

GERMANY, SOUTH AFRICA AND RWANDA: THREE MANNERS FOR A CHURCH TO CONFESS ITS GUILT

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines three historical situations where Christian churches confessed their guilt for their implication in episodes of extreme violence, whether by acts of omission or commission: post-Second World War Germany, post-apartheid South Africa and post-genocide Rwanda. In Germany and in South Africa several churches confessed their guilt rapidly and fairly comprehensively. In Rwanda only the Presbyterian Church did so. The other churches either abstained from making any statement or only acknowledged the crimes committed by some of their members. This paper argues that, for a large part, the political and military context explains the difference. In Germany the war was irremediably lost and in South Africa the apartheid government had accepted the necessity of a regime change. In Rwanda, by contrast, the government which had orchestrated the genocide had withdrawn to a neighbouring country and vowed to continue the fight. A second factor is the quality of the church leadership, strong in the first two cases, weak and divided in Rwanda except for the Presbyterian Church.

Keywords: Stuttgart; Rustenburg; Detmold; Nazism; apartheid; genocide; guilt; confession

INTRODUCTION

Ethics, a book which Dietrich Bonhoeffer started to write in the early 1940s, at the onset of the Second World War, and left unfinished when he was arrested by the Gestapo in April 1943, included a chapter entitled “Guilt, Justification, Renewal.” His work anticipated the dilemma that the German churches would face at the end the war; a moment he could not witness because he was executed a few days before the conflict

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ended. Should a church confess its guilt? For him the response was “yes.” “Confession of guilt happens without a sidelong glance at the others who are also guilty,” he wrote. “Looking on this grace of Christ frees us completely from looking at the guilt of others and brings Christians to fall on their knees before Christ with the confession: *mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*.”¹ This confession of guilt, according to Bonhoeffer, was not only an individual matter. It also concerned the church. The German theologian did not only have in mind the Lutheran churches, most of which supported Hitler’s vision for Germany, but also the Confessing Church, which failed to oppose a united front to the Nazi regime and hardly said a word in support of the Jews.² “The church confesses,” he noted, “that it has misused the name of Christ by being ashamed of it before the world and by not resisting strongly enough the misuse of that name for evil ends.”³

For a number of years, we have been living in an “age of apology.”⁴ Public statements of apology are made by nations, institutions, corporations and celebrities for crimes such as the slave trade, colonial dispossession, paedophilia cover-up, gender abuse, institutional racism and extreme violence. The churches also confess their guilt for past failures but often they do so belatedly, reluctantly and after lengthy and divisive internal debates.⁵ Confessing one’s guilt may promote healing and reconciliation. However, as Jeremy Bergen observed in his study of ecclesial repentance,⁶ when done inappropriately, it does more harm than good. An act of repentance names a wrong that was done and claims responsibility for it. Naming only one part of the wrong that was done, or rejecting the responsibility of the wrong on some members of the church instead of the church as a corporate body, creates uneasiness and sometimes anger among the victims and prevents the healing process from taking place. Full validation of the trauma that was inflicted and genuine repentance are essential to reconciliation.

There are various dynamics by which a church acknowledges that harm has been done. It can confess its guilt to its own members or to people outside the church. It can acknowledge responsibility for harm done in the past, as in the case of slavery, or in the present, as with clerical paedophilia. The process also varies between churches

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Ethics,” in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, edited by Clifford J. Green and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), vol. 6, 136. Bonhoeffer *Ethics* was published by his friend and disciple Eberhard Bethge in 1949 at Christian Kaiser Verlag in Munich.

2 Matthew Hockenos, “The Church Struggle and the Confessing Church. An Introduction to Bonhoeffer’s Context,” *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations*, 2, no.1 (2007): 1-20. The Confessing Church was a movement within German Protestantism during Nazi Germany that arose in 1933 in opposition to government-sponsored efforts to unify all Protestant churches into a single pro-Nazi Protestant Reich Church.

3 Bonhoeffer, “Ethics,” vol. 6, 139-140.

4 Mark Gibney, Rhoda Howard-Hassmann, Jean-Marc Coicaud, and Niklaus Steiner (eds), *The Age of Apology: Facing up to the Past* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University, 2008).

5 The best author on this question is the American Mennonite theologian Jeremy Bergen. See Jeremy M. Bergen, *Ecclesial Repentance: The Churches Confront Their Sinful Pasts* (London: T&T Clark, 2011); “Whether and how a church ought to repent for a historical wrong,” *Theology Today*, 73, no.2 (2016): 129-148.

6 Bergen, “Whether and how a church ought to repent,” 135.

and politics.⁷ It has been noted that, unlike Lutherans and members of the Reformed churches, Catholics and Anglicans have difficulty with the notion of a “confessing church.”⁸ Yet, for a man such as John-Paul II making apologies was the right thing to do. The Italian journalist Luigi Accattoli collected no less than ninety-four statements by this pope expressing sorrow or repentance for corporate sins in which Christians and Catholics had been implicated.⁹

This paper examines in a historical perspective three cases where Christian churches confessed their guilt, at least partly, for their implication in episodes of extreme violence, whether by acts of omission or commission: post-Second World War Germany; post-apartheid South Africa; and post-genocide Rwanda. It tries to establish why in the first two cases, despite some ambiguities, the Christian churches found ways of confessing their guilt in a manner acceptable to the victims, while the same cannot be said of the Rwandan churches. In the Catholic Church of Rwanda for example, the question of whether or not they should confess their guilt remains controversial up to this day. It will compare these three historical situations and draw some conclusions on the circumstances which make possible the process of ecclesial repentance.

The state of the literature varies from country to country. Post-Second World War ecclesial confessions of guilt, the Stuttgart Declaration in particular, have attracted a lot of scholarly attention, both in Germany and in the English-speaking world.¹⁰ The South African churches’ confessions of guilt for their participation in apartheid were widely commented upon at the time,¹¹ but have never been studied in depth by historians and scholars of religion. The matter of the Christian churches’ confessions of guilt for the involvement, direct or indirect, in the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda, on the other hand, remains largely unexplored, at least at the academic level.¹²

POST-WAR GERMANY

In October 1945, a delegation from the World Council of Churches – which had been established before the war but was not yet fully constituted – visited a group of church

7 Bergen, “Whether and how a church ought to repent,” 131.

8 John de Gruchy, *The Church Struggle in South Africa*, 25th anniversary edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 192.

9 Luigi Accattoli, *When a Pope Asks Forgiveness. The Mea Culpa's of John Paul II*, (New York: Alba House, 1998), quoted in Avery Dulles, “Should the Church Repent?” *First Thing*, 88 (December 1998): 38.

10 John Conway, “How Shall the Nations Repent? The Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt, October 1945.” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 38, no. 4 (October 1987): 596-622; Martin Greschat (ed.), *Die Schuld der Kirche. Dokumente und Reflexionen zur Stuttgarter Schulderklärung vom 18/19 Oktober 1945* (Munich: Christian Keiser, 1982).

11 See in particular Louw Alberts and Frank Chikane (eds), *The Road to Rustenburg. The Church looking forward to a new South Africa* (Cape Town: Struik Christian Books, 1991).

12 The pioneering work of Tharcisse Gatwa, Timothy Longman and Paul Rutayisire on the history of the Christian churches in post-genocide Rwanda deserves, however, to be mentioned.

leaders in Stuttgart.¹³ Most of them had been members of the Confessing Church before and during the war. On the evening of 17 October, just before the meeting started, the 11 members of the German delegation (three bishops, Theophil Wurm, Hans Meiser and Otto Dibelius; three other church leaders; three pastors, including Martin Niemöller who had spent seven years in a concentration camp and Hans Asmussen, one of the authors of the Barmen Declaration of 1934; an academic; and a layman, Gustav Heinemann, future president of the country) signed what would be known as the Stuttgart Declaration. This short text included the following confession of guilt:

We have for many years struggled in the name of Jesus Christ against the spirit which found its terrible expression in the National Socialist regime of tyranny, but we accuse ourselves for not witnessing more courageously, for not praying more faithfully, for not believing more joyously and for not loving more ardently.¹⁴

The Stuttgart Declaration was addressed to the World Council of Churches delegation, led by the Dutch theologian Willem Visser't Hooft. Asmussen had written to him in December 1942 to let the leaders of the ecumenical movement know that the enforced silence of the Confessing Church should not be understood as acquiescence in Hitler's policies.¹⁵ Holding such a meeting so soon after the end of the war was no easy matter. Most members of the ecumenical delegation belonged to former enemy countries. However, the Stuttgart meeting had positive effects. It paved the way for the integration of the German churches into the World Council of Churches.

Two observations can be made about the Stuttgart Declaration. The first is that it made no reference to the extermination of the Jews. If the German people could pretend not to know during the war, after the defeat this was no longer possible. The Allied forces has widely publicised horrific pictures of the concentration camps. Another omission was that of a reference to restitution, an essential element of any programme of reconciliation.

The second observation is that, incomplete as it was, the Stuttgart Declaration was far from expressing the view of the German public. A vast majority of Germans condemned it as a capitulation to the victorious powers. They reacted with outrage to the idea of attributing a collective guilt to the German people.¹⁶ When the young Jürgen Moltmann, not yet a theologian at the time, heard in a camp for prisoners of

13 Willem Visser't Hooft, "Report on the Visit of a Delegation of the World Council of Churches to Germany, 15-20 October 1945," in *Die evangelische Kirche nach dem Zusammenbruch: Berichte ausländischer Beobachter aus dem Jahre 1945*, edited by Clemens Vollnhals (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1988), 194-204 (Document 53).

14 "Stuttgart Declaration of Guilt," in Conway, "How Shall the Nations Repent?" 621.

15 Conway, "How Shall the Nations Repent?" 603-604.

16 Greschat (ed.), *Die Schuld der Kirche*, 144-155; Raymund Lammersdorf, "The Question of Guilt, 1945-1947. German and American Answers," unpublished paper read at the Conference "The American Impact on Western Europe: Americanization in Transatlantic Perspective," German Historical Institute, Washington DC, 25-27 March 1999, 5-6.

war in Glasgow that the Council of the Evangelical Church of Germany had issued a “Confession of Guilt”, his first reaction was that it was an insult.¹⁷ It took him a few years to see things otherwise.

To understand the reaction of the German people one must remember that after the defeat of the Wehrmacht in May 1945 they went through an extremely trying period. Most cities had been bombed by the Allied forces and were in ruins. Food and fuel were hard to find. The division of the country into four occupied zones and the transfer of the eastern part of Germany to Poland were resented as unfair and humiliating. Millions of refugees from Poland, Czechoslovakia and eastern Germany were moving westwards. A drastic denazification programme was imposed on the population by the occupying powers. In the American Zone alone, 117,500 Germans—roughly one of every 142 inhabitants—went into detention, many of them without trial.¹⁸ The German people were deemed to be collectively responsible for the atrocities of the Nazi regime. Posters with photos of the Dachau concentration camp and the heading “*Das is Eure Schuld*” (This is your fault) were put up by the occupiers in public places.¹⁹

Because of these humiliations and frustrations, some of the signatories of the Stuttgart Declaration started to have second thoughts. In December 1945 Bishop Theophil Wurm said in a letter to the “Christians in England” that the excesses of the Allied forces in occupied Germany cancelled out the Nazi atrocities as if the sufferings of the German people after the war could be compared to those of the Jews in the Holocaust. “The military conquest and occupation of our country,” he claimed, “was accompanied by the very same acts of violence against the civilian population about which such just complaint has been made in the countries of the Allies.” Furthermore, he added in reference to the recent division of Germany, “to pack the German people into a still more narrow space, to cut off as far as possible the material basis of their very existence, is no different, in essentials, to Hitler’s plan to stamp out the existence of the Jewish race.”²⁰

17 Jürgen Moltmann, “Forty Years after the Stuttgart Declaration,” in *Case Study 2. The Forgiveness and Politics Study Project*, edited by Brian Frost, translated by Susan Reynolds (London: New World Publications, 1987), 41-43. See also Donald Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies. Forgiveness in Politics* (New York: OUP, 1995), 85. In his autobiography Moltmann recounts how shocked his companions and he were when they were shown pictures of the Belsen and Buchenwald concentration camps in September 1945 in Glasgow. They thought it was propaganda but after a while they realised that it was the truth. See Jürgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place. An Autobiography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 29.

18 Malcolm Coates, “Denazifying Germany: German Protestantism and the Response to Denazification in the American Zone, 1945-1948,” unpublished Master’s thesis, University of York, 2014, 64.

19 Lammersdorf, “The Question of Guilt, 1945-1947,” 6.

20 Lambeth Palace Library, Bishop George Bell Papers, xv. See Conway, “How Shall the Nations Repent?” 618; Matthew Hockenos, *A Church Divided: German Protestants Confront the Nazi Past* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 150; Caroline Sharples, *Postwar Germany and the Holocaust* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 94.

It took a few years for these defensive attitudes to dissipate. In August 1947 the Council of Brethren of the Evangelical Church of Germany, an emanation of the Confessing Church which did not have the same authority as the Evangelical Church of Germany, adopted, at a meeting held in Darmstadt, a “Statement concerning the political course of our people” which called for a “progressive political engagement” and referred to “*unserer gesamten Schuld*” (our common guilt), a term close to expressing the much debated notion of collective guilt.²¹

There was no mention of the Jews in this declaration. It came up in April 1948 with the “Message concerning the Jewish question” issued by the Council of Brethren in the same city of Darmstadt. The second Declaration of Darmstadt regretted the fact that “the church is not allowed to teach that Jesus is a member of the Jewish people” and urged the Protestant community to take heed of Christianity’s “special relationship” with the Jews. Calling for an end to anti-Semitism, it used phrases such as “what we did to the Jews” to demonstrate the Brethren’s Council’s acceptance of common responsibility.²²

It took two more years for a proper admission of guilt on the part of the German Church for the Holocaust to be made. This took place at a regional and not a national synod but was nevertheless very significant. In May 1950 the synod of Berlin-Weissensee acknowledged, in reference to the Nazi era, that “by omission and silence we became implicated before the God of mercy in the outrage which has been perpetrated against the Jews by people of our nation.”²³

Similar hesitations affected the Catholic Church of Germany, an ecclesial community which, one must say, had accepted the Nazi ideology less wholeheartedly than its Protestant counterpart and taken a more active part in the resistance against Hitler. In mid-June 1945, hardly one month after the end of the war, Cardinal Michael von Faulhaber, the archbishop of Munich, lamented, in a pastoral letter, the “*himmelschreiende Unmenschlichkeiten*” (appalling acts of inhumanity) in Dachau and Buchenwald that “every reasonable human being detested.” He added, however, that these “terrible events and conditions” had been the responsibility of individual *Unmenschen* (non-humans) and not of the German people as a whole or even of all Nazi Party members.²⁴ Two months later, at a meeting held in Fulda, the Catholic bishops gave their assessment of the situation in a document entitled “*Gemeinsamer Hirtenbrief nach beendeten Krieg*” (Joint Pastoral Letter after the End of the War).²⁵

21 Shriver, *An Ethic for Enemies*, 87-88; Coates, “Denazifying Germany,” 126-127.

22 Sharples, *Postwar Germany and the Holocaust*, 94.

23 Sharples, *Postwar Germany and the Holocaust*, 95. See also Dieter Koch, *Heinemann und die Deutschland-frage* (München: Kaiser Verlag, 1972), 119, 121, quoted in *Case Study 2. The Forgiveness and Politics Study Project Krushke*, edited by Brian Frost (London: New World Publications, 1987), 17.

24 Anthony Kauders, “Jews in the Christian Gaze: Munich’s Churches before and after Hitler,” *Patterns of Prejudice*, 34, no. 3 (2000): 33.

25 “Gemeinsamer Hirtenbrief nach beendeten Krieg,” Fulda, 23 August 1945, in *Die Kirchen und das Judentum. Dokumente von 1945-1985*, edited by Rolf Rendtorff and Hans Hermann Henrix

At the instance of Bishop Konrad von Preysing, a major figure of the Catholic resistance to Nazism, they added to the original draft a paragraph asserting that many Germans had been contaminated by National Socialism, that many had remained unconcerned when crimes against human dignity had occurred and that many, including Catholics, had become war criminals. The bishops stopped short, however, of declaring that the Catholic Church should accept collective responsibility for the Holocaust.²⁶

Like the leaders of the Evangelical Church of Germany, the Catholic bishops reacted negatively to the occupation of their country by the Allied forces and to the denazification programme. In the pastoral letter mentioned above, Cardinal Faulhaber did not hesitate – as Bishop Theophil Wurm did a few months later – to compare the Nazi crimes with the harsh treatment meted to the German population by the occupying powers. Although they had been in Germany for “only a few weeks” and the occupation had had no “history of twelve years like Dachau,” he declared, things had “happened here and there” that from a moral point of view could only be deplored. The archbishop of Munich described the various efforts of American journalists to relate to the world, including the “remotest Negro village”, Germany’s “shame and disgrace.” Yet, he commented, the pictures would be no less frightening if one had shown the terrible misery caused by British and American aerial bombardments of Munich and other cities.²⁷ Interestingly, the editor of Cardinal Faulhaber’s episcopal statements in 1978 censored the reference to the 12 years in Dachau and to the Negro village in his edition of the June 1945 pastoral letter.²⁸

This brief intrusion into German post-war Christian history shows that if the church authorities, both Protestant and Catholic, formulated a confession of guilt, they did so with reservations and in an incomplete manner. It took five years for a regional body of the Evangelical Church of Germany to take responsibility for the Holocaust. In 1945 two prominent church leaders, Bishop Wurm and Cardinal Faulhaber, equated the sufferings of the German people under Allied occupation with those of the Jews in the Holocaust. This is not without similarities of the so-called double genocide theory adopted in some Catholic circles after the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda.

(Paderborn and Munich, 1988), 233-239, here 235, quoted in Anthony Kauders, “Catholics, the Jews and Democratization in Post-war Germany, Munich 1945-65,” *German History*, 18, no. 4 (2000): 466-467. On this pastoral letter, see also Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust* (Indiana University Press, 2000), 135-136.

26 Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*, 135.

27 Dienstlicher Verkehr mit der Amerikanischen Militärregierung, “Pastorale Richtlinien für den Klerus der Erzdiözese München,” 5-6: LKA, *Landeskirchenrat*, no. 869, quoted in Kauders, “Jews in the Christian Gaze,” 33-34.

28 Ludwig Volk (ed.), *Akten Kardinal Michael von Faulhabers*, vol. 2, 1935-1945 (Mainz: Matthias-Grunewald-Verlag 1978), no. 953.

POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICA

South African church leaders also confessed guilt for their complicity in an episode of massive human rights abuse—in their case apartheid. They did so on two occasions: during the National Conference of Church Leaders, held at Rustenburg in November 1990, and at a session of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Faith Community Hearings at East London in November 1997. This was a remarkable achievement. A close reading of the archives, however, reveals that many of these confessions of guilt were contested internally and that some churches refused to join the movement.

The Rustenburg Conference was an initiative of the South African president, Frederik Willem De Klerk, who, in February 1990, less than a year after his installation as president, had unbanned the liberation movements and set the stage for a constitutional settlement. The South African Council of Churches (SACC), closely linked to the United Democratic Front, a mass anti-apartheid movement, agreed to support the project. Louw Alberts, the president's man, and Frank Chikane, the SACC general secretary, co-chaired the conference which took place in a posh hotel outside Rustenburg, in today's North-West province, on 5-9 November 1990. The meeting was truly ecumenical with not only representatives of the mainline churches, Protestant and Catholic, but of the Pentecostal and charismatic churches and also of the African Initiated Churches. In total 230 people, including 26 overseas visitors who had come as observers, participated in the Conference. They represented 97 denominations and organisations.²⁹

What was meant to be a debate on the role of the churches in the new South Africa, with a series of papers followed by discussions, took an unexpected turn when Willem Jonker, a theology professor from Stellenbosch University who represented the Dutch Reformed Church, the white component of the Dutch Reformed family, concluded his presentation by a confession of guilt in due form:

I confess before you and before God not just my own sin and guilt, and my personal responsibility for the political, social, economic and structural injustices under which you and our entire country are still suffering, but I also venture to do so vicariously on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Church, of which I am a member, and for the Afrikaners.³⁰

This dramatic disclosure, in fact, had been planned. The conference organisers had been notified³¹ and a copy of the speech had been printed and distributed to the participants.³² Jonker was at liberty to speak on behalf of the Dutch Reformed Church because, as the moderator of the Dutch Reformed church, Pieter Potgieter, confirmed it to the participants,

29 "The Rustenburg Declaration November 1990" [1990], 1. Copy in the Institute for Contextual Theology Papers at the William Cullen Library.

30 Willem Jonker, "Understanding the Church Situation and Obstacles to Christian Witness in South Africa," in Alberts and Chikane, *The Road to Rustenburg*, 92.

31 Alberts and Chikane, *The Road to Rustenburg*, 102.

32 Copy in the Institute for Contextual Theology Papers at the William Cullen Library, Historical Papers, AG2843.

³³ the general synod of the church, held on 16-25 October 1990 in Bloemfontein, had already made a confession of guilt. In a document entitled *Kerk en Samelewing* (Church and Society), which replaced an earlier document of the same name, the synod had declared, for the first time with such clarity, that the Bible did not prescribe any political model, be it apartheid, separate development or racial integration.³⁴ It had also stated that “the church [should] not self-righteously declare its standpoint as infallible but rather humbly undergo a self-examination so as to listen to the other in truth, acknowledge its guilt when necessary and reform itself on an ongoing basis.”³⁵

Jonker’s confession of guilt attracted a lot of attention and soon other participants declared their intention to do the same. A committee including theologians such as Frank Chikane, Barney Pityana, the director of the Programme to Combat Racism of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, and Piet Meiring, a Dutch Reformed Church theologian, drafted, on behalf of the assembly, a document, later known as the Rustenburg Declaration, which contained, in addition to a faith statement and a programme of action, a confession of guilt phrased as follows:

We know that without genuine repentance and practical restitution we do not appropriate God’s forgiveness and that without it, true reconciliation between people is impossible. We also know that this process must begin with a penitent Church. We therefore confess that we have in different ways practised, supported, permitted or refused to resist apartheid.³⁶

According to Frank Chikane, the Rustenburg Declaration obtained a “consensus” among the conference participants. “A few,” he noted however, had “problems with some aspects” of the document. “Reactions to Prof Jonker’s confession,” he further observed, “varied from complete acceptance by Archbishop Tutu and many others, to cynicism from some, especially the black Dutch Reformed Churches.”³⁷ In a joint statement the representatives of the coloured and black branches of the Dutch Reformed Church family explained their position as follows:

The position of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa will ... be enormously compromised if the Conference has to become a platform for the theological view point of the white Dutch Reformed Church and the acceptance thereof, regardless of the point of view of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the Dutch Reformed Church. In view of the fact that we wish to steer away from the sectarian debate on matters of the Dutch Reformed Church, we request you to urgently clarify with the Conference the matter of the acceptance of the confession of guilt.³⁸

33 Copy in the Institute for Contextual Theology Papers at the William Cullen Library, Historical Papers, AG2843, 100.

34 *Kerk en Samelewing* 1990, Art. 21.

35 *Kerk en Samelewing* 1990, Art. 21 (my translation).

36 “The Rustenburg Declaration,” in Alberts and Chikane, *The Road to Rustenburg*, 277 (Art. 2.4 and 2.5).

37 “The Rustenburg Declaration,” in Alberts and Chikane, *The Road to Rustenburg*, 10, 16.

38 “The Rustenburg Declaration,” in Alberts and Chikane, *The Road to Rustenburg*, 261.

As Jeremy Bergen pointed out, the process of deciding on an apology, the consultations about apology and the portrayal of a new relationship in a ritual of apology are crucially important.³⁹ In the 1970s and 1980s, after decades of passive acquiescence to white rule, the two churches who objected to Jonker's confession of guilt in Rustenburg had vigorously opposed the paternalism of the white Dutch Reformed Church and its segregation practices. No wonder that they refused to accept an apology on which they had not been consulted. There was, the theologian John de Gruchy explained, "another agenda on the go" in Rustenburg,⁴⁰ that of the difficult negotiation between a dominant and a dominated group in the Dutch Reformed Church family.

The Rustenburg Conference was a forum of church leaders, not a decision-making body. No church signed the Declaration at the Conference. This happened in subsequent months. Examples of churches which ratified the Rustenburg Declaration are the Congregational Church,⁴¹ the Moravian Church,⁴² Ray McCauley's Rhema Bible Church,⁴³ and the Catholic Church.⁴⁴

Whether the church members accepted the confessions of guilt made on their behalf by the church leaders is another question. The Catholic Church is a case in point. Bishop Napier, the president of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference (SACBC), was a member of the Rustenburg Conference's steering committee but otherwise he maintained a relatively low profile.⁴⁵ In a letter to family members Archbishop Denis Hurley, who did not attend the Conference, made the following comment: "It was an extraordinarily moving experience to be made aware of it. After that everybody seemed to be trying to make confessions—except, as far as I could gather, the Catholics. It is so much part of our sacramental life, I suppose."⁴⁶ In fact, the Catholic bishops did make a statement but only later, at the plenary session of the SACBC in January 1991 in Pretoria. They roundly admitted that the Church "as a corporate body" had not been "innocent of all complicity in supporting or going along with the sin of apartheid."⁴⁷

39 Bergen, "Whether and how a church ought to repent," 138.

40 John de Gruchy, "From Cottesloe to Rustenburg and beyond. The Rustenburg Conference in Historical Perspective," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 74 (1994): 28. In an email to the author (2 June 2017), John de Gruchy, who attended the Rustenburg Conference, confirmed that there was "a great deal of tension between the white NGK and the Sending Church."

41 De Gruchy, mail to the author, 2 June 2017.

42 Karel Thomas August, "The quest for being public church: a study of the South African Moravian Church in historical and contemporary perspective," unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 2003, 268.

43 Alberts and Chikane, *The Road to Rustenburg*, 262.

44 "SACBC Administrative Board statement on the Rustenburg Declaration (30 January 1991)," in *The Bishops Speak*, vol. 6 (1991-1994).

45 See his speech in Alberts and Chikane, *The Road to Rustenburg*, 232-234.

46 Durban Archdiocesan Archives: Archbishop Denis Hurley to Ursula, Chris, Bobbie and Jerry Hurley, Durban, 31 December 1990.

47 "SACBC Administrative Board statement on the Rustenburg Declaration (30 January 1991)," in *The Bishops Speak*, vol. 6 (1991-1994).

It would be an exaggeration to say that all Catholics agreed with this statement. During the apartheid years, some bishops, the expatriates in particular, resisted the idea of confronting the state because they were afraid the Catholic institutions in their diocese might be harmed in the process. In white parishes the anti-communist propaganda of the apartheid government was often uncritically absorbed. Many priests and sisters cooperated with homeland leaders without much soul searching. Led by Archbishop Hurley, a key figure of the anti-apartheid movement, the bishops' conference acted as a vanguard. Most bishops discovered, thanks to briefing sessions and site visits, the real face of the apartheid regime. A substantial minority of church members resented their commitment to social justice.⁴⁸

In November 1997, exactly seven years after the Rustenburg conference, representatives of 41 faith communities—mostly Christian but also Jewish, Muslim, Hindu and Baha'i—made written submissions or came in person to the TRC faith community hearings in East London. Some repeated the confession of guilt made at the time of the Rustenburg Conference. Others, the black mission churches and the African Initiated Churches in particular, testified as victims of apartheid.

As pointed out in the TRC report, “while a fairly wide spectrum of churches was represented, some important churches were missing.”⁴⁹ The Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk did not respond to the invitation. The Gereformeerde Kerk also decided not to participate but four theologians from this church made a submission in their personal capacities. Only two Lutheran churches, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa (Natal-Transvaal) and the Moravian Church, made a submission. The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Southern Africa (ELCSA) and the Free Evangelical Lutheran Synod in South Africa (FELSISA) did not. Four Pentecostal and charismatic churches or groups of churches, the Apostolic Faith Mission, the Rhema Bible Church, the Hatfield Christian Church and the Evangelical Alliance of South Africa (TEASA) made a submission. Many others abstained from doing so.

The Dutch Reformed Church, which had played such a prominent role in Rustenburg, announced that it would not make a submission to the Commission but in the end its moderator, Freek Swanepoel, came to the hearing. He made reference to Willem Jonker's testimony and reported that 180 ministers and members of the Dutch Reformed Church had made a public confession of guilt at a Global Consultation on World Evangelisation in Pretoria. But he also declared that his church was “divided into two groups.” In response to the question of a commissioner he candidly admitted that “there are a large group of people who do not want to accept the work of this Commission, and who do have a negative attitude towards the Commission.”⁵⁰

48 This section was inspired by a conversation with Kevin Dowling, the Catholic bishop of Rustenburg, on 30 May 2017. I thank him for his insights. Together with Buti Tlhagale, the secretary general of the bishops' conference he represented the Catholic Church at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

49 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, *Report*, vol. 1, 432.

50 Dutch Reformed Church. Testimony before the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, East London, 18 November 199[7].

All in all, the Christian churches' participation in the reconciliation process, both at the Rustenburg Conference and in the TRC faith community hearings, was of high quality. But one should not hide the difficulties. On the question of whether or not it was appropriate to confess their guilt for their complicity in the sin of apartheid, the churches were divided among and within themselves. What made the process relatively easy, though, was the nature, particularly peaceful, of the political transition in South Africa. From that point of view, Rwanda offers a very different picture.

POST-GENOCIDE RWANDA

In post-genocide Rwanda the Christian churches confessed their guilt later and in fewer numbers than in Germany after the war and in South Africa at the beginning of the democratic transition, and the debate on guilt confession was more virulent than in these countries. The reasons for this state of affairs are multiple. The first is the amplitude of the trauma caused by the genocide against the Tutsi. The element which triggered the conflict was the attack of an army of Tutsi in exile in October 1990. Over a period of three months, starting on 7 April 1994, with a peak in the first month, an estimated 800 000 Tutsi men and women and a good number of so-called moderate Tutsi were massacred by state-sponsored *Interahamwe* militia and fanaticised crowds; with the logistical support of the Rwandan government and the local authorities in an atmosphere of intense ethnic hatred. Neighbours killed neighbours and parishioners, parishioners. The churches, Catholic as well as Protestant, were both victims—by losing dozens of priests and bishops and suffering the desecration of worship sites— and perpetrators—by their proximity to the civil authorities, their refusal to recognise and condemn the genocide for what it was and, in some cases, by their active complicity in the massacres.

But this is not sufficient to explain why the churches found it so difficult to confess their guilt. Unlike in Germany after the Nazi regime was defeated, and in South Africa after the principle of a negotiated settlement had been adopted, in Rwanda the victory of the mostly Tutsi FPR army in July 1994 did not put an end to the conflict. Using the mass of a million or more civilians parked in refugee camps in Eastern Congo as a human shield, the *génocidaires* vowed to continue the fight. For nearly 10 years bands of *Interahamwe* made bloody incursions into the Rwandan territory, now under FPR control. The new government reacted violently to these attacks. Severe human rights abuse on the part of the FPR occurred before, during and after the genocide, even though their extent is difficult to estimate with precision for lack of reliable evidence. Like the German population in post-war Germany many Rwandans, including those who had killed Tutsi neighbours by their own hands, saw themselves as victims of an unjust regime. Large sectors of the Catholic Church, particularly in the refugee camps and abroad, gave credence to the “double genocide” theory which had started to spread in the milieu of Hutu in exile in July 1994. In a manner reminiscent of Cardinal

Faulhaber and Bishop Wurm in 1945, they equated the exactions of the FPR army with the genocide against the Tutsi.⁵¹

The Stuttgart Declaration was written five months after the end of the Second World War and the Rustenburg Declaration nine months after President De Klerk's announcement of the launch of a constitutional negotiation. By contrast, it took more than two years for a Rwandan church – the Presbyterian Church – to confess its guilt at a general synod held on 10-15 December 1996 in Kigali. On 7-12 December 1996 – by a curious coincidence at almost exactly the same time – a group of Rwandans gathered to discuss the situation in Rwanda, and produced the Detmold Confession, a statement of guilt named after the town in north-western Germany where the meeting was taking place.

The Presbyterian Church, a church established in the early twentieth century but which always remained small because of the predominance of the Catholic Church in Rwanda, had close links with the Habyarimana regime in the 1980s and early 1990s. Its president, Michel Twagirayezu, and a few church leaders have been accused of being implicated in the genocide, which cost the life of 19 pastors and resulted in the flight into exile of a sixth of the church membership.⁵² The Presbyterian Church stands out, in the post-genocide period, as the church which made the biggest effort to reconstruct itself on a new basis. Under the leadership of André Karamaga, a Rwandan pastor previously working for the All Africa Conference of Churches in Nairobi, it made conscious efforts to deal with the memories of the genocide and work toward reconciliation.

It was in this context that the general synod of 10-15 December 1996, the first to be held since the genocide, made the following confession of guilt:

Dear Rwandan and Christians, the time has come to proceed with self-criticism because the Church of God is ashamed of having been incapable of opposing or denouncing the planning and execution of the genocide. As God's servant Nehemiah did (Neh. 1:5-11), so we, the Synod, in the name of the members of the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda repent and ask for forgiveness before God and the nation for our weakness and lack of courage when these were needed. The Synod asks the people of Rwanda and the world-wide Christian family to oppose every rejection of God's will for His creatures, to denounce and resist strongly ethnicism, regionalism and

51 There is a fair amount of literature on the history of Rwanda before, during and after the genocide against the Tutsi. See in particular Alison Desforges, *Leave None to Tell the Story. Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999); Jean-Pierre Chrétien, *Le défi de l'ethnisme. Rwanda et Burundi* (Paris: Karthala, 2012); Filip Reyntjens, *Political Governance in Post-Genocide Rwanda* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Hélène Dumas, *Le génocide au village. Le massacre des Tutsi au Rwanda* (Paris: Seuil, 2014).

52 André Karamaga, "Les Églises protestantes et la crise rwandaise," in *Les crises politiques au Burundi et au Rwanda (1993-1994). Analyses, faits et documents*, edited by André Guichoua (Lille : Faculté des Sciences et Technologies, 1995), 299-308; Gérard van't Spijker, *Indicible Rwanda. Expériences et réflexions d'un pasteur missionnaire* (Yaoundé: Editions Clé, 2007), 35, 51; Timothy Longman, *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda* (Cambridge and New York, 2009), 285-288.

religious divisions. For God, there is no Jew, Greek, Hutu, Tutsi nor Twa. We are all one in Christ.⁵³

Three months later, on 4-6 March 1997, an ecumenical seminar organised in Kigali by the Protestant Council of Rwanda (CPR), of which André Karamaga was the president, adopted a declaration according to which “the Church—as an institution as well as in the person of certain individuals—bears a great responsibility in the elaboration, the diffusion and the encouragement of the ethnist ideology” and that it should “recognise its part of responsibility in the genocide, repent, humbly ask for forgiveness and make reparations.”⁵⁴

Unlike the declaration of guilt of the Presbyterian Church, which had been in the making for some time and which reflected the point of view of a constituted body, the Detmold Confession was the unplanned outcome of an informal reunion of Rwandans of diverse origins. The organiser of the meeting was a doctor by the name of Fulgence Rubayiza. A member of the Charismatic Renewal, he was doing a medical internship in Switzerland when the genocide occurred. Distraught by this terrible news, he invited a few fellow Rwandans to Detmold where he had moved in the meantime to discuss the situation, pray about it and imagine new ways for Hutu and Tutsi to live together. The second meeting, held in December 1996, gathered 24 people: nine Hutu, nine Tutsi and six Europeans who had worked in Rwanda. Among them there were eight priests, three pastors and one religious sister. A local ecumenical group provided logistical support to the project. At one point in the meeting, quite unexpectedly, a Hutu who happened to have a Tutsi wife confessed his guilt in a very emotional atmosphere. Other participants followed suit. The next day the participants met in three groups, one of Hutu, one of Tutsi and one of Europeans. Each drafted its own confession of guilt. The Detmold Confession is a combination of the three texts which resulted from this process.⁵⁵

Generally speaking, the Presbyterian Church’s confession of guilt was well accepted.⁵⁶ The same cannot be said of the Detmold Confession, which received a positive response in some quarters and a negative one in others. Some Hutu criticised the Hutu signatories for only denouncing the “unspeakable crime” of genocide and not the crimes of the RPR army. Some Tutsi, especially those who were close to the new government, blamed the Tutsi signatories for contributing to the denial of the genocide

53 Tharcisse Gatwa, *The Churches and Ethnic Ideology in the Rwandan Crises 1900-1994* (Oxford: Regnum Books, 2005), 227-228. Original in Kinyarwanda.

54 “Les Églises protestants sortent du silence,” *Bâtissons. Bulletin de l’Église Presbytérienne au Rwanda*, 9 (January-February 1997), 2 (my translation).

55 On the Detmold Confession, see Fulgence Rubayiza, *Guérir le Rwanda de la violence. La Confession de Detmold: un premier pas* (Paris-Montréal: L’Harmattan, 1998); Gatwa, *The Churches and Ethnic Ideology in the Rwandan Crisis*, 230-234; Benoit Guillou, *Le pardon est-il durable? Une enquête au Rwanda* (Paris: Éditions François Bourin, 2014), 193-218.

56 The Dutch missionary C.M. Overdulve, who blamed the FPR for the genocide, is an exception. See C. M. Overdulve, *Rwanda. Un peuple avec une histoire* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1997), 86-88. He had, however, left Rwanda by the time of the genocide.

by admitting to have adopted “certain arrogant attitudes” towards the Hutu in the past. The Rwandan Catholic magazine *Dialogue*, transferred to Brussels at the end of the genocide, gave a voice to all these opinions.⁵⁷

The question of whether or not a confession of guilt is necessary has always been controversial in the Catholic Church of Rwanda. It took a year for the Catholic bishops and the representatives of the Holy See to use the word genocide in a public statement. During the first three or four years the relationship with the Tutsi-led government was tense. Yet, there were Catholics such as the lay theologian Laurien Ntezimana, the Jesuit Octave Ugirashebuya and the episcopal conference general secretary Modeste Mungwareba who pleaded for a more self-critical approach. Slowly, the defensiveness of the Catholic Church gave way to a more open attitude. On the occasion of the Jubilee of the Centenary of Evangelisation in Rwanda in February 2000, the Catholic bishops made a first step towards a full confession of guilt. In a prayer addressed to God – not to the victims, explicitly at least – they asked forgiveness for “those who prepared and executed the genocide and the massacres, who deliberately shed the blood of others, who killed by vengeance, who blindly followed orders and who could not discern what was contrary to the Gospel.” They also asked forgiveness for the priests and religious “who, in moments of division, failed to be credible signs of unity and communion,” for the political leaders “who neglected their duty” and for the religious leaders, “who did not have any discernment in their relations with the powerful.”⁵⁸

In February 2004, the bishops published a pastoral letter “à l’occasion du dixième anniversaire du génocide et des massacres” (on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the genocide and the massacres) and, in March of the same year, the Justice and Peace Commission of the Episcopal Conference organised a conference on “the church and Rwandan society confronted to the genocide and the massacres ten years later” in which several Cabinet ministers participated.⁵⁹ These initiatives were well received but the persistent use of the phrase “genocide and massacres” caused unease among the genocide survivors because it implied a sort of balance between the genocide against the Tutsi, an event of incomparable amplitude, and the crimes committed by the FPR army since 1990.

A further step towards a full confession of guilt was taken in November 2016 when the Rwandan bishops spoke for the first time, in a statement published on the occasion of the closure of the Year of Mercy, of the “genocide against the Tutsi”, without reference to the massacres. They asked forgiveness “for all the children of the Church, priests, consecrated persons and lay people” implicated in the genocide.⁶⁰ The time had not

57 “Réactions à la Confession de Detmold”, *Dialogue*, 197 (March-April 1997), 34-61, and 198 (May-June 1997), 92-97.

58 “Actions de grâce, demande de pardon et de protection à Dieu,” *Kinyamateka*, no. 1546 (février 2000): 7 (my translation).

59 *L’Église et la société rwandaise face au génocide et aux massacres dix ans après*, Commission Justice et paix, Kigali, March 2004.

60 “Communiqué des évêques catholiques du Rwanda à l’occasion de la clôture de l’année du Jubilé

yet come for the Catholic Church of Rwanda to confess its guilt as a corporate body as the Catholic Church of South Africa had done in January 1991 and the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda in December 1996. For this reason Ibuka, the association of genocide survivors, only gave a qualified welcome to the bishops' pronouncement.

The ultimate development in the formulation by the Catholic Church of a confession of guilt for its participation in the genocide against the Tutsi happened in March 2017 when Pope Francis, receiving the president of Rwanda, implored, according to the official press release, "God's forgiveness for the sins and failings of the Church and its members, among whom priests, and religious men and women who succumbed to hatred and violence, betraying their own evangelical mission."⁶¹

CONCLUSION

In Germany a small group of church leaders confessed to have done too little to oppose the Nazi regime five months after the end of the war. A few other confessions of guilt were made in subsequent years, with a gradual recognition that the biggest sin was to have allowed, without protest, millions of Jews to be slaughtered. At first some were tempted, on the Catholic side as well as on the Protestant side, to put the Nazi atrocities and the hardships imposed by the Allied forces on the German population on an equal footing, but this type of discourse disappeared as the work of reconstruction progressed in the country.

In South Africa the process of ecclesial repentance for having failed to oppose apartheid with sufficient vigour also started early. It was triggered by the spontaneous confession of guilt of a delegate of the Dutch Reformed Church at the Rustenburg Conference in November 1990, 10 months after President Frederik de Klerk's surprise announcement that the South African government was prepared to negotiate a constitutional settlement with its former enemies. Many Christian churches, though not all, formally confessed their guilt in the following months or at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Faith Community Hearings at East London in November 1997.

The confessions of guilt made during these two periods were relatively well received by the victims. It is true that the signatories of the Stuttgart Declaration for example did not mention the slaughter of the Jews. It took a few years for this particular crime, the most horrible of all, to be confessed. But there is no record of Jewish communities having complained that the Christian churches' confession of guilt were incomplete or insincere. *Mutatis mutandis* the same can be said of the confessions of guilt made in the post-apartheid era. Dynamics of power and conflict within the Dutch Reformed family resulted in the black churches casting suspicion on the good faith of their white

extraordinaire de la Miséricorde," 20 November 2016.

61 Holy See Press Office, *Press Communiqué: Audience with the President of the Republic of Rwanda*, 20 March 2017.

counterpart. Signs of racial division remain in all churches up to this day. But like in post-war Germany, the Christian churches' willingness to take responsibility for their failure to oppose apartheid has never seriously been put in doubt. It was only recently, and for reasons which are not directly related to apartheid, that tensions have started to appear between some Christian churches and the African National Congress government. For a long time the relationship between the liberation movement, henceforth in power, and the churches has been devoid of any major controversy.

Why, then, is the process of ecclesial repentance so difficult and so controversial in post-genocide Rwanda? Only one church, the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda, has comprehensively and unambiguously recognised its complicity, by action or by omission, in the mass killings of Tutsi and moderate Hutu and in the diffusion of a divisive ethnic discourse. The Catholic Church produced several statements of guilt but failed to take responsibility as a church for its participation in the genocide against the Tutsi. It has also failed to recognise its role in the diffusion of the ideology which ultimately led to the genocide. Pope Francis recently made a full confession of guilt on behalf of the Rwandan Church, but it remains to be seen if the Rwandan Catholics will follow. The other churches did not make any formal statement on their participation in the genocide against the Tutsi. Various forms of denialism are observed in the Christian communities, outside and inside Rwanda.

Two reasons can be invoked to explain the difference between the *status confessionis* in Rwanda and in the other two countries. The first is the political and military context. By the time of the Stuttgart Declaration the German army had been annihilated and the country was under military occupation. When delegates from various churches met in Rustenburg, the apartheid government itself had accepted that a regime change was necessary. With the exception of Natal and some parts of the Transvaal where a conflict opposed Inkatha and the ANC, the country was in peace. The state of emergency had been lifted, the exiles were coming back into the country and constitutional negotiations had started.

Totally different was the situation in Rwanda in July 1994 when the victory of the Tutsi-led FPR army *de facto* put an end to the genocide against the Tutsi. Far from recognising defeat, the army and the administration of the Habyarimana regime withdrew to eastern Zaire in the hope of regaining power one day and "finishing the genocide." A low intensity conflict persisted between the Interahamwe militia and the FPR army until well into the 21st century. Both sides perpetrated acts of violence against civilians in Rwanda and neighbouring Zaire during this period. The Christian churches were deeply divided with clergy and laity on both sides of the border between the two countries until the refugee camps of Bukavu and Goma were forcibly closed in late 1996.

This explains why it was, and still is, difficult for the Christian churches to confess their guilt. It is easier to heal from the wounds of a traumatic situation which has come to an end, than from those of a situation which persists, with new wounds added to the old ones. In Germany and South Africa the Christian churches were in a position to look

at their past errors and move beyond because, by and large, the conflict had ended. This is much more difficult in Rwanda when the conflict, in some way, continues to this day, though with less intensity than in the period immediately following the genocide.

A second factor is the quality of the leadership. Confessing one's guilt requires insight and courage. The Stuttgart Declaration would not have been possible without a trigger from the World Council of Churches and the determination of Confessing Church members such as Martin Niemöller and Hans Asmussen. The Rustenburg Declaration and the subsequent confessions of guilt owed a lot to men like Frank Chikane, Desmond Tutu, Barney Pityana and Denis Hurley. In Rwanda the Presbyterian exception finds an explanation in the personality of André Karamaga, who helped his church to move to a new era with faith and assurance. Other church leaders, in the Catholic Church in particular, found it more difficult to steer their church in one direction. In these churches the legacy of the past was too heavy to be overcome in a short time.

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