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# God in Pre- and Post- Genocide Rwanda: Understanding People's Perspectives

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God in Pre- and Post- Genocide Rwanda: Understanding People's Perspectives

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### Abstract

After the slaughter of over a million Tutsi and moderate Hutu in Rwanda in 1994, God remains an important part in the life of many Rwandans. In this study, 11 Rwandans including survivors, perpetrators, and refugees, were interviewed to provide their perceptions of God before and after the genocide. Through the use of these interviews and various studies on evil, coping, and trauma, this research intends to understand both the shift in belief before to after the genocide and the factors that caused the shift to occur. Informant testimony provides evidence of the way that God and Christian theology has been used as way to cope with the trauma and conflicts of the genocide. The vast majority of informants focused their attention on explaining how God can exist after genocide, rather than actually questioning God's existence. In that way, the informants have placed a great deal of faith in God's plan and have used their faith as a powerful tool to continue living and reconciling after the genocide. The study provides a look into the power of religion and God's ability to heal the wounds of unthinkable trauma and conflict by just being something to believe in.

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Also, thank you to whoever is reading this right now. I put a lot of work into this and am proud of the result. I hope you will enjoy it and learn a little too.

Murakoze Cyani.

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## **Chapter I: General Introduction of the Study**

A popular Rwandan proverb states: “God spends the day elsewhere, but sleeps in Rwanda.” This widely used phrase intended to describe God’s love for Rwanda is one piece of evidence that shows the important role that God plays in the lives of Rwandan people. To say God sleeps in Rwanda not only pays tribute to God’s love for the beautiful landscape but also God’s upmost love for the Rwandan people. As one of the most Christianized countries in Africa, the presence of God is heavily discussed in Rwanda. Culturally, atheism is hard to understand because God is an inherent part of the vast majority of Rwandans.

Rwandans have believed in God even prior to the Christianization of the nation by missionaries and colonizers. African Traditional Religions focuses belief on an omnipotent Supreme Being. Through colonization and Christianization, God’s existence remained an important part of the Rwandan experience. Religion continued to permeate in culture and as almost all of Rwanda became Christian, the Christian God, all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-good, became prominent in the lives of Rwandans.

Ethnic conflict and discrimination has also been prominent in the lives of Rwanda’s people, especially since colonization. That ethnic conflict between Hutus and Tutsis reached its head in 1994 when the extremist Hutu regime instrumented the systematic extermination of Rwanda’s Tutsi population. Between April and July of 1994, extremist Hutus killed over 1 million Tutsi and moderate Hutu. Churches themselves were used to the advantage of perpetrators to kill during the genocide. Tutsi victims felt that the House of God would protect them from harm and fled there to seek refuge. Extremists used this faith to their advantage and thousands were slaughtered in cold blood in churches across the country.

Even today, after the horrendous events of the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi and the use of churches as murder houses, God's existence is still a prominent part of Rwandan faith.

Rwandans are still able to identify with and have immense faith in a loving God after the horrible events that left their country on its death bed and more than one million dead. This phenomenon of faith is the basis of my research.

### **Section 1. Research Problem**

As evident from the background of the study, the genocide demonstrated immense hatred between groups of Rwanda that ultimately caused millions to participate in evil acts that attempted to eliminate all Tutsis in Rwanda. Researches have done extensive research the role of the Catholic Church in the genocide, as well as how people are able to return to the Church and trust the organization. However, researchers have paid little attention to the perception of God during and after the genocide. Returning to church is not only renewing a faith in the organization but also sustaining a faith in the beliefs of the religion, or, more simply, sustaining a faith in God. Though academics are able to point to the history of Rwanda and relations between Hutus and Tutsis to explain how extremists perpetrated the genocide, few academics have examined how such evil can be explained spiritually or theologically. If one believes in an all mighty, all knowing, and loving God, how can such evil take place in the place that God sleeps? How are Rwandans able to conceptualize God in terms of God's role in the genocide? How did the genocide, that remains a recent memory for most Rwandans, change the way in which they perceive God?

### **Section 2. Objective of the Study**

1. To compare the Rwandan perception of God from before and after the genocide.
2. To understand the factors, if any, that caused any possible shift in faith in God.



## **Chapter II: Research Methodology**

### **Section 1. Scope of Study**

In order to examine the Rwandan perception of God, I conducted a number of interviews with Rwandans that had an experience in the genocide. I conducted interviews within the greater Kigali area, specifically within Gahanga and Kacyru Sectors. Informants were gathered through Celine Mukamurenzi, the Academic Director overseeing this study. Mukamurenzi contacted an individual in charge of a co-operative association in Gahanga Sector who then set up nine interviews at a cell office within the district.

In total, I conducted eleven interviews. Each informant was born in Rwanda and had some connection to the genocide. The informants were made up of five perpetrators of the genocide, four survivors, and two refugees during 1994. It was important to have a diverse group of people to represent even a small percentage of the Rwandan people. Because the research revolves around the genocide and changes in faith due to its events, it was also important to ensure that the genocide affected the individuals in some way. Each informant identified as a current member of a Christian denomination and spoke about the Christian God.

Although Rwanda is not only made up of Christians, the limitation of only interviewing Christians in terms of the Christian God was necessary for the time and resource constraints of the study. Limiting the scope to one faith and one well-defined Supreme Being allowed for more specific analysis in terms of theological and historical perspectives on God. Also, the vast majority of Rwandans are Christian, so although the Christian God does not represent the entirety of Rwanda, it does provide a fairly accurate picture of the way in which Rwandans perceive God.

## **Section 2. Research Design**

The research is a qualitative, explorative study intended to better understand the perceptions of God by Rwandans from before to after the genocide. I designed the research with an ultimate focus on the interviews I conducted through direct contact with informants and a controlled set of interview questions. Although some survivors and perpetrators have had their testimonies about God published, those testimonies were not consulted for this research. By limiting outside informants and secondary testimonies, I ensured that the research would not be reliant on the accuracy of the publishing of the testimonies intended for commercial sale in books or newspapers. I collected data from informants through a controlled interview protocol that provided me the background information that was necessary for understanding the shift in faith.

Along with interviews, I conducted research on the background of African Traditional Religions, the Christian perception of evil, and religion as a method of coping. I will expand upon the aspects of outside research in Chapter III to provide a base for understanding and interpreting the way in which Rwandans perceive God.

## **Section 3. Data Collection Techniques**

I conducted interviews between April 15 and April 22, 2015. With the help of a translator, I conducted ten of the eleven interviews in Kinyarwanda. I conducted one of the eleven interviews English without the need of a translator. All interviews were one on one with the exception of the translator for Kinyarwanda interviews. With the permission of each informant, I used a voice recorder for all interviews. I also kept extensive notes during the interviews. After each one, I summarized and described the content and my observations in a field notes document.

I conducted secondary research for information on ATR, evil, and coping through the online database EBSCO.

#### **Section 4. Ethical Values and Considerations**

I based my research on ethical research norms and practice with special regard to Rwandan culture and the way Rwandan informants could have reacted to certain protocol. I took special care to ensure permission was secure for voice recording and that each informant was aware I was taking notes.

I also took special care to be aware of emotional and spiritual wounds of informants. The events of the genocide affected each informant in a unique way so certain questions could have retriggered traumatic experiences. I tried to frame my questions in sensitive ways and if at any time an informant needed to stop the questioning, they were able to do so. On one occasion, an informant asked for a glass of water as he teared up recounting his personal experience with God and his gaze with death. I allowed the informant as much time as he needed to recover and we continued the interview only when he was ready.

#### **Section 5. Limitations of the Study**

Limitations exist based on the time and resources available for the research. The limited number of informants (eleven) fails to allow me to generalize about the perceptions of all Rwandans. Although I interviewed survivors, perpetrators, and refugees, the small number limits the ability to apply the data from these informants to the general population of Rwanda. Because of the qualitative nature of the study, I couldn't reach large quantities of people for their perceptions, rather I could only rely on the small number of informants that were able to participate. Also the limitation of only interviewing Kigali residents does not fairly represent the whole of Rwanda. Rural areas of Rwanda also have real connections to the genocide and God

but I could not reach them to inform the study. I will only be able to interpret and analyze the perceptions of the informants interviewed and cannot generalize past that.

In terms of credibility and reliability of the research, it is hard to accurately gauge. Having recorded and taken extensive notes for every interview, some individuals could have purposely been vague or dishonest about their experiences. Although I briefed each informant about the nature of the study, discussing the genocide could have made the informants reluctant to share too much. The topic of religion certainly isn't controversial in Rwanda but discussing religion in terms of the genocide may have been for some individuals. There is a stigma against non-religious individuals in Rwanda and that could have been on the informants' minds during interviews with a Rwandan interpreter present. The data gained from the interviews does not seem to point to these inaccuracies but they certainly could exist.

I found one experience that points to the possibility of some unreliable data after an interview with an informant who was incredibly vague about his role in the genocide. After the interview, I assumed the informant was a survivor, but after consultation with another researcher I discovered he is a convicted perpetrator. His interview provided little evidence to point to his role within the genocide, not mentioning any wrongdoing on his part. Although no question asked the informants specifically their role in the genocide, they were framed around how God was a part of their experiences in the genocide which usually elicited revelations about an informant's role. The fact that at least one informant provided vague information and did not allude to his role shows the possibility of unreliable data. I understand a perpetrator may not want to have to relive his moments of killing and evil acts within the genocide, but not taking any responsibility for those acts through the course of the interview is troublesome.

### **Chapter III: Literature Review and Definition of Key Concepts**

#### **Section 1. Background Literature**

##### **Part A. Understanding God in African Traditional Religions**

In order to understand the way in which Rwandans perceive God today, one must at least have a brief understanding of how Rwandans, and Africans as a whole, perceived God prior to Christianity. All of the informants interviewed for the results of this study identified as Christian. The Christianity of Rwanda however must be seen within the context of the colonization and Christianization of the country. In that way, the indigenous beliefs of the area are of particular interest because they were the groundwork for the way that Christian missionaries converted the people. John Mbiti explains that “Africans are notoriously religious so much so that religion permeates permanently into all departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it” (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2013, p. 3). In this way, even though Rwandans were converted and identify as just as Christian as the white people that colonized them, the Rwandan Christianity is set up on the religious beliefs of the indigenous Rwandans.

Although indigenous Africa is full of diverse religious beliefs and practices, the underlying concepts and philosophy of those religions can be studied as one. African Traditional Religions, as the unity of these diverse religions is termed, has been studied and theorized by many in academia. Many of the diverse religions in Africa are without a deep written history and with the infiltration of Islam and Christianity into the country some belief systems disappeared altogether and some barely held on through oral tradition. Practically all of pre-Christian Rwanda practiced the same religious tradition but study of Rwanda’s indigenous beliefs is lacking in comparison to the research on ATR.

Some scholars claim that African Traditional Religions is a polytheistic religion, but in reality ATR beliefs are based on the existence of one Supreme Being. Today, ATR as monotheistic is becoming more widely accepted in the academic and religious community (Beyers, 2010). Although lesser gods, spirits, and ancestors are seen as divine beings in the religion, one Supreme Being is above all else. The Supreme Being is called different names in each specific belief system and language, in indigenous Rwanda the Supreme Being was called *Imana*. For the purposes of this paper, I will call this Supreme Being God as many academics and theologians do. In ATR, “God is the ‘Giver of Life, the Power’ behind everything (Magesa 1997:35). The way of human life (tradition) originates from God” (Beyers, 2010, p. 3). Jele Manganyi and Johan Buitendag (2013) explain, “It seems Africans do not question the reality of God, because it is a given” (p. 3). Much like Christianity’s perception of God, ATR believes that God is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. In this way God is both all-knowing and all-powerful which easily leads to questions of why God allows evil. Of particular note for ATR is the stress on God’s mysteriousness and distance from humanity. Many origins exist of humanity disobeying God’s commandments and thus God withdrawing from the daily trials of human life. Practitioners of ATR did not focus all of their attention on God, but rather to lesser deities within the faith (Beyers, 2010). The existence of these lesser forces in the world and God’s perceived distance makes for a much easier explanation of evil in the wake of an all-knowing and all-powerful God.

ATR still remains at the root of belief within the African religious communities today. Although mass conversion has taken place over the last 100 years in Rwanda, the way Rwandans approach faith can be seen through the lens of ATR. Rwandan culture has remained strong

through pre- to post- colonization periods and the nation's religion had been ingrained into that culture.

## **Section 2. Literature Review**

### **Part A. The Relationship between Faith in God and Satan**

When discussing God in terms of evil events or actions, one must be prepared to understand the role that believers see God having in evil. In the case of Rwanda, it is a Christian understanding of God and evil that permeates through society. In her analysis of the origin of the devil, Carolyn Eng Looi Tan (2010) explains, "Theologians from antiquity have struggled to understand the nature of evil, particularly moral evil, and to reconcile its reality with a good and holy creator" (p. 153). This question, on the nature of evil in the face of God, is not easily answered but Christianity does attribute much of evil to Satan. From a Christian perspective, Satan, or the devil, is a fallen angel created naturally good by God but ultimately became evil and now considered the Prince of Evil (Tan, 2010). Such a supreme being of evil is in contrast to what is known about ATR, where evil exists among conflicting spirits. With that, it is clear that "the singular devil was an import to Africa" (Tan, 2010, p. 146). With Christianity and the arrival of a God that sustained the African belief in an all-knowing, all-powerful Supreme Being and strengthened the Supreme Being's goodness, also came a singular entity of evil. Satan's entrance into Africa, and specifically Rwanda, affords the Rwandan people at least one answer to the question of how evil exists in the face of a good God. Among many studies, two of interest focused on Satan's relationship to God. The first studied when individuals would attribute certain life events to God and others to Satan and why that was the case. The second study looked into how belief in Satan's existence alleviates pressure to blame a good God for evil.

In the study on attribution, conducted by Ray, Lockman, Jones, and Kelly, researchers developed different hypothetical positive and negative life-alternating events in the form of written vignettes. Earlier research on the subject showed “positive events are more likely to be attributed to God and negative events are more often attributed to Satan (Lupfer & Layman, 1996; Ritzema, 1979)” (Ray, et al, 2014, p. 61). Beyond what many could call an obvious finding, this study sought to “explore the possibility that God might be perceived as playing other roles in negative events, such as allowing them or providing comfort in the midst of them” (Ray, et al, 2014, p. 61). Their findings, using variations of the positive and negative vignettes did show God’s role in negative life events. The study explains, “The majority of our participants endorsed the statement that God causes negative events to bring about a purpose... God got involved as a rescuer, comforter, or one who uses the negative to bring about positive” (Ray, et al, 2014, p. 67). In terms of Satan, the research found that informants were more likely to involve the devil in life-events that were more internal or psychologically based, such as Satan tempting bad decisions or bad actions rather than causing a particular event to take place. In relation to my research conducted in Rwanda, the findings on how and why people attribute certain life events to God or Satan, can be applicable when discussing the genocide as well.

While the study conducted by Ray, et al is focused on attribution, the study conducted by Richard Beck and Sara Taylor focused on the strength of belief between Satan and God and how that strength affected the other. Beck and Taylor (2008) explain that the main idea driving the study is that “the belief in one omnipotent God, creates a unique emotional burden for its adherents and that beliefs in Satan can be used to attenuate this burden” (p. 151). In visiting the historical relationship between evil and God in Christian theology, the researchers point to an early time in Christian thought when some believed that there were two gods, a god of good and



a god of evil. Today, that kind of theology has been declared heretic but the researchers posit that those “dualistic notions remained in Christianity via the character of Satan” (Beck & Taylor, 2008, p. 152). Between two studies, Beck and Taylor used questionnaire’s to gauge informants’ perceptions and understandings of God and Satan then compared an informants strength of belief in Satan to their faith in a good God. What they found was that “persons [who] reported more robust notions of Satan also report[ed] more satisfying relationships with God” and that “subjects with more robust notions of Satan tended to blame God less for the suffering in human existence” (Beck & Taylor, 2008, p. 154, 156). With these two results, one can determine that more satisfying relationships with God come out of blaming God less for suffering. Beck and Taylor found that focusing that blame on Satan can make for better relationships with God. Both concepts can be seen in the Rwandan reaction to the genocide.

### **Part B. Trauma, Genocide, and God**

In my research, asking about perceptions of God after the genocide has led to hearing about how informants, especially survivors, coped with the trauma of the genocide. Psychology has provided extensive research on coping after trauma. Three studies of particular interest focus on coping with trauma for religious individuals. The first focuses broadly on religious changes after trauma, the second on Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, and the third on Christian survivors of the genocide against the Tutsi.

In the realm of psycho-social research there is plenty of data and studies on trauma and religious beliefs. One study in particular by Hager ter Kuile and Thomas Ehring looked at predictors of the changes in religiosity. Their study, in line with their hypotheses and past research, revealed that “nearly half of trauma survivors in this study experienced changes in their religious beliefs and activities. However, experiencing a decrease in religiosity was more likely

than an increase... This suggests that traumatic events are capable of dramatically changing beliefs and religious activities in a permanent fashion, which can have far reaching consequences for a trauma survivor's everyday life" (Kuile & Ehring, 2014, p. 353). Their research exploration provides a great basis for understanding the changes experienced by Rwandans from before to after the genocide.

A more specific study conducted by Sara Botwinick focused on the trauma and religious coping methods of four Jewish, Holocaust survivors. In her study, she looked at the ways in which a religious upbringing created resilience for the survivors of the genocide. Botwinick's results included the development of seven coping mechanisms and strategies that she discovered from the survivors' experiences. One coping mechanism Botwinick (2000) observed from her interviews was the victims' "faith in God and believing that God has chosen them to survive" (p. 230). Botwinick's research (2000) shows that religion provides space for expression of trauma in a way that "can be integrated systematically into the survivor's lives" (p. 232). For Botwinick, survivors' use of religion to cope with trauma came from their religious upbringing and the way the system of practice and belief provided the mechanisms they need to survive. Aside from the communal belief that the informants' survival came from God, very little of the study focused on the informants' belief in God but more so on the traditional and ritual parts of their Judaism.

The second specific study of interest was conducted by Nicole Fox of survivors of the genocide against the Tutsi now residing in the United States. Fox focused on whether or not the faith of Rwandan survivors acted as an obstacle or resource in their post-genocide life. Fox's data only coming from current survivors in the United States is a clear limitation of her study. However, her results are still worthy of note in terms of the current research. Fox develops that religion acted as a resource for the survivors not only in providing a framework for acceptance

and creating opportunities to serve but also in restoring a faith in God. Fox's informants "stated that 'coming back to God' after the genocide was the 'only way to survive, the only path to forgiveness'" (Fox, 2012, p. 71). Returning to God, from wherever the individual had been before, allowed opportunities for inner peace that brought gratitude for God and God's gifts. Of particular note is the way that Fox discusses the survivors' search for conceptualizing God. Fox (2012) explains, "For some, this meant relinquishing judgment to a God of supreme power with a grand plan that included the events of the genocide, whereas others embraced the opposed notion of a God of human attributes and some limitations who had not abandoned the Rwandan people but mourned with them" (p. 76). Beyond her brief discussion at the conclusion of her study, Fox does very little to develop the different perceptions of God, leaving room for further investigation.

### **Section 3. Definition of Key Concepts**

**Theology** – The study of the nature of God and the interpretation of matters of God and religion.

**God** – In this study specifically relating to the Abrahamic monotheistic God, this includes Jewish, Christian, Muslim perspectives on the Almighty. This study pertains only to the Christian views of God.

**Satan** – Commonly identified as the Prince of Evil, Satan in the Christian belief system was once a good angel that fell from heaven and became evil by his own doing.

**African Traditional Religions (ATR)** – The united religion of diverse traditional African belief systems and faith practices that share similarities within those belief systems and faith practices. An indigenous faith still practiced today.

**Survivor** – For the purposes of this study, survivor is a term given to any individual that was in Rwanda and targeted during the genocide.

**Perpetrator** – For the purposes of this study, perpetrator is a term given to any individual that was in Rwanda and participated in the execution of the genocide.

**Refugee** – For the purposes of this study, refugee is a term given to any individual that identifies as Rwandan but was not in the country during the events of the genocide.

**Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)** – The rebel front that entered Rwanda in 1990 from Uganda and is responsible for ending the genocide in 1994. Now the current ruling party.

## **Chapter IV: Presentation, Analysis, and Interpretation of the Data**

### **Section 1. Shift in the Perception of God**

Of the eleven interviews conducted, ten informants strongly agreed that their belief and relationship with God has strengthened. Before presenting the responses from the informant whose beliefs diminished, I will present the responses of the ten informants who perceived their beliefs in God increased from before to after the genocide. In terms of the change in belief between these ten informants, their role in the genocide played little to no part in how they believe differently.

#### **Part A. Before the genocide**

Survivors, perpetrators, and refugees alike, explained their newfound beliefs in a similar way. Of the ten whose beliefs strengthened, all but one had identified as Christian with a belief in God prior to the genocide. Every informant also spoke generally about the Rwandan population as a whole, explaining that all of Rwanda has developed a stronger belief in God. All of the informants that identified as Christian before the genocide attributed much of their religiosity to their family pushing them to go to church or teaching them about God. Many informants explained that their knowledge and relationship with God was limited to knowing that God existed and that God is good. When I questioned informants about their perceptions of good and evil before the genocide, all but two explicitly named God as the doer of good and Satan as the doer of evil. Those that were Christian explained that the role of a good Christian was to do good. One individual that identified as Christian before the genocide only went so far as to say that God existed, but explained that at the time he didn't think God played a role in his life. He testified that he "didn't yet understand God's love" (VI, personal communication, April 15, 2015).

Two informants, both survivors, described their experiences being born-again prior to the events of the genocide. One informant specifically explained that with all of the talk of people thinking about genocide his decision to be born-again made him closer to God. He believed “refuge was to be with God in the other life” and so before the genocide he accepted that refuge (III, personal communication, April 15, 2015). The other informant also made a reference to eternal life so that her belief in God would bring her peace in the end. Although being born-again, a spiritual rebirth or baptism, is an important rite of passage for Christians, both informants still put emphasis on their beliefs being stronger today than they were before the genocide.

The one individual that did not believe in God prior to the genocide, a genocide perpetrator, explained that his family practiced witchcraft. He had “heard of God but did not do what God said” (X, personal communication, April 22, 2015). He described how the sort of “events” that his family participated in included using shakers for sound, exclaiming bad words, and sacrificing cows and hens. He explained that all of these events were intended to praise grandfathers, continuing to describe it as witchcraft now that he “knows God” (X, personal communication, April 15, 2015).<sup>1</sup>

Before the genocide, of the ten informants who became more religious, five identified as Catholic, two identified as Protestant, and two identified as Anglican, plus the one who identified as performing witchcraft.

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<sup>1</sup> Although not of particular interest to the study, what he described as witchcraft seems to be the practice of ATR. The evidence of divination (tools, shakers, exclamations, sacrifices) to his ancestors (grandfather) lines up with what is known about ATR practices and beliefs. The fact that today he terms the practices as witchcraft most likely comes from the way that Christianity continues to define traditional religions as heretical and uncivilized.

**Part B. After the genocide**

Although every informant was quick to explain their more developed faith since the genocide, many prefaced it with the fact that God has not changed at all. These individuals make it clear that God's love and power has always existed, it is just a matter of their belief that has changed. It is those two elements of God, God's love and God's power, that came up most in the research. One informant felt his stronger beliefs to be an advantage saying, "Knowing God is powerful. It is valuable and precious" (I, personal communication, April 15, 2015). He can now understand his relationship with God and knows the way in which a Christian should live explaining that these were all things he hadn't known. He said, "Before, I believed that God could do anything but I now believe deeply" (I, personal communication, April 15, 2015). His sentiment was shared by the other informants as well, especially in terms of the deepness of their beliefs. One informant describes it as "now believing with my whole heart" (VI, personal communication, April 15, 2015). He went on, "God has changed my life, I am different than who I was" (VI, personal communication, April 15, 2015). For another, he explained that his Christianity is "no longer just words, but now my existence" (VII, personal communication, April 16, 2015). When re-asked about their perceptions of God's role in good and evil now, the informants responded similarly to how they did when discussing their perceptions before the genocide. The difference was that almost every informant referenced the genocide when explaining God as good and Satan as evil. I will explore these genocide references more deeply later in the paper.

Now, after the genocide, between the informants there is a much wider diversity between church identifications. Only one now identifies as Catholic, three identify as Protestant, two identify as Anglican, two identify as Pentecostal, one identifies as a Jehovah's Witness, and one

identifies as a Friend (Quaker). The change in religious landscape did not seem to have an effect on the belief in God. One informant who had trouble going to church after the events of the genocide explained that in her two years not going to church because “church was nonsense because Christians were killed” during the genocide, she continued to believe in God and read the Bible (IV, personal communication, April 15, 2015).<sup>2</sup> The informants didn’t describe their current church affiliation beyond explaining that it was the best pathway for their relationship with God. In this way, it seems that God comes before church today whereas before the genocide many explained that going to church with their families was the extent of their religious experience. Such a change in religious priority is clear evidence of a change in the perception of God.

### **Part C. A Diminished Belief**

As explained above, one informant, a survivor, expressed a diminished belief in God from before to after the genocide. This individual was raised in the Catholic Church and had a relationship with God prior to the genocide. His parents were extremely religious before both being killed in the genocide. When he was growing up, his morality was based on God’s teachings and his belief that God was always watching his actions. Even as he grew older and became skeptical of the Church, he continued to pray directly to God.

Today, however, that skepticism has infiltrated his belief in God as well. He explained that “rationally I don’t believe in God” (VIII, personal communication, April 21, 2015). Although he feels that this kind of belief is a betrayal to his mother who was so devout that she was praying for her killers just before her death, he still has too much trouble believing. On top of that, “It is complicated to not believe in Rwanda”, he explained making note of the extreme

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<sup>2</sup> The noticeable change in Catholicism as an identity can be interpreted based on the events of the genocide and the choices of the Catholic Church but for the purposes of this study will not be addressed further.



religiosity of his fellow citizens (VIII, personal communication, April 21, 2015). I will develop the factors that led him to his current state of nonbelief later in the paper.

## **Section 2. Factors of the Shift in Perception of God**

Although the actual shift in perception of God was not divided between lines of survivors, refugees, and perpetrators, the factors that caused those shifts do divide between those lines. Based on the research, survivors and refugees had similar experiences (though with different severity) that caused their perception and belief in God to shift, whereas perpetrators had much different experiences that explain their shift. Throughout this section, not only will I explore the informants' experiences but will also explore their perceptions of God's role in the genocide. For this section, I will include the declining belief in God of the one informant as a part of the survivor experience.

Through the research I found that the greatest factors that caused the informants' shift in the perception of God revolved around the way they conceptualized God's role during and after the genocide. For survivors and refugees, they perceived God as the reason they were still alive and perpetrators perceived God as the reason they were so easily forgiven.

### **Part A. The Survivor and Refugee Experience**

The only difference between the individuals interviewed that are defined as survivors and refugees is that refugees were able to be outside the country at some point before the height of the violence. Both groups of people were targeted during the genocide and thus had similar fears about their imminent death. With their death such a real possibility, even for those that had fled to an outside country, and every informant having had some sort of relationship with God before the genocide, many survivors and refugees prayed to God for their survival. All but the

informant whom lost faith in God, believes that their prayers were answered and that it is the number one factor that has strengthened their faith in God.

For the informant who can no longer rationally believe in God, he explained that when he prayed straight to God he became frustrated when, as he says, “my prayers didn’t catch anything” (VIII, personal communication, April 21, 2015). He lost both of his parents, a brother, and a sister in the genocide and struggled as he watched the Catholic Church, that he had grown up in, facilitate the killings of so many. Looking back, although after the genocide he searched for a rekindling of faith in Islam and later in Catholicism, not feeling God during the genocide and having his prayers remain unanswered makes it easier to not believe in God today. Also, what he attributes to his non-belief today is the amount of traveling outside of Rwanda he did after the genocide. Directly after, he lived in Tanzania for a short time before travelling to other parts of Africa and spending a number of years in the United Kingdom. He believes that his distance allowed him the ability to make his own conclusions about his faith.

Every other survivor and refugee had a different perception of God during the genocide believing that God was in Rwanda and was answering prayers. Three of the six refugees and survivors interviewed explicitly told of asking God directly for God’s grace in protecting them during the killings. One refugee prayed for safety on his way to Congo and felt, “God protected me in passing” (V, personal communication, April 15, 2015). A survivor explained that she prayed and told God, “God if you protect me, I will work for you” (IV, personal communication, April 15, 2015). She feels that her purpose now is to fulfill her promise to God because God saved her. Another survivor, when explaining his prayers for safety, displayed a wound in his side that had come from getting stabbed and left to die. He prayed, “God, I feel like I’m not dead. If you pick me up, I will work for you” (VII, personal communication, April 16, 2015). For

those that mentioned their explicit prayers to God, their subsequent survival acts as a large factor for why their faith in God has increased. Even those that didn't recount a specific prayer to God, still attribute their survival to God's power.

The refugees and survivors not only attributed their own survival to God but also attributed the end of the genocide to God, pointing to God's ultimate power in the world. Again, just as it had been for a belief in God, informants seemed to think it was assumed that God was ultimately responsible for ending the killing. One informant even explained that it was God working in the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) that ended the genocide. He said, "God used the RPF to save the few [still alive], it is because of God" (I, personal communication, April 15, 2015).<sup>3</sup> He continued, "Perpetrators wanted to kill everyone, but God did not allow that" (I, personal communication, April 15, 2015). Whether an informant mentioned the RPF or not, they all presented God's will and God's power as the primary force that ended the genocide.

While the survivors and refugees attributed the end of the genocide to God, when asked about why the genocide took place, survivors and refugees put the genocide into the context of God's greater plan; a plan that humans cannot understand but has brought about reconciliation and development in Rwanda. Although not all, some informants also explicitly held Satan accountable for the evil actions of the killers. One mentioned that "Satan possessed all killers" (I, personal communication, April 15, 2015). Even for those that didn't directly assign the evil actions in the genocide to Satan, their current perceptions of good and evil assign all evil actions to Satan.

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<sup>3</sup> Although this informant was the only one to explicitly mention God's work in the RPF, the RPF militarily ending the genocide and the people's perceptions that God's power ended the genocide clearly links the two together. Here, one can interpret one of the many factors that makes the RPF so supported in Rwanda. If people believe that God used the RPF they would go on to believe the God continues to use the RPF, giving the party divine power. The connection of the RPF as God's party has the possibility of dangerous implications but that is beyond the scope of this research.

Though many perceive that Satan's power causes evil action, "the power of God is above everything" and so the informants believe that the genocide occurred because God allowed it to (I, personal communication, April 15, 2015). The informants continually articulated God's greater plan. As some rationalization, informants pointed to the good governance, development, and reconciliation happening in Rwanda. One survivor captured some of the positive outcomes of the genocide and new government by saying, "Without the genocide people could still hate me...[but now] my country does not fight with Satan but fights for peace and security" (VII, personal communication, April 16, 2015). Many informants agreed that God did not immediately stop the genocide for good reasons. One survivor claims God's reasoning was to "test the faith of people who said they were Christian" (IV, personal communication, April 15, 2015). When asked why it took God so long to end the genocide, another survivor said that people must be patient for God's promises to come. He explained, "A day to God is like 1000 days. Wait for God's promise. It will come" (III, personal communication, April 15, 2015). The informants' responses to their conceptions of God in the genocide point to the factors that strengthened their beliefs afterward. With the exception of one survivor, the answering of their prayers and God's power ending the genocide were the factors that most caused the shift in their perceptions of God's goodness and power.

### **Part B. The Perpetrator Experience**

Whereas survivors' and refugees' faith in God that led them to prayer during the genocide acted as a factor in shifting their perceptions of God, perpetrators agreed that God was not a part of their experience during the genocide at all. The perpetrators rather found God again after the genocide most notably due to the forgiveness and reconciliation they received from the country, in their opinion due to the will of God.

All five of the informants identified as perpetrators stressed that during the genocide they did not know God. The references by perpetrators were explicit such as, “I questioned if God even existed” (II, personal communication, April 15, 2015), “Everyone was saying God doesn’t exist and so God didn’t exist” (IX, personal communication, April 22, 2015), “In genocide, I did not know God” (X, personal communication, April 22, 2015), and “Everyone was forgetting God and knowing that God doesn’t exist” (XI, personal communication, April 22, 2015). The only informant that at the time of genocide felt that God was part of his experience explained that he believed God promoted the killings of the bad Tutsi. Now, with his newfound faith, he looks back on the events and his actions recounting, “God is not a part of people who do evil things. In genocide there was no law of God” (VI, personal communication, April 15, 2015). The perpetrators believed that it was the absence of God in their hearts or their false belief in God that allowed them to do evil and for the genocide to happen. They didn’t blame God for being absent but rather put blame on themselves allowing Satan to infiltrate their hearts.

Just as some survivors and refugees explained the evil actions by the perpetrators as results of Satan’s power, most perpetrators explained it the same way. Many felt that the evil that they had done was due to Satan. “It was Satan who came in the hearts of people,” (X, personal communication, April 22, 2015) one perpetrator explained with another saying “Satan gets his power from others doing evil and Satan had so much power [during genocide]...someone did evil with the purpose of Satan” (XI, personal communication, April 22, 2015). Perpetrators did not explain much about their role or activities during the genocide, even when attributing their actions to Satan’s power.

The point in which perpetrators were most explicit about their experiences was when they began discussing the forgiveness and reconciliation in Rwanda. Here too is where perpetrators

testified to finding God for the first time after the genocide. One perpetrator explained that because he could “quit evil things and ask for forgiveness...God has changed his life” (VI, personal communication, April 15, 2015). When I asked another informant why he now believes in God, he replied in detail the factors that account for his current beliefs:

Today I believe in God because today I can sleep...I was afraid of people that I had done bad things to. My heart was hurting, [but] once you have asked forgiveness, your heart comes down. You are not afraid when you met those you hurt...When the family that you did bad things to forgives you, you feel like you are between God. The forgiveness shows that God exists...I thank God for the good relationships with people that I did bad things to. God has forgiven me. (IX, personal communication, April 22, 2015)

The sentiment of God role in reconciliation was shared by all of the perpetrators interviewed.

They believe that God’s goal is the development and reconciliation of Rwanda.

Even while perpetrators believed they had a more personal encounter with Satan’s power, they still believed the genocide itself was a part of God’s plan. Similarly to the survivors and refugees interviewed, perpetrators explained such things as, “Those killed may have been sacrifice for peace and democracy...God has chosen for those people to die...for God maybe it is a good thing” (II, personal communication, April 15, 2015), “God has His plan for everyone. God accepts some to die not because He hates them” (VI, personal communication, April 15, 2015), and “I know the plan of God is to create good things for people but God allows bad things to reach on people” (X, personal communication, April 22, 2015). For these perpetrators, the good outcomes of forgiveness and reconciliation point to God’s purpose of the genocide. The informants agree that their role in the genocide came from the evil of Satan whereas the genocide itself was a part of God’s greater plan. It was in the forgiveness that they felt and the

reconciliation that has been happening in Rwanda that has been the greatest factor that has increased these perpetrators' beliefs in God.

### **Section 3. Analysis of Results and Outcomes**

Relying on the literature previously explored in Chapter III, I can explain and analyze the findings of this study. By addressing the studies on Satan and coping reviewed above, I can analyze the reasons as to why the factors that brought about a shift in the perception of God exist. With that, a brief understanding of Rwanda's religious tradition can act as the backdrop for an understanding of the current Rwandan perceptions of God.

ATR, although almost completely silenced in Rwanda, still plays a role in the way religion acts in the culture. As Mbiti explained, religion permeated through society while ATR was at its height in African communities. The adoption of Christianity in Rwanda did not disconnect religion from society, but rather made both religion and society adapt to each other. As I witnessed throughout the interviews, religion continues to be assumed and still, "Africans don't question the reality of God" (Manganyi & Buitendag, 2013, p. 3). Knowing this, it makes sense that even after the genocide, the majority of the country still assumed God's existence. So, the pressure was not on Rwandans to discover whether or not God exists after such horrendous events, but rather to explain how God exists.

For the informant that lost faith in God after the genocide (VIII), his experiences outside of the country provided him the opportunity to distance himself from the culture of religiosity and assumed belief in God. In that way, he could more critically address his struggles with the belief in God and the evil he witnessed and experienced in the genocide. Of course though, his beliefs could have been similar even if he had stayed in Rwanda. With only one informant able to articulate his loss of faith, I cannot make conclusions on the connections between individuals

that have lost faith. However, he is not alone with his diminished faith in God. Even in a culture of extreme religious belief, people revealed to me that there are some Rwandans who lost their faith. In the context of Kuile and Ehring's (2014) study on trauma victims' changes in religiosity, with more traumatized individuals losing rather than gaining faith, the few Rwandans' religious reaction to their trauma is reasonable. It is Rwanda's culture of extreme faith that explains the drastic differences between Kuile and Ehring's study and the majority of Rwanda's reaction to trauma.

For those whose faith strengthened, reacting to the trauma of genocide for survivors, refugees, and perpetrators alike was, as mentioned above, not to question God's existence but to explain God's existence. The informants had many different ways to explain God's existence during and after the genocide. All of those different ways can be seen as both means of coping and reconciliation. For survivors and refugees that comes from reconciling their perception of God and the evil that they witnessed and experienced. For perpetrators it comes from the need to reconcile with those that they hurt during the genocide and cope with what they did by explaining why they did it. Overall, individuals produce this reconciliation and coping for themselves through their insistence that God willed the genocide for a purpose.

The informants who displayed a stronger belief in God after the genocide than before, share the perceptions of the majority of informants in the Ray, et al (2014) study that focused on the attribution of positive and negative life events to God or Satan. The findings revealed that the majority of people conceptualize negative life events through the belief that God has a grand purpose. By believing that the genocide was a part of God's plan, whether to strengthen the government, develop the economy, reconcile the people, or any other reason, Rwandans are able to see God's intentions and power as still being good. For many of the informants, it was not



important to understand what God's intentions were since they could never truly understand them. That view of God as mysterious and unknowable, parallels the God of ATR.

Understanding God is not what is important, rather what is important is faith in God. They are able to believe that although what happened was bad, God allowed it for the betterment of the Rwandan people.

To further their ability to not place blame on God for the evil of the genocide, the informants held Satan responsible for evil actions in the world. Again paralleled to the Ray, et al (2014) study, the informants placed blame on Satan for infiltrating the minds of the perpetrators and using them for Satan's purpose. In that way Satan's role was psychologically based tempting the killings in the genocide. With that, Satan can be blamed for the role of the perpetrators whereas God can still be perceived as holding the ultimate power and allowing the genocide for the greater good.

Of particular interest is although all of the informants with a strengthened faith attributed evil to Satan, it was the perpetrators who placed the most blame on Satan for tempting their actions during the genocide. Here, the perpetrators are attempting to cope with the evil that they committed and shift some of the blame off of themselves. Although for the purposes of reconciliation many perpetrators have come to terms with their evil and asked forgiveness, alleviating some of the pain of their actions by attributing the evil to Satan may still be necessary to live with themselves after their role in the genocide.

The perception of Satan as responsible for all evil also works to explain the ability for the majority of Rwandans to continue to have a strong relationship with God. As Beck and Taylor (2008) found in their study of monotheistic belief, the more one believes in Satan's role in the world the easier it is to believe in one omnipotent God. Rwandans display this belief in Satan in

a way that continues to allow God to be free from blame for human suffering and rather be seen as a beacon of light in Satan's darkness.

Even in the face of darkness during and after the genocide, the informants who felt more connected with God after the genocide, were able to find God's light in their experiences. For survivors and refugees, that light came from God allowing their survival in the genocide. As Botwinick (2000) concluded through her interviews with Holocaust survivors, the faith that God acted as their savior was one of seven coping mechanisms she witnessed. Survivors of the genocide against the Tutsi are coping with their survival over that of their family or friends by explaining it as God's plan. By once again placing God's power and plan at the forefront of their beliefs, survivors are able to live with their survival.

For perpetrators, the light of God came out of the forgiveness that they received from the country and the reconciliation they continue to be a part of. Clearly, the forgiveness acts as a way to cope with their past. Attributing their evil past to Satan and their bright, reconciled future to God makes it easy for them to explain their faith in God. In order to reintegrate into a society of extreme religiosity, that faith in God is important.

Of all the informants' testimonies on God, the most common display of God's goodness came out of their belief in God ending the genocide. Attributing the evil actions of the perpetrators to Satan and putting the genocide in the context of God's plan are both coping mechanisms for religious individuals. The faith that God inevitably stopped the deaths of Tutsis and ended the genocide provided the informants with the most evidence of God as good. That faith in God's ultimate goodness is the main reason why ten of the eleven informants interviewed felt an increase in their faith in God from before to after the genocide.

#### **Section 4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Rwanda's religious strength since the genocide is a phenomenon of faith. How so many individuals were able to strengthen their faith in God after one of the most devastating events in human history, for some, is beyond understanding. However, this study attempts to determine the change in belief for individuals from before to after the genocide and understand the factors that caused that change. In the end, the analysis of the outcomes of these objectives provides a look into why most victims, perpetrators, and refugees needed God in order to cope with the trauma and wounds of the genocide. Although one cannot apply the results of this qualitative study generally to all of Rwanda, the understanding of how at least eleven Rwandans perceive God today after their experiences in the genocide does portray the role that God can play in the lives of people affected by conflict, evil, and trauma.

God above all provided survivors, perpetrators, and refugees a way to cope with their genocide experiences. Then, Satan and a belief in God's plan provided a way for the informants to cope with the struggle of understanding evil in the face of a good God. One informant did not share the beliefs that the other ten did, however his beliefs are still representative of others in Rwanda. For him, the idea of Satan's power and God's plan did not explain the existence of evil enough to overcome his doubts in God. With the vast majority of informants, though, affirming their faith in God far more than they had before the genocide says something extremely powerful about their ability to believe. Continuing to understand how God can have a positive effect on the lives of those that live through conflict and trauma can also have powerful implications for healing the wounds of the world.

Whether or not someone believes in God themselves, the way in which the beliefs of the few Rwandans I interviewed helped to heal their genocide wounds cannot be denied. Even

though their beliefs can be analyzed and rationalized as methods of coping, the ability for those beliefs to make a positive difference in their lives is legitimate. One can argue that their perceptions of God have been adopted and created out of convenience to help them deal with their past and yet still cannot scientifically deny God's existence or the reality of the informants' perceptions. If the beliefs of Rwandans, whether beliefs in God or not, allow for the healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation that is so needed in the country, who is to say whether those beliefs even need to be true? Isn't their impact enough? The power of God very well may come from just being something to believe in.

For future research I recommend a more specified study of each group (survivor, perpetrator, and refugee) involved in the genocide to get a more developed understanding of how and why they believe what they do based on their experiences. Also, an analysis of psychological mechanisms in the country, whether counseling or therapy, to help Rwandans cope with the genocide, would provide interesting comparison to the coping in the county as a result of religious belief. Further, a comparative study on the beliefs of individuals from other genocides in history could provide an intriguing picture into the role that culture plays in promoting or discouraging faith after trauma.

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## Appendix A – Interview Protocol

**Interview Protocol – Questionnaire**  
**4/15/2015**

*Overarching Question: As a Rwandan effected by the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi how, if at all, has your perception of God changed from before the genocide to after the genocide? How do you conceptualize God's role in the genocide?*

Warm up/recorder check: We would like to gather some background information about you in your own words

a) Describe yourself --- age, education, family, time in Rwanda

1. I would like to begin by discussing your perceptions of God prior to the genocide.

- a) Did you belong to a particular church or denomination growing up?
- b) Did you have a personal relationship with God before the genocide?
- c) How, if in any way, did you believe God effected your life?
- d) What, if any, role did you believe God played in good and evil before the genocide?

2. The majority of this interview will deal with how your experiences in the genocide may have changed how you viewed God.

- a) How, if at all, was God related or apart of your experiences in the genocide?
- b) How would you describe your thoughts on God during your experiences in the genocide?
- c) What role did you believe God had in your actions or reactions during the genocide?

3. Now, I would like to transition to after the events of the genocide and any possible shift in your views of God.

- a) After the genocide, have you remained apart of your particular church or denomination? Why or why not?
- b) Has your personal relationship with God, if you had one, changed after the genocide?
- c) Now, how do you believe God effected your life in the genocide?
- d) What, if any role do you now believe God plays in good and evil?

4. Based on your answers to the last questions I want to probe into why you believe your perception of God has or not changed.

- a) Explain why you believe any of the shifts that you have described occurred?
- b) What about the genocide changed your views and beliefs in God?

Closing: We are coming to the end of the interview. Is there anything else you would like to add?

## Appendix B – Interview Informants

<b>Informant</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Date of Inquiry</b>
I	Refugee to Burundi	36	Male	April 15, 2015
II	Perpetrator	45	Male	April 15, 2015
III	Survivor	45	Male	April 15, 2015
IV	Survivor	40	Female	April 15, 2015
V	Refugee to Congo	57	Male	April 15, 2015
VI	Perpetrator	45	Male	April 15, 2015
VII	Survivor	35	Male	April 16, 2015
VIII	Survivor*	41	Male	April 21, 2015
IX	Perpetrator	43	Male	April 22, 2015
X	Perpetrator	48	Male	April 22, 2015
XI	Perpetrator	58	Male	April 22, 2015

\* Interview conducted in English