

Jehovah's Witnesses During and After the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda

Psychosocial Factors Related to Faith, Forgiveness, and Family



Prepared by
Organisation Religieuse des Témoins de Jéhovah
Rwanda

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Executive Summary

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Recommended citation:

Nkurikiyinka, V., & Chu, J. (2025). *Jehovah's Witnesses during and after the Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda: Psychosocial factors related to faith, forgiveness, and family*. Organisation Religieuse des Témoins de Jéhovah, Rwanda. <https://rwanda.jwresearch.org>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Study Title: Jehovah’s Witnesses During and After the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda:
Psychosocial Factors Related to Faith, Forgiveness, and Family

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The religious community of Jehovah’s Witnesses issues this project report with the objective of contributing to the understanding of the past and current impact of the Genocide on ordinary Rwandans across generations. The study *Jehovah’s Witnesses During and After the Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda: Psychosocial Factors Related to Faith, Forgiveness, and Family* (JW-RWA) is the first nationwide, post-genocide survey study of a single religious group. Jehovah’s Witnesses are a population of interest to researchers for its distinctive religious beliefs and practices of nonviolence and neutrality. The research findings are relevant to multiple disciplines, including sociology, psychology, political science, genocide, religion, and family studies. It offers insights to all who share the goals of forgiveness, reconciliation, and genocide prevention.

The Ministry of National Unity and Civic Engagement (MINUBUMWE) gave support to the study proposal, which is in line with the Ministry’s mission of promoting unity and preserving the memory of the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in general. The study was conducted within the Rwandan community of Jehovah’s Witnesses in particular. The Rwanda National Ethics

Committee (RNEC) reviewed and approved the study design in accord with ethical and scientific standards.

The Kigali-based Organisation Religieuse des Témoins de Jéhovah sponsored the JW-RWA study with support from the World Headquarters of Jehovah's Witnesses in Warwick, New York, U.S.A. An international academic advisory committee of scholars reviewed the survey instrument, data findings, and preliminary reports.

Need for the Study

The JW-RWA study aligns with the 2015 National Dialogue Council's aim to promote research about the history of religious organizations during and after the Genocide.¹ It documents in a scientific investigation the historical experiences and contemporary characteristics of Jehovah's Witnesses during the Genocide against the Tutsi. As a contribution to scholarship, it fills a gap in academic literature about the faith community of Jehovah's Witnesses during and after the Genocide against the Tutsi.

Objectives

The four main research objectives were the following:

1. Identify **demographic and religious characteristics** of Jehovah's Witnesses in Rwanda: growth of Jehovah's Witnesses before and after the Genocide against the Tutsi; their religious beliefs, motivations, orientation, and identity; and experiences during the government ban on the religion prior to the Genocide.
2. Examine **forgiveness and prosocial characteristics** of the faith community: three types of forgiveness (of others, of self, and by God), other prosocial attributes (compassionate

¹ For simplicity and variety in text, the term "Genocide" refers specifically to the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi; "genocide" (not capitalized) is applied generally.

love, community support, and helping behaviors), and perceived changes in social relationships.

3. Investigate gender, generational, and other group differences in **Genocide situations and trauma events** experienced by those who were Jehovah's Witnesses at the time of the Genocide and those who adopted the faith after the Genocide with respect to the following: duration of danger during the Genocide, changes in household composition before and after the Genocide, Genocide role-situations, trauma events, and helping behaviors during the Genocide against the Tutsi.
4. Investigate factors related to the **subjective social and psychological wellbeing** of those in the faith community, including family satisfaction, attitudes and intergenerational communication about genocide and traumatic events, posttraumatic stress symptoms, posttraumatic growth, centrality of Genocide, and temporal orientation, hope, and scriptures to cope.

The four objectives and multiple psychosocial variables are connected with the ecological systems model of interactive influences of microsystems (e.g., family and religious groups) and macrosystems (e.g., time, history, and culture) on individual development and behavior. The investigation of interrelated systems draws attention to the broad topics of faith, forgiveness, and family, and their respective roles in the building, maintenance, and repair of social bonds.

Methodology

A nationwide survey was conducted in the spring of 2023 among adults who were baptized Jehovah's Witnesses associated with congregations in Rwanda. The survey design for the quantitative, cross-sectional study included questions that allowed yes-no, multiple choice, and Likert-scaled responses. The anonymous survey encouraged open and honest responses. The

survey instrument was organized into five topical areas: (a) Religious Beliefs, (b) General Attitudes, (c) Situations During the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi, (d) Dealing With Traumatic Events, and (e) Intergenerational Communication. Fourteen question sets were taken from empirically tested measures developed by other researchers and related to such psychometric constructs as forgiveness, social identity, posttraumatic growth, and family satisfaction. The survey instrument was translated from English to Kinyarwanda using a back-translation protocol.

To minimize survey bias and accommodate those with limited literacy and access to Internet or electronic devices and in hard-to-reach areas (e.g., remote regions and correctional facilities), provisions were made to increase participation in the study while maintaining the scientific integrity of the study. To minimize the effects of socially desirable responses (SDR), a measure was used to identify those who gave only favorable responses, which resulted in 281 survey submissions being removed from the sample. (The methodology is discussed in Section 2 of this report.)

Sample. After data cleaning, the total sample size was 13,590, which represented 51% of baptized adult Jehovah's Witnesses in Rwanda aged 18 and over. The sample came from all 30 districts in the five provinces: Kigali (19.4%), Southern Province (15.7%), Western Province (22.7%), Northern Province (15.0%), and Eastern Province (27.2%). The sample was demographically similar to the general population: 56% female (52% of the general population); 71% from rural areas (compared with 72% for the general population); 6% with no formal education and 26% who completed secondary school (compared with 17% and 21% for the general population, respectively). The total sample was composed of 63% who were in Rwanda at the time of the Genocide (Genocide Generation), 8% who lived outside Rwanda in 1994 (Returnees), 24% who were born after 1994 (Post-Genocide Generation), and 5% who could not be classified. The

sample included those who were baptized Jehovah's Witnesses during the Genocide against the Tutsi and those who became Witnesses after 1994, which was the majority of the sample. From the anonymized data set, analysis focused on descriptive statistics and group comparisons (e.g., gender, age group, generation, Genocide role-situation).

Research regarding the Genocide against the Tutsi necessarily includes questions about the situation and outcomes of respondents who were targeted for killing because of their Tutsi ethnicity. The original intent of the JW-RWA survey was to allow respondents to self-identify as Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa. However, the Rwanda National Ethics Committee stipulated that the survey instrument should not inquire explicitly about the ethnicity of the respondents. Nevertheless, respondents could report whether, during the Genocide against the Tutsi, they had been targeted to be killed—a classification that clearly applies to Tutsi. It is possible that some respondents who were not ethnically Tutsi may have self-identified as having been targeted (e.g., those mistakenly identified by the Interahamwe militia as being Tutsi; those with Tutsi spouses or relatives; or perhaps certain Hutu who were targeted, not for genocide but because the Interahamwe viewed them as politically moderate or resistant to the Genocide). For statistical analysis, the category *targeted to be killed* allowed for inferential group comparisons of those targeted (Tutsi) and not targeted (not Tutsi) on selected variables (e.g., posttraumatic stress symptoms, change in household composition, and help received by those targeted during the Genocide).

Key Findings

Sections in this report correspond to the research objectives. The following are the main research results.

1. Demographic and religious characteristics of Jehovah's Witnesses. (Findings are discussed in Section 3 of this report.) From the total sample of 13,590, 87% were born into families

who were not then Jehovah's Witnesses, and 13% were second-generation Jehovah's Witnesses with at least one Jehovah's Witness (JW) parent. Before making the decision to become baptized, individuals studied the Bible and the beliefs and practices of the faith community, with slightly over 40% studying for 2 or more years before their baptism. Just under one tenth of the sample stopped and later resumed their religious association, two thirds of whom resumed their affiliation within 2 years or less. Contrary to trends worldwide of younger age cohorts abandoning organized religion, the average age at baptism of the Rwandan JW respondents is 26 years.

The leading original attractions to JWs were the desire to *learn more about the Bible* and the *logic of their main teachings*. A desire to *be closer to God* and *hope for the future* were the main motivations to remain in the religion. Although coming from diverse religious backgrounds, JWs almost unanimously agree on main doctrinal teachings, namely about creation, holy spirit in the writing of the Bible, prophecy about the "last days," condition of and hope for the dead, God's Kingdom government to end problems on earth, Jesus' teaching of political neutrality, and the nonexistence of hellfire.

Over 95% of the sample population identify with and feel committed to their faith. Religion is an integral part of their lives; and while they indicated having received personal and social benefits from their faith, their religious orientation is more intrinsic than extrinsic.

2. Forgiveness and prosocial behavior. (Findings are discussed in Section 4 of this report.) Religious tenets of forgiveness and compassionate love for humanity—values extolled almost universally—are reinforced by the JW faith community. Three aspects of forgiveness (of others, of self, and by God) were investigated. Compared with results from a measure used widely by other researchers, the mean scores on trait forgiveness were relatively high and with relatively low variance. The study showed that JWs recognize the role of remorse and taking responsibility

in divine and self-forgiveness. Despite believing that God forgives, some indicated that they struggled with accepting that God forgave them for past “sins,” that their sins were “too serious.”

Although changing religions might cause tension with family and friends, especially in the beginning, over 80% of respondents indicated that their social relationships had improved since they became Jehovah’s Witnesses. This included improved relationships with those previously in conflict—that is, with persons who had hurt them or whom they had hurt.

3. Genocide situations and trauma events. (Findings are discussed in Section 5 of this report.) According to records of the religious organization, Jehovah’s Witnesses in Rwanda numbered approximately 2,500 by 1994. Of that number, an estimated 400 Witnesses and those associated with them (i.e., family and Bible students) died during the Genocide. (The precise figures and the proportions of Tutsi and non-Tutsi deaths among Witnesses are not known.) In the JW-RWA sample population, a total of 552 were Jehovah’s Witnesses baptized in or before 1994—an estimated 20% to 25% of those who were Jehovah’s Witnesses at the time of the Genocide.

The scope of the study necessarily set temporal, spatial, and population boundaries, with Genocide-related survey questions applied specifically to the Genocide against the Tutsi that occurred between April 6 and July 19, 1994, as recalled by the study population who became Jehovah’s Witnesses either before or after the Genocide.

The survey results quantify experiences of the Genocide Generation with a composite profile of the study population who were in Rwanda during the Genocide. For example, out of 8,309 adults and minors who reported traumatic events they experienced in Rwanda during the Genocide, 34% reported that they had a close family member murdered or die unexpectedly—higher among females (38%) than males (30%). Contrary to the single categorization of victim, perpetrator, rescuer, and bystander, respondents self-identified as having multiple role-situations

during the Genocide (i.e., faced harm, refused to harm those targeted, helped others, fled for safety). From the perspective of those who were children and those who were parents of children during the Genocide, the data show that children provided both instrumental support (e.g., fetched water, food, or supplies) and emotional support (e.g., motivated parents not to give up) during the Genocide. Eight respondents who were baptized Witnesses in 1994 indicated that they were later imprisoned for participating in the Genocide; 146 respondents who became Jehovah's Witnesses after 1994 reported that they had been imprisoned for participating in the Genocide. To encourage candor from respondents, details were not requested about their imprisonment.

Subgroup analysis included comparisons between Jehovah's Witnesses in 1994 and non-JWs in 1994, and between those targeted and not targeted during the Genocide. The *targeted* category was based on data from a question set listing various situations during the Genocide, including the option *targeted to be killed*, which Rwandans generally understand to apply to Tutsi. Of the total of 3,620 Genocide Generation Adults who gave responses, 14% selected *targeted to be killed*. The percentage of those targeted (Tutsi) was higher for the subgroup of those who were Jehovah's Witnesses in 1994 (23%) than those who were not Witnesses at the time of the Genocide (13%).

The study investigated the extent and nature of help those who were targeted received. For example, 60% reported that they received help from up to 10 people. Most often they were hidden on others' property and given food, clothing, and supplies. Proximity was a factor in helping, with a higher percentage of help coming from neighbors than from extended family. Among targeted Jehovah's Witnesses, 80% received help from fellow believers and those associated with the religion (e.g., family or Bible students) and 35% indicated that those who helped them could have been killed for helping.

As evidence that Jehovah's Witnesses in general acted according to their position of nonviolence during the Genocide, 776 respondents in Rwanda during the Genocide—not baptized JWs at the time of the Genocide and from various religious backgrounds—indicated that they learned about the nonviolent teachings of the religious group when *they saw Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to participate in the Genocide*. Observing firsthand the nonviolent behavior of individual JWs during the Genocide could partially explain why one third of this group reported that they were attracted to the faith community because of their nonviolent position.

Unlike those in the total Genocide Generation, early adopters of the religion faced two critical historical periods for the minority group: the government ban on the religion from 1982 to 1992 and the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. The findings show the circumstances of 981 Jehovah's Witnesses and their close associates who lived during both the decade-long period of government ban between 1982 and 1992 and then the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi. They reported the harassment, persecution, and for some, imprisonment during the ban that was followed 2 years later by Genocide trauma. The research findings show that in those early years, these new converts—who had the option to discontinue or conceal their association with the stigmatized group—identified themselves as Jehovah's Witnesses despite potential ostracism and personal harm. Facing political persecution, the Witnesses individually and collectively determined how they would adhere to the principles of nonviolence, political neutrality, and impartiality—positions that would be put to extreme test during the Genocide.

As with previous studies of the religious community during the Holocaust, this study documented that Jehovah's Witnesses, individually and collectively, maintained a consistent pattern of nonviolence and political neutrality. Although the circumstances during the Holocaust under Nazism and the Genocide against the Tutsi differed, both posed similar moral challenges.

Beliefs and prosocial behaviors learned prior to the Genocide laid the basis for individuals' conscientious responses to coercion and violence, resulting in persecution and even death for some, not because of their ethnicity or political position, but strictly for adhering to the principles of their faith.

4. Subjective social and psychological wellbeing. (Findings are discussed in Section 6 of this report.) The study examined the openness to dialogue about trauma, family satisfaction, and perceived wellbeing. The vast majority (92%) believe that it is important for young people to learn about the history of the Genocide against the Tutsi. About difficult or traumatic events, respondents indicated they are comfortable talking with those of similar ages to theirs (87%), with immediate family (86%), and with those in their congregation (83%). Although the majority indicated an openness to intergenerational sharing of traumatic events, 32% thought that talking about past traumas did more harm than good; 38% thought children should not be burdened by others' traumas; and 55% reported it was painful to hear about their family's Genocide experiences. Half of respondents reported that their family had talked about moral lessons learned from the Genocide.

The effects of the Genocide on individuals vary widely. Overall, the centrality of the Genocide on their worldview, their family's story, and sense of self was greater for those who were adults during the Genocide than for other generation groups. Thinking about the Genocide is more frequent and posttraumatic stress symptoms are statistically higher for Genocide Generation Adults than Genocide Generation Minors or the Post-Genocide Generation.

Despite the gap in Genocide experiences and their ongoing effects, Jehovah's Witnesses showed similarity on other subjective wellbeing measures. They report consistently high scores on measures of hope and posttraumatic growth. The data show that Jehovah's Witnesses believe and

personalize the religion's optimistic view of the future. Regardless of gender, age, or Genocide experience and despite negative feelings about their childhood or past, they were positive about the present, near future, and distant future. Satisfaction with the degree of cohesion and communication in the family is consistently high across all demographic groups. Over 90% believe that their self-worth, opinion of self, hope for the future, emotional and mental wellbeing, and life in general are better compared with the time before they were Jehovah's Witnesses.

Given that the sample population are known to advocate reliance on the Bible as a guide—as is the case for many religious Rwandans—the survey asked what scriptural thoughts helped them cope when thinking about the Genocide against the Tutsi. From a list of familiar scriptures related to prayer, love, forgiveness, endurance, and meek inhabiting the earth, the top three scriptures were: *Return evil to no one. Vengeance belongs to God* (54%); *Death, pain, and sorrow will be no more* (50%); and *The wicked will be no more* (43%). The most frequently chosen scripture has two distinct but related concepts: behavioral and emotional self-constraint (*Return evil to no one*) and a cognitive rationale related to divine justice (*Vengeance belongs to God*).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study has limitations common to survey research. The cross-sectional design of this study cannot establish causal links. All self-reported data are susceptible to social desirability bias. Quantitative survey research based on individual self-reports cannot capture the complex and dynamic functioning of congregations and families. The findings can only be applied to the sample population of Jehovah's Witnesses in Rwanda and cannot be generalized to the larger population. Although the survey questionnaire could not directly inquire about ethnicity, respondents could self-identify as being *targeted to be killed* during the Genocide against the Tutsi.

The study fills a void in the empirical literature, providing insights about individual and collective aspects of the community of Jehovah's Witnesses before, during, and after the 1994 Genocide: their faith (motivations, beliefs, and practices); family (functioning, satisfaction, and relationship changes); and forgiveness (prosocial attitudes, social support, and subjective wellbeing). The large data set allowed for statistical comparisons of gender, age, generational difference, and role-situations during the Genocide. The JW-RWA study identified a consistent pattern of nonviolence, impartiality, and political neutrality before, during, and after the Genocide against the Tutsi among a subgroup of the study population.

This study of Jehovah's Witnesses in Rwanda demonstrates research possibilities for online survey research in post-conflict societies and reinforces the need for further quantitative and qualitative research in the study of genocide and religion.

