

# FAITH AFTER GENOCIDE

Deborah Mayersen

## Introduction

“And then one day, God replaced the light with the darkness.”<sup>1</sup> In this way, Miriam Katin begins her account of surviving the Holocaust, presented in graphic novel format. For graphic novelists depicting genocide, like Katin, theological questions can be a pressing issue. Characters—and their authors—grapple with the seeming chasm between the existence of a benevolent deity and the occurrence of this most terrible of crimes. Where was God as genocide unfolded? Is it possible to have faith in its aftermath? This essay will examine how three graphic novels explore these complex and challenging issues. In many respects the graphic novels are very different: *We Are On Our Own* is a Holocaust memoir; *Smile Through the Tears* a non-fiction account of the fate of a Tutsi family during the Rwandan genocide; and *Deo gratias* a fictional account of a perpetrator of the Rwandan genocide. Yet each pose searing questions about the role of God, and the role of organised religion, during genocide.

This analysis begins by briefly examining broader theological responses to genocide in the post-Holocaust period. It then explores the graphic novel as a space in which to depict and grapple with genocide. After introducing the reader to each of the graphic novels under discussion, the essay examines how each uses text and images to pose challenging questions about the role of God, and of organised religion, during genocide. It examines the anger and feelings of abandonment experienced by the protagonists as their prayers go unanswered. I explore their sense of betrayal as religious leaders prove corrupt and complicit with the genocidaires. My analysis shows how each grapples with deep theological questions about God’s existence, nature and role during genocide. Finally, I reflect on how the three graphic novels each come to vividly contrasting conclusions.

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1 Miriam Katin, *We Are On Our Own: A Memoir* (Montreal: Drawn and Quarterly, 2006), 5.

## Theology after genocide

Theological debate about the role of God in the world, and particularly Jewish theological debate, was profoundly challenged by the Holocaust. Traditional Judeo-Christian conceptions of God as omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent have always conflicted with a world in which pain and suffering exists, but for many this conflict became intolerable in the wake of the Holocaust. Survivors expressed their anguish in memoirs, none more famously than Elie Wiesel in *Night*:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp [Auschwitz], which has turned my life into one long night, seven times cursed and seven times sealed.

Never shall I forget that smoke.

Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky.

Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my faith forever.

Never shall I forget that nocturnal silence which deprived me, for all eternity, of the desire to live.

Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust.

Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.<sup>2</sup>

Wiesel's anguished testimony reflects an unresolved inner turmoil about God in light of the Holocaust; a turmoil common to many survivor accounts. Survivors and religious scholars—Jewish and non-Jewish—have attempted to resolve this conflict in multiple ways. Some have proposed the death of God, or posited that God never existed at all.<sup>3</sup> Others, such as Richard Rubenstein, have suggested that the only logical response is to reject a God that has not protected His people.<sup>4</sup> Rabbi and theologian Eliezer Berkovits asserted that humankind's free will was dependent upon God remaining hidden; were God

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2 Elie Wiesel, *Night* (1960; London: Fontana, 1972), 45.

3 Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (1961; Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

4 Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1992).

to intervene to curb humankind's capacity for evil, it would nullify free will.<sup>5</sup> Harold Kushner and others have taken that concept further, identifying a God that is not omnipotent and thus unable to intervene.<sup>6</sup> Explanations of the Holocaust as a punishment for sin have been proposed but widely rejected. Yet there has been no satisfactory resolution to this theological conundrum; no explanation has proven acceptable to a majority.

Ultimately, religious leaders have recognised that perhaps resolution is impossible. Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the former leader of the Chabad Lubavitch branch of Judaism, stated that there "is no rational explanation" and that religious texts could provide no elucidation for the devastation of the Holocaust.<sup>7</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, when visiting Auschwitz, reflected: "In a place like this, words fail; in the end, there can only be a dread silence—a silence which is itself a heartfelt cry to God: Why, Lord, did you remain silent? How could you tolerate all this?"<sup>8</sup> For survivors of genocide, this remains an urgent question, a question without resolution but one that must be explored. It is this question that the graphic novels discussed in this chapter address.

## Graphic novels and genocide

Graphic novels are a relatively new genre. Will Eisner's *A Contract With God*, published in 1978, is often regarded as the first graphic novel. Eisner sought to take the medium of comics and imbue it with literary content. Interestingly, the eponymous story in this collection of four shorter stories is one in which the protagonist grapples with theological anguish after the premature death of his adopted daughter. The genre is a diverse one, but is typically characterised by "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer."<sup>9</sup> That is, the narrative of graphic novels unfolds through both text and images, rather than exclusively through text. In doing so, graphic novels "generate narrative effects not available to non-pictorial novels."<sup>10</sup> For example, they provide unique spaces to pictorially represent the unspeakable; to portray contradic-

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5 Eliezer Berkovits, *Faith after the Holocaust* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1973).

6 Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (1981; New York: Schocken Books, 1989).

7 Menachem Mendel Schneerson, *Sefer HaSihot 5751*, vol. 1 (Brooklyn: Kehot, 1992), 233–34.

8 Pope Benedict XVI, "Pastoral Visit of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI in Poland: Address by the Holy Father: Visit to the Auschwitz Camp," May 28, 2006, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en=/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20060528\\_auschwitz-birkenau.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en=/speeches/2006/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060528_auschwitz-birkenau.html).

9 Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 9.

10 Liam Kruger, "Panels and Faces: Segmented Metaphors and Reconstituted Time in Art Spiegelman's *Maus*," *Critical Arts* 29, no. 3 (2015), 358.

tion and conflict through disagreement between the words and texts in a panel; and to provide the reader with insight into the thoughts and feelings of characters through the literal depiction of “thought bubbles.” Like other new genres, however, graphic novels have struggled for legitimacy and literary recognition, particularly when grappling with serious topics such as trauma.

The publication of Art Spiegelman’s groundbreaking Holocaust graphic novels, *Maus I, A Survivor’s Tale: My Father Bleeds History* (1986) and *Maus II, A Survivor’s Tale: And Here My Troubles Began* (1991) accorded a new space and legitimacy to graphic novels about genocide. *Maus*, recounting the tale of Spiegelman’s father’s experiences in Auschwitz, yet unsettling the reader through its illustration of its characters as mice, cats and pigs, won the Pulitzer Prize and identified the graphic novel as a new medium for the exploration of extreme violence. Like *Maus*, graphic novels about genocide have typically adopted a creative, rather than journalistic style, and that is true of those examined herein. *Maus*, however, almost completely refrained from theological reflection on the Holocaust. Only in one small scene, in Auschwitz, is there arguably a theological component. In this scene, the character Mandelbaum prays: “My God. Please God . . . help me find a piece of string and a shoe that fits.”<sup>11</sup> In a caption at the bottom of the cell, Spiegelman informs us matter-of-factly: “But here God didn’t come. We were all on our own.”<sup>12</sup> The narrative continues briskly, leaving little opportunity to reflect as to whether this was just a mechanism to inform the reader that Mandelbaum had to struggle on without string or a shoe that fits, or whether Spiegelman was offering a broader theological statement.

Since the publication of *Maus*, there has been a very small yet growing number of graphic novels depicting genocide. Despite this, graphic novels attempting to portray the experience of genocide remain marginalised and viewed as a somewhat experimental format.<sup>13</sup> The subject matter is one often perceived as at the limits of representation, that is, one in which there are serious challenges to compellingly describing or representing such horrific events within the limits of expression. The unconventional format can be perceived as provocative in overlaying an additional challenge to mainstream notions of historical representation. Moreover, graphic novels are rarely the subject of critical analysis.<sup>14</sup> Interrogations of the limits of portrayal, of the relationship

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11 Art Spiegelman, *The Complete Maus* (London: Penguin, 2003), 189.

12 Ibid.

13 Deborah Mayersen, “One Hundred Days of Horror: Portraying Genocide in Rwanda,” *Rethinking History* 19, no. 3 (2015), 359.

14 Hugo Frey and Benjamin Noys, “Editorial: History in the Graphic Novel,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6, no. 3 (2002), 255.

between literary representation and truth, and of that between meaning and history, have typically focused on the functions of language and text, not images.<sup>15</sup> Traditional historiographical notions of representations of history have been challenged in recent decades, but the privileging of text over images “has remained relatively unquestioned.”<sup>16</sup> Images have been regarded as too ambiguous, too emotive, too distant from their subject matter.<sup>17</sup> In the graphic novel in particular, they compress the elements of a sequence of events within frozen panels, distorting time and space.<sup>18</sup>

Yet there are also opportunities for alternative conceptualisations of the graphic novel that embrace the strengths of the format.<sup>19</sup> The emotive nature of graphic novel depictions of genocide, for example, can be perceived as promoting reader engagement rather than detracting from parochial notions of the primacy of “objectivity.” Images can tell a tale of their own, depicting a complex and multilayered scene with a richness that text alone cannot. Moreover, the experimental nature of graphic novels makes them “good sites for ‘thinking’ about history and memory in a creative fashion.”<sup>20</sup> I suggest they also offer valuable sites for exploring the raw and emotional issue of faith after genocide. The sparse text facilitates a directness in communication that quickly informs the reader of the theological anguish of protagonists. Speech bubbles enable the reader to literally “read the mind” of characters as they beseech or berate their God. The reader is thus privileged to access the innermost thoughts of protagonists in a way unlikely to be expressed through external communication. Biblical imagery, and images of churches, priests and prayer books provide context for the reader far more efficiently than could be achieved solely through text. Moreover, the inherently fragmented and incomplete nature of depiction within a graphic novel provides an almost ideal space for the sometimes conflicting, confused and unresolved nature of attempts to theologically grapple with genocide. In some ways the graphic novel also has a unique capacity to resist the impetus of purely written forms to reach a neat resolution in the concluding chapters.

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15 Frank Ankersmit, *Meaning, Truth, and Reference in Historical Representation* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 117, 124.

16 Jan Baetens, “History Against the Grain? On the Relationship Between Visual Aesthetics and Historical Interpretation in the Contemporary Spanish Graphic Novel,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6, no. 3 (2002), 346.

17 *Ibid.*, 345–56.

18 Jonathan Walker, “Pistols! Murder! Treason!” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 7, no. 2 (2003), 146.

19 Baetens, “History Against the Grain?” 346.

20 Hugo Frey, “History and Memory in Franco-Belgian *Bande Dessinée* (BD),” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 6, no. 3 (2002), 302.

## Faith in the aftermath of genocide

This essay explores theological responses to genocide through three very different, yet in some ways surprisingly similar, graphic novels. *We Are On Our Own* is a memoir written by accomplished graphic novelist, Miriam Katin. While it tells her own story of survival during the Holocaust, she remembers none of the events she depicts. She survived as a toddler, and the tale she records is her journey with her mother, as her mother recounted it. Within the narrative she is depicted as Lisa. Lisa and her mother, Esther, became caught up in the Holocaust as it reached Budapest in 1944. With fake documents, they went into hiding to avoid deportation. They survived precariously in the countryside, fleeing on foot from place to place, staying just a few steps ahead of the German soldiers. Miraculously, Lisa's father Ka'roly also survived the war fighting for the Hungarian army. After the war they reunite and rebuild their lives. Alongside and within the compelling narrative of survival, Katin devotes substantial space to her exploration of the issue of faith, and the presence or absence of God during the Holocaust.

*Smile Through the Tears* is also a non-fictional account of the fate of one family during genocide. Author Rupert Bazambanza is a survivor of the Rwandan genocide, but it is not his own story that he tells, rather that of close family friends, the Rwangas. The Rwanga family is a Tutsi family with a long history of experiencing discrimination and persecution. The graphic novel presents their story within a narrative that also provides a broader account of Rwandan history. The Rwangas are a deeply religious Catholic family, but when they are targeted during the genocide, the Church offers no safe haven, and neither the UN, nor the international community provide protection. Ultimately only the mother, Rose, survives the genocide, while her husband and three children are killed. As the Rwangas experience genocide, the corruption of the Church is revealed. Yet while their faith is challenged and questioned, it provides ongoing comfort for Rose after losing her family.

*Deogratias* differs from *We Are On Our Own* and *Smile Through the Tears* in that it is a fictional account of the Rwandan genocide, and was not written by a survivor. *Deogratias* tells the eponymous story of a teenage boy and the community in which he lives. Deogratias is Hutu, and despite liking a Tutsi girl, becomes a reluctant perpetrator of the genocide. The author oscillates between scenes before, during and after the genocide, deftly utilising colour and darkness to alert the reader to these scene changes. In the aftermath of the genocide, such is Deogratias' distress that he morphs between human and dog-like forms as he loses his sanity. Many scenes in the novel are violent and shocking, and it provokes both horror and a strange compassion for Deogra-

tias. A major theme within the narrative is the corruption and complicity of the Catholic Church during the genocide. Yet it also goes beyond critical examination of the Church, directly questioning the role of God in the genocide.

In many respects, *We Are On Our Own* and *Deo gratias* can be interpreted as having been written as theological statements about God and genocide. That is, a core purpose—if not the core purpose—of each, is to explore the theological anguish created by the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide. This is immediately evident from the titles of each graphic novel. The title *We Are On Our Own* is taken from a scene towards the end of the book, when Lisa's parents, Esther and Ka'roly, are reunited after the war. Esther joyously proclaims "Thank God that we are alive and together again," but for Ka'roly "God has nothing to do with any of this."<sup>21</sup> He questions, "How can you give thanks to a deadly sky?"<sup>22</sup> While Esther is shocked at Ka'roly's sacrilege, he insists, "We are on our own, Esther. That's all there is," as a young Lisa looks on.<sup>23</sup> The title *Deo gratias* is similarly explicit in defining the theological focus of the graphic novel, albeit through irony. *Deo gratias* literally means "thanks be to God," and is used as a Catholic given name in the region. There are also additional layers of depth within this choice. The term *Deo Gratias* is used during mass, a liturgical formula repeated after readings from the scriptures, and after communion. Thus, it is repeated after parishioners receive something, becoming a statement of gratitude in response to a gift. Into the title *Deo gratias*, therefore, we can perceive an even deeper layer of irony in the aftermath of genocide.

Katin goes even further to immediately locate *We Are On Our Own* within a theological framework. The opening panel, a full-page cell in black with only a small square of text in the centre, begins "In the beginning darkness was upon the face of the deep"—a condensed version of the opening sentences of the bible.<sup>24</sup> The biblical rendition continues with God creating light. A series of panels slowly zooms out from the Hebrew text of God's name to a page of the Hebrew bible, then to Esther teaching a young Lisa the story of creation as they sit at the family table together. On the next page, the scene changes seemingly innocuously, to the view of a Budapest street out the apartment window. Across six panels, however, the pleasant view of buildings and blue sky is obscured by the approaching of a Nazi flag, until in the final image the black of the swastika blots out the view from the window completely. Text, written between the panels, states simply "And then one day, God replaced the light with

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21 Katin, *We Are*, 117.

22 *Ibid.*, 118.

23 *Ibid.*

24 *Ibid.*, 3.

the darkness.”<sup>25</sup> This highly evocative scene, placed even before the reader meets the protagonists of the graphic novel, identifies the fundamental place of theological anguish within the memoir. To suggest that “God replaced the light with the darkness” is effectively to hold God responsible for all that follows in Katin’s experience of the Holocaust. Yet this is not a clear theme that emerges consistently. Rather, there is an ongoing tension between an anger at God—as expressed in this statement of blame—and the assertion that God does not exist. Underlying this tension are additional themes of abandonment by God and oblique references to divine malevolence.

In the first half of the graphic novel, themes of anger and abandonment dominate. For Katin, however, anger cannot be expressed directly. Instead, a muted fury appears in repeated images of a broken God, an evil God; images that can only be regarded as blasphemous. The reader is shocked out of the narrative by these intense scenes. In the first, a young Lisa is delighted to meet a new “doggie” friend when Esther finds refuge at a vineyard in the Hungarian countryside.<sup>26</sup> The dog is starving, but without enough food even for the people, there is nothing to feed it. Esther gives the contents of a chamber pot Lisa has just used to the dog. As the dog eagerly eats her waste, Lisa reflects “I am helping my bestest friend to eat. I am the God of my doggie.”<sup>27</sup> Just a few pages later, Lisa confuses God with a Nazi commander. The commander arrives at the vineyard in search of good wine, meeting Esther while appropriating a supply. Attracted to her, he soon returns with a box of chocolates and carnal desires. As Esther is forced to comply, Lisa enjoys the chocolates in a different room, musing “Mmm. So Good. Such a Nice man. Maybe he is God. The Chocolate God.”<sup>28</sup>

As Lisa and Esther struggle to survive the war, these profane scenes continue. When they seek refuge from bombs in a wine cellar, it is not God that can provide comfort but the wine. “God’s only truth is inside these barrels. Give some to the child,” says the vintner, and as Lisa is calmed by the alcohol she muses, “God is red. God is in the glass. . . . God lives inside the big barreeellsss.”<sup>29</sup> Later, it is a doll of Saint Anthony that provides comfort in a storm—a striking blasphemy for a Jewish child.

As *We Are On Our Own* progresses there is a subtle shift in its theological focus. Slowly, hesitantly, the author begins to explore the possibility that God

25 Katin, *We Are*, 5.

26 Ibid., 34. Her previous pet dog had been forcibly confiscated by the Nazis.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 42.

29 Katin, *We Are*, 50.

does not exist. As Esther and Lisa flee the vineyard in a storm, they discover Lisa's "doggie" friend shot by the approaching Russian soldiers. Lisa, just a few years old, experiences the loss of a second beloved dog. As she mourns, her reflection takes us back to the opening scene of the novel: "And then, somehow she knew that God was not the light and God was not the darkness and not anybody at all. Maybe, God was not."<sup>30</sup> Several pages later, Katin returns to this theme in one of the occasional scenes that flash forward to Lisa's adulthood. In this scene—depicted in colour rather than the drab greys of the wartime narrative—Lisa is herself a mother with her toddler son. We join the family mid-discussion, as the child's father insists he must go to Hebrew school "to learn the bible and the prayers the way I did."<sup>31</sup> As father and son go outside to play though, Lisa replies to the empty room "And so did I. I prayed and I prayed."<sup>32</sup> But in the poignant final panel in the scene the reader sees a downcast Lisa opening a bottle of wine as she continues "God, He turned out to be residing in a wine barrel."<sup>33</sup> Lisa's desire for, yet inability to find, comfort in a belief in God, is strikingly portrayed in this redolent image. In the second half of *We Are On Our Own* this emerging conclusion of the non-existence of God comes to dominate. Indeed, in the epilogue Katin remarks, "I could not give this kind of comfort, a comfort of faith in the 'existence of God,' to my children. I was unable to lie."<sup>34</sup>

*Smile Through the Tears*, like *We Are On Our Own*, also has moments in which the faith of the protagonists is severely tested. When Rose's husband Charles and two sons Wilson and Degroot are taken away to a certain death during the genocide, Rose cries out "God! What sin did we commit to warrant this?"<sup>35</sup> Later in the genocide, when Rose's daughter Hyacinthe is shot in front of her, she beseeches "God in Heaven! Why have you abandoned me?"<sup>36</sup> Yet in *Smile Through the Tears*, these questions arise only during times of crisis. The narrative operates within a framework of faith and prayer, and there are many references to trust and comfort in God. Even as Rose buries Hyacinthe after the *interahamwe* (Hutu militia) leave, she prays "May you be with God, my child!"<sup>37</sup> After the genocide, she reflects: "God! You gave me angels for

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30 Ibid., 69.

31 Ibid., 84.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid., epilogue.

35 Rupert Bazambanza, *Smile Through the Tears: The Story of the Rwandan Genocide* (Montreal: Les Éditions Images, 2006), 50.

36 Ibid., 59.

37 Bazambanza, *Smile Through*, 60.

children. I returned them to you as I received them. Knowing that I've fulfilled my task and done it well is my sole happiness today."<sup>38</sup> In the closing scene of the graphic novel, Rose visits a mass gravesite where she has been told her husband and sons were buried. She finds a child there, calling out to his parents whom he believes were buried alive. She comforts him: "Your parents suffer no more. Their souls have left this grave and gone somewhere marvelous!"<sup>39</sup> For Rose Rwanga, genocide has robbed her of her entire family, but not the comfort of a loving God.

In *Smile Through the Tears*, it is not faith in God that is tested and found wanting, but faith in the Church. The corruption and complicity of the Catholic Church emerges as a major theme of the narrative. As the genocide approaches, the reader gets the first hint of the issue. Degroot, in a conversation with his brother about the dangers of the *interahamwe*, notes that the Church is unlikely to offer protection.<sup>40</sup> Its leadership is associated with the MRND, the increasingly extremist Hutu political party of Rwandan President Habyarimana.<sup>41</sup> At the outbreak of the genocide, the failure of the Church to offer protection rapidly becomes clear in a series of scenes that take place at the *Centre d'éducation de langues africaines* (CELA), a school run by the White Fathers, Catholic missionaries. Rose and Hyacinthe seek refuge at CELA. At first they are warmly welcomed and given assistance so that the rest of the family can seek refuge there too. Just as they are seemingly safe under the protection of the White Fathers, the reader learns: "At that moment inside the CELA, the White Fathers considered their position."<sup>42</sup> Belgian soldiers have arrived in Rwanda to evacuate their compatriots, including the White Fathers. In the following panel, a warm yellow light radiates from above, signifying the presence of God. As a White Father packs his suitcase, a voice emanating from the warmth intones: "The good shepherd stays with his sheep when the wolves come!"<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the White Father replies: "Lord! I hear your voice but the flesh is weak. We lack the strength to do as You wish."<sup>44</sup> The following day, "every last one of the White Fathers left."<sup>45</sup>

It is not just the weakness of the White Fathers that is highlighted in the narrative, but also the active complicity of many priests. After the White Fa-

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38 Ibid., 61.

39 Ibid., 64.

40 Ibid., 37.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 43.

43 Ibid.

44 Bazambanza, *Smile Through*, 43.

45 Ibid.

thers leave CELA, the Tutsi that had gathered there seeking protection attempt to defend themselves from the genocidal onslaught. When Tutsi resistance at CELA is crushed, Rose and Hyacinthe are transferred to the nearby Sainte-Famille Church. There they are welcomed by Father Munyeshyaka, but it quickly becomes apparent he is acting in league with the *interahamwe*.<sup>46</sup> Father Munyeshyaka offers Hyacinthe “favours” in exchange for sex. When Hyacinthe refuses, she is targeted by *interahamwe* but manages to hide. Later, in a desperate bid to stay alive, Rose and Hyacinthe again seek the protection of Father Munyeshyaka, this time at his private apartments. When Hyacinthe continues to refuse his sexual advances, she is cast out and dies shortly thereafter. The complicity of the Church in the deaths of the Rwanga family is clear.

In *Deogratias*, as in *Smile Through the Tears*, the malevolence of the Church is a key theme. Very quickly, the centrality of the Church within the narrative is established. Images of the church are repeatedly used to signify a change of scene (for example pages 3, 28, 49–50 and 67). Images of the cross are everywhere. Yet they are confronting, not comforting images, often juxtaposed with depravity. In a darkly coloured scene from after the genocide, for example, a filthy, decrepit Deogratias sits directly under a cross outside his local church.<sup>47</sup> In the next panel Deogratias—now in a bright, full-colour scene from before the genocide—is secretly examining a magazine featuring erotica, his back turned to the church behind him. In school, meanwhile, Deogratias is taught the racist attitudes that led to the genocide under the image of the cross.<sup>48</sup> In these ways, the reader is continually drawn back to the Church as a central reference point, but in a manner that can provide no comfort.

Two of the main characters within the narrative are Father Stanislas, a white priest that has lived in Rwanda for decades, and Brother Philip, a newly arrived Belgian missionary. From the first image of Father Stanislas the reader is cued to suspicion by his severe expressions and the bottle-end thick glasses that obscure his eyes. Before the reader even learns his name, they hear of the rumour of a previous mistress and illegitimate child Apollinaria—now a beautiful young lady.<sup>49</sup> Brother Philip is presented as naïve but well-meaning, but he too acts improperly. Shortly after his arrival he gets terribly drunk on the local beer, and he is unable to keep himself from ogling Apollinaria.<sup>50</sup>

It is when the genocide erupts that the reader sees the true depths of the

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46 Ibid., 53.

47 Jean-Philippe Stassen, *Deogratias: A Tale of Rwanda*, trans. Alexis Siegel (New York: First Second, 2006), 13.

48 Ibid., 17–18.

49 Ibid., 12.

50 Ibid., 35.

behaviour of these missionaries. At first it seems honourable. At the outbreak of the genocide, Father Stanislas and Brother Philip are depicted defending the church from a gang of *interahamwe* who are armed with guns, machetes and clubs. Behind them, Tutsi cower in the church for protection.<sup>51</sup> In the next scene, however, the missionaries are fleeing Rwanda in a convoy. Stanislas justifies his behaviour: "We did what we could, Brother Philip. We have to go now. Staying any longer would be suicide."<sup>52</sup> Brother Philip counters: "We could at least have tried to take Apollinaria."<sup>53</sup> It becomes apparent that not only has Father Stanislas abandoned the Tutsi seeking the protection of the Church, but he has made no special effort to protect even his own daughter.<sup>54</sup> The immorality of Stanislas sinks even lower when Apollinaria's mother, Venetia, comes across them in the convoy. "Where is Apollinaria? She's not with you?" Venetia demands to know.<sup>55</sup> Stanislas responds: "We had to leave her in the church. These . . . people prevented us from taking anyone with us."<sup>56</sup> For once his glasses are off and eyes clearly visible in a seeming display of sincerity, but the reader knows this is a complete lie. When Venetia arrives at the church shortly thereafter, the double doors are ajar. On one side of the door is the cross, on the other a pool of congealing blood.

Beneath the narrative exploring the culpability of the Church, a further and more subtle narrative exploring the role of God in the genocide can be discerned. In the scene described above in which Father Stanislas and Brother Philip defend the church against the *interahamwe*, for example, Father Stanislas responds to the armed men: "My children, my children, you can't think of desecrating the house of God."<sup>57</sup> Yet the reply he receives is "You don't understand Father. We're working with God. God loves justice."<sup>58</sup> The scene abruptly shifts to the convoy fleeing Rwanda; the reader does not get the opportunity to hear the missionaries' reply. Following the genocide, Brother Philip returns to Rwanda, somehow still naïve to the reality of the violence. A broken Deogratias cryptically recounts his role in the genocide to him, to which Brother Philip declares he will pray to God to forgive him. But Deogra-

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51 Ibid., 59.

52 Ibid., 60.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid. Throughout the narrative Stanislas neither admits nor denies being Apollinaria's father, but the rumour of his paternity is presented multiple times. Moreover, in the next scene, Apollinaria's mother Venetia appears to indirectly confirm his paternity of Apollinaria through implying he holds a special responsibility towards her.

55 Ibid., 61.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid., 59.

58 Stassen, *Deogratias*, 59.

tias replies, “I don’t need your forgiveness! Or the mercy of your god! . . . It wasn’t a confession!”<sup>59</sup> Faith is now only relevant to Brother Philip, safely removed from the genocide.

It is the final scene of *Deogratias* that most powerfully challenges the role of God in the Rwandan genocide. It is a complex scene that can be interpreted in multiple ways, depicted through multilayered allusion.<sup>60</sup> In a dark climax, Deogratias—taking on the form of a dog in his distress—tries to poison Brother Philip while recounting his role in the genocide. Fortuitously, he is prevented from doing so when police swoop in and arrest Deogratias for previously poisoning a French soldier. As Deogratias is led away, an officer asks the shocked Brother Philip, “Friend of yours, that madman?” A downcast Brother Philip replies, almost to himself, “He was a creature of God.”<sup>61</sup> The final three wordless panels slowly zoom out, from the exterior of the hotel, to the beauty of the setting sun, to a vast image of the stars in a dark night sky. These wordless images and the opening vista invite the reader to reflect upon this final statement. Does Brother Philip, secure in his faith, believe Deogratias was “a creature of God” in that all beings are divine creations, even those who have somehow gone astray? Or perhaps the reader can ponder a more insidious interpretation. If a creature of God is capable of murder, indeed of genocide, does the creator himself bear responsibility for this evil? A clue to interpreting this scene may lie much earlier in the graphic novel. When Brother Philip’s parents visit him in Rwanda before the genocide, Apollinaria joins the family as a guide for a museum visit. As they explore an exhibit, she explains of traditional Rwandans: “because they did not yet know our Lord Jesus Christ and the greatness of His love, they believed the spirits of the dead filled the underworld, where they schemed spitefully against the living; and at night they lit up the sky over Rwanda.”<sup>62</sup> According to a traditional Rwandan interpretation, the reader is thus informed, the stars represent malevolent spirits. As the reader reflects on the starry night sky, Stassen’s ambiguous conclusion may be suggestive of a malevolent divinity above.

The conclusion of *We Are On Our Own* is no less powerful. If, for Stassen, the God that allowed the Rwandan genocide is evil, for Katin her experience of the Holocaust is evidence that God does not exist. The final scene of *We Are On Our Own*, like that of *Deogratias*, is complex. The joyous reunion of Esther with her husband Ka’roly is tempered by Ka’roly’s assertion that God

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59 Ibid., 76.

60 This style is reminiscent of Nobel prizewinning author Shmuel Yosef Agnon.

61 Stassen, *Deogratias*, 78.

62 Ibid., 44.

does not exist, only “a deadly sky.”<sup>63</sup> As a young Lisa plays at their feet during this reunion, she re-enacts some of her traumatic experiences and reflects upon her unanswered prayers for her beloved dog Rexy to return.<sup>64</sup> The final panel refers back to a scene near the opening of the novel. Esther, in preparation for going into hiding, burns all evidence of their Judaism. While throwing pages of a Hebrew prayer book onto the fire, however, she is secretly observed by Lisa, who misinterprets the scene. “You burned him! Yo [sic] burned God! I saw it! I saw it!” cries Lisa.<sup>65</sup> At the time her mother replies “Hush! You can’t burn God silly. He will be with us everywhere helping us. You will see.”<sup>66</sup> In the final panel of the novel, however, after Lisa reflects on all of her traumatic experiences, she asks “And what if Mommy burned that God after all?”<sup>67</sup>

The concluding reflections in *Smile Through the Tears* contrast starkly with those of *We Are On Our Own* and *Deo gratias*, and yet the reader is again deeply moved. Rose visits the mass grave where her son Wilson is supposed to be buried, and she is accompanied by Wilson’s girlfriend. Wilson’s girlfriend reflects: “Before he died, Wilson asked me to embrace life. To live and be happy! He said this would help him live in Paradise.”<sup>68</sup> Rose affirms, “None of our loved ones who are now dead would wish us to live our lives in mourning. . . . You young people, your mission is to restore harmony so that your children never know the meaning of the words ‘racial discrimination.’”<sup>69</sup> For Rose, it is not God that is responsible for the Rwandan genocide, “But its own people [who] have sullied this Eden.”<sup>70</sup> What humankind has destroyed, it must attempt to rebuild.

## Conclusion

The three graphic novels explored in this chapter, *We Are On Our Own*, *Smile Through the Tears* and *Deo gratias*, are all very different. They span different genocides, different generations, and they divide between fiction and non-fiction. Yet each has successfully utilised the format of the graphic novel to pose searing questions about theology and religion during and after genocide. *Smile Through the Tears* and *Deo gratias* hold the Catholic Church to account for its

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63 Katin, *We Are*, 118.

64 Ibid., 119-21.

65 Ibid., 23.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid., 122.

68 Bazambanza, *Smile Through the Tears*, 63.

69 Ibid., 64.

70 Ibid., 64.

complicity with the genocide in Rwanda. All of the graphic novels hold God to account. In *Deo Gratias*, Stassen questions whether divine malevolence enabled the genocide; for Katin the tentative explanation is divine absence. Yet Rose Rwanga is able to retain her faith in *Smile Through the Tears*, despite losing her husband and three children. In each case, the reader is taken on a deeply emotive journey. The graphic novel format provides a compelling medium and a unique space to explore unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable questions, concerning the existence and role of God during genocide. The inherently incomplete and fragmented nature of the medium challenges the reader to reflect on these unanswered questions. The authors have the space and ability to conclude in a manner that invites ongoing theological reflection. As these three masterful works demonstrate, the graphic novel provides an extraordinarily powerful medium for exploring the impact of genocide.