

The misinformed consciences in the rwandan genocide



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For roughly one hundred days in 1994, brutal killings took place in Rwanda by the hand of morally corrupted Hutu soldiers. An estimated one million lives were lost, almost wiping out the Tutsi race. The stories told by survivors like Immaculée Ilibagiza elicit heart-wrenching emotions in the reader. When people read her story, the same word comes up over and over again: How. How were so many lives lost in such a short time? How could more than one hundred thousand peoples' consciences have been corrupt to point that, were they isolated incidents, we might have been forced to assume that the murderer simply didn't have the capacity to see right from wrong? It doesn't seem possible. When we look further into what lead up to the killings, it becomes clear that, whatever the initial factors (whether political, social, or both) the Rwandan holocaust was inevitable due to the spread of misinformation. The Interahamwe and other Hutus taking part in the horrific acts had misinformed consciences and the result was the slaying of more than one million people in one hundred days. Though it can't be proven, it is often said that a small percentage of people " have no conscience". When we say this, we are referring to a person's capacity for moral decision making. It is easier to say that a person who has performed acts that many would believe go against our inherent ethical foundation is simply incapable of discerning good from evil, than to find an explanation for their behaviour. In the case of the Rwandan genocide, we can't rationally say that there is any probable chance that nearly an entire generation of a race was born without the capacity to make moral decisions. Indeed, components of Immaculée's story do indicate that some of the killers, at least, had a conscience. According to Emmanuel Levinas, the face (especially the eyes) is a window to the soul, and a face to face encounter with another human

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being has the highest ethical meaning. His philosophy claims that this face to face encounter calls one forth to be ethical. In Immaculée's encounter with the band of killers she tells her story: " We stared into each other's eyes for what seemed like a lifetime. Finally, the killer broke my gaze and looked away. He turned his back to me and dropped his machete, as if the devil had left his body," (Ilibagiza, 172). This is a clear example of the face as a representation of the Good, and the killer was called forth to be ethical. He proved his capacity for conscience when he saw the Good in Immaculée's eyes. Likewise, when Damascene's murderer, Semahe, realized what he had done, he broke down and cried for days. He saw the flaw in his moral judgment. He cried, " It was a sin to kill such a boy – it was a sin." (Ilibagiza, 155). Semahe had the capacity for conscience, which was proven when he repeated his conscience process to analyze his judgment. He was able to reform his conscience through a process of reflection and personal analysis, making a moral truth his own again. The Hutus possessed the inherent sense that there is a right and wrong, and had the capacity for a good conscience and to make moral decisions. Though the Interahamwe Hutus had the capacity to develop a good set of morals, they were surrounded by influences that relayed immoral lies. Therein lies the problem. Hate, repetition, and lies fueled the RTLM radio station's broadcasts. The speaker yelled, " These Tutsi cockroaches are out to kill us. Do not trust them... Every Hutu must join together to rid Rwanda of these Tutsi cockroaches! Hutu Power! Hutu Power!" (Ilibagiza, 37). The spread of this misinformation grew exponentially as the RTLM became the most popular radio station, and every Hutu that believed the propaganda spread it to every Hutu they knew. The power, conviction, and extensiveness with which this misinformation was

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spread transformed an idea into an ideology powerful enough to affect the processes of the consciences of tens of thousands of Hutus. Every corner of every province was rife with the hateful messages so none could escape the propaganda. The conscience is formed with knowledge from society and any information a person takes in, will affect the conscience. In Immaculée's case, the broadcasts strengthened her conscience when she saw how evil lies can be. When in school, " Young Hutus were taught from an early age that Tutsis were inferior and not to be trusted, and they didn't belong in Rwanda," (Ilibagiza, 86). Immaculée saw that dishonesty, a venial sin, often of little harm, had led the Interahamwe to terrifying mortal sins, strengthening her convictions. As the killers took in the misinformation as " moral truth", they were allowing it to form their conscience, creating their moral belief that killing a Tutsi is no more wrong than killing a snake. The Hutus consciences were misshapen by the information they took in, and it was this misinformation that ultimately led to their immoral judgments. Immaculée's faith strengthened her conscience, as did her moral upbringing and learning of truth. We all have some inherent sense of what is right and true, but our conscience is strongly built on what we take in. It is with the information we receive throughout our lives that we form our ethical foundation, and in turn, decide what is right or wrong for us. Immaculée and her brothers were raised in a loving environment, and their parents only taught them of kindness, respect, and tolerance; values that shape a good conscience. Immaculée recalls, " Everyone was welcome in our home, regardless of race, religion, or tribe. To my parents, being Hutu or Tutsi had nothing to do with the kind of person you were. If you were of good character and a kind human being, they greeted you with open arms," (Ilibagiza, 15).

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Once away from her parents, she looked to God, her new Father, to strengthen her conscience, and reflected, “ I knew that I couldn’t ask God to love me if I were unwilling to love His children... I asked God to forgive [the killers’] sins and turn their souls toward His beautiful light. That night I prayed with a clear conscience and a clean heart,” (Ilibagiza, 94). Immaculée knew what was right, and that she had to forgive the people who had so badly wronged her, to forgive those who trespassed against her. She was only able to do this with the strength she drew from her conscience and God. Unlike Immaculée, the killers didn’t have so strong a conscience, and it was easily changed by the misinformation. We decide what is right and true by the moral wisdom we take in. For a healthy conscience, the information taken in promotes showing love to everyone, and bringing good to the community. The process of the Hutus’ conscience being formed was filled with messages of discrimination and hatred. This led to their wrongful moral judgments, and the murder of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The spread of lies is a sin, and these sins will lead to greater and greater sins if it isn’t stopped. Everyone has the capacity for conscience, and if we form these consciences in a community with moral wisdom and love, our society will form a strong ethical foundation on which morality will flourish.