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# A Spirituality of Reconciliation: Lessons from Rwanda

Marian Maskulak, CPS


## Abstract

Robert Schreiter has examined the topic of a Christian understanding of reconciliation in the context of large scale global violence. One of his key notions is that, along with God's grace, forgiveness extended by the victim to the oppressor is the primary element that opens the path towards reconciliation. In this way, the victim acts as the subject or agent of reconciliation. Significantly, the object of reconciliation is the oppressor's humanity – not the act committed. Such a position correlates well with Julian of Norwich's depiction of a God of no blame and no wrath which may be best understood when one distinguishes between persons and their sinful acts. While work towards social and individual reconciliation continues in post-genocide Rwanda, a number of bona fide acts of forgiveness by survivors are supportive of these views. Without dismissing the need for human accountability and for injustices to be addressed, people such as Immaculée Ilibagiza and Célestin Musekura have been able to take that first step of forgiving by distinguishing between the humanity of the perpetrator and the act committed. Their concrete examples provide a closer look at the dynamics of a Christian spirituality of reconciliation in its theological and practical realms.



## Keywords

Reconciliation, Robert Schreiter, Julian of Norwich, Immaculée Ilibagiza, Célestin Musekura, Rwanda


The idea of reconciliation holds a tenuous position in a world that continues to witness far too many violent conflicts that tragically destroy or uproot people's lives. From a Christian perspective, reconciliation lies at the heart of the gospel message, conveyed through Jesus' life, passion, death, and resurrection. But despite its centrality, reconciliation poses great challenges and often seems to be lacking even in the daily lives of Christians who are far removed from any type of violent conflict. Nevertheless, contemporary stories of reconciliation

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continue to surface that can teach and inspire. Some truly remarkable stories of reconciliation have come out of post-genocide Rwanda, a country where large-scale efforts have been made to restore peace and civic trust. Such accounts demonstrate that reconciliation is indeed complex and demanding, but yet, possible.

This essay examines some dynamics, of a Christian understanding of reconciliation in its theological and practical realms. I begin by considering the thought of Robert Schreiter as conveyed in his works, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* and *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies*. Two images underlie Schreiter's theological reflection on a spirituality of reconciliation – the loving God who reconciles the world to Godself through Christ, and the resurrected Jesus as the victim raised to new life who heals, forgives, and commissions. To these I add another, more provocative image of God that is portrayed in Julian of Norwich's *Showings* – a God of no blame and no wrath. I propose that distinguishing between human beings themselves and human acts is key to understanding Julian's challenging perception of God. Following these theological considerations, the essay moves on to the practical realm. After presenting a brief overview of some of the efforts directed towards restorative justice and reconciliation in Rwanda, I highlight some work by the Rwandan Catholic bishops and Catholic Relief Services that was aimed at facilitating reconciliation. Finally, I consider the stories of forgiveness of two better known Rwandans, Immaculée Ilibagiza and Célestin Musekura. Acknowledging the need for God's grace in the reconciliation process, I submit that these concrete examples support the idea that forgiveness extended by the victim is the prime element of Christian reconciliation and concur with Schreiter that forgiveness is both a process and a decision for a new future that is founded on a relationship with God.[1] I further suggest that the core component in the process of forgiving is the victim's ability to distinguish between the humanity of the perpetrator and the act committed. It is this recognition of the perpetrator's humanity and the corresponding distinction between the human being and the human act(s) committed that provides the impetus towards forgiveness. This corresponds with Schreiter's position that the object of reconciliation is "the humanity of the deed's perpetrator," not the deed committed.[2] Likewise, I submit that Julian's notion of a God of no blame and no wrath correlates with this distinction between person and act, and that persons who are able to forgive provide a glimpse of this image of God. Nevertheless,

[1] Robert Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation: Spirituality and Strategies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), pp. 15, 58.

[2] Robert Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry in a Changing Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), p. 45.

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these views on forgiveness do not in any way dismiss the need for human beings to be held accountable for their actions, for justice to be served, and for injustices to be addressed and righted.

## Spirituality of Reconciliation

Robert Schreiter has examined the topic of a Christian understanding of reconciliation against the political backdrop of large scale violence found globally. Distinguishing between social and individual reconciliation,[3] Schreiter submits that the social aspect of reconciliation involves "providing structures and processes whereby a fractured society can be reconstructed as truthful and just," come to terms with its past, punish wrongdoers, provide some degree of reparation to victims, and promote an atmosphere of trust.[4] Related to the social, the individual aspect of reconciliation contributes to "rebuilding shattered lives so that social reconciliation becomes a reality."[5] As Schreiter rightly points out, while governments can set up commissions, offer amnesty, and administer punishment, they "cannot legislate the healing of memories" or guarantee forgiveness.[6] The following focuses mainly on Schreiter's perception of individual reconciliation.

The term reconciliation is found in the Pauline and Deuteropauline writings. In Romans 5:10-12 and 2 Corinthians 5:18-19, Paul makes it clear that human reconciliation with God is God's work, not ours. Extending this notion, Schreiter submits that reconciliation between humans themselves also needs to be recognized as coming from God, but with an invitation for the human being to take part in the process. Rather than trying to find a way to forgive within oneself, the individual needs to discover God's mercy welling up in one's own life. As borne out in many situations globally, the complex task of reconciliation exceeds human effort alone.[7]

Schreiter names three characteristics of a spirituality of reconciliation. The first is "an attitude of listening and waiting" that allows victims to tell their story repeatedly in order to escape what he calls "the narrative of the lie." Attention and compassion comprise the second characteristic, and for the third, Schreiter borrows the

[3] See Anna Floerke Scheid, "Interpersonal and Social Reconciliation: Finding Congruence in African Theological Anthropology," *Horizons* 39 no. 1 (2012), pp. 27-28. Without denying the usefulness of such a distinction, Floerke Scheid notes that this distinction may be less meaningful in cultures such as African communitarian societies where such a dichotomy is absent.

[4] Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, p. 4.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry*, pp. 42-43, 59; Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, pp. 12, 14.

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terminology "post-exilic stance" from South African theologian Charles Villa-Vicencio to convey the idea that "A new society has to be constructed on the ruins of the old."[8] Regarding the attitude of listening and waiting, Schreiter holds that violence destroys "the narratives that sustain people's identities and substitute[s] narratives of its own."[9] By retelling their story, victims "begin to construct a new narrative of truth that can include the experiences of suffering and violence without allowing those experiences to overwhelm it."[10] However, while telling one's story plays an important role in the process of reconciliation, the idea of the healing effect of "repeatedly" telling one's story has been challenged by Karen Brounéus who studied the effects of witnessing in Rwanda's gacaca courts. Brounéus found a higher level of posttraumatic stress disorder and depression among witnesses than among non-witnesses, suggesting that the experience caused more distress than healing. Furthermore, she discovered that the prolongation of the truth-telling process did not have a healing effect, possibly indicating that the process involved "an ineffective, repetitive exposure to suffering, similar to what is known as rumination in psychology." Rumination, "the incessant, repetitive thinking of past trauma," works as an avoidance strategy that evades successful emotional processing.[11]

I believe that some of Schreiter's most significant contributions center around his recognition that Christian reconciliation reverses the commonly held perception that reconciliation first requires the perpetrator to repent and seek forgiveness and reparation, as is found in theories of social reconciliation. In Schreiter's view, it is the victim, aware of God's forgiveness in one's own life, who is brought to forgive the oppressor. Guided by God's grace, the victim becomes "the agent of reconciliation." The oppressor may then be moved to repent of his/her wrongdoing. Schreiter emphasizes that this reversal does not mean placing blame on the victim but properly orders the subject and object of reconciliation. The victim is the subject of reconciliation and "the object of reconciliation is not the violent deed done, but the humanity of the deed's perpetrator."[12] He asserts that "God begins with the victim, restoring to the victim the humanity which the wrongdoer has tried to wrest away or destroy," and Schreiter holds this restoration of the victim's humanity to be at the heart of

[8] Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry*, pp. 71-73.

[9] Ibid., p. 34.

[10] Ibid., p. 71.

[11] Karen Brounéus, "The Trauma of Truth Telling: Effects of Witnessing in the Rwandan Gacaca Courts on Psychological Health," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54 no. 3 (2010), pp. 425-427.

[12] Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry*, pp. 45, 49.

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reconciliation.[13] His stance does not intend to remove responsibility for taking action on the side of either the victim or oppressor. He also stresses that human forgiveness involves a process, often long and difficult, of being freed from the power of the past. Furthermore, while neither ignoring nor forgetting the past, forgiveness is also a decision to pursue a different future.[14]

A nurtured relationship with God is the means that makes this type of reconciliation possible.[15] In this way, Schreiter perceives reconciliation to be more of a spirituality – a way of life – rather than a strategy.[16] A spirituality "that recognizes and responds to God's reconciling action in the world" undergirds a successful reconciliatory process and comprises a way of life, not a series of distinct tasks to be performed. More than restoration, reconciliation involves transformation of both victim and oppressor, described in the words of scripture as bringing about "a new creation."[17] This transformation neither denies nor eradicates the experiences of injustice and violence, but adds the new experience of reconciliation to those past events.[18] In forgiving, part of a victim's transformed self is evidenced by "the astonishing care that victims can provide for their own oppressors, their uncanny ability to help not only other victims, but also their oppressors discover their humanity."[19]

But while reconciliation may be more a spirituality than a strategy, Schreiter recognizes that strategies are also needed. Overemphasis on strategy conveys the idea that reconciliation is a learnable technique that merely requires the right tactics. On the other hand, spirituality that does not lead to action and strategies also fails. A balance is required between the two, with spirituality guiding the strategy. Noting the strong communal aspect of Christianity, Schreiter notes that a spirituality of reconciliation includes building communities of reconciliation where victims can safely examine their wounds and where memory can be recovered so that "people can come to common memory of the past" and learn to again speak the truth. Communities of reconciliation are communities of hope that work to build a common future built on justice and truth.[20]

For his reflections on reconciliation, Schreiter draws on two images of God. The first is probably the most frequently used in reflections

[13] Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, p. 15.
[14] Ibid., pp. 15, 58.
[15] Ibid., p. 16.
[16] Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry*, *p.* 60; Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, p. 16.
[17] Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry*, pp. 60-61.
[18] Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, p. 17.
[19] Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry*, p. 56.
[20] Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, pp. vi, 16-17, 94-95.

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on reconciliation – the loving God who reconciles the world to Godself through Christ. One might guess that the second image would be that of the forgiving Jesus as depicted in his ministry and on the cross, but Schreiter highlights a new perspective. His second image is the resurrected Jesus as the victim raised to new life who offers healing and forgiveness, and commissions his disciples to carry out his message and mission.[21] To these two powerful images, I would like to add another, more challenging one – the God of no blame and no wrath.

## The God of No Blame and No Wrath

In *Showings*, Julian of Norwich (c.1342 – 1416) conveys a series of visions that she experienced when she was 30 years old, along with her later reflections upon them. One of the themes that I find most provoking is Julian's emphasis on the idea that there is neither blame nor wrath in God. Such an image of God was possibly meant as a corrective to an image of a blaming, wrathful, punishing God portrayed in sermons during Julian's time. But it also carries a timely message for the contemporary world where human blame and wrath often run rampant as seen on all levels of social media. Yet, given the scriptural references to God's wrath and the notion of God's justice, the idea of a God of no blame and no wrath is bound to meet resistance and needs to be examined.

Julian attributes the lack of blame on God's part to God's courtesy, love, and Jesus' taking on the blame.[22] While she does not define her understanding of "blame," I suggest that Julian intends more than simply an objective accusation of another related to their wrongdoing. I identify her use of the term with the sense of blaming that carries hateful, judgmental, or condemning undertones, and I offer the following reasons to support this position. First, Julian distinguishes between God's judgment and human judgment. God's justice is fair, loving, and assigns no blame, and while human judgment can imitate God's judgment, it can also be difficult and painful. Moreover, not finding blame or wrath in God puzzled Julian because she understood the Church's view of judgment that emphasized one's knowledge of being a sinner who at times deserves blame and wrath.[23] Secondly, Julian does not disregard human accountability. On the contrary, she specifically maintains that humans are accountable for sins

[21] Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry*, p. 42; Schreiter, *The Ministry of Reconciliation*, p. 22.

[22] Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, ed. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (New York: Paulist, 1978), LT 28, 39, 51. References are to chapters of the Long Text (LT) of *Showings*.

[23] Ibid., LT 45, 50.

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committed but in doing so, she does not convey any demeaning connotations. While counseling contrition and sacramental confession, she depicts God as desiring sinners to "meekly" and "willingly" accuse themselves, mindful of the harmful consequences of their actions, yet fully cognizant of God's love and mercy.[24] Furthermore, Julian writes that God desires humans to acknowledge their sins, but without remaining in misery or excessive self-accusation. Nor does God wish people to despair because of frequent or grave sins, for nothing can deter God's love. Sinners should confidently return to God as to a mother.[25] Finally, the various instances of harsh blaming in Europe during the 14th century may have been what Julian had in mind when she was writing about blame. Jews were blamed for the Black Death, and although Jews had been expelled from England in 1290, there is little reason to think that anti-semitism quickly vanished or that the cruel accusation of blame did not reach England. Likewise, blame for a Peasants' Revolt in England in 1381 was placed on the teachings of John Wycliffe.[26]

Regarding wrath, Julian writes that God never was nor will be angry because God's goodness, truth, love, peace, friendship, and love are contrary to wrath. She calls wrath a perversity opposed to peace and love which humans are more than capable of carrying out. In Julian's view, God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness work to abate *human* wrath and transform humans to beings of peace, meekness, and mildness.[27] But while Julian saw no wrath in God, there were plenty of her contemporaries who did. For example, some viewed the Black Death and other calamities of the time as God's wrathful punishment for sin. This belief was reflected in letters by church leaders of the time, as well as by flagellants who hoped to appease God's wrath through self-inflicted punishment.[28]

Given the above factors, it seems reasonable that the image of a God of no blame and no wrath was meant to counter the image of a blaming, wrathful God during Julian's time. Nevertheless, the Scripture references to God's wrath may appear to contradict Julian's thought. I propose that recognizing the object of God's wrath to be sin, not the sinner, lends support to Julian's image. In other words, God's wrath is directed towards human *deeds*, not human beings.

[24] Ibid., LT 39, 52.

[25] Ibid., LT 39, 61, 79.

[26] Julia Bolton Holloway, *Anchoress and Cardinal: Julian of Norwich and Adam Easton, O.S.B.* (Salzburg: Salzburg University, 2008), pp. 160, 224.

[27] Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, LT 13, 46, 48-49. Emphasis mine.

[28] Rosemary Horrox, ed., *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University, 1994), pp. 95, 113, 115, 118-20, 153-54. For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Marian Maskulak, "Julian of Norwich and the God of No Blame and No Wrath," *Magistra: A Journal of Women's Spirituality in History* 17 no. 2 (Winter 2011), pp. 71-87.

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Such an understanding is consonant with the adage, "love the sinner but hate the sin." This perception parallels Schreiter's position that the object of reconciliation is the oppressor's humanity, not the violent deed.[29] Even with the worst sins, Christianity requires the clear distinction between the sinner and the sin, with any rage directed toward the sin, not the sinner. This, of course, is a great challenge for human beings, but surely not for God. For most people, making such a distinction usually takes time and often does not occur at all. But scripture assures us that sinners are not excluded from God's love. Unfortunately, history is replete with examples of blaming, wrathful human beings meting out punishment to the fullest extent in the name of God.

And what about God's justice? It seems to me that understanding God's wrath as being directed toward human deeds rather than human beings themselves does not in any way discount God's justice. Scripture strongly relates God's concern that justice be done on earth and that God liberates the oppressed. The challenge is to carry out justice without dehumanizing even those who have dehumanized others. Working for justice is essential, but seeking justice against even the worst oppressions cannot ignore the humanity of the oppressor. The story of Cain conveys that God's justice also extends to perpetrators. Even a number of legal systems in the world are set up so that ideally, the just rights of both victim and perpetrator are sought to be protected.

The idea of a God of no blame and no wrath is difficult to grasp, but relating this image of God to human justice systems might be helpful. I suggest that an understanding of God as directing disparaging blame and wrath towards the human being models the perspective often fostered by a system of retributive justice where punishment of the offender is sought for the crime committed without concern for any reconciliation between victim and offender, and often with more concern for the punishment rendered than the humanity of the offender. On the other hand, the image of a God of no blame and no wrath matches better with a restorative justice approach that "emphasizes the humanity of both offenders and victims [and] . . . seeks repair of social connections and peace rather than retribution against the offenders."[30]

An understanding of reconciliation that incorporates Julian's image of a God of no blame and no wrath maintains the importance of holding people accountable for their deeds and seeking justice for the oppressed without acting out on feelings of hateful blame and wrath in ways that harm or denigrate the perpetrator. This requires the

[29] Schreiter, *Reconciliation: Mission and Ministry*, p. 45.

[30] Martha Minow, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), p. 92.

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ability to distinguish between the humanity of the perpetrator and the act committed. Yet, awareness of this distinction does not occur without conscious effort and God's grace. As Schreiter points out, forgiveness involves both a process and a decision. The typical reaction of a person who has been offended by another, even in small ways, is anger towards the offender. Even in situations involving loved ones, it takes time to differentiate between the humanity of the person and the act committed which then facilitates the willingness to forgive. It seems to me that expressions such as, "What you did was wrong, but I forgive you," are indicators of this distinction being made. I propose that the victim who comes to the point of distinguishing between the human being and the act committed, and subsequently extends forgiveness exemplifies both the image of a loving, forgiving God and the God of no blame and no wrath. As will be seen below, some Rwandans provide living proof that such a stance is possible even in cases of the most unthinkable violence against human beings. This does not deny a victim's struggle with feelings of hatred, blame, wrath, and the desire for revenge. The pain of traumatized victims must not be ignored or undervalued, and memories of injustice cannot be brushed aside or forgotten. But from a Christian perspective, neither can the humanity of even the worst perpetrators be disregarded.

I will now turn to Rwanda to consider the lived experience of reconciliation in the aftermath of genocide. The violence of the 1994 genocide which took the lives of over 80,000 people leaves one speechless in view of the bloodshed that took place there. But perhaps even more unfathomable are the bona fide acts of forgiveness and reconciliation that have taken place at the grassroots level in the country.

## Gacaca and Restorative Justice

Following the 1994 Rwanda genocide, approximately 120,000 persons were arrested for their involvement in the killings, with the projection that it would take more than 100 years to try everyone through the courts.[31] In 2003, the government began the release of about 40,000 prisoners who confessed their crimes. The government concurrently reinstated a traditional form of justice known as gacaca, meaning "justice on the grass," which formerly had been led by local

[31] Timothy Longman, "Trying Times for Rwanda," *Harvard International Review* (August 1, 2010), http://hir.harvard.edu/law-of-the-land/trying-times-for-rwanda?page=0,1 (accessed November 15, 2014).

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elders and "emphasized reparations and community restoration."[32] More formal and complex than their precursors, the recent gacaca trials consisted of three levels of courts and blended punitive and restorative justice. In over 9,000 Rwandan communities, panels of elected lay judges presided over genocide trials.[33] The gacaca trials provide an example of social reconciliation and demonstrate the complexity of such an undertaking. The gacaca courts officially closed in June 2012.[34]

Both the gacaca proceedings and other government efforts which focused on peace and reconciliation have received mixed reviews. While some journalists and scholars have positively assessed the government's efforts toward reconstruction, others maintain that the gacaca trials resulted in a decline of mutual trust, a distorted appearance of reconciliation, coerced attendance, lack of participation, and increased fear. Other critiques include the lack of counsel for defendants, inadequate training for judges, false accusations, fear of reprisals for rendering testimonies, and exclusion of the killings of Hutu civilians by members of the Rwanda Patriotic Army.[35] Still others have expressed concern about the government's scripted narrative of the genocide and inculcation of a new ideology of unity and reconciliation, its authoritarian and restricted form of democracy, limitation of the media's freedom, and suppression of free speech.[36]

Ari Kohen, Michael Zanchelli, and Levi Drake hold that Rwanda's "restorative justice initiatives have moved the country closer toward reconciliation than retributive measures, such as the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda [ICTR]."[37] However, they also maintain that the government has not shown a serious commitment to

[32] Max Rettig, "Gacaca: Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation in Postconflict Rwanda?" *African Studies Review* 51 no. 3 (2008), p. 30.

[33] Ibid., pp. 25-26, 31.

[34] "Rwanda "Gacaca" Genocide Courts Finish work," *BBC News Africa 2012*, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-18490348 (accessed November 12, 2014).

[35] Rettig, "Gacaca: Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation," pp. 26, 29; Mark Amstutz, "Is Reconciliation Possible after Genocide? The Case of Rwanda," *Journal of Church and State* 48 no. 3 (2006), p. 557; Bert Ingelaere, "'Does the Truth Pass across the Fire without Burning?' Locating the Short Circuit in Rwanda's Gacaca Courts," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 47 no. 4 (2009), pp. 509-13.

[36] Timothy Longman, "Limitations to Political Reform: The Undemocratic Nature of Transition in Rwanda," in Scott Strauss and Lars Waldorf, ed., *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), pp. 25-42; Scott Strauss and Lars Wolf, "Introduction: Seeing Like a Post-Conflict State," in Scott Strauss and Lars Waldorf, ed., *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), pp. 8-10; Bert Ingelaere, "Do We Understand Life after Genocide? Center and Periphery in the Construction of Knowledge in Postgenocide Rwanda," *African Studies Review* 53 no. 1 (2010), pp. 49-51.

[37] Ari Kohen, Michael Zanchelli, and Levi Drake, "Personal and Political Reconciliation in Post-Genocide Rwanda." *Social Justice Research* 24 (2011), p. 87.

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healing the wounds that persist between individual Rwandans or the groups that they comprise. They argue that the search for justice in the country must be accompanied by "a commitment to truth-telling and accountability by the victims and perpetrators of the genocide, as well as by current government officials."[38] Like Schreiter, they delineate two types of reconciliation – personal and political. "Generally speaking, the former is concerned with restoring a relationship between victim and offender, while the latter seeks to repair broken trust between hostile groups in the aftermath of international or intrastate conflict."[39] They do not see personal reconciliation as a prerequisite for political reconciliation which requires that well-known victims, as representatives of their groups, "must be willing to publicly forgive and notable offenders must publicly apologize or accept the proffered forgiveness, thereby acknowledging the wrongs they have committed."[40] However, it seems that no public apology is forthcoming from those who have been convicted by the ICTR, those serving prison terms, or those who remain at large.[41] On the other side of the coin, government rulings against "genocidal ideology" and "divisionism" prevent public discussion about ethnicity and thwart the possibility for a public figure to offer forgiveness to the Hutus as a group.[42]

The above observations paint a rather grim picture. However, despite the many challenges of post-genocide reconciliation, the following examples demonstrate that some Rwandans have found a way towards reconciliation and in doing so, provide hope for larger scale reconciliation in Rwanda.

## Rwandan Catholic Bishops

While some Christian leaders tried to help or were themselves killed during the genocide, others remained silent, supported, or actually took part in the violence. Although such violence in a largely Christian country can seem incomprehensible, Timothy Longman maintains that "Christians could kill without obvious qualms of conscience, even in the church, because Christianity as they had always known it had been a religion defined by struggles for power, and ethnicity had always been at the base of those struggles."[43]

[38] Kohen, Zanchelli, and Drake, "Personal and Political Reconciliation," p. 87.
[39] Ibid., "Personal and Political Reconciliation," pp. 87-88.
[40] Ibid., pp. 95-96.
[41] Kohen, Zanchelli, and Drake, "Personal and Political Reconciliation," p. 98.
[42] Ibid., p. 103.
[43] Timothy Longman, "Church Politics and Genocide in Rwanda," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 31 no. 2 (2001), p. 164.

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Mark Amstutz believes that the church, as a major institution in Rwanda, must help to reform values and attitudes that are essential in creating a society where human rights are respected.[44] Without any intention of exonerating those Catholics who took part in the genocide, this section looks at some initiatives taken by the Catholic Bishops of Rwanda to facilitate reconciliation in the aftermath.

Prior to the Jubilee Year of 2000, the bishops worked with Catholic Relief Services to involve members of the 20,000 Catholic base communities in a jubilee synod. Participants were encouraged to consider the role ethnicity played in the genocide. As a result of the people's responses, the synod highlighted the need for truth-telling, public confession, and asking for forgiveness. At the request of Archbishop Thaddée Ntihinyurwa of the Kigali diocese, parish justice and peace commissions led "a massive program of Scripture study and reconciliation ministry."[45] This process began before the government's 2003 release of prisoners. The Kibungo Diocese then worked with Catholic Relief Services so that diocesan staff, parish leaders, and base community animators could be trained in methods of communal trauma healing, conflict management, Catholic social teaching, and human rights. Between 2002 and 2007, 3,000 diocesan leaders were trained, and 20,000 nationwide. Upon completion of the Catholic Relief Services' peacebuilding training, parish peace and justice commission members sought out released prisoners, encouraging them to confess their crimes and seek forgiveness. These trained leaders also led their base communities in examinations of conscience and encouraged attendees to be honest about their actions during the genocide.[46]

Jeffrey Korgen interviewed 200 Rwandan justice and peace commission members in 2006 and reports hearing the same story in whatever parish he visited. "Men confessed brutal killings and looting. Women admitted pointing out Tutsi, turning away frightened neighbors who sought refuge, and looting. Each described a moment of moral clarity, experienced while reflecting on Scripture that compelled them to confess."[47] All offenders publicly asked for forgiveness. Then, accompanied by peace and justice commission leaders, they sought forgiveness in the survivors' homes where most of the survivors granted forgiveness.[48]

Korgen tells the story of a man, Justin Ndagijimana, who lost 65 family members in the genocide. Ndagijimana has forgiven eight killers who came forward. Focusing on Ndagijimana's forgiveness of

[44] Mark Amstutz, "Is Reconciliation Possible after Genocide?," pp. 555, 560.
[45] Jeffry Odell Korgen, "Forgiveness Unbound: Reconciliation Education Is Helping Rwanda to Heal." *America* (September 2007), p. 16.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid., p. 17.
[48] Ibid.

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one specific killer, Korgen delineates a few components that facilitate post-genocide forgiveness. First, the perpetrator's detailed confession of the crimes and accomplices helps bring closure for the survivors and brings killers to justice through the decisions of the courts. Secondly, Ndagijimana realized his own need for God's forgiveness and the gospel call to forgive others. Finally, Ndagijimana believed the killer was influenced by authorities, mobs of killers, and Satan. Korgen also makes the important observation that "a wealth of conversion leads up to the instant of forgiveness and, to be lasting, the forgiveness must be ongoing," such as in small acts of sharing ordinary life.[49] I suggest that Ndagijimana's realization of his personal need for God's forgiveness indicates his recognition of the distinction between his own humanity and acts which then facilitated his seeing his oppressors in a similar light.

Hundreds of the elected judges for the gacaca courts were women and men who took part in the peacebuilding training by Catholic Relief Services. Korgen writes that some survivors believe that the Church's peacebuilding efforts and the gacaca process let the killers off too easily and that killers were not held accountable for their deeds. They hold that speaking the right words resulted in a light sentence and reintegration of the killer into the community. Korgen could sympathize with this view when a man who beat two young girls to death said he did so because of "bad governance." The response struck Korgen as a rehearsed phrase geared towards opening a prison's doors. But two members of Catholic Relief Services asserted that only a minority abused the reconciliation process and believed that the gacaca trials added momentum to the Church's efforts at peacebuilding. More telling, Korgen himself reports that of all the persons with whom he spoke, this man was the only one whose sincerity he doubted. Korgen praises the others for their honesty and courage in witnessing to the power of forgiveness, and recognizes the role that strong faith communities and the power of Scripture have played in the movement towards peace and unity in Rwanda.[50] Nevertheless, given concerns expressed earlier about freedom of speech in the country, one must question whether some individuals interviewed felt that they needed to give "acceptable" responses.

## Immaculée Ilibagiza

There are numerous reports of Rwandan survival stories, but one of the most detailed accounts is that of Immaculée Ilibagiza, a Tutsi

[49] Ibid., pp. 17-18.
[50] Ibid., pp. 18-19.

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who recounts her incredible story of survival in *Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*. Ilibagiza's book has been translated into more than a dozen languages and she speaks on forgiveness and hope in talks and retreats in many venues throughout the world.

For three months during the genocide, Ilibagiza hid in a three by four foot bathroom with seven other women while killers searched inside and around the house numerous times looking for her, since that was the last location where she had been seen. Even after her escape to a camp of French soldiers, she faced several close encounters with the enemy. While in hiding, Ilibagiza spent much of her time praying. She relates how at one point she had to admit her hatred for all those who had slaughtered and raped thousands of innocent people. For a week she prayed asking God to show her how she could forgive. At one point, she heard God's answer in the statement, "You are *all* my children." Ilibagiza writes, "Despite their atrocities, they were children of God, and I could forgive a child, although it would not be easy . . . especially when that child was trying to kill me."[51] Understanding that even the killers were deserving of God's love and forgiveness, she could finally pray for the killers and ask God to help them recognize the evil of their actions, but this was just the first step towards a stance of forgiveness.

Ilibagiza later learned the gruesome details of her family members' deaths. Her mother and closest brother had been slaughtered to pieces, her father was shot to death, and her younger brother was murdered with thousands of other Rwandans in a stadium. Many other relatives and friends had also been killed. At one point, the captain of the French troops offered to kill anyone she named in order to avenge her family, but she declined. Ilibagiza realized how hard it was going to be to break the cycle of violence and hatred in Rwanda, and believed that part of her life's work would be involved in helping others to forgive. After the genocide ended, Ilibagiza returned to her family's burned home and again heard the grim details of her mother's and brother's deaths. The violent reality reopened the wounds that were just beginning to heal and she again felt hatred for the killers and sought revenge. Once more, Ilibagiza prayed that God would help her to forgive and love those responsible for the killings. She felt the bitterness leave her and believed that those who hurt her family had harmed themselves even more. She knew that the perpetrators needed to be punished for their crimes, but yet pitied them, and resolved to turn immediately to God whenever tempted to blame and hatred.[52]

[51] Immaculée Ilibagiza, *Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust*. (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2006), pp. 92-94.

[52] Ibid, pp. 145-46, 158-59, 195-97.

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During another visit to her village, Ilibagiza visited the prison to learn the identity of the leader of the gang that killed her mother and brother. She was stunned to find that the man presented to her was the father of children with whom she had played in primary school. Then she remembered that it was his voice she had heard calling her name, seeking to kill her while she was in hiding. Ilibagiza felt pity and cried for this now battered man whom she understood to be a "victim of his victims, destined to live in torment and regret." The man finally began sobbing and Ilibagiza touched his hands and said, "I forgive you."[53] The jailer was furious at her, but later he told Ilibagiza that seeing her offer forgiveness that day changed his life. Until that point, he had only sought revenge, but thereafter he tried to teach the killers, asking them why they did such terrible things. In Ilibagiza's words, "Forgiveness is freedom."[54] Ilibagiza continues her mission of telling her story and speaking on forgiveness throughout the world.

Ilibagiza's account shows that she began to distinguish between the perpetrators as human beings and their evil acts when she realized that even the killers were deserving of God's love and forgiveness. Acknowledging the need for the perpetrators to be punished for their crimes, she resolved to turn to God whenever tempted to "blame" and hatred – or to use Julian's words, blame and wrath. Ilibagiza also clearly demonstrates Schreiter's position that in individual reconciliation, forgiveness extended by the victim precedes repentance by the oppressor, and that forgiveness is both a process and a decision.

## Célestin Musekura and ALARM

Baptist minister Dr. Célestin Musekura, a Hutu who grew up in Rwanda, adds yet another perspective to accounts of reconciliation in Rwanda. Studying in Kenya during the time of the genocide, Musekura traveled to the refugee camps in the Congo to search for relatives and friends who might have escaped from his country. There he met church leaders who had lost families and friends, as well as those who had informed on moderate Hutus or Tutsis whom they were hiding when their own families were threatened by the militia. The former were asking where God had been during the killings, and the latter were asking if they could be forgiven for their actions. Musekura felt called to a ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation to those in the refugee camps in Congo, Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya.

[53] Ibid, pp. 203-4.

[54] United Nations Webcast, "Annual Commemoration of the Rwanda Genocide" (2011), http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/webcast/2011/04/commemorative-ceremony-for-the-rwanda-genocide-english.html (accessed May 23, 2011).

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The idea of repentance and reconciliation was neither welcomed by the politicians and militia who led the killings, nor by Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and in the refugee camps. Musekura reports being beaten three times in the camps, tortured by the police, and constantly threatened because of his ministry of reconciliation. Despite this opposition, he began the African Leadership and Reconciliation Ministries (ALARM) with the mission to engage "the church of Rwanda that had been involved in the genocide through the sins of commission and omission, in a radical ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation."[55]

During revenge killings that took place after the genocide officially ended, the people in Musekura's village, including his father and relatives, were killed by uniformed men. Upon hearing the news, Musekura became angry with God and wanted revenge against those responsible. Having instructed others about repentance and forgiveness, he came face to face with the Christian ideal of unconditional forgiveness and recognized it was now his turn to forgive.[56] Musekura writes that on the day he heard the news of the killings, he learned that through God's power, "forgiveness can take place even in the midst of unjust suffering and pain,"[57] and that forgiveness opens up the possibility of new hope and a future between the perpetrator and victim. He prayed for the grace to forgive the killers and pronounced what he refers to as his imperfect forgiveness of them. With this, the healing process began by which he could think of the killers as human beings who also need God's transforming grace. A year later during a ministry training session, his anger and resentment resurfaced when he encountered three relatives of those who killed the people of his village. He was moved, however, to use the opportunity to ask their forgiveness for his resentment in front of church leaders attending the training session. They, in turn, asked forgiveness for what their relatives had done.[58]

Musekura notes that failure to forgive makes a person a double victim – of one's offender and one's own hatred. Like Ilibagiza, he found that forgiveness has a liberating power, while anger and resentment have a debilitating effect on the mind. Also like Ilibagiza, Musekura prayed for the grace to forgive the killers and gradually came to understand that despite their acts, the killers were human beings who also needed God's transforming grace. Once again, his experience shows how the victim's act of forgiveness precedes possible repentance by the perpetrator and involves a process and a decision.

[55] Gregory L. Jones and Célestin Musekura, *Forgiving as We've Been Forgiven: Community Practices for Making Peace* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), pp. 17-19.

[56] Ibid, pp. 16, 20-22.

[57] Ibid., p. 23.

[58] Ibid., pp. 23-24, 26-28.

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Despite obstacles of misunderstanding and antagonism, Musekura is adamant that the church has the responsibility to build communities of forgiveness and reconciliation in a world filled with violence. He also endorses the idea that Christian communities of forgiveness can positively affect sociopolitical forgiveness where parties concerned agree to speak truthfully of historical enmity, commit to restorative justice, desire to mend broken relationships, and seek creative ways to deal with future conflicts that arise. Musekura reports an attitudinal change toward forgiveness by government leaders in Rwanda, Burundi and Congo due to the work of unofficial communities of forgiveness supported by the ministries of ALARM.[59]

## Concluding Thoughts

The suffering of the people of Rwanda during and after the 1994 genocide is beyond words. Stories told of the slaughtering of families and friends, the countless rapes, the fear, the psychological impact, and revenge killings leave the listener horrified. Just the ability to continue on with life in the aftermath is a tribute to the strength of the human spirit of these Rwandans. The road to social reconciliation has been long and complex, and in reality, does not seem to be as clearly demarcated from individual reconciliation as often conveyed in the literature. Scholars and Rwandans themselves assess the gacaca process that took place and other government efforts toward unity both favorably and negatively. Much remains to be done.

Individual reconciliation is also a difficult and complex matter. Forgiveness is never easy and reconciliation is even harder. Despite the uniqueness of each experience described, one can sketch the contours of a spirituality of reconciliation and note some key features. The stories told of Ndagijimana, Ilibagiza, and Musekura demonstrate the centrality of forgiveness in reconciliation which entails a gradual process and a decision for a new future. Ndagijimana's act of forgiveness took place within a larger process of social reconciliation and occurred after perpetrators came forward seeking it. Ilibagiza and Musekura demonstrate Schreiter's point that in individual reconciliation, the victim acts as the agent of reconciliation and that forgiveness precedes possible repentance on the part of the perpetrator. All three displayed a relationship with God by which they were aware of God's forgiveness and the gospel call to forgive others. Also integral to their ability to forgive, despite any feelings of hateful blame or wrath, was their recognition of the humanity of the perpetrators as distinct from their acts. This correlates well with an image of a God of no blame

[59] Ibid., pp. 68, 113, 118-19.

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and no wrath for whom, to use Schreiter's insight, the object of reconciliation is the oppressor's humanity, not the violent deed. These victims who have forgiven mirror, in the limited way possible for human beings, not only the image of a loving, forgiving God, or the resurrected Jesus as the victim raised to new life who heals and forgives, but also the image of a God of no blame and no wrath. But at the same time, these victims who have forgiven do not in any way dismiss the need for human beings to be held accountable for their actions, for justice to be served, and for injustices to be addressed and righted.

A spirituality of reconciliation is fostered in community and fosters communities of reconciliation. In the case of the initiatives taken by the Rwandan Catholic bishops, support was provided by communal Scripture study and by leaders who were trained in conflict management, peacebuilding efforts, Catholic social thought, and the promotion of human rights. The stories of Ilibagiza and Musekura demonstrate how their faith, originally nurtured in their families and supported by their prayer, helped to sustain their ability to forgive. They now continue to reach out to encourage others to take steps toward reconciliation. The witness given by the Rwandans who have forgiven their offenders speaks eloquently of a lived spirituality of reconciliation. Their stories continue to inspire others to take steps toward reconciliation in a world where it is greatly needed.

*Marian Maskulak, CPS*
*14128 84th Drive Apt.3C*
*Briarwood*
*New York*
*United States*
*11435*

*maskulam@stjohns.edu*

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