the world stage. The Adventist press reported minimal details alongside letters of protest from angered parishioners and even the pastor's son himself, blaming the press for reporting it at all. Like the Catholic press, the Adventist magazines struggled to account for the reality that the church itself seemed to be on trial.

The Canadian Adventist press successfully offered the most comprehensive and grisly coverage of the horrifying and systematic work of genocide. But just as the Rwandan killings were acknowledged to be a *Christian* problem, the result of an unconverted church, it now needed a Christian solution. Though Adventist officials admitted too great a preoccupation with numerical growth, they felt that new construction, healing and hope yielded fresh revivals. In 2004, the church claimed 50,000 people had embraced Adventism and a "new life for Rwanda."<sup>47</sup> As the problem of the genocide could be 'solved' in Christ's name, past and present presidents of the Africa-Indian Ocean Division of the Adventist church urged the church to move on. "Our approach is to forget the past and begin afresh," describes division President A.J. Daniel, "It is not easy to preach to the deeply aggrieved people in Rwanda after hearing of such

atrocities. But we must forgive those who hurt us. We must forgive anyway.”<sup>48</sup> There was an eager mission to spiritually re-baptize a body of divided believers and begin again.

As time wore on, this commitment to begin afresh allowed the Adventist media to graphically describe the realities of the genocide and to provide a possible Christian closure, even while they still struggled to come to grips with their denomination’s role in the atrocity. Unlike the Catholics and the Mennonites, Adventists continued to see their Christian ideals as in tandem with the policies of Canadian international intervention. While Catholics and Mennonites failed to completely encapsulate the totality of the tragedy, eventually both communities came to look beyond a purely Christian solution to the devastation to view Rwanda as an inherently Canadian failure as well.

#### ***Rwanda as a Canadian Failure***

As the Rwandan genocide began to imprint itself on the minds of Canadians, a macabre scene of holocaust, the Canadian religious press began to see it not only as a Christian problem, but as a Canadian problem. Consequently, by the early years of the new millennium, the state of Canadian self-identity appeared to be in crisis. Rwanda did not fit into the Canadian political imagination. A failure in equity with regard to humanitarian aid, United Nations intervention, and robust international multilateralism, Rwanda was a perfect storm of Canadian desires falling short.

With Romeo Dallaire at the helm of the United Nations’ failed intervention, UNAMIR, and numerous Canadians acting in key positions, the genocide created far-reaching implications for Canadian politics. Since Canadian Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson first popularized the term “peacekeeping” in the late 1950s, Canadians hinged their national identity to this global role. Popularized historical vignettes captured in Canadian “Heritage Minutes” celebrate Canadian soldiers, capped in UN blue berets, quieting the violence in the Congo with diplomatic finesse. Such tales of heroism shaped the imagination of Canadians, who think of themselves as a mediating middle power. While popular sources continued to preach that Canadians regularly make up ten per cent of peacekeeping forces, contrary to prominent Canadian self-perception recent studies showed otherwise. According to a 1997 survey, seventy per cent of Canadians identified “peacekeeping” as a primary national identity marker.<sup>49</sup> For Canadians, the

role of peacekeeper brought pride and a particular international orientation. Hence, with deteriorating confidence in its own mandate, Canada's vision of itself as a multilateral peacekeeper was in a state of profound disjuncture. Facing this situation, the Canadian state had to choose between two models: an Americanized army, broad and blunt, or a niche military, small, wieldy, and highly specialized. With dramatically insufficient military funding, Canadians would need to demonstrate the political will to either stop allowing America to effectively underwrite its defense, or employ small special ops and authorize them with the force to accomplish peacekeeping goals abroad.

The 1990s had seen Canadian peacekeepers in hasty and haphazard missions with inconclusive results. Furthermore, with the world's opinion of the efficacy of the United Nations dwindling, Canada's heavy investment in UN multilateralism was not paying off. While André Ouellet, foreign minister to the UN General Assembly, heralded Rwanda as the catalyst for the Canadian government's decision to press for UN peacekeeping reforms, polls reported a continual decline in Canadian confidence in the UN.<sup>50</sup> Though Rwanda was described as a sobering lesson for peacekeeping, Canada committed fewer and fewer of its citizens to the endeavor. In 1993, ten thousand of the eighty thousand individuals serving under UN command were Canadian. By 2007, with only .2% of Canadians as peacekeepers, the UN has simply stopped asking Canada to participate.

As political scientists Andrew Cooper and Dane Rowlands argued, Canada is "going through a period of profound anxiety, critique, and reconsideration. All of the accepted images of why and how Canada should play an international role have been eroded if not completely shattered."<sup>51</sup> After years of deteriorating confidence in the United Nations, Canada appears to be at a crossroads. Its previous model of peacekeeping, classic United Nations Chapter Six defenders of peace agreements, had been rendered defunct in a new multinational and porous economy of peace. Not only was Canada not playing the global role it once had, but others were starting to notice. As one strategist described, "Canada will continue to be irrelevant unless there is a political will to change. Today it adopts high moral standards from a safe distance."<sup>52</sup> Once national sources of collective pride, peacekeeping and diplomatic prowess now seemed exposed to global scrutiny. Canada, as the most influential middle power in Rwanda and a major broker in multilateral negotiations, found Rwanda to be an embarrassment of epic proportions that prompted the country to question its role in international intervention.<sup>53</sup>

Initially the Canadian religious press reported their denominational missionary efforts as working in tandem with Canadian ideals. Both as Christians and as Canadians, nationally and religiously, their generosity was well documented. In some cases CIDA channeled funds through their religious agencies in order that both might achieve their goals. But by the close of the 1990s, worries surfaced in the Catholic and Mennonite press which suggested that perhaps Canadian solutions may not satisfy the gospel's requirements. When the UN adopted Lloyd Axworthy's initiative, entitled "The Responsibility To Protect," Canada again appeared to be on the front lines of multilateralism. While religious communities concurred with its purpose to ensure that the Rwandan genocide would never happen again, it questioned Canadian methods that tended to spurn the possibility of military risk.

The Catholic press, though largely preoccupied with the trials of its own leadership, began to question Canada's international role after Rwanda. Some questioned Canada's commitment to its own "responsibility to protect." While regular columnist, Father Raby, grumbled in his headline that, "I'd unite with UN if it weren't so useless," others worried that Canada's ongoing lack of human security agenda for the Sudan proved its lack of political will to take necessary measures.<sup>54</sup> Yet the Catholic community found an unlikely hero in Romeo Dallaire, the broken UN commander who witnessed Rwanda's tragic downfall. As a Catholic with a compassionate drive to prevent another atrocity, the Catholic press reported Dallaire's rallying cries for action in Darfur. Further, three Catholic organizations joined a group of lobbyists to invoke the "Responsibility To Protect" in order to prevent an inevitable genocide in the Sudan.<sup>55</sup> These new initiatives brought about an unusual degree of Catholic candor. Reporting on Dallaire's testimony at the Catholics in Public Life Conference, the Catholic media relayed a startling admission of Catholic responsibility in Rwanda led to a self-indictment: "All of Rwanda is under judgment and, also, the countries that did nothing and now hypocritically bemoan their inaction. All of us are under judgment."<sup>56</sup>

Though the Mennonite press had initially floundered in describing the nature of the crisis, later reports yielded an intense grappling with the issue of Mennonite responsibility in Canadian initiatives. Much of the controversy revolved around constructing a faithful response to the new "responsibility to protect." Some saw Rwanda as an argument for the role of policing to restrain harmful forces. Others sympathized with the need for military intervention in order to stop ethnic cleansing, but worried

about the free license a “protection mission” may grant. While many spoke of the political subversiveness of forgiveness, the genocide in Rwanda perpetually surfaced as a reminder of the possible limits of pacifism.

In Rwanda, an artificial divide separated Hutu from Tutsi, as this common people shared the same language, music, customs, rites of passage, and religion. Marking Hutu from Tutsi became a national preoccupation, an arbitrary marker without discernible physical or cultural features. Such a mythology captures the political and social imagination, and is itself borne out with real, even deadly, consequences. As one observer of Hutu Power’s motivations observed, the engine of the slaughter was not economic or even primarily political. Common people, coached by political authorities, eagerly took up a distorted view of Tutsis as the foil of Hutu greatness. As such, “they killed each other to upbraid a vision they had of themselves more than any physical resources.”<sup>57</sup> In Canada, as in Rwanda, mythology equally captured the national imagination, shaping or distorting Canadians’ vision of themselves.

To understand what happened in those one hundred bloody days in 1994 one must expand the geography of genocide. First, it is necessary to see the failure of humanity as lying beyond central African tribalism and influenced by the myriad ecclesial, national, and international actors, which made these conditions possible. Second, by using the Canadian religious press one sees how “Rwanda” is constructed through the lens of denominational interests, giving life and meaning beyond the original site. As believers suffused their hopes for Rwanda with Canadian form and content, they soon discovered the limitations of their Christian vision and national self-identity. As Canadian foreign policy was constructed abroad through religious aid and at home in the press, religious bodies remained a vital part of constructing and interpreting public discourse about Rwanda.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Rwanda, mistakenly, is called Africa’s most Christian country, with the percentage of Christians estimated to be roughly 90%. The World Christian Database offers a corrective through a detailed breakdown of each denomination broken down by geography. In 2005, 78.1% of Rwandans identified themselves as Christian; 46% of all Rwandans say they are Catholics (“Rwanda,” *World Christian Database* [Leiden: Brill, 2007]).

2. While the sundry sources and authors that comprise religious publications do not directly speak to the *intent* of a community, these reports offer a window into the interests, worries, and insider-conversations of Canadian Christians as they sought to understand an unthinkable tragedy.
3. Timothy Longman, "The churches and the Genocide in the East African Great Lakes Region," in *In God's Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 140.
4. Timothy Longman, *In God's Name*, 141.
5. While I implicate Catholicism as the primary religious and political vehicle for colonial rule, Protestant missionaries emerged in the 1930s as religious actors willing to play by the same rules.
6. "Rwandan churches culpable, says WCC," *The Christian Century*, 24-31 August 1994, 778.
7. *Catholic Register*, 21 May 1994.
8. *Catholic Register*, 13 August 1994.
9. "MCC Response to Rwanda," *MB Herald*, 26 August 1994.
10. John Longhurt, "Rwanda: The Story One Year Later," *Mennonite Reporter*, 31 July 1995.
11. "Rwandan refugee effort continues in Zaire," *Mennonite Reporter*, 3 October 1994, 4.
12. "A blood bath to remember," *Canadian Adventist Messenger*, August 1994; "ADRA starts field hospital for Rwandan refugees," *Adventist Review*, 25 August 1994; and "ADRA's mission of mercy" *Canadian Adventist Messenger*, July 1994.
13. Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families* (New York: Picador Press, 1998), 165.
14. Jean Hatzfeld, *Machete Season: The Killers in Rwanda Speak* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005), 244.
15. *The Catholic Register*, 23 April 1994.
16. *The Catholic Register*, 14 May 1994.
17. The number of deaths cited by the *Register* tended to be unrealistically low for the duration of the genocide.

18. *The Catholic Register*, 23 April 1994.
19. On June 10, a press briefing by the United States' State Department was still using the approved phrase "acts of genocide may have occurred."
20. *The Catholic Register*, 28 May 1994, reporting a 15 May speech.
21. *Catholic Register*, 28 May 1994.
22. *Catholic Register*, 18 June 1994; and *Catholic Register*, 25 June 1994.
23. *Catholic Register*, 1 October 1994.
24. *Catholic Register*, 8 October 1994.
25. *Catholic Register*, 26 April 1999; *Catholic Register*, 3 May 1999; and *Catholic Register*, 31 May 1999.
26. *Catholic Register*, 24 July 2000.
27. "Report calls for Church to admit role in Rwandan genocide," *Catholic Register*, 24 July 2000.
28. *Catholic Register*, 24 July 2000.
29. *Catholic Register*, 24 July 2000.
30. *Catholic Register*, 23 April 2001.
31. "Nuns Guilty in Rwandan Genocide," *Catholic Register*, 18 June 2001.
32. "1998 record so far (missionaries and clergy assaulted)," *Catholic Insight* 6, no.5 (June 1998): 19-21.
33. "Catholic priest guilty of genocide," *Catholic Insight* 15, no.2 (February 2007): 34(1).
34. *MB Herald*, 5 November 1999.
35. "Zaire's war engulfs Mennonites communities," *MB Herald*, 16 May 1997; and *MB Herald*, 4 February 2000.
36. *MB Herald*, 9 February 1996.
37. "Situation grim in Bukavu find MCC visitors," *Mennonite Reporter*, 9 December 1996.
38. James Fly, "Africa's Adventist Island," *Adventist Review*, 9 February 1984.

39. "Churches, college outgrow facilities," *Adventist Review*, 29 July 1993; and "Rwandan civil war touches Adventist College," *Adventist Review*, 8 April 1993.
40. "Out of Tragedy, a New Vision," *Adventist Review*, 24 November 1994.
41. "Out of Tragedy, a New Vision," *Adventist Review*, 24 November 1994.
42. Roy Branson, "Never Again," *Spectrum*, June 1996.
43. Robert Folkenberg "GC President speaks out about Rwandan atrocities," *Adventist Review*, 7 March 1996.
44. Folkenberg "GC President speaks out about Rwandan atrocities."
45. Branson, "Never Again."
46. Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish To Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families* (New York: Picador Press, 1998), 42.
47. Michele Stotz, "New Life for Rwanda," *Adventist Review*, 2004.
48. Alita Byrd, "Sabbath slaughter SDAs and Rwanda," *Spectrum*, June 1996, 8.
49. Michael Valpy, "The Myth of Canada as Peacekeeper," *The Globe and Mail*, 28 February 2007.
50. Valpy, "The Myth of Canada as Peacekeeper."
51. Andrew Cooper and Dane Rowlands, eds., *Canada Among Nations 2005: Split Images* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), 3.
52. Jennifer Welch, "Reality and Canadian Foreign Policy," in *Canada Among Nations 2005*, 29.
53. Howard Adelman, "Canadian Foreign Policy in Rwanda," *The Path of a Genocide: From Uganda to Zaire* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 185.
54. "Father Raby, I'd unite with UN if it weren't so useless," *Catholic Register*, 30 June 2006.
55. Michael Swan, "Canada must accept 'responsibility to protect,' in Dafur," *Catholic Register*, 13 October 2006.
56. Michael Higgins, "Fiction can delve into the heart of darkness," *Catholic Register*, 13 July 2006.
57. Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (Hong Kong: Columbia University Press, 1997), 40.

