

AFRICAN
STUDIES

CHRISTIANITY AND GENOCIDE IN RWANDA

TIMOTHY LONGMAN



CAMBRIDGE

Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda

TIMOTHY LONGMAN

Boston University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521191395

© Timothy Longman 2010

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2010

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data

Longman, Timothy Paul.

Christianity and genocide in Rwanda / Timothy Longman.

p. cm. – (African studies)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-19139-5 (Hardback)

1. Genocide–Rwanda–History–20th century. 2. Genocide–Religious aspects–
Christianity. 3. Rwanda–History–Civil War, 1994–Atrocities. 4. Rwanda–
History–Civil War, 1994–Religious aspects. 5. Ethnic relations–Religious
aspects–Christianity. I. Title. II. Series.

DT450.435.L66 2010

967.57104'31–dc22 2009023321

ISBN 978-0-521-19139-5 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or
accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in
this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Web sites is,
or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

To my parents, who have always supported me.
To Jacolijn Post and Isaac Nshimiyimana who made my
research in Rwanda possible.
To Alison Des Forges whose friendship and insight will be
deeply missed.
And to those many Rwandans who lost their lives in the
events of 1994. May your sacrifice never be forgotten.

“What we saw in this country surprised us, too. These were things commanded by the devil....”

– Hutu man, Gisovu, Kibuye

Acknowledgments

I was never supposed to have gone to Rwanda. In September 1991, with plane tickets purchased and research clearance in hand, I was two weeks away from flying to Kinshasa to spend a year researching church-state relations in Zaire, when troop rioting forced most foreign nationals to flee and made my research plans impossible. After waiting a few months to see if things might calm down in Zaire, one of my professors suggested that I consider shifting my dissertation focus to Rwanda, "a nice peaceful little country." Thus, in May 1992, after a quick crash course on Rwandan history and culture, I found myself arriving in Kigali for a year, with little inkling of the extraordinary events that were about to come crashing down around me. During the initial year that I spent studying religion and politics in Rwanda, I watched as conditions in the country declined precipitously. Though I could never have predicted the extent of the coming violence, nor that it would take an overwhelmingly ethnic rather than political form, I left Rwanda in mid-1993 quite concerned over the probability of imminent violence.

During the next several months, as I toiled away on my dissertation, news trickled in from friends and the media about deteriorating conditions in Rwanda. I was nearly halfway through writing the text when a fellow student called on the morning of April 7 to ask if I had heard that the president of Rwanda had been killed in a plane crash. Over the next weeks, my writing halted as I struggled to find out what had happened to friends and colleagues and to deal emotionally with the devastation that had befallen a country that had become so precious to me. Gradually I received information – sometimes partial, sometimes inaccurate – of friends who had been killed, some who had survived and were in exile,

others who were still in Rwanda. In August, I took up a one-year teaching position at Drake University while I completed my dissertation. After defending in May 1995, I began looking for full-time academic employment, but a few months later I received a call from Alison Des Forges about my potential interest in returning to Rwanda to work in the field office of Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH). While I had some trepidation about returning to Rwanda with all of the sad memories it contained, I eventually agreed, and in the fall of 1995, I headed back to Kigali. My primary task for HRW and FIDH was to conduct research on the 1994 genocide, primarily in Butare and Gikongoro, for the book *Leave None to Tell the Story*. I was also able to follow up on the three case studies that I had conducted in Butare, and Alison also allowed me to return to Kibuye, where I gathered documentary evidence in government offices and interviewed people about how the genocide took place in Kirinda and Biguhu. During the course of the year, I gradually reconnected with friends and colleagues I had known before the genocide and learned their stories of suffering and survival. When I left Rwanda again to take up a teaching position at Vassar College, I had a rich new body of data. Drawing both on my dissertation research and on the additional year of fieldwork, I worked on this book over the next several years, the completion of the text often delayed by new projects in Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda.

Having taken more than a decade to complete this book project and having undertaken two extended periods of field research, I am indebted to a large number of individuals. Jacolijn Post met me at the airport on my arrival in Kigali, provided me with a place to stay, and helped me get started on my first case study; her help, insight, and – above all – friendship, made my first year in Rwanda both successful and enjoyable in ways that would otherwise not have been possible. Through Jacolijn, I met Isaac Nshimiyimana, who became a valuable research assistant and close friend, traveling with me to conduct interviews in various parts of the country, helping me improve my Kinyarwanda, and sharing his deep insights about his country. A number of others assisted me as translators or interviewers, particularly a number of students at the Protestant Faculty of Theology in Butare. Among my colleagues at the Faculty, Rina and Marius Joosten helped me with housing, warm meals, and medical care. Fellow student researchers Jennifer Olson and Christof den Biggelaar were of great help in getting me started on research in Butare. I owe a great debt to Alison Des Forges, who allowed me to follow up on my case studies while I worked under her supervision for HRW and

FIDH. Her mentoring, insights, and inspiration over the years have been invaluable, and she is already sorely missed. The HRW/FIDH researchers and translators, JoJo and Faustin, were a great help in this second period of research. I also am grateful to Bosco Nduwimana for his assistance and friendship during this period. Anysie, Aaron, and Oswald were particularly generous in sharing their stories of survival during the genocide.

My dissertation committee, Crawford Young, Michael Schatzberg, Joanne Csete, Aili Tripp, and Booth Fowler, provided helpful guidance on the earliest versions of this manuscript. Professor David Newbury provided careful, extensive comments on a later version. I am indebted to my colleagues at Vassar College, who always provided support. I must particularly thank my parents, William and Lee Longman, for the patient support that they have provided over the years, encouraging my graduate studies and helping to fund my research. I wish to thank my partner, Tracy Keene, for his patience and support over the years.

Finally, I am indebted to the people of Butare, Save, Kirinda, Biguhu, and Kinigi for welcoming me into their communities, allowing me to observe and interview, and making me feel at home. Some individuals, like Geras Mutimura and Obed Niyonshuti, did not survive the 1994 genocide. This book owes a particular debt to them, and to the millions of other Rwandans who have suffered from war and violence.

Contents

Acknowledgments

page xi

INTRODUCTION

- I "People Came to Mass Each Day to Pray,
Then They Went Out to Kill":
Christian Churches, Civil Society, and Genocide 3

PART I "RIVER OF BLOOD": RWANDA'S NATIONAL CHURCHES AND THE 1994 GENOCIDE

- 2 "Render Unto Caesar and Musinga ...": Christianity
and the Colonial State 33
- 3 The Churches and the Politics of Ethnicity 58
- 4 "Working Hand in Hand": Christian Churches
and the Postcolonial State (1962-1990) 82
- 5 "Giants with Feet of Clay": Christian Churches
and Democratization (1990-1992) 117
- 6 "It Is the End of the World": Christian Churches
and Genocide (1993-1994) 161

PART II "GOD HAS HIDDEN HIS FACE": LOCAL CHURCHES AND THE EXERCISE OF POWER IN RWANDA

- 7 Kirinda: Local Churches and the Construction
of Hegemony 203
- 8 Biguhu: Local Churches, Empowerment
of the Poor, and Challenges to Hegemony 240

9	"Commanded by the Devil": Christian Involvement in the Genocide in Kirinda and Biguhu	268
	CONCLUSION	
10	Churches and Accounting for Genocide	303
	<i>Bibliography</i>	325
	<i>Index</i>	341

INTRODUCTION

I

“People Came to Mass Each Day to Pray, Then They Went Out to Kill”

Christian Churches, Civil Society, and Genocide

The small East African state of Rwanda gained sudden international attention in the spring and summer of 1994 when an explosion of deadly violence shook the country. The death of Rwandan President Juvénal Habyarimana in a fiery plane crash on April 6, 1994, served as the pretext for a circle of powerful government and military officials to launch a long-planned offense against opponents of the regime. Within hours after Habyarimana's death, the Presidential Guard and other elite troops spread out into the capital, Kigali, with lists of opposition party leaders, human rights activists, progressive priests, journalists, and other prominent critics of the Habyarimana regime to be eliminated. During the next few weeks, government officials, soldiers, and civilian militia carried the violence into other parts of the country, focusing it more narrowly on one minority ethnic group – the Tutsi, whom regime supporters viewed as a primary threat to their continued dominance. By early July, when the remnants of the Habyarimana regime fled into exile in Zaire, the violence had devastated political and civil societies, killed as many as one million people, and almost completely annihilated the country's Tutsi minority. In a century that has known many atrocities, the genocide in Rwanda was remarkable for its intensity – more than one-tenth of the population of Rwanda was killed in only three months.¹

¹ For details regarding the genocide, the definitive source is Alison Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (New York: Human Rights Watch, and Paris: Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, 1999), written by a long-time student of Rwanda based on research by a large team of investigators, including myself. Gerard Prunier, *The Rwanda Crisis: History of a Genocide* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995) is also useful. It is not my purpose here to enter into the debate

Rwanda is an overwhelmingly Christian country, with just under 90 percent of the population in a 1991 census claiming membership in a Catholic, Protestant, or Seventh-Day Adventist Church.² In the aftermath of the 1994 genocide, journalists, human rights activists, scholars, and even some church officials condemned Rwanda's Christian churches for their culpability in the shocking violence that ravaged the country.³ Not only were the vast majority of those who participated in the killings Christians, but the church buildings themselves also served as Rwanda's primary killing fields. As African Rights claims, "more Rwandese citizens died in churches and parishes than anywhere else."⁴ Organizers of the

over use of the term "genocide." The carnage in Rwanda clearly qualifies as genocide by even the most restricted definitions, for example, Irving Louis Horowitz, *Taking Lives: Genocide and State Power* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997, 4th edition). For useful critical evaluations of various definitions of genocide, see Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn, *The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 8–32; and Helen Fein, *Genocide: A Sociological Perspective* (London and Newbury Park: SAGE, 1993), pp. 8–31.

² Government of Rwanda, "Recensement General de la Population et de l'Habitat au 15 Aout 1991" (Kigali, April 1994) reports that 62.6 percent of the population declared themselves Catholic, 18.8 percent Protestant, 8.4 percent Seventh-Day Adventist, 1.2 percent Muslim, and 1.1 "traditional" (p. 146).

³ "Archbishop Carey's Visit to Rwanda: Rwanda Church Voice 'Silent' During Massacres, Carey Says," *Ecumenical News International*, May 16, 1995; Julian Bedford, "Rwanda's Churches Bloodied by Role in Genocide," *Reuters*, October 18, 1994; Jean Damascène Bizimana, "Église et le Génocide au Rwanda: Les Pères Blancs et le Négationnisme," Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001; Raymond Bonner, "Clergy in Rwanda is Accused of Abetting Atrocities: French Church Gives Refuge to One Priest," *The New York Times*, July 7, 1995, p. A3; "Churches in the Thick of Rwandan Violence," *The Christian Century*, November 8, 1995, pp. 1041–2; Joshua Hammer, "Blood on the Altar: Rwanda: What Did You Do in the War Father?," *Newsweek*, September 4, 1995, p. 36; Gary Haugen, "Rwanda's Carnage: Survivors Describe How Churches Provided Little Protection in the Face of Genocide," *Christianity Today*, February 6, 1995, p. 52; Lindsey Hilsum, *Rwanda: The Betrayal*, Blackstone Films, Channel 4; Donatella Lorch, "The Rock that Crumbled: The Church in Rwanda," *The New York Times*, October 17, 1994, p. A4; Tom Ndahiro, "The Church's Blind Eye to Genocide in Rwanda," in Carol Rittner et al., *Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches?* St. Paul: Paragon House, 2004; Thomas O'Hara, "Rwandan Bishops Faltered in Face of Crisis," *National Catholic Reporter*, September 29, 1995; Faustin Rutembesa, Jean-Pierre Karegeye, and Paul Rutayisire, *Rwanda: L'Église catholique à l'épreuve du génocide*, Greenfield Park: Les Editions Africana, 2000; Wolfgang Schonecke, "The Role of the Church in Rwanda," *America*, June 17, 1995; Dominique Sigaud, "Genocide: le dossier noir de l'Eglise rwandaise," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, February 1–7, 1996, pp. 50–1; "Sin and Confession in Rwanda," *The Economist*, January 14, 1995, p. 39; Henri Tincq, "Le fardeau rwandais de Jean Paul II," *Le monde*, May 23, 1996; Alan Zarembo, "The Church's Shameful Acts: Many Rwandans Refuse to Return to Sanctuaries Where Blood Was Spilled," *Houston Chronicle*, January 29, 1995.

⁴ African Rights, *Rwanda: Death, Despair, and Defiance*, revised edition (London: African Rights, 1995), p. 865.

genocide exploited the historic concept of sanctuary to lure tens of thousands of Tutsi into church buildings with false promises of protection; then Hutu militia and soldiers systematically slaughtered the unfortunate people who had sought refuge, firing guns and tossing grenades into the crowds gathered in church sanctuaries and school buildings, and methodically finishing off survivors with machetes, pruning hooks, and knives.

In Nyakizu commune in the far south of Rwanda, for example, after instigating massacres along the Burundi border to prevent Tutsi from fleeing the country, the burgomaster (leader of the local government) traveled through the commune to encourage local Tutsi, as well as the thousands of refugees from violence in neighboring communes who were passing through Nyakizu, to gather at the Roman Catholic parish of Cyahinda, promising to protect them as Tutsi had been protected in the church from ethnic attacks in the 1960s. The burgomaster subsequently personally supervised gendarmes and civilian militia who surrounded the parish complex and, over a four-day period, systematically slaughtered more than 20,000 people. The church sanctuary, the last building to be attacked, still bears the marks of bullets and grenades and the stains of blood and brains on its floors and walls. According to local officials, 17,000 bodies were exhumed from one set of latrines beside the church, only one of several mass graves at the site.⁵ Research by Human Rights Watch, African Rights, and other groups suggests similar numbers killed at parishes throughout the country.⁶

The involvement of the churches, however, went far beyond the passive use of church buildings as death chambers. In some communities, clergy, catechists, and other church employees used their knowledge of the local population to identify Tutsi for elimination. In other cases, church personnel actively participated in the killing. The International War Crimes Tribunal for Rwanda convicted Elizaphan Ntakirutimana, a pastor in the Seventh-Day Adventist Church, for encouraging Tutsi to assemble at his church in Kibuye Prefecture, then leading to the church a convoy of soldiers and civilian militia, who slaughtered some 8,000 Tutsi.⁷ In April 1998, a Rwandan court condemned to death two Catholic

⁵ The information in this paragraph is based on interviews I and several other researchers conducted in Nyakizu in 1995 and 1996 under the auspices of Human Rights Watch. For a more detailed discussion of events in Nyakizu see Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, pp. 353–431, the two chapters that I drafted for the book.

⁶ African Rights, *Death, Despair, and Defiance*, pp. 258–572.

⁷ Marlise Simons, "Rwandan Pastor and His Son Are Convicted of Genocide," *New York Times*, February 20, 2003.

priests, Jean-François Kayiranga and Eduoard Nkurikiye, for luring people to Nyange parish, where soldiers and militia subsequently massacred them, then bringing in a bulldozer to demolish the church and bury alive any survivors.⁸ Prosecutors in Rwanda have accused Father Wenceslas Munyeshyaka, the curé of Sainte Famille parish in Kigali, of turning over to death squads Tutsi who had sought refuge in his church. Survivors report that Munyeshyaka wore a flack jacket and carried a pistol and that he helped to select out sympathizers of the Rwandan Patriotic Front to be killed. According to some witnesses, he offered protection to women and girls who would sleep with him and turned over to death squads those who refused his advances.⁹

In my own research, I discovered similar stories. For example, a Tutsi woman who worked at a Catholic primary school in Kaduha parish in Gikongoro Prefecture testified that her priest, Robert Nyandwe, had himself come to take her out of hiding and turn her over to a death squad:

The priest, Nyandwe, came to my house. My husband [who is Hutu] was not there. Nyandwe asked my children, "Where is she?" They said that I was sick. He came into the house, entering even into my bedroom. He said, "Come! I will hide you, because there is an attack." ...He said "I'll take you to the CND." He grabbed me by the arm and took me by force. He dragged me out into the street, and we started to go by foot toward the church. But arriving on the path, I saw a huge crowd. There were many people, wearing banana leaves, carrying machetes. I broke free from him and ran. I went to hide in the home of a friend. He wanted to turn me over to the crowd that was preparing to attack the church. It was he who prevented people from leaving the church.¹⁰

National church leaders were slow to speak publicly, and they never condemned the genocide, instead calling on church members to support the new regime that was carrying out the killing. Based on the past close collaboration of church leaders with the organizers of the genocide and their failure to address specifically the massacres of Tutsi, many church members concluded that the church leaders endorsed the killing.¹¹ Believing that their actions were consistent with the teachings of their

⁸ Emmanuel Goujon, "Two Rwandan Priests Given Death Sentences over Rwanda Genocide," *Agence France Presse*, April 18, 1998; "Priests Sentenced to Death for Rwanda Massacre," *Associated Press*, April 20, 1998.

⁹ Bonner, "Clergy in Rwanda Is Accused of Abetting Atrocities"; Hammer, "Blood on the Altar."

¹⁰ From interview conducted in Kaduha by the author on June 12, 1996, in French and Kinyarwanda.

¹¹ Des Forges, *Leave None to Tell the Story*, pp. 245-6.

churches, the death squads in some communities held mass before going out to kill. In Ngoma parish in Butare, a Tutsi priest who was hidden in the sanctuary by his fellow Hutu priests reported to me that, "People came and demanded that my fellow priest reopen the church and hold mass. People came to mass each day to pray, then they went out to kill."¹² In some cases militia members apparently paused in the frenzy of killing to kneel and pray at the altar.¹³ According to a report by a World Council of Churches team that visited Rwanda in August 1994, "In every conversation we had with the government and church people alike, the point was brought home to us that the church itself stands tainted, not by passive indifference, but by errors of commission as well."¹⁴

Apologists for the churches have responded to accusations of church complicity in various ways. The official Catholic response has denied institutional responsibility, blaming the participation of Christians in the genocide on individual sinfulness. In a 1996 letter, Pope John Paul II stated that participation in the genocide was clearly against church teachings, and thus clergy and other Christians who participated were personally culpable, without implicating the wider church. According to the pope, "The church itself cannot be held responsible for the misdeeds of its members who have acted against evangelical law."¹⁵ Father André Sibomana, who himself offers a number of criticisms of the Catholic Church, offers a similar defense. "I don't accept the language of generalization which states that the Roman Catholic Church participated in the genocide.... It is not the Church as such which is called into question, but its members."¹⁶

Others have emphasized the mixed response of the churches to ethnic violence, countering the examples of involvement by some clergy and church leaders with examples of bravery and resistance by others. These authors pointed out that, although the Catholic and Anglican archbishops strongly supported the regime that carried out the genocide, other people

¹² Interview conducted by the author March 26, 1996, in Ngoma in French.

¹³ This claim, made by Laurient Ntezimana in Lindsey Hilsum's documentary on the churches and the genocide, *Rwanda: The Betrayal* (London: Blackstone Pictures, 1996), was corroborated by other Rwandans with whom I spoke.

¹⁴ "Rwandan Churches Culpable, Says WCC," *The Christian Century*, August 24-31, 1994, p. 778.

¹⁵ "Pope Says Church Is Not to Blame in Rwanda," *New York Times*, March 21, 1996, p. A3.

¹⁶ André Sibomana, *Hope for Rwanda: Conversations with Laure Guilbert and Hervé Deguine* (London: Pluto Press, and Dar es Salaam: Mkuki na Nyota Publishers, 1999), p. 123.