

CHRISTIANITY'S RELATION TO THE RWANDAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION:
WHAT CHRISTIANITY CAN ADD TO THE RTR

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The coming of missionaries in 1900 found Rwandans with a traditional Rwandan religion. After their coming, news was proclaimed to Rwandans that there is another king and savior for Rwanda, not the Rwandan King. The news was radically resisted by the then king of Rwanda, Yuhi Musinga, but the resistance did not stop a few secret conversions. Later, his successor, Mutara 3 Rudahigwa, unlike his father, accepted Christ as his lord and savior, got baptized on 17th October 1943 together with his wife,¹ and later gave an edict, an edict not of Milan but Nyanza, a city in the southern part of Rwanda, on 27th October 1946:

“...In the name of all Rwandans, we commit to follow you, Christ, Lord of all people and all nations. I surrender myself, my family, and my country to you...”²

That was the official acceptance of Christianity in Rwanda.

Since then, the two religions have been learning how to live together, but despite the past years of contact, the relationship remains a challenge. Up to now, some continue to see the two religions as irreconcilable enemies: One has to abolish the other to survive. You cannot serve two masters, you cannot be a Christian at the same time a Rwandan, recently said, an RTR follower. My proposal is rather the opposite. The central argument of my paper is to show that Christianity is not antagonistic to the Rwandan traditional religion but rather a religion to fulfill it. And by the end, I hope to show what Christianity can add.

In the eyes of some Rwandans, Christianity has been perceived as a religion completely against the Rwandan Traditional religion. For Yuhi Musinga, the king who reigned at that time, Catechism was poison. “Be careful with the whites, especially the one called Bsp

¹ Myr Kizito Bahujimihigo, *MUTARA 3 RUDAHIGWA, UWATUYE U RWANDA KRISTO UMWAMI* (Kigali, Rwanda: Pallotti Presse, 2020), 35. [The title in English is: Mutara 3 Rudahigwa, who offered Rwanda to Christ the King]

² Myr Kizito Bahujimihigo, *MUTARA 3 RUDAHIGWA, UWATUYE U RWANDA KRISTO UMWAMI*, 75.

The Kinyarwanda version of the quote: Nyagasani Kristo Umwami, ... natwe abanyarwanda twese twemeje ku mugaragaro ko tukuyobotse, ukaba uri Umwami wacu. Nguhaye igihugu cyanjye cyose, abo tuva inda imwe, nanjye ubwanjye.

Classe”,³ were the words that Musinga bid farewell to his son Rudahigwa. Kabale, who was one of the influential politicians, advised the palace ministers to accept the skills and knowledge of the whites but not their Gods. And Kanjogera, the mother of the king, was not different. To be a Christian was to willingly hand the kingdom of the Rwandans into the hands of another king, which was a betrayal.⁴It was not a blind resistance, though; the king’s question still stands: What is wrong with our God to accept a new one?⁵

It was not only the Rwandans who saw Christianity as an enemy, but some Christians (Rwandans and non-Rwandans) saw the Rwandan traditional religion as an enemy to be destroyed. Aloys Bigirumwami, growing up in a Roman Catholic seminary, confesses his error: The error of fighting to abolish the Rwandan traditional religion without knowing why.

AMABUYE ABIRI IYO AKOCANYE AVAMO URUMULI: ... Kuri iki gihe mu Rwanda hari amadini abili: Ubupagani n’Ubukiristo. Mbabajwe n’uko ntabimenye kare kose, ngihabwa ubusaseridoti mu wa 1929. Mbabajwe n’uko muri iyo myaka nigishije ubukristu mbwangisha Ubupagani, nsha Ubupagani mu Rwanda ntazi icyo mbuziza! Mbabajwe n’uko ubukiristo butarashinga imizi mu Rwanda n’igihe bumaze. Mbabajwe n’uko njye n’abandi, Ubukiristu twabuhagitse mu giti cy’Ubupagani nk’abahagika umuzinga mu giti! Murumva ko igiti n’umuzinga bitagira ihuriro. Igihe kirageze cyo guhuza ivanjiri n’umuco mwiza w’I Rwanda.⁶

For the translation:

[When two stones collide against each other, it gives light! From two things erupt light! Currently in Rwanda, we have two religions: “PAGANISM” and “CHRISTIANITY. I regret not to have known this, since 1929 when I was ordained into the priesthood. During those years, I regret having taught Christianity by opposing it to “paganism”, wanting to eradicate paganism in Rwanda, without knowing the reason for its eradication. I regret to notice that Christianity is not rooted in Rwanda, despite the many years of presence. I regret having, with others, suspended Christianity in the branches

³ Bsp Classe was the leader of the first missionary team in Rwanda.

⁴ Myr Kizito Bahujimihigo, *MUTARA 3 RUDAHIGWA, UWATUYE U RWANDA KRISTO UMWAMI*, 18-19,24.

⁵ Myr Kizito Bahujimihigo, *MUTARA 3 RUDAHIGWA, UWATUYE U RWANDA KRISTO UMWAMI*, 33.

⁶ Mgr Aloys Bigirumwami, *UMUNTU: Balibwira-Barabwirwa-Batereliyo Ni Jyejyejyewe-Jyejyenyine*, vol. 1, 2 vols., of - (Kigali, Rwanda: -, 1983), 99.

of paganism, just as a hive is suspended in the branches of a tree. It is clear that under these conditions, the tree and the hive are not in a good unity. The time is now to relate the gospel to the Rwandan good tradition.]⁷

From the confession, we hear that it was ignorance of one of the religions that made him see them as enemies. And as it was then, it is now; many who are ignorant of one of these religions continue with prejudice to misrepresent and portray them as irreconcilable. The best way forward towards my thesis is to define these religions for a common understanding.

But before the definitions, like in many other religions, there were many later developments within the Rwandan traditional religion, which ought not to be confused with the Rwandan traditional religion in its original sense. What the RTR was, in its beginnings, is in many ways different from what Christianity found on the ground in 1900. For a common definition of RTR, the later developments will be put aside.

The Imandwa of Lyangombe, traced from Uganda, and the cult of Nyabingi, from Tanzania, even the Runukamishyo rwa Nyamurorwa from Ndorwa, were like Jesus, new figures brought later in the beliefs of Rwandans.⁸ The first was believed to have ended a great famine, hence a superman, the other, a superwoman, and the last one, for having given a wise counsel to the king, so super-wise. The widely known were Lyangombe and Nyabingi. It is ignorance to confuse these new cults with the real Rwandan traditional religion, for not all Rwandans subscribed to or followed the above mentioned.⁹ The Kubandwa practice, which is thought to be originally Rwandan, is clearly a later development, despite its wide embrace.¹⁰

⁷ Joel Kubwimana and Gillian Mary Bediako, *A Rwandan Bishop's Confession: Mother Tongue Use and Primal Religion in the Writings of Bishop Aloys Bigirumwami* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2021), 5.

⁸ The cults were enculturated around the 16th and 17th century

⁹ Mgr Aloys Bigirumwami, *UMUNTU*, 134.

¹⁰ Myr Kizito Bahujimihigo, *MUTARA 3 RUDAHIGWA, UWATUYE U RWANDA KRISTO UMWAMI* (Kigali, Rwanda: Pallotti Presse, 2020), 58-61.

Hence, the people called ‘Inzigo’: the name given to the Rwandans who refused to practice it.¹¹

All the later developments purged, RTR mainly remains, like many other natural religions, a religion that sprang from natural revelations. According to Muzungu Bernardin, a priest who was once an RTR follower and later a Christian, the traditional religion of Rwandans was mainly built on two elements: first, the knowledge of God from man’s given intelligence, and second, observing God’s commandments as written in their hearts.¹² Unlike the many other world religions, this religion had no other founder but God: Imana Rurema.¹³ An RTR follower, then, is someone who believes in God according to his or her natural intelligence and obeys God’s commandments as written in his or her heart. Here now, we can start to see the commonalities in the two religions.

For Rwandans, Imana (God) was not yet a subject of comprehensive study; their theology was not as systematic as what we find in Christianity, but hidden in their myths, their names, and proverbs, we find allusions and explicit statements about Imana. As the people imagine him, to quote Father Hurel, “He is powerful, superior to everyone, but personally kind. He is loved more than he is feared”. He is a creator, and the people are the creatures.¹⁴

For Rwandans, God is *Niyonzima*, which means that God is the one who lives, the one with life, and so the rest wait for life from him. *Imana ni iyakare*, *God is the ancient of days*, *Imana rurema*, which means *God is the creator*, *Imana Rugira*, meaning *God is the*

¹¹ Bernardin Muzungu, *Idini Gakondo Y’Abanyarwanda Ihuriye He n’ayandi Madini? = Les Religion Traditionnelle Des Rwandais Comparee Au Autres Religions = Rwandans’ Tradition Religion Vis a Vis to Other Religions*, 84.

¹² Bernardin Muzungu, *Rwandans’ Tradition Religion Vis a Vis to Other Religions*, 67-70.

¹³ Bernardin Muzungu, *Rwandans’ Tradition Religion Vis a Vis to Other Religions*, 67.

¹⁴ Louis de Lacger, *Le Ruanda Ancien*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, 2 vols. (Kabgayi: Rwanda, 1959), 151-53.

sustainer, and *Imana Nyamurunga*, which means that *God is the unifying rope*.¹⁵ In the mentioned RTR theology of God's attributes, Christianity and RTR are not in conflict.

For Aloys Bigirumwami, in the names of Rwandans, we find a big picture of what Rwandans thought their God to be:

Hagenimana [It is God that destines], Habyalimana [It is God that gives birth], Harelimana [It is God that grows], Mukeshimana [Provided by God], Ntezilyayo [I wait from the Lord], Ntigurirwa [God is just], Ntihabose [He does not give to all], Ndikuyabanje [I am with the Alpha], Ndikubwimana [I live by God's will], Bigilimana [God is the owner], Ahingeneye [Where God chose for me], Ahinkuye [Where God brought me from], Ngendahimana [I live in God's territory], Hategikimana [It is God that rules], Twagilimana [Only God can help], Musabyimana [I asked her/him from God], Muhawenimana [Given to me by God], Hakizimana [It is God that saves] and many more. We see the concept of prayer, the concept of grace, the concept of divine provision, salvation, and many more. There is no knowledge of God beyond this, says Bigirumwami.¹⁶

For those who understand Christianity, this was a good and common foundation. But it should not go unmentioned that some missionaries called the mentioned names, *pagan*, perhaps because of their syllables! Had they known and cared about the meaning, they could have appreciated the closeness of the RTR to the Christian revelations. In the names, we see that Rwandans were not atheists. For Rwandans of then, to say I am an atheist was not far from saying, I am stupid.¹⁷ Second, 'Rwandans were not polytheistic but monotheistic', beliefs that are also Christian.¹⁸

However, that being said, there were significant differences in their Monotheism and the Christian monotheism. Here is a special note about their monotheism by Father Arnoux in 1918:

¹⁵ Bernardin Muzungu, *Rwandans' Tradition Religion Vis a Vis to Other Religions*, 3-6.

¹⁶ Mgr Aloys Bigirumwami, *UMUNTU: Balibwira-Barabwirwa-Batereliyo Ni Jyejyejyewe-Jyejyenyine*, 22-23.

¹⁷ Mgr Aloys Bigirumwami, *UMUNTU*, 107.

¹⁸ Bernardin Muzungu, *Rwandans' Tradition Religion Vis a Vis to Other Religions*, 65.

“It should be said of the Banyarwanda that they are monotheistic in their own land and for themselves, but that they see no impossibility in the simultaneous existence of several creators, with a geographically limited sphere of action. Even today, pagans still skillfully contrast the god of the Banyarwanda with that of the Europeans. We are the children of Imana, not of Mungu, the name of God in Kiswahili, introduced by the catholic missionaries.”¹⁹

Furthermore, the commonality of the Rwandan traditional religion and Christianity is not only in how they see the attributes of God, but also in the structures of their big story. Here is a glimpse of the Rwandan version of creation:

“Imana first created two lands, the upper land, above the clouds, the sun, and the stars, and the lower land, which he made in the image of the upper land, but without beauty and happiness. This is the earth we inhabit, a land of misery, suffering, toil, and revolt. Before this twofold creation, there was nothing: Imana existed alone. In heaven, Imana created every kind of useful and pleasant plant and tree, and for each animal, a brother and a sister. The creation of humankind, brother and sister, was the last. These lived in close communion with Imana and enjoyed without labor all the plants and animals created. Suffering and illness were unknown to them.”²⁰

It was the failing towards Imana that made man and woman lose this paradise. From one of the myths, all along, God had protected men from death, but themselves, at a point, sheltered death.²¹ Later, from another myth fragment, we hear the fallen, crying for mercy. God heard them and sent them a Savior. It is said that this savior was nailed on tree by wicked men, but God dried the wounds, and through a storm, he was taken up. It is said that, when misfortunes befall Rwanda, that spirit indwells a king's son to save the country. Thus, the cult of Kibogo.²² In these stories, the backbone is perhaps semi-Christian but not Anti-Christian.

Ignorant of the big picture, or zealous for the Christian faith, some missionaries were against those stories of Rwanda, in which the Rwandans found their meaning. The whole

¹⁹ Louis de Lacger, *Le Ruanda Ancien*, 156

²⁰ Louis de Lacger, *Le Ruanda Ancien*, 154.

²¹ Louis de Lacger, *Le Ruanda Ancien*, 163-64.

²² Louis de Lacger, *Le Ruanda Ancien*, 167-68.

book *Kibogo* is about the tendency of missionaries to destroy whatever they found on the hills of Rwanda, without explaining why, and even not knowing why. They could not see that the stories were not here to abolish but to fulfil. Like Marcion, some proposed the Old Testament of the Rwandans to be entirely abolished, and found their God completely different from the God of Christians.²³

For those finding abolition to be the way, Augustine is helpful. There cannot be a nature of which there is no good, even the nature of the devil himself.²⁴ With the evil things in the Rwandan culture, we ought to see the good things that were planted early on, before Christianity was proclaimed in Rwanda. Rather than assuming a total ignorance or a negative attitude towards the Rwandan religion, *what do you know about God* is the best question to ask before attempting their evangelization, advises Bsp Kanyamacumbi.²⁵

They already knew that God is not a *matter*. And surprisingly, they already knew that the Word is God (*Ijambo ryiza ni mugenzi w'Imana*).²⁶ With all that is in the RTR, and the many more commonalities, unmentioned, Jesus would not have held back his words: I did not come to abolish but to fulfil.²⁷

But since it is now clear that the religion was not to be abolished, what then can Christianity add to it?

To that question, Muzungu's answer is my answer: Jesus. In Christianity, we find Jesus Christ and his way of life, with the new revelations about God, life, and death that he

²³ Scholastique Mukasonga, *Kibogo* (Paris: Archipelago books, 2022), 30-32.

²⁴ City of God, pg 13, chapter 19.

²⁵ Kanyamacumbi, Patient. "Culte Des Ancetres et Christianisme." *Culture traditionnelle et Christianisme*, - , no. (July 14, 1969): 27-44, 43.

²⁶ Edouard Sinayobye, *Ijambo Ryiza Ni Mugenzi w'Imana* (Kigali, Rwanda: I.P.N, 2020), 11-12.

²⁷ Bible, Matthew 5:17

revealed²⁸. In Christianity, we find a savior, a redeemer, the Word, who in Kinyarwanda is God. God from God. All cultures, Rwandans included, are deeply wounded by the primal sin of man, which is turning away from that God, in whom they had a beginning.²⁹

Despite the many riches of the Rwandan traditional religion, even having its beginning in God, the country was stained by sins of unfaithfulness, injustice, unchastity, and disobedience, to mention but a few. According to the myth fragments, this made them lose their paradise. Christianity's news to Rwanda is the way back to the lost paradise, the lost communion with God.³⁰

Rwanda, as a nation, had been waiting for this, always in her kings. The salvation of her people was for the kings to bring. Which king has this been? Which King could it be? In whom does Rwanda await its salvation? The book of kings [Isoko y'Amajyambere], written by Alexis Kagame, is important here.³¹

In his analysis, Kagame, poetically, after showing the kings' shortcomings, asks an important question about most of the kings and their regimes: where could we have been, if so and so were still the king? Like the author of the book of Kings in the Bible, Kagame has a king whose heart God is pleased with, and that is Mutara 3 Rudahigwa, 'Rudahigwa' means the excellent. But why?

For Kagame, it is his wisdom, the wisdom to offer Rwanda back to its creator, the king not only of Rwanda, but of earth and heaven. Christianity proclaims a new King, a king not

²⁸ Bernardin Muzungu, *Rwandans' Tradition Religion Vis a Vis to Other Religions*, 83-84.

²⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 211.

³⁰ Louis de Lacger, *Le Ruanda Ancien*, 154.

³¹ Alexis Kagame, *Isoko Y'Amajyambere* (Kabgayi, Ruanda: Ibitabo by'injijuramuco (Éditions morales), 1949), 1.

to destroy the Rwandan kings but to fulfil them. In Christ, Rwanda has a king, and in him, Rwanda has a savior, a savior who is true God, the new Hakizimana, who can redeem her and restore her to the lost paradise. To answer Yuhi's question raised at the start, there is nothing wrong with the Rwandan God; Christianity's news is the way to that God. For those who can understand.

However, in fulfilling the Rwandan traditional religion, good contextualization will demand a good understanding of the Rwandan culture. "The rejection of Christ in the Jews, the Greeks, the Romans, Moderns, Westerners, Orientals, (and the RTR followers), includes the fear of losing their culture."³² While respecting the Rwandan culture, Christianity can still offer a transformational ideal based on the good elements found in the culture.

To conclude, though differences remain, there are many commonalities between the Rwandan traditional religion and Christianity, commonalities so plentiful to stop us seeing the religions as antagonistic. Second, there are many good elements in the Rwandan traditional religion, elements so eternal that if understood, are not to be abolished but to be fulfilled. And finally, for Rwanda, Christianity has Jesus, a king and savior, who, among the many that Rwandans looked upon, is the true God, true man, and incomparable to all the kings and saviors ever. In him alone remains the perfect salvation of all nations. It is upon us to kill him or let him reign.

³² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), 4.

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