

The Rwanda Genocide in 1994 and Danish Baptist Involvement in the Country

The following text is a translation of the conclusions of a report published in Danish in July 1998: "Folkemordet i Rwanda - og danske baptisters engagement i landet ". The report was made by a work group set up by the Board of the Baptist Union of Denmark, but working independently. The members of the group were Rasmus Hylleberg, Lone Moller-Hansen, and Allan Poulsen. The Baptist Union Commissioned the report following intense debate among Baptists in Denmark about Danish Baptist involvement in Rwanda in relation to the ethnic issue, and especially about the way their relations with Rwanda were handled during the genocide. Responsibility for the contents and conclusions of the report rests exclusively with the three authors. The Board of the Baptist Union has subsequently issued a statement commenting on the report.

Conclusions

1) Has The Danish Baptist Union been ethnically biased in its mission work over the years?

Part of the criticism of the Baptist missionary work is the contention that from its beginning it has been ethnically biased towards the Hutu side, that it has established "Hutu churches", and that it has generally shown solidarity exclusively with the Hutu ethnic group.

a) An apolitical attitude to mission

From the very beginning the missionary work of The Danish Baptist Union has been based on a classical apolitical attitude to mission. Our research into the history of the mission shows that the practice and thinking of the missionaries and of the Danish missionary leadership in relation to the political situation have never been directed by overall political considerations, but exclusively by the desire to carry out missionary work and to give humanitarian aid when it was needed.

This pragmatic attitude is manifested in many ways, for example:

For the first many years of the mission the Belgian colonial system was the unchallenged framework of the work.

In the years preceding independence and the partition of colonial Ruanda-Urundi into the original nation states of Rwanda and Burundi, this new situation was likewise accepted and prepared for through the establishment of two independent churches, *Union des églises baptistes du Rwanda (UEBR)* and *Union des églises baptistes du Burundi (UEBB)*.

During crises, for example in **1963-64** when thousands of Tutsi refugees poured into Burundi, no political stand was expressed, but humanitarian aid to the refugees was initiated and carried out.

During the selective genocide against Hutu in Burundi in **1972** no political statements were made - in the Yearbook of the Danish Baptist Union the genocide was described in vague terms like "the terrible events", while all efforts were focused on the desire to get on with the missionary work. One missionary was arrested and then expelled from

Burundi for having protested against an incident where innocent people were assaulted, but the Missionaries or the missionary leadership did not take any political steps in consequence of this experience. These pragmatic and apolitical attitudes and practices have been followed with equal consistency in the two countries: i.e. in Burundi, where political situation has been dominated by Tutsis, and in Rwanda, where it has been dominated by Hutus.

No practical steps were taken to follow up the Ibadan Declaration, a Baptist Missionary manifesto signed in Ibadan, Nigeria on 22 d October 1987 by representatives of a number of national Baptist Unions, including The Baptist Union of Denmark. One paragraph, which is relevant in the context of the subject matter of this report, says that it is a violation of the gospel to preach the salvation of Christ to people who are the victims of discrimination and injustice, without voicing a prophetic word of protest.

In Danish Baptist reports the introduction of ethnic quotas in Rwanda in 1973 is described - again pragmatically - as follows: "it seems that a solution [to the ethnic problem] has been found".

After the 1994 genocide in Rwanda the missionary work has been carried on in co-operation with the new local leadership and within the framework of a new ethnic power situation.

In the context of the present report - that of the 1994 genocide - it may seem odd that it has been possible to adhere to this apolitical theory and practice. However, it must be born in mind that this has generally been the case in international mission. In addition to this it is useful to compare with the political basis of Danish development aid until around 1990. Here, too, the basic principle was that development aid was granted without political conditions. In cases where the political situation in a country was considered unacceptable, practice was simply not to grant any aid to or to work in that country. Danish Baptists have not found this option feasible as regards their missionary work because they have felt under a Christian obligation to spread the gospel. Thus it is obvious that missionary work in Burundi during the period 1972-1988 was carried out under a political system so totalitarian that taking a political stand - indeed the mere reference to the ethnic issue - would have made it impossible to work in the country.

b) No discrimination

Our research has shown that missionaries and the leadership of the mission have had an unprejudiced and non-discriminatory practice in relation to the ethnic groups in Rwanda and **Burundi**. Individuals have always been related to without any considerations of ethnicity. We have not been able to find a single case of **ethnic discrimination** on the part of the missionaries. Descriptions of the ethnic situation in Danish Baptist missionary literature

(annual reports, articles, individual books) usually reflect the time in which they were written; thus you find the tendency to see ethnicity as a hierarchical order (the "noble" Tutsi, the "common" Hutu, the "primitive" Twa). However, these descriptions are usually less extreme and more matter-of-fact than contemporary descriptions in travel books and anthropological literature. When indigenous (discriminatory) ethnic norms are described in missionary literature, it is usually done with a pragmatic sense of reality and sometimes **forbearance**. The basic attitude is always a Christian principle of human equality.

It has often been said that the Baptist unions of Rwanda and Burundi were "Hutu churches". This seems to be the case in the sense that the great majority of church members have been Hutus, thus reflecting the general demographic situation in the regions concerned. But there is nothing in the historic sources to suggest that the missionaries have had any desire to establish "Hutu churches". In the light of the massive experiences of violations of the rights of Hutus which many **Danish missionaries have had from Burundi, there** has often been a strong feeling of solidarity with the Hutu community - a solidarity which seems natural from the point of view of the Christian (or simply human) principle of solidarity with the weak. In consequence of this experience you also sometimes find that missionaries have shown some scepticism towards Tutsis as a (historical and potential) elite, but we have found no cases of such scepticism having been directed towards Tutsis as individuals.

2) Has The Danish Baptist Union denied or played down the reality of the genocide?

a) How is the genocide described in official Baptist sources?

The most official statement on the genocide was made in a resolution which was passed at the Annual Conference of The Baptist Union of Denmark in Aalborg on 9th July 1994, in which -among other things - it is said that it "is regrettable that the international community has to such a worrying extent been manipulated into passivity which has allowed and contributed to unrestrained killings"

Seen in the light of the fact that the 1994 genocide must be considered "one of the greatest tragedies in human history" (as it is stated in the 1995 Baptist Yearbook), and seen with the advantage of hindsight, some of the wording of the resolution seems almost offensive in its caution. We suggest that there are three factors which contribute to this striking caution: Firstly, over the years missionaries and the missionary leadership have been "trained" by experience to be silent and discreet, even when witnessing very grave atrocities. Secondly, there has been a desire to understand the genocide in the context of the power struggle in the region. Thirdly, theologically events were interpreted in a larger perspective: "... the Evil One will lose, indeed he has already lost. Therefore we can get on with our work dauntlessly." (1995 Yearbook). It is as if these three factors in unison produce a will to get on with missionary work as quickly as possible -- even at the expense of reflecting on the seriousness of the genocide. With the critical advantage of hindsight this seems almost morally offensive. Especially we should like to raise one concrete question for self-reflection: Has enough been done in relation to the common Danish church members, and indeed the public at large, to make it clear how great the tragedy was?

b) How is the genocide described by unofficial Baptist sources?

Unofficially many Baptists have commented on the genocide or debated how it is to be understood. Some of the early comments (e.g. those made by evacuated Baptist missionaries their return to Denmark in April '94) express the view that the Hutus in Rwanda only acted in legitimate self-defence. In retrospect this is manifestly wrong, but this is not very interesting today since nobody at that time had enough of an overview to be able to know what was really going on.

One public statement, however, calls for explicit criticism: In *Kristeligt Dagblad* (*The Christian Daily*) of 4th August '94, there is an interview with a former missionary, who is quoted as denying that there was an organised genocide in Rwanda. At that time the world was generally sufficiently well informed for it to seem incomprehensible that anyone could make this judgement without further documentation. Although the missionary in question did not officially speak on behalf of The Danish Baptist Union, the statement contributed to the impression that The Baptist Union played down the genocide or described it in unrealistic terms. If the statement contained a misquote or was based on a misunderstanding [as has later been explained], an official denial ought to have been issued. It is also the judgement of the work group that if the leadership of the Danish Baptist Union disagreed with the views in the interview -which was published under the headline: "Rwanda according to the Baptists" this should have been expressed publicly and officially. It seems that this matter - and the part played by the press - were not taken seriously enough.

One point should be added here: The critics of the Baptist Union have in some cases misunderstood the points made by Baptists who knew Rwanda before the genocide. What has been taken as a playing-down of the reality of the genocide sometimes was simply a desire to see events in Rwanda in their political context and against the background of many years' experience of ethnic-political tension, violence and massacres. It is also easy to, understand that missionaries and others with a thorough knowledge of Rwanda and Burundi have often been deeply frustrated over press coverage, which has often been very biased and misleading. Against this background comments may have been made which were biased in the opposite direction.

c) When was it possible to know what was going on?

As mentioned above a major point of criticism of The Baptist Union is that it was too late in characterising the 1994 events in Rwanda as what they actually were, i.e. a planned genocide. Some of this criticism has very much been based on the advantage of hindsight. As stated above some of the earliest misleading comments on the Rwanda situation made by Danish Baptists are to some extent excusable because of the lack of knowledge at the time. However, in the Danish context the visit to, Copenhagen by African Rights director Mr Alex de Waal at the end of May '94 ought to have been a turning point. At a meeting organised by Danish Church Aid he presented the preliminary report of African Rights on the events in Rwanda, in which they were unequivocally characterised as a planned genocide. We question whether this interpretation was taken seriously enough by the leadership of the Baptist Union. Although there was good reason to be critical of African Rights' understanding of the situation (which, *inter alia* included an uncritical acceptance of the activities of the RPF invasion army and an insufficient historical analysis), the documentation contained in the

report was so overwhelming and its conclusions so serious that it should at least have provoked serious doubt and reflection, which appeared only very slowly and hesitatingly (cf. the cautious wording of the resolution of the Annual Conference in '94). In this period in which it was important to get a clear understanding of what was actually happening in Rwanda, it seems that the extensive experience of the suppression of Hutus in Rwanda made it difficult for Danish Baptists to realise to what extent Tutsis had been victimised in Rwanda.

d) Has The Danish Baptist Union been biased in its view of the conflict in Rwanda? Some of the critics of the Baptist Union maintain that it has been too uncritical of the Rwandan Hutu government (before the genocide) and too critical of the Rwandan Patriotic Front, which by some observers is called a liberation army. Towards the end of the 1980s the human rights situation in Rwanda deteriorated, and following the RPF invasion in 1990 a number of murders of Tutsis took place while a great number of Tutsis were arbitrarily arrested. Ought the Baptist Union of Denmark to have reacted to this, or should they have been sufficiently alerted in order to have realised the nature of the genocide before others? It is our judgement that the Baptist Union cannot reasonably be criticised for its reactions during this period. We base this view on the following observations:

- 1) For those missionaries and others who were used to working in the region, but who were not by profession political observers, these developments in Rwandan political and civic life appeared very much to fit into the usual picture of conflict and human rights violations as known in the region, especially in Burundi.
- 2) During the period in question the said murders and human rights violations in Rwanda were to a great extent overshadowed by the drama and suffering one could witness among internal Hutu refugees in Rwanda following the RPF invasion of 1990 and among the hosts of Burundian refugees in southern Rwanda following the turmoil of 1991 and especially in the wake of the murder of the Burundian president in 1993.
- 3) The critics of the Baptist Union seem to overlook the fact that the RPF invasion of Rwanda in 1990 was in many ways the factor that triggered the assaults on Tutsis in the country as it had happened earlier in the history of Rwanda (esp. 1959-64). Generally speaking much of the criticism of the Baptist Union seems to expect that the Baptists should have been able to do what no other observers did - apparently not even the otherwise very efficient and well informed RPF - namely to foresee the genocide.

3) Has The Danish Baptist Union neglected their duty to be critical towards Rwandan

Baptist leaders concerning their role during the planning and execution of genocide?

Following the genocide, allegations have been made against Rwandan Baptist leaders to the effect that they were involved in the planning and execution of the genocide. These allegations have been put forward especially in articles in the Danish press written by journalists Mr Ojvind Kyro and Mr Jesper Strudsholm, and internationally in reports from African Rights. On the one hand, allegations have been made against the secretary general of the UEBR and of the All-African Baptist Alliance, Rev. Eleazar Ziherambere, and other Rwandan Baptist leaders, on the other hand general statements have been made to the effect that a large number of Rwandan Baptists, including Baptist ministers, took part in the genocide. It must first be said that these allegations have often been made in a form which in itself is very open to criticism and which sometimes obviously breaks the rules of the journalistic ethics: Testimonies against Ziherambere have been heard from persons notoriously known as his enemies without taking into consideration the psychological climate of mutual accusations and mistrust in the wake of the genocide; some articles have *a priori* stated that The Danish Baptist Union was ethnically biased; some articles have been published without getting comments from the Baptists first. In some cases the purpose of the articles seem to have been to judge the individuals concerned rather than to find as much information as possible. On the other hand, all this does not *per se* indicate that the allegations are unfounded. The allegations against Ziherambere call for a specific comment because they are of a very serious nature, and because they were first published in the influential African Rights report "Death, Despair and Defiance". In our view the Baptist Union has not publicly shown that it has taken the allegations seriously enough. The Baptist reactions which have been put forward in the press, in *Baptist* (the Danish Baptist weekly), and elsewhere leave the impression that the necessary talks and reflections have been made in some haste and the conclusions drawn rather swiftly, in order to get on with business as usual. The criticism that "Baptists did not have the heart to ask enough questions to the persons involved" cannot be lightly dismissed. On the other hand, nothing suggests that Baptists have "protected the executioners of genocide" or anything like that. We do find, however, that it should be considered whether matters have actually been thoroughly investigated, and - and this is what we can realistically judge - whether this has been shown sufficiently clearly to the public.

A note should be added here on the allegations against Rev Eleazar Ziherambere. While in the first edition of "Death, Despair and Defiance" it was alleged that he had taken an active part in the planning of the genocide and delivered weapons for a particular massacre (allegedly taking place on a date on which he was manifestly in Nairobi), in the second edition the testimonies against him were left out. In a letter to the workgroup, African Rights director Rakiya Omaar explains why:

*"You have asked us a specific question about the allegations concerning Ziherambere which appeared in the first edition of Death, Despair and Defiance but which were not repeated in the second edition. When I was travelling in Rwanda during the genocide, I was not able to go to certain parts of the country, such as Cyangugu, or to get information about certain regions. We sent someone to Burundi, to interview survivors. We **did not find his testimonies** very detailed*

and rich, but were forced to include them in the first edition because we were so short of information on these areas. In 1995, I spent three months doing research for the second edition of the book, concentrating on the regions neglected in the first edition. Because I got very good material, we decided to drop out the testimonies gathered by the researcher who had gone to Burundi in 1994. That is how the material on Zihembere got dropped. There is no other reason. " (Rakiya Omaar infax of 25th August 1997, to Allan Poulsen).

In effect, Ms. Omaar here says that African Rights published testimonies including allegations of genocide, *knowing that they were not reliable!*

4) How has the Baptist Union communicated with the public and how has it handled its internal debate?

It is our judgement that The Baptist Union has not handled its relations with the media and the public satisfactorily. In several cases it has neglected to issue denials when incorrect information and unreasonable presentations of the activities of the Baptist Union have appeared in the media. This is probably because the Baptist leadership has had the basic attitude that its public image is less important than its actual activities. This is an unrealistic attitude in modern media-dominated society and it may in the long run do harm to the missionary activities as well as to the African partners. Furthermore, the Baptist leadership has neglected to comment on the public statements of individual Baptists, even when these have incorrectly been understood to express the attitude of the Baptist Union. It is the opinion of the workgroup that *The Baptist Weekly* as well as the Baptist Union as such have allowed too little time and space for the debate which was provoked by the *internal criticism*. This is partly understandable because some of the criticism has been obviously unfair and off the mark, and because it has been a heavy strain on top of the demanding efforts of carrying on missionary work after the genocide. With the advantage of retrospective reflection, however, we must conclude that the 1994 events in Rwanda, which included one of the greatest tragedies in human history, ought to have provoked a process of self-reflection and debate which was not restricted by lack of space or time.

5) Conclusion

In retrospect, writing four years after the genocide, 1994 in Rwanda seems to be one of very few events in world history which will remain for decades a point of reference of human tragedy, evil and suffering. In this perspective, Danish Baptists owe it to themselves as well as to their African partners to carry through a critical reflection on the events, on the role of the Baptist Union in relation to them, and on the perspectives for their future work.

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