

CS 502: The Church as a Social and Cultural Institution

Book Review

By

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Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith After Genocide in Rwanda
By Emmanuel Katongole and Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove (Grand Rapids,
Michigan, Zondervan, 2009)

“This is a book about bodies” (Katongole 2009, P. 10). It is a book about the bodies of Christians that were destroyed by neighbors, friends, co-workers and most importantly fellow Christians in the country of Rwanda in 1994.

Emmanuel Katongole’s book, *Mirror to the Church*, describes the chilling stories of genocide and reflects upon this horrific event in the history of Rwanda. This story is not just an account of atrocities committed in a Christian nation but the mirror that is lifted to reflect the identity of the church. He struggles with a haunting question: How does one of the most Christianized countries in Africa become a place of unimaginable darkness and evil at the most holy time of the year; Easter? Katongole examines the identity crisis that occurred in Rwanda and how this crisis is not unique to this African country. “What is the relationship between my own body, the body politic, and the broken body of Christ? ... In the end, these are

questions about identity” (Katongole. P.12). *Mirror to the Church* describes not only the death and destruction of physical Rwandan bodies, but the historical context of the body politic and the broken body of Christ. Although the content of the book is extremely horrific and almost inconceivable, Katongole gives us hope that by examining this atrocity the Christian community can learn to correct the identity crisis that Christians suffer with throughout the world.

The book begins with the events that led up to the 100 days of mass killing and what roles were played by ethnicity, culture, politics and most importantly the church. It continues with a history of Rwanda that is rooted in European colonialism which created a story (ironically based upon poor theology) to exploit a division of labor into an ethnic, racial, political and socio-economic hierarchy.

The Belgians set out to develop Rwanda into a modern nation state. With the help of the Hamitic story, according to which Tutsis were the ‘natural born leaders’ and the Hutus were the inferior descendants of Ham, government representatives and missionaries alike committed themselves to transforming Rwanda into a modern, civilized, and efficient state. (Katongole. P. 59)

The author continues by examining the different stories and histories that form our identities nationally, culturally, ethnically, economically and politically. He moves forward with the story on how the church reinforces these identities and either by ignorance or by design create Christians that are shallow in their discipleship and more importantly their identity in Christ. The different postures that are discussed give the reader an illustration of

the short-sighted efforts of the church to combat this crisis of identity and to be an effective force in preventing genocide. Finally, Katongole concludes with illustrations of hope and resurrection for the church in Rwanda and for Christian identity across the world. He tells the story of Christian martyrs and heroes from various backgrounds that interrupted the chaos that occurred and celebrates their faith and assured identity in Jesus Christ.

Katongole utilizes the genocide in Rwanda to argue the point that the identity of Rwandan people was not based upon their religious beliefs or differences in theology but in the distorted history and philosophy of racism imported from Western Europeans. "Along with their philosophy of history, Europeans brought to Africa the idea of race" (Katongole 2009, P.57). This philosophy of race was reinforced by the education system, the political system and the churches evangelical missions. The story that was imposed upon Rwandans is that they "... were and always had been two distinct races called Hutu and Tutsi" (Katongole 2009, p. 75). Katongole recalls his own personal history growing up as a Rwandan immigrant in Uganda and recounts the courtship and marriage of his father (a poor Tutsi) to his mother who was part of a wealthy Hutu family. His family history defied the national story of Tutsi being superior to Hutus and allows Katongole to have a unique perspective on the tension between Tutsi and Hutus. The effects of identity crisis were not prevalent in Katongole's early life. "We were not Hutu or Tutsi, but rather we were Rwandans living in Uganda. That by itself made us strange enough" (Katongole 2009, p.15, p.16). Looking from the outside

of the events that occurred allows the author to sift through the rhetoric and ask the crucial question: How did this happen? This distortion of identity is not unique to Rwanda and in essence can be found in America, Europe and other so-called Christian nations. Katongole reveals this history of Rwanda not to place blame upon Belgium but to highlight how the “silence of history” and the “silence of geography” play a crucial role in isolating and in some ways minimizing the tragedies that occurred in Rwanda (Katongole 2009, p.77). There is a simplicity in dismissing horrific events as tribalism or believing that because these events are in a country far away, they are not relevant to Christians around the world. The author argues that these are merely stories that people accept to either ease their conscience or to allay the fear that a similar atrocity may occur in their own country or community. There is a prophetic tone that Katongole uses to warn other Christians and Christian nations against becoming complacent and being conformed to the standards of the world. “The political and economic institutions in which we participate both demand and determine our lives. They shape our identities” (Katongole 2009, p. 94). The world is still amid an identity crisis and western countries are feeling the awful effects of this crisis. The current status of politics in America and Western Europe are a symptom of this pervasive problem. There is a division that is sweeping across nations that misplace their allegiance to politics, race and economic status and is frighteningly like the Rwandan experience leading up to the genocide in 1994.

There is a confusion that occurs in the life of Christians and it stems from the stories that we are told by the world and the upbringing that we experience in our environment. There is a basic understanding that when we are baptized that we are now brothers and sisters in Christ, but how strong is that identity in comparison to our nationality, race or ethnicity? This is a question that the author poses to the reader to determine for themselves and it is a very important question indeed, because the answer to this question will provide the lens in which Christian missions will operate in the future. There are a lot of lessons to learn from the tragedy of Rwanda and one of the most important questions is: Who is Jesus? And what place does He have in your life? The people of Rwanda accepted Jesus as their personal Lord and Savior, they knew the rituals and traditions of Christianity but their belief in Jesus Christ was not in the forefront of their lives. A similar problem is occurring in America where people find religion and particularly Christianity as a personal belief. There is a separation of the public life of the state and the private beliefs of our faith and there is an illusion that the two do not meet. This creates the confusion that Katongole seeks to clarify in the community of believers. We are Christians first and foremost and all other forms of identity are secondary to this belief.

Jesus Christ is the source of life for the Christian and as such is the primary standard for human identification. Nationality, race, ethnicity and other worldly identifiers need to take a secondary role in our lives, because the future of evangelical mission is at stake. There is a superiority complex

that is still rooted in racism, classism and ethnicity in the church and the mission fields. The idea that our brother or sister in Christ is in need because they are somehow inferior in intelligence or lack the moral capacity to affect change themselves is still prevalent in the Western Church. The world is a smaller place because of technology and globalization; the hard boundaries that separated nations is beginning to disintegrate and the methods of identity are becoming more divisive and destructive. The church as a body has a greater role to play in the ever-growing movement to globalization. Christians must understand that what unites us (Jesus Christ) is greater than what divides us (race, politics, economics, culture and geography). If Katongole's warnings are not heeded, we will see the heinous acts of genocide rear up again soon and the question will remain: How did this happen? The understanding of who we are in the body of Christ is critical to the posture that the church will take in the event of tribulation. When we do not love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength we lose our identity as a disciple of Christ and it become impossible to love our neighbor as ourselves. Rwanda was an example of the global community loving themselves (their nationalities, etc.) more than God and certainly more than their neighbors in Rwanda. Cleaning up the mess in the aftermath of destruction is a familiar and necessary role for the church but it is not enough to send missionaries and NGO's to clean up after atrocity; we as a Christian community must understand our identity in Christ and be at the frontlines of the battle to prevent genocide.