Posttraumatic growth and religion in Rwanda: individual well-being vs. collective false consciousness

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Some scholars include changes in spirituality, such as a greater commitment to their religious beliefs or an enhanced understanding of spiritual matters, in the definition of posttraumatic growth; others conclude that questions of spirituality should be excluded from this definition. This article highlights the fundamental difference of religion to other domains of posttraumatic growth because religions are ideologies (and other domains of growth are not). As ideologies, it is argued that religions can affect different levels of identity in different ways. Based on testimonial evidence from Rwandan genocide survivors, the article demonstrates that although religious beliefs can bring existential comfort at the individual level, they can also lead to a state of false consciousness at the collective level. In Rwanda, the dominant religious ideology facilitated the spiritual and moral climate in which genocide became possible. Today, religious interpretations of the Rwandan Patriotic Front’s (RPF) leadership provide spiritual backing to a government which has become increasingly authoritarian.

Keywords: false consciousness; posttraumatic growth; religion; Rwanda

The notion that human suffering can lead to positive change has received considerable attention in recent years (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Joseph & Linley, 2008; Weiss & Burger, 2010). What is now frequently referred to as “posttraumatic growth” is the tendency of some individuals to develop new psychological constructs or build a new way of life following a traumatic event that is experienced as superior to their previous one in important ways. Research suggests that posttraumatic growth tends to manifest itself in domains such as self-perception (e.g., a greater sense of autonomy and self-reliance), interpersonal relationships (e.g., enhanced feelings of compassion or intimacy) and life philosophy (e.g., a new sense of meaning, a greater appreciation for life or an increased spiritual awareness) (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

The fact that growth is observed in these domains supports McAdams’ (1993) conceptualisation of identity which draws on Bakan’s (1966) theory of basic human motivations, highlighting the two fundamental drives of agency and communion. According to Bakan (1966), agency is
manifested through self-protection, self-assertion and self-expansion, while communion is manifested through contact, openness and union. McAdams (1993) adds a third component to this motivational duality which he refers to as the “ideological setting” (p. 68), which defines a person’s understanding of the universe, the world, society and God. Comparable to Janoff-Bulman’s (1992) definition of “basic assumptions”, the ideological setting functions as a context for the superordinate themes of agency and communion in a person’s identity.

Traumatic experiences can leave survivors feeling powerless, isolated and without a sense of meaning, suggesting that trauma destabilises these fundamental drives of agency and communion, undermining their ideological belief system (i.e., their basic assumptions). Given that posttraumatic growth tends to manifest itself in the aforementioned domains (self-perception, interpersonal relationships and life philosophy), it would seem that individuals who experience growth are striving to restore these motivations of agency and communion, and rebuild a philosophical framework that provides meaning and purpose (Williamson, 2014). For many individuals, this philosophical framework may include religious beliefs and, in the rebuilding of their assumptions following a traumatic event, some individuals may experience a renewed commitment to their religious beliefs or an enhanced understanding of spiritual matters which they interpret as a positive change.

For Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006), such positive changes in the domain of religion and spirituality form part of the definition of posttraumatic growth and are included as items on their self-report measure, the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). The authors acknowledge, however, that “it is not yet entirely clear the degree to which the religious dimension of posttraumatic growth is relevant to countries that are significantly more secular than the United States” (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006, p. 6). Pals and McAdams (2004) also highlight the cultural bias of the PTGI and argue that Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (1996) model reflects the “importance of religion and personal spirituality in contemporary American life” (p. 68).

Joseph (2011) questions whether religion and spirituality should be included within the definition of posttraumatic growth altogether. According to Joseph (2011), there needs to be a distinction made “between experiences that survivors themselves perceive to be growthful and changes that are growthful in a way [that is] consistent with theory and empirical evidence on what constitutes positive functioning” (p. 844). This is because while some people consider a deepening of faith to be growthful, for others a decrease in faith has the same effect. Moreover, although religious people may perceive a deepening of faith as positive, some non-religious people may see an increase in religious faith as “illusory or even as delusory” (Joseph, 2011, p. 845). The lack of consensus as to whether an increased commitment to religious beliefs is positive or negative leads Joseph (2011) to conclude that “religiosity and spirituality should not be part of the definition of posttraumatic growth” (p. 845).

It is clear that, positive or otherwise, religion is fundamentally different to other domains of posttraumatic growth (such as self-perception and relations with others). This is because religions are ideologies whereas the ways in which people view themselves and their relationships with others are not. Given that ideologies exist not only within individuals but also between them as “socially shared” sets of beliefs, attitudes and social representations (van Dijk, 1998, p. 8), they may affect different levels of identity in different ways. As Williamson (2014) demonstrates, posttraumatic growth at the individual level may be distinguished from posttraumatic growth at the collective or group level. According to Williamson (2014), while individual posttraumatic growth consists in rebuilding cognitive structures via the individual pursuit of communion and agency, collective posttraumatic growth involves the same drives but “takes place at the ideological level and is thus both cognitive and social” (p. 92).

At the individual level, religion and spirituality can provide existential comfort. For example, proponents of Terror Management Theory, such as Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski (2004), contend that cultural worldviews (including religious beliefs) have evolved because they provide
their constituents with a sense of meaning and worth by providing explanations of “the origin of the universe, prescriptions of appropriate conduct, and guarantees of safety and security to those who adhere to such instructions” (p. 16). In a similar vein, Janoff-Bulman (1992) suggests that most people perceive meaning through adhering to a belief in a “just world” (Lerner, 1980); a world in which bad behaviour is punished and good behaviour is rewarded. Religion plays a role in our perceived just world, as Janoff-Bulman and McPherson Frantz (1997) note, “most religious perspectives enable believers to perceive meaning through the expectations of rewards and punishments” (p. 93). Although beliefs in a just and benevolent world may be illusory, Janoff-Bulman (1992) argues that such positive illusions are in fact adaptive as they are generally associated with better mental functioning, physical health and social interactions. Thus, as part of both our cultural worldview and our just world beliefs, religion plays a role in reducing existential anxiety by providing us with a sense of perceived meaning and control.

Although spiritual beliefs can be a source of struggle following a traumatic event, spirituality has also been found to be associated with measures of posttraumatic growth following major life crises as it can provide a source of empowerment, meaning or a change in life goals (Pargament, Desai, & McConnell, 2006). Spiritual change at the collective level following a traumatic event is yet to be considered. Compared with at the individual level, religion at the group level may have a different impact because ideologies may be subject to manipulation by people in positions of power and therefore tend to favour elites (van Dijk, 1998). If a group member subscribes to a religious ideology which upholds people and institutions which do not favour the (agentic or communal) interests of their group, this may result in what some scholars refer to as “false consciousness” (van Dijk, 1998; Jost and Banaji, 1994). False consciousness is the acceptance of ideologies in which one’s own group is represented “as negative in relation to dominant groups” (van Dijk, 1998, p. 73). Examples of non-religious false consciousness might include poor workers accepting the hegemony of the liberal market, black people accepting racism or women accepting sexism (van Dijk, 1998). As this article will demonstrate, an example of religious false consciousness might include Christian Tutsi genocide survivors because, in Rwanda, the Christian churches colluded in the scapegoating of Tutsi prior of the genocide.

Since the arrival of the first Christians in Rwanda (and even before), there has been a strong link between political power and religion. While the churches provided spiritual legitimacy to the Tutsi during the colonial period, after independence they did the same for the Hutu. This continued even after General Juvénal Habyarimana’s 1973 coup d’État. Many church leaders held prominent positions in Habyarimana’s political party and, as Des Forges (1999) observes, the media often “portrayed Habyarimana as a saint or a priest and one depicted God cursing the leaders of the political opposition” (p. 61). Despite evidence that plans for genocide were taking place under Habyarimana’s leadership, the church continued to support his regime. Indeed, religious system legitimation continued even during the genocide. For example, because of the church’s silence and, in some cases, active participation in the genocide, many parishioners believed that by killing Tutsi, they were carrying out the will of the church and did not consider their participation in the massacres contradictory to their religious beliefs (Longman, 2010). As Longman (1997) discovered in his field research, people would come and demand mass in order to pray before going out to kill. Des Forges (1999) suggests that “by not issuing a prompt, firm condemnation of the killing campaign, church authorities left the way clear for officials, politicians, and propagandists to assert that the slaughter actually met with God’s favour” (p. 189). Thus, the church not only failed to prevent the genocide but, because of its history of alignment with the state, it gave divine legitimation to the genocide ideology, providing the moral climate in which genocide could be possible. It is not without significance that in 1994, more Rwandans died in churches than in any other place (African Rights, 1995). Many Christians have since converted to Islam (Wax, 2002), but Christianity remains the dominant religion in Rwanda and many genocide survivors interpret their traumatic
experiences through Christian beliefs. Religion plays a significant role in helping survivors cope with the genocide and many survivors cite their Christian beliefs as providing a source of meaning and empowerment and the church as providing a source of social support.

However, some survivors also interpret the current government’s position in religious terms, giving religious legitimation to a government which does not favour their group interests. As a number of scholars have noted, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) has become increasingly authoritarian since coming to power in 1994 (Prunier, 2009; Reyntjens, 2004). As a party that is made up predominantly of returning Tutsi refugees, one might expect the RPF to be sympathetic with Tutsi genocide survivors; yet, the opposite seems to be the case. Survivors are often referred to by returnees as *bapfuwe buhagazi* meaning “the walking dead” and looked on with suspicion, (Prunier, 2009). According to Prunier (2009), some RPF ideologues have even hinted that the “interior” Tutsi deserved what happened to them while Reyntjens (2004) argues that Tutsi genocide survivors feel that they have become “second-rate citizens who have been sacrificed by the RPF” (p. 180). Thus, by interpreting the position of the RPF in religious terms, it could be argued that survivors are disenfranchising their group identity because they provide spiritual authority to a political party which maintains them in a position of subordination.

This is not to say that spiritual posttraumatic growth cannot take place at the collective level. Elites often apply a number of manipulation strategies in order to maintain ideological control, such as dividing non-dominant groups, preventing in group solidarity, or preventing or limiting access to public discourse (van Dijk, 1998; Williamson, 2014). However, as Williamson (2014) shows, with access to public discourse, Rwandan genocide survivors may develop counter ideologies which favour their own group identity by pursuing agency (e.g., by gaining freedom and autonomy for Tutsi survivors) and communion (e.g., by reconciling with other groups, such as the Hutu population) at the group level. This article will demonstrate that by sharing their testimonies via the Genocide Archive of Rwanda, genocide survivors can actively shape religious ideology in a manner that both empowers survivors (agency) and promotes reconciliation with the Hutu population (communion).

**Method**

In order to investigate the question of religious ideology and posttraumatic growth at the collective level following the 1994 genocide, this article uses discourse analysis to analyse the testimonies of Rwandan survivors. Discourse analysis is a particularly useful tool for investigating ideologies because, by analysing what is presupposed or implied by the speaker, it becomes possible to gain an insight into their underlying belief system. As van Dijk (1998) suggests, discourse “has a special status in the reproduction of ideologies [...]. There is no semiotic code as explicit and as articulate in the direct expression of meanings, knowledge, opinions and various social beliefs as natural language” (p. 192).

**Corpus**

The analysis presented in this article is based on a corpus of female survivors’ oral testimonies from the Genocide Archive of Rwanda, which was established by the Aegis Trust in association with Rwanda’s National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide (CNLG). Survivors who give their testimonies for the Genocide Archive of Rwanda do so on a voluntary basis and provide their full, written consent for these to be used in the public archive. The archive began collecting testimonies in 2004 and this process is ongoing, with survivors coming from a range of demographic groups and geographical locations. The interviews are conducted in Kinyarwanda by
survivors working for the Genocide Archive of Rwanda using open-ended questions which encourage survivors to speak at length about their experiences before, during and after the genocide.

A total of 18 female survivors’ testimonies were taken from the online archive (http://www.genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw) or made accessible to me during my employment at the physical archive in Kigali from 2011 to 2012. Of these 18, six were analysed for this article, as the remaining women did not discuss their religious beliefs to provide sufficient evidence for analysis. The analysis was carried out on the original Kinyarwanda versions (with the assistance of a native Kinyarwanda speaker). Presented here are the English translations. Although the women signed consent forms for their testimonies to be used in the public archive, to preserve anonymity, names have been abbreviated.

Procedure

The discursive analysis of these testimonies investigates the ways in which religious beliefs affect group identity. To begin with, the testimonies were divided into semantic macrostructures (topics or themes), then for sections in which religious beliefs were the focus of discussion, local meanings were scrutinised via an analysis of syntactic and semantic structures, including the use of agency, implicit presuppositions (i.e., implied or assumed meanings), use of silence, use of pronouns and lexical choices (such as choice of noun-phrase to evoke a person, place or thing).

Results

The analysis that follows shows that religious ideology affects survivors’ collective drives of agency and communion in four different ways. These include (1) religious beliefs that prevent survivors from pursuing communion; (2) religious beliefs that prevent survivors from pursuing agency; (3) religious beliefs that lead survivors to pursue communion and (4) religious beliefs that lead survivors to pursue agency. Of the six women, three fell into the first category, four fell into the second category, one fell into the third and one fell into the last category. An example of each type of response is presented below.

(1) Preventing the collective pursuit of communion

Drawing on Clark’s (2010) research on transitional justice in Rwanda, Williamson (2014) argues that communal growth at the collective level requires the pursuit of truth, peace, justice, healing, forgiveness and reconciliation, where reconciliation is the ultimate objective in which the other five are involved. However, when it comes to discussing the crimes of individuals associated with religious institutions, such as the infamous Roman Catholic Priest, Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, many survivors appear reluctant to pursue these goals. Father Munyeshyaka was implicated in crimes of genocide perpetrated at his Church of Sainte Famille in Kigali (African Rights 1999). Munyeshyaka charged Tutsi seeking refuge in his church yet allowed the militia to circulate freely. He made no effort to intervene or help those in trouble and even actively collaborated with the militia in sending Tutsi to be slaughtered (African Rights, 1999). He also obstructed the evacuation operations of the United Nations Assistance Mission to Rwanda (UNAMIR) (African Rights 1999). Despite his crimes, however, all three of the survivors in the sample who witnessed this man’s actions first-hand seem reluctant to make explicit accusations against him.

This is the case for SB who, in the following extract, compares the actions of Munyeshyaka with those of Father Célestin of Saint Paul’s Church which is located on the same plot in Kigali:
The news came that in Saint Paul there was a very kind priest. We wanted to go there but it was hard for us to get in there. Father Célestin gave people water to drink, some food, I mean not so much to offer. The man was standing with his people; he served as a symbol of love and hope to many. On our side the story was different, there was no such thing as love among the leaders.

Here, SB alludes to Munyeshyaka’s crimes only by highlighting all of the good things that Father Célestin did for Tutsi taking refuge in his church. For example, while Father Célestin provided food and water, Munyeshyaka was known for hiding these supplies (African Rights, 1999). While Father Célestin stood “with his people”, Munyeshyaka turned those hiding at Sainte Famille over to the militia. Although she highlights that at Sainte Famille, “the story was different”, SB never overtly accuses Father Munyeshyaka of any wrongdoing. Even when the interviewer prompts her to say more about the priest, she replies, “How can a servant of God dare to do the things he did?” But besides “carrying a gun” and “associating with soldiers”, SB does not provide specific examples. As Hitchcott (2012) observes, witness testimonies recorded in the African Rights (1999) report also avoid openly accusing the priest of crimes of rape and genocide. Nonetheless, the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) indicted Father Munyeshyaka on four counts of genocide: rape, acts of genocide, assassination and crimes against humanity (Hitchcott, 2012). But despite referring the case to the French authorities in 2008, no trial has yet been held in France and Father Munyeshyaka has continued to work as a parish priest in the French town of Gisors (Hitchcott, 2012).

On this subject, the African Rights (1999) report points to the fact that, a Roman Catholic priest holds a sacred position in French society; he represents one of the county’s most influential institutions. Fr. Munyeshyaka’s conviction would support allegations that aspects of the policy of the Catholic Church in Rwanda have been morally inadequate, before, during and after 1994. (p. 2)

Munyeshyaka’s sacred position, it seems, also makes Rwandan survivors reluctant to condemn him or his actions. Although speaking the truth and seeking justice would benefit survivors as a group, their religious ideology appears to inhibit these communal processes. But Christian beliefs do not only affect survivors’ condemnation of religious figures; these beliefs also lead survivors to appraise the current government’s position in sacred terms, preventing their collective pursuit of agency.

(2) Preventing the collective pursuit of agency

Williamson (2014) argues that agentic growth at the group level may be achieved among Rwandan survivors via the pursuit of freedom and autonomy. One way to achieve this is by resisting the dominant ideology that prevails in Rwanda today. As Williamson (2014) observes:

while the Hutu are often portrayed as collectively guilty genocidal killers, survivors appear to be discredited as suspicious and psychologically unstable. The only people in Rwanda who are not stigmatised are those who were not in Rwanda at the time of the genocide, the returnees, which serves to justify this group’s relatively advantageous position in society and maintains intergroup inequality. (p. 94)

In their testimonies, the most common religious response observed among Rwandan women survivors is a religious reappraisal of their experiences. This is when an individual redefines a situation through religious intervention as benevolent and potentially beneficial; a coping strategy that Pargament, Koenig, and Perez (2000) suggest helps achieve a sense of meaning (e.g., “The grace of God was on my side” (LK)). In some cases, such re appraisals associate
the actions of the RPF with acts of God. So although the RPF has not allied itself with the church in the same way that leaders did in the past, evidence from survivors’ testimonies suggests that a form of theocracy nevertheless underlies its powerbase.

This can again be seen in the testimony of SB who attributes the ending of the genocide and her being saved by the RPF to an act of God: “In the morning, God helped us and the Inkotanyi [RPF] liberated the city and we lived to see another day.” SB goes on to explain how “seeing [the Inkotanyi] was like the coming of Jesus, I swear. It was like meeting God, I know he also sent them to us”. Such reappraisals reflect the belief that it was God’s plan to end the genocide via the actions of the RPF. In the following extract from her testimony, it would appear that SB continues to view the RPF’s leadership in spiritual terms: “To me I will always thank the RPF government. May God continue to protect them and may they rein forever or even be succeeded by Jesus.”

Such benevolent reappraisals demonstrate the differential impact of ideological beliefs on individual and collective identity. While the religious interpretation of an event as benevolent and beneficial may provide a sense of meaning and alleviate existential anxiety (Pargament et al. 2000), by giving divine legitimation to a government which does not favour their group interests, it could be argued that Tutsi survivors are operating under false consciousness. However, religious reappraisals of the genocide do not always lead to a state of false consciousness. In some cases, survivors’ benevolent religious reappraisals lead them towards self-transcendence, encouraging the pursuit of agency and communion at the collective level.

(3) Promoting the collective pursuit of communion

Self-transcendence is a psychological function of religion discussed by Batson and Stocks (2004), referring to the drive within certain individuals to place their priorities outside their own individual needs in order to pursue a higher purpose or cause. Batson and Stocks (2004) describe this function of religion as “qualitatively different” to its other functions which meet our individual needs, because self-transcendence may call us “to lift our eyes from our own needs to set our sights on higher matters, beyond ourselves” (p. 153). Similarly, Janoff-Bulman and McPherson Frantz (1997) observe how many survivors engage in behaviours to promote social causes and help others in a way that goes beyond the boundaries of themselves by connecting with something greater. An example of self-transcendence as a result of religious beliefs may be found in the testimony of IM, enabling her to pursue communion:

As a Christian, I will forgive them with no regrets. For instance, I pardoned Papa Dido. […] In that way, we became good friends, we get on well as Christians and we go to church together. I am also willing to forgive Paul as there is no way the dead can come back to life. If I knew that killing would bring back the person I lost, I wouldn’t hesitate to do it. But I prefer to give out my forgiveness in order to save my soul.

Religious forgiving is a method that Pargament et al. (2000) suggest helps to shift the anger, hurt and fear associated with a traumatic event to peace, and facilitate life transformation. It is clear that the religious component of IM’s ability to forgive is central as it is not as a human being, a Tutsi or as a woman, but “as a Christian” that she may forgive. However, IM’s emphasis on forgiving as a Christian could also be problematic. As Clark (2010) observes, “some survivors argue that they must forgive perpetrators, regardless of the latter’s motivations for requesting forgiveness, because their Christian faith requires them to forgive out of gratitude for God’s mercy” (p. 302). Clark (2010) suggests that the “interpretation of a biblical commandment to forgive unconditionally amounts to a damaging level of coercion” (pp. 302–303). IM’s emphasis on saving her soul could be seen to reflect this coercive sense of duty. Nevertheless, the friendship IM establishes with one of the
génocidaires is founded on the basis of their shared Christian beliefs. Thus, it could also be argued that IM experiences a form of self-transcendence motivated by her religious beliefs as she goes beyond her own interests, describing how she takes food to Papa Dido who was imprisoned for killing the family of one of the orphans under IM’s care. Most importantly, her willingness to forgive and speak openly about her forgiveness no doubt contributes more broadly to processes of reconciliation between survivors and perpetrators, contributing to collective processes of communion.

(4) Promoting the collective pursuit of agency

LK’s testimony provides a similar example of religiously inspired self-transcendence but this case demonstrates the pursuit of agency:

Whatever it was, we were saved by God because we have a special mission. Not just eating and drinking because it adds nothing to society. We survived the way we did because our task is to bless the rest of the country. Our task is to tell he who thinks he can kill that there is no profit gained in killing. We are left to witness that those who killed gained nothing and we must help them to rebuild their conscience and repent. I realised that the duty of survivors is very great.

LK’s emphasis on the collective “mission”, “task” and “duty” of survivors affords a sense of agency to survivors as a group, promoting the idea that they should play an active role in reshaping post-genocide Rwanda. Not only might this benevolent reappraisal of her situation provide existential reassurance at the individual level, but also a sense of empowerment to survivors at the group level. LK’s engagement in processes of truth, justice and reconciliation also demonstrates her pursuit of communion. So while religious beliefs can lead to cases of false consciousness, the examples of IM and LK demonstrate that religious ideologies can also lead to positive outcomes at the collective level, enabling the collective pursuit of agency and communion.

Conclusion: individual well-being vs. collective false consciousness?

With regard to the question of whether religion can itself be considered a domain of posttraumatic growth, this article shows that the matter is complicated by the fact that religion may have a differing impact on individual identity compared with group identity. Benevolent reappraisals of a traumatic event may provide individual existential comfort, but such appraisals can also give divine legitimacy to ideologies which counter the interests of trauma survivors as a group, resulting in a situation of false consciousness. For example, perceptions of religious leaders as sacred are a likely reason for survivors’ apparent reluctance to condemn the crimes of priests such as Father Munyeshyaka. Such reluctance inhibits survivors from achieving truth and justice which are necessary for broader processes of reconciliation. Their Christian faith also appears to lead survivors to interpret the leadership of the RPF in spiritual terms, continuing the history of theocracy observed in Rwanda. Thus, despite providing survivors with meaning, and existential comfort at the individual level, religious beliefs can also uphold people and institutions which very much counter their collective/group interests. As this article also shows, however, survivors can use their religious ideology to inspire positive change at the group level through the collective pursuit of communion (via reconciliation) and agency (via empowerment and autonomy).

Even if the results from this study suggest that religious beliefs may have a negative impact on group identity, in a clinical setting, the clinician’s empathy of trauma survivors’ worldview is nonetheless important. As Calhoun and Tedeschi (1999) highlight, “the ultimate arbiter of posttraumatic growth in spiritual and religious matters is the client” (p. 121). Moreover, as the impact of religion at the collective level branches into the political sphere, the role of trauma therapists in facilitating positive change at this level may be limited. Ultimately, survivors require access to outlets from which
they may develop counter ideologies, enabling them to collectively pursue agency and communion. But because elites usually control access to public discourse, dominant ideologies are often influential and tend to favour those in positions of power (van Dijk, 1998). Unfortunately, the RPF adopts a number of strategies, such as preventing free speech, that thwart the development of such counter ideologies. There are some platforms, such as the Genocide Archive of Rwanda, which provide survivors with access to public discourse, however free speech remains limited and seeking justice or speaking out against the government are potentially dangerous activities.

A significant limitation to this study is the small sample size which is limited to female survivors, impeding the generalisability of the findings presented. Women were affected by the genocide in different ways to men and it is likely that they may experience posttraumatic growth differently. For example, women have had to take on new roles in the post-genocide period which has created a sense of solidarity amongst them that transcends ethnic lines. A much larger sample size that included men and women would be needed to identify more extensive, generalisable patterns of ideological response among survivors. The testimonial evidence presented nonetheless demonstrates that, while the meaning, control or existential reassurance afforded by religious ideologies may benefit individuals on some levels, it is essential not to underestimate the power of religious institutions and their ideologies on a broader scale. In Rwanda, Christian institutions allied themselves to Habyarimana’s regime and provided the spiritual climate in which genocide could take place. A religious interpretation of the RPF’s leadership has the potential to be equally dangerous given that the Rwandan government has become increasingly intolerant and authoritarian since coming to power. A divine interpretation of the RPF’s position will undoubtedly make it difficult to dispute its actions, even if these include human rights abuses, as doing so would mean challenging the will of God.

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Notes
1. I use the term “philosophical framework” to differentiate individual belief systems from “ideology”, which, using van Dijk’s (1998) definition refers to a relatively fixed and abstract system of knowledge and attitudes that is shared by a group. The term “ideology” used by McAdams (1993) alludes to the individual’s idiosyncratic set of basic beliefs. As van Dijk (1998) points out, even if many individual subscribe to the same ideology (e.g., Christianity), not all members “have identical ‘copies’ of the representations. Rather, we must assume that because of obvious individual differences of ‘ideological socialisation’ in the group, each member has her or his own personal ‘version’ of the ideology” (p. 79).
2. People’s self-perceptions and relationships with others are undoubtedly influenced by ideological beliefs but are not, in themselves, ideologies.
3. Tutsi who had fled previous episodes of violence and returned to Rwanda after the genocide.
4. Father Munyeshyaka withheld food and water supplies from all refugees, but a small group of women and young girls, yet in exchange for such privileges, he committed acts of sexual violence and rape against them (African Rights, 1999).
5. Papa Dido and Paul were local members of the militia.

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