

**BOOK REVIEW: Genocide in Rwanda – Complicity of the Churches?**

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*Genocide in Rwanda: Complicity of the Churches?* is a collection of essays written by many different scholars on the topic of the Rwandan genocide and the role of the churches. I chose this book because I have always been confused by the catastrophe and curious about how the Hutu killers could be so successful. It is one of the most tragic and preventable genocides in our history, and the role of the churches makes it an interesting topic to learn more about. Church has always been an outlet and source of comfort for people around the world, yet it has often become entrenched in political chaos that leads to destruction. This book – edited by Carol Rittner, John K. Roth, and Wendy Whitworth – helps us understand how that process developed in Rwanda. The 1994 Rwandan genocide was one of the fastest and most deadly genocides to occur in modern history. About 800,000 to 1 million Rwandans (Tutsis and Hutus that were sympathetic to Tutsis) were killed from April 1994 to July 1994. These numbers seem impossible; how could so many Tutsis die at the hand of the Hutu extremists in only a few months? This book explains that the churches had a lot to do with the high death toll.

Before the Rwandan genocide, the role of the churches was to provide a religious outlet for the people of each parish. There were two major denominations: the Catholic Church and the Church of England. Both of these churches played a large role in the lives of Rwandan people, giving them hope. In times of trouble, the Rwandan people fled to these churches and found refuge. Their churches became the one place they could escape to. Naturally, many people fled to their churches when the 1994

genocide broke out, but this time they found no safe haven. Tutsis and some Hutus were slaughtered when they ran to their churches, in part because the Hutu extremists expected them to flee there for shelter. Many clergy members even helped to kill their parishioners or orchestrated the killing themselves.

Although some churches were responsible for much injustice, John K. Roth notes that there was religious opposition to the killing, as well. He describes the Catholic Pope's plea for the end of this massacre. Pope John Paul II was one of the first leaders to call the killing "genocide", which is a huge step for the Catholic Church to admit because it requires leaders to take responsibility for the actions of clergy and followers. The Pope pled for the people of Rwanda, particularly the clergy, to stop the killing of innocent people. He made this plea countless times during the genocide, usually during his sermons. The Church's part in the genocide was far too prominent for the Catholic Church to ignore; therefore, the statement made by Pope John Paul II was definitely a much needed acknowledgement. The Pope also told people that just because many of the Church's followers had succumbed to these political disputes and added fuel to the fire, the killing of almost a million people did not mean that the Catholic Church condoned this behavior. On the contrary, the Pope said that a religion should not be defined by the acts of some of its people. He feared that many would leave the Church when they heard about the genocide in Rwanda. The Catholic Church teaches that it is wrong to kill innocent people; therefore, the Pope declared that these actions came from choice, not from something people were taught in church.

Despite these pleas, it's important to note that the 1994 Rwandan genocide is not the only time that the Catholic Church has been involved in terrible events. Jerry Fowler writes about the involvement of the Church in the Dirty Wars and other conflicts during the twentieth century, in countries such as Argentina, Chile, El Salvador, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. He concludes that there is an obvious involvement of the Church in all of these conflicts, whether it be taking sides and perpetuating violence or working to promote and protect human rights. The Church is an obvious factor in political

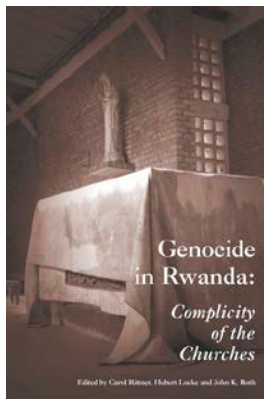
strife; although it often claims not to be involved with politics, it has a lot of power in these situations. Although the Catholic Church should not be blamed for the killing of innocent Rwandans, Church leaders still have an obligation to show the people that they do care and are willing to protect the innocent. The Church is usually seen as a neutral power and safe place for those in danger, but many authors in this book argue that churches take roles in political dilemmas and conflicts.

Today in Rwanda, churches are often involved in the commemoration of victims and remembrance of the 1994 genocide. James M. Smith and Carol Rittner detail how many churches where massacres took place have now become memorial sites for the people who perished. Bones, skulls, clothing, and shoes are put on display to remind people of this terrible time in their history. Many places have outside memorials with names of identified victims, or burial vaults containing mass graves. There is one church that has barely been touched since the genocide: Ntarama. The church still has bones, skulls, clothing, and other remains scattered on the floor and other parts of the church, in memorial of the people who were killed inside. The remains of the victims have been preserved in the church because they are a shocking reminder of the tragedy that took place.

The burning question for many scholars and human rights advocates is why churches allowed this corruption to occur. Charles Petrie writes that, although the Catholic Church did not condone this behavior, they still had some say in the violence and must take responsibility because they failed to act, (along with much of the developed world). According to Petrie, the Catholic Church needs to understand their role in countries like Rwanda and make sure something like this doesn't happen again. The Church is supposed to help people overcome petty political differences and come together as children of God, but the Catholic Church could not stop extremists from killing. The key for Philippe Gaillard is neutrality. Neutrality for any organization is the only way to help to end this kind of catastrophe. The Catholic Church did not remain neutral when many church leaders took part in the genocide; they became the murderers and bystanders who were to blame for the deaths of innocent victims. David P. Gushee

argues that one major norm is found within Christianity – treat thy neighbors justly – but that doesn’t mean clergy will teach that lesson to followers. In Rwanda, there was often little Church control over what was said to individual parishes.

This book gave incredible insight on this issue and outlined reasons that help us understand how the 1994 Rwandan genocide happened. Most struggles start with political or social issues, but they only continue when people take sides. Although we want to believe that churches are neutral and value all people, this can be difficult in politically-charged situations because people – including some church leaders – take a stance on issues and within conflicts. This is what needs to change; churches should be “independent” and “unselfish” institutions for people to take refuge when they need someone to save their souls or their lives (p. 265). Churches, including the Catholic Church, need to change their ways and help people understand their purpose; churches need to be a safe haven from struggles within society. This book helps us understand the value of neutrality, as well as the importance of universal human rights; no one should be turned away in times of trouble.



**Book Information**

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