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978-0-521-19139-5 - Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda

Timothy Longman

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Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda

Although Rwanda is among the most Christian countries in Africa, in the 1994 genocide, church buildings became the primary killing grounds. To explain why so many Christians participated in the violence, this book looks at the history of Christian engagement in Rwanda and then turns to a rich body of original national- and local-level research to argue that Rwanda's churches have consistently allied themselves with the state and played ethnic politics. Comparing two local Presbyterian parishes in Kibuye before the genocide demonstrates that progressive forces were seeking to democratize the churches. Just as Hutu politicians used the genocide of Tutsi to assert political power and crush democratic reform, church leaders supported the genocide to secure their own power. The fact that Christianity inspired some Rwandans to oppose the genocide demonstrates that opposition by the churches was possible and might have hindered the violence.

Timothy Longman is director of the African Studies Center at Boston University, where he also serves as associate professor of political science. From 1996 to 2009, he served as associate professor of political science and Africana studies at Vassar College. He has also taught at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa; the National University of Rwanda in Butare; and Drake University in Des Moines. He has served as a consultant in Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo for USAID and the State Department, the International Center for Transitional Justice, and Human Rights Watch, for whom he served as director of the Rwanda field office 1995–1996. From 2001 to 2005, he served as a Research Fellow for the Human Rights Center at the University of California, Berkeley, directing research on social reconstruction in post-genocide Rwanda. His articles have appeared in *African Studies Review*, *The Journal of Religion in Africa*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Comparative Education Review*, *Journal of Genocide Research*, and *America*, and he is currently completing a book manuscript titled *Memory, Justice, and Power in Post-Genocide Rwanda*.

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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.*

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

– Hutu man, Gisovu, Kibuye

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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,

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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

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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.

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