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**Rwanda**

**Gerard van’t Spijker**

Rwanda is a small country in the heart of the Great Lakes Region in Africa, just south of the equator. Rwanda became an independent nation in 1962, when Belgium handed over political authority to a democratically chosen government under Grégoire Kayibanda (1924–1976), Rwanda’s first president. At the time, it counted 3.5 million inhabitants, of whom 95 percent were subsistence farmers who lived on the hills that are for the greater part covered with fertile soil.

By then, more than one-third of the population had been converted to Christianity, and particularly the Roman Catholic missionaries counted as the most successful in the world. The genocide of 1994, through which more than 800,000 people were slaughtered within less than 4 months, was a great disillusionment.

In 1885–1886, the Conference of Berlin allotted Rwanda to the German Empire, but only in 1896 did troops start to impose German authority. Before that date, the dreaded spears of the Rwandese kings had been able to keep slave traders from the coastal area and European explorers at a distance. The oral history of the kingdom was well recorded by the court aristocracy, and modern historians trace it back to the 14th or even the 10th century.

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In the 18th century, anthropologists saw the Rwandese kingdom, in which the minority of Tutsi dominated the majority of Hutu and a small minority of Batwa, in the light of the Hamitic hypothesis, according to which the Batutsi belonged to the Nilo-Hamitic race. According to this hypothesis, the Batutsi had entered the country with their great herds of cattle in several stages in the 12th and 13th centuries. In the course of the last few centuries they had gradually subjected the Hutu agriculturalists of the Bantu race, who themselves had steadily deforested the hills since their arrival between the seventh and 10th centuries. These Bahutu had driven into the remaining forests the original pygmoid race of the Batwa, who were hunters.

Modern Rwandese historians and some Western scholars consider the Hamitic hypothesis as a way for European scholars to explain how highly developed cultures and organizations could be discovered in black Africa, where the “backward” Negro could not have created such civilizations. They claimed, therefore, that the Hamitic race was of Asian or even European origin (Sanders 1969). The fact is that the Rwandese oral history does not say anything about invading cattle farmers who gradually took the dominant position. The Banyarwanda (people of Rwanda)—the Tutsi, Hutu, and Twa—speak one language (Kinyarwanda*,* classified within the Bantu languages), share the same religious concepts and costumes, and have the same family traditions. The Hamitic hypothesis leaves unexplained why 15 out of the 18 Rwandese clans show a mixture of Batutsi, Bahutu, and Batwa.

Some lineages within the Batutsi group created their own identity, which in the 19th century strengthened the kingdom under the leadership of the Banyiginya clan, which is exclusively Batutsi. The kingdom developed an expansive power and gained hegemony over the greater part of Rwanda. This development created a growing tension between Bahutu and Batutsi, who were more and more seen as representing exclusive classes, although there always remained Batutsi without political influence and Bahutu who took leading positions in the Banyiginya kingdom. Until the beginning of the 20th century, a number of small more or less independent monarchies subsisted with a king (*mwami*) who belonged to the Bahutu group.

After World War I, the League of Nations conferred Rwanda to Belgium as a trustee area. The Belgian regime introduced an administrative reform in which leadership was exclusively given to Batutsi people. Thus, the distinction between Hutu and Tutsi was rigidified. The antagonism between classes turned into a struggle between what were considered different races, leading to a bloody social revolution in 1959 and continued turmoil within the Hutu-dominated government that assumed control from Belgium in 1962. At that point, some 10,000 Batutsi, many of them of the former ruling class, sought refuge in neighboring countries.

Denied the right to return, a second generation of these refugees, organized in the Rwandan Patriotic Front (FPR), attacked the country in 1990, heightening tensions between the two groups, now called Hutu

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and Tutsi, and culminating in the genocide of April–June 1994, in which more than 500,000 Tutsi and a considerable number of moderate Hutu were assassinated. Out of fear for the strong Tutsi-dominated invasion army, between 2 and 3 million Hutu then fled the country and stayed in refugee camps in Zaire/Congo and Tanzania until they were forced to return in 1996–1997. Upon their return they found a disrupted society of 8 million people, characterized by hatred, mistrust, grief, and mourning.

A government of national unity under the leadership of the FPR, carries out administrative reforms, and makes it illegal to speak of Hutu or Tutsi as different ethnic groups. Inspired by the autocratic leadership of Paul Kagamé, chosen as president in 2002, the nation experienced rapid economic development and radical social changes: an active policy of birth control, a transparent combat against HIV-AIDS, and national health insurance were introduced. Rwanda is characterized by a high participation of women in public affairs. In 2009 the shift from French to English was carried through as the basic language in administration and education.

From ancient times, the Rwandese people have been characterized by a religious consciousness that permeates all life—procreation, cattle breeding and agriculture, and the building of a homestead. They feel a strong relationship and even kinship with nature, which explains their respect for the environment. Humans are surrounded by an invisible world of spirits who influence human life. To this spiritual world belong the spirits of the ancestors (*abazimu*), who for some generations after their death participate in the life of the family. These ancestors need not be feared if people live in harmony and according to the rules of life that the forebears left as their testament. Illness, barrenness, and misfortune may be interpreted as punishment or revenge of the ancestors, reminding their offspring of the proper behavior. Ancestors are to be distinguished from bad spirits or malevolent forces (*amahembe* or *ibitega*), often of unknown origin. Bad forces may be used by personal enemies who act in a hidden way, only known and influenced by sorcerers (*abarozi*). In case of illness or misfortune, diviners (*abapfumu*) are consulted in order to detect the character and the meaning of the spiritual force behind it.

The idea of relations between human beings and God are fundamental notions in Rwandese religion. Humans are seen not as isolated persons but always in relationship to fellow humans and nature. The closest relationship is with the members of one’s family, which includes several groups: the *inzu*, or minor lineage, one’s father, mother, brothers and sisters; the *umuryango,* or major lineage, one’s family in a larger sense; and the *ubwoko,* or clan, a broader entity of families, the membership of which is decisive for the rules of marriage. Individuals may enter into relationship with the spiritual world, enjoy the blessings from that world, and participate in its forces.

God, or Imana*,* is creator (Rurema) of the Earth and of the humans who reside there. Christian theologians have depicted Imana as transcendent, fitting the basic concept of God according to Christianity. Anthropologists have tended to describe Imana as the sacred dimension of life as it determines human destiny, gives fecundity, and yields wealth or poverty. According to some well-known myths, Imana once lived very close to people, and his most favorite activity was the cradling of babies. However, one day a young couple discovered Imana in their compound. They saw him as an intruding stranger, with their child in his arms. In defense the man aimed his arrow in the direction of Imana, who, since this unhappy misunderstanding, has never been seen again. According to an oft-cited proverb, Imana dwells all over the Earth during the day, but prefers to spend the night in the beloved Rwanda.

Traditional Rwandan religious consciousness involves no specific cultic manifestations of worship but is manifest in the celebration of the rites of passage, specifically the cults of Ryangombe, or *kubandwa*, and the cult of Nyabingi*.* Ryangombe is a mythical hero who died a tragic death. Before he died, he appealed in agony to the Batutsi, Bahutu, and Batwa peoples to be initiated into societies that honor him. The Ryangombe rite consists of cult sessions with dancing and singing, through which people are initiated into kubandwa societies. Initiates (*imandwa*) receive their own new secret name. Misfortunes, such as barrenness and illness, and natural disasters, such as drought, may intensify the Ryangombe cult sessions. Giving honor to Ryangombe provides protection against evil spirits. The Ryangombe cult has its parallels in other parts of

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the Great Lakes region. Traditionally, as Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa participated together in it, the cult created social cohesion. Only the sacral king (*mwami*) could not participate in the initiation.

In the northern part of the country the cult of Nyabingi has a greater popularity. According to the myth, the woman named Nyabingi did not become a normal spirit (*umuzimu*) after her death, but instead she turned into a medium by whom one can be possessed through trance. Women may be cured from barrenness if they “have Nyabingi” (*bagirwa,* being possessed).

The first Christian missionaries to arrive in Rwanda were the White Fathers. This order of the Roman Catholic Church worked according to clear-cut missionary principles: gaining a deep knowledge of the people, establishing a four-year catechism according to the model of the ancient church, and trying to convert first the supreme political authority, who then will help with the conversion of the great masses. Rwanda, with its well-organized society headed by a king as absolute ruler, was an ideal place to apply these principles. Eager to precede Muslims and Protestants, the White Fathers quickly established parishes in all parts of the country, ten having been opened by the time the Germans were expelled in 1916.

In 1907 the first Protestant missionaries, German Lutherans, arrived as representatives of the Bethel Mission (the Evangelical Mission Society for German Eastern-Africa, or Evangelische Missionsgesellschaft für Deutsch-Ostafrika). One of their prominent missionaries, Ernst Johanssen (1864–1934), saw the African religion as a human answer to the divine revelation of the one God who communicates with all humankind. He studied Rwandese customs and religion in order “to trace the radiation of God’s Glory hidden in the African religion.” The German Lutherans founded eight missionary stations, along with two commercial missions to compete with the Muslim traders. When forced to leave in 1916, the Lutherans had already edited a translation of the four Gospels and a textbook in the Rwandese language.

The White Fathers continued their missionary work into the 1920s and provided the new patterns for structuring the Rwandan society. Missionaries became advisors to Belgian authorities, and Vicar Apostolic Léon Classe (1922–1943) especially promoted the influence of the Tutsi, being convinced that they were born to rule. By 1994 the Roman Catholic Church controlled more than half of all primary and secondary schools and sponsored a large number of hospitals.

In 1931, after King Yuhi V Musinga (1883–1944) refused to convert, Monseigneur Classe advised that he be dismissed and sent into exile. His successor, King Mutara III Rudahigwa (1913–1959), was baptized in 1943, and three years later he allocated his country to Christ. Prompted by the king’s action, almost all the

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Crowd listens to American evangelist Billy Graham during his African crusade in Rwanda, 1960. ( James Burke/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images)

aristocracy presented themselves for baptism, and the Hutu were encouraged to do the same. People spoke of the Tornado of Mission. From that time on, Christianity, and especially the Catholic Church, saw tremendous growth. In 1950, 25 percent of the population were counted as belonging to the Catholic Church, increasing to 34 percent in 1961 and 50 percent in 1988.

Only after World War II did leaders perceive the weakness of the missionary strategy. A new generation of priests, influenced by the ideas of Catholic Action and social democracy, saw the injustices of Rwandese class society. Previously, the rigid classification of the Rwandese as either Tutsi or Hutu resulted in their identification with the oppressors and the oppressed, respectively. Unfortunately, the new message of the equality of all people worked only to strengthen the identity of individuals as either Hutu or Tutsi, resulting in an even more rigid division of the population.

Catholic missionaries then began to promote the interests of the majority Hutu. On the eve of independence, the Hutu, supported by the church, started a social revolution. Under Rwanda’s first president, Grégoire Kayibanda, the ruling party pursued a policy of ethnic equilibrium, through which jobs and positions were divided according to the percentage of Hutu (85 percent) and Tutsi (15 percent). This policy was continued by the successor government, led by General Juvénal Habyarimana (1937–1994), who took over power in a nearly bloodless military revolution in 1973.

After 1921 the Belgian Protestant Missionary Society (Société Belge des Missions Protestants au Congo) continued the work of the German Lutherans, thus accounting for the existence of a strong Presbyterian Church (rather than Lutheran) in the country. The Society represented a minority faction in Belgium, and its progress was initially hampered by lack

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of finances and personnel. In the course of time other Protestant missionary organizations followed: the Seventh-day Adventist Church from the United States (1916), Anglicans of the Church Missionary Society (1921), Danish Baptists (1938), Swedish Pentecostals (1940), and the Free Methodist Church (1942) from the United States. In 1994 the Union of Pentecostal churches outnumbered the mainline Protestant churches.

Within the Church Missionary Society, a revival movement developed that, in the 1930s and 1940s, exercised great influence among Protestants in neighboring Burundi, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. This movement, called the East African Revival, typically sponsored “conventions,” large meetings where people gathered for praying and singing, hearing sermons, and giving testimonies. The 1945 Kabale Convention attracted an international audience of 15,000. Devoted members of the movement, called *abake* (people on fire), or *abalokole* (those who are saved), experienced a heightened joy, visions and dreams, and an absence of any color bar between white and black. The abake struggled for equality between Hutu and Tutsi, promoted strong participation by women, and placed African leadership at the head of the movement. The movement led to independent churches in other countries, and in Rwanda it remains an influential movement within the Anglican community.

Around 1959–1962, the Protestant missions were transformed into independent church organizations, which then collaborated in founding the Conseil Protestant du Rwanda (CPR). From then on, an emancipation of the Protestants from foreign control became evident. The theological school in Butare, founded in 1971, developed into a Theological Faculty in which most mainline Protestants (including the Pentecostals) participate. In 1988 all Protestants together represented 20 percent of the population, less than half of that of Catholics. Today there are two ecumenical organizations serving the Protestant community, the Alliance Evangélique du Rwanda, which is affiliated with the World Evangelical Alliance, and the Protestant Council, which is affiliated with the All African Conference of Churches (AACC) and the World Council of Churches. The genocide of 1994 left all the churches in deep crisis. Almost one-third of the clergy had been

Tutsi, of whom a majority were murdered. Those who had held leading positions, mostly Hutu, fled the country. Returning Tutsi refugees added to the controversy by attempting to seize leading positions. Past racial ideology and present internal problems prevented the churches from becoming healing communities. The Catholic Church was singled out for criticism by the new Tutsi-dominated government, which derided the church’s assumed policy of divisionism, seen as the ultimate cause of the genocide.

After 1994 a number of new African Initiated Churches were created, most of them at the initiative of Tutsi returnees who did not want to reintegrate into the older churches that had been associated with the genocide. Thus, inadvertently and for the first time in Rwandese history, churches were founded on an ethnic basis. Most of these new communities participate in the Charismatic/Pentecostal movement, which is also influencing the older mainline churches. This new charismatic wave is characterized by strong eschatological preaching, baptism by immersion, and long sessions of ecstatic prayer. The Restoration Church, founded in 1994, is moreover characterized by a prosperity gospel. The Zion Temple Celebration Centres, founded by Apostel Paul Gitwaza in 1999, has created branches in Tanzania, Burundi, Congo, Denmark, Belgium, and the United States.

After 1994, Islam was no longer considered by the government and by the public news agencies to be an inferior religion. Muslims had been present in Rwanda since the beginning of the 20th century, the first being African soldiers serving in the German colonial army. The Germans also promoted the immigration of merchants and craftspeople, some of whom were Muslims, but at the same time they took measures to prevent any spread of Islam among the population.

The marginal position of Muslims in Rwanda was accentuated under Belgian rule, the Muslims being viewed as German partisans. Muslims were denied permission to create their own associations, and only in 1964 did Rwandese authorities recognize the Association of Muslims in Rwanda (AMUR). In 1970 about 8 percent of the population was Sunni Muslim. Then in 1994, Muslim Tutsis returning from their exile gave the community a new self-consciousness, claiming that Muslims had not participated in the genocide.

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Muslim missions began to attract great audiences. Schools were installed, and the end of Ramadan became an official national holiday. At his installation in January 2001, Sheikh Saleh Hategekimana claimed that Muslims, with about 120 mosques scattered throughout the country, represent 18 percent of the population.

Since 1996, the Centre for Theological Education and Documentation (CFD), related to the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda, has developed a dialogue program in which Protestants, Catholics, and Muslims participate. On a regular basis the Center organizes seminars where prominent leaders of these communities discuss together the social problems of the country.

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