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Book Review: No Greater Love: How My Family Survived the Genocide in Rwanda

Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann

Wilfrid Laurier University, hassmann@wlu.ca

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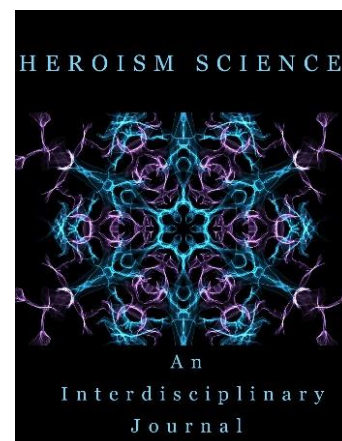
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Book Review:
**No Greater Love: How My
Family Survived the
Genocide in Rwanda**
Tharcisse Seminega (2019).
GM&A Publishing.



*RHODA E. HOWARD-HASSMANN*¹

Wilfrid Laurier University

hassmann@wlu.ca

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Tharcisse Seminega is an ethnic Tutsi who survived the 1994 Rwandan genocide, along with his wife and all five of his children. He is also a Jehovah's Witness. This book is his memoir of growing up in Rwanda and surviving the genocide. The book also contains shorter memoirs by his wife and some of his children, some short pieces by some of his rescuers, a selection of documentary evidence, and a timeline of the genocide.

Born in 1940, Seminega was raised a Roman Catholic, and was training for the priesthood when he became disillusioned with the Church. He began to notice that some of his schoolmates had been sexually molested by priests (p.37). He also explains how the Church and clergy supported the early colonial division of Rwanda's population into Hutu and Tutsi, changing a status division into an ethno-racial one (pp. 7-10). Moreover, the Church changed allegiances as it were, shortly before independence in 1959. For many years it had permitted only Tutsi to become priests and nuns, but younger European Catholic priests began to champion the Hutu cause (p.16). From supporting the Tutsi elite, it began to support the then-underdog Hutu, using racial language to accentuate the difference. Church authorities also collaborated with the Hutu-dominated government of Juvénal Habyarimana (p.48).

Seminega became a Jehovah's Witness in 1983, joining this new Christian group which had first entered Rwanda in 1976, and which did not distinguish among its Hutu and Tutsi adherents. His wife, a former Roman Catholic nun, was afraid to convert because Witnesses were already being persecuted in Rwanda (p. xxiii), for example, because they refused to wear badges glorifying President Habyarimana (p.63).

At the same time, Seminega continued his education, eventually obtaining a doctorate in France in 1988. He returned to Rwanda to teach at the National University in Butare, as he had agreed to teach in Rwanda for at least five years in return for financial support for his studies that he had received from the government. He was well-known in Butare, and the genocidal authorities were actively looking for him. His wife was a member of the extended family of the last Tutsi King of Rwanda, Mutara III, further endangering their family.

The family survived the genocide in several hiding places, either together or separately. For a month they hid in a goat-pen. Their protector, Vincent, was a Hutu who was not a Witness but had studied the Bible with Witnesses. At one point two female Hutu Witnesses dressed the youngest son as a girl, taught him to modify his boyish walk, and took him through the marketplace from one hiding place to another in broad daylight (p. 117).

More than a story of survival, Seminega's tale is one of heroic rescuers who risked their and their families' lives to save his family. Many, but not all, of these rescuers were fellow Jehovah's Witnesses, ethnic Hutu who could easily and safely have turned their backs on the Seminega family.

Readers will be familiar with the Judeo-Christian principles, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" and "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." Seminega himself refers to Matthew 7:12, "All things, therefore, that you want men to do to you, you must also likewise do to them." (p. 196). According to Seminega, though, Jehovah's Witnesses' guiding principle is to regard their neighbors as more than themselves. "Jesus commanded his disciples to love one another *more than* they loved themselves, putting others' interests ahead

of their own...and...being ready to sacrifice their lives, as Jesus had done, for one another” (p. 42; emphasis in original).

In 1994 there were about 2,500 Witnesses in Rwanda, of whom approximately 400 were killed. Those murdered included Tutsi Witnesses; Hutu Witnesses who tried to rescue Tutsi; and Hutu Witnesses who refused to participate in the genocide. Their teaching taught them not only to put others before themselves, but also not to differentiate among believers on ethno-racial grounds.

Following Christ’s precept, “You do not belong in the world,” Jehovah’s Witnesses refuse to take part in political or military activities. Ambassadors of Christ may not take up weapons against any human being (p.56). Thus, Hutu Witnesses were impervious to calls for patriotic Hutu to take part in mass killings. But this does not mean that they sat back idly when others suffered because of politics or war; to do nothing was also against their Christian principles.

Thus, the heroes who helped the Seminega family were already conditioned to rescue others before the genocide occurred. Indeed, some Hutu Witnesses had already prepared for the genocide; one rescuer had built a tunnel to an underground room so that he would be able to hide victims when the time came. As the rescuers’ own testimonies in the book show, they put their faith in Jehovah while taking enormous risks to their own safety.

Undoubtedly, the close-knit relationships among Jehovah’s Witnesses contributed to the motivations of rescuers. All Christians are taught to love their neighbors as themselves, but few do so. In Rwanda, many Hutu Christian priests, nuns and pastors actively participated in the genocide, their ethnic hatreds easily overcoming Christians’ supposed universal love (pp. 134-142). Indeed, the only Rwandan Christian group none of whose members participated in the genocide was the Jehovah’s Witnesses (p. 142).

Not all the people who helped the Seminegas were Witnesses. Seminega’s former gardener, himself a Hutu militiaman, nevertheless protected one of Seminega’s daughters. He put his hand before her to protect her from another member of the militia, and sustained a cut himself in the process (p. 191). This was a clear, spontaneous act of altruism that could have cost him his life. Some Hutu militiamen “helped” in exchange for bribes of various sorts, or looked the other way when they saw the Seminegas escaping. Such spontaneous acts suggest that many individual Hutu were uncomfortable with the genocide, but they did not possess either the moral framework or the supportive group that enabled so many Jehovah’s Witnesses to risk -- and to sacrifice -- their lives.

As of the time of writing of the book, Seminega lived with his wife and four of his children in Canada, where they had obtained landed immigrant status in 2003.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.