

# Doomsday movements in Africa: Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*This article investigates Kibwetere's Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God. A brief summary of the Movement's short history is followed by an outline of the movement's main beliefs. This Ugandan cult's socio historic context is thereupon analyzed. The cult's document, "A Timely Message", is summarized and their relationship with a similar Marian movement in Australia is indicated. Finally, the phenomenon of their suicide is discussed in terms of doomsday apocalypticism and depicted as a result of Roman Catholic apocalyptic thinking.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

An estimated number of 338 members of The Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God (MRTCG) died in a church building near the village of Kanungu on March 17, 2000. This was in the Rukungiri district, 350 km South-West of Uganda's capital Kampala. It seems to have been a mass suicide. During the night of March 15<sup>th</sup> the members came together and slaughtered three bulls to eat and consumed 70 crates of soft drinks they had purchased to celebrate the building of their new church (cf Robinson 2000). On the next day, the 16<sup>th</sup>, their leader Kibwetere deposited the Land Title of their property along with the MRTCG's Article of Association, Constitution and Certificate of Incorporation with the police at Kanungu for safe custody (cf Walliss 2005:50). They prayed all through the following night. The next morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> they met in their new church building. A little before 10h00 they were seen leaving the new church to enter the old church which was

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### ***Doomsday Movements in Africa: Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God***

used as a dining hall at that time. The windows were boarded up from the outside and the doors were locked. Just after 10h30 an explosion was heard and a fire quickly consumed the building and all those inside (cf Religious-movements s a).

Four days after the fire, investigators found six bodies in the bottom of the latrine behind the new church, covered in concrete. The six had been brutally murdered, half undressed, and placed almost haphazardly in a hole. On March 24, another 153 bodies were found in mass graves in nearby Buhunga. On March 26 another 155 bodies were unearthed in a mass grave in a sugarcane field in Rugazi. Some had been stabbed and others had pieces of cloth wrapped tightly around their throats. They appeared to have been dead for at least a month. Another 81 bodies, including 44 children were discovered on the farm of lay leader Joseph Nymurinda (cf Robinson 2000). At the home of Dominic Kataribabo,<sup>2</sup> one of their leaders, authorities exhumed 74 bodies from a mass grave in Kataribabo's yard. An additional 28 bodies were found beneath a concrete floor in Kataribabo's home (cf Religious-movements s a). All in all nearly 800 members of the Movement lost their lives during February and March 2000.

The group initially believed that the world would come to an end on the 31<sup>st</sup> December 1999. They believed that all the people in the world would be exterminated on that day, while they themselves would be transported to heaven. Their leader Joseph Kibwetere proclaimed that he overheard a conversation between Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. In this conversation Mary stated that the world would come to an end unless humans started to follow the Ten Commandments closely. When the end did not come with the turn of the millennium, Kibwetere changed the date of the end to the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2000. On that day the Virgin Mary would appear and take the faithful to heaven. In preparation for this event the members convened in their new church near Kanungu.

Many factors contributed to this disaster. Information on the internal motivations for the eventual suicide is very scarce. From the little that is known this paper studies the history of the Movement, their beliefs, their socio historic context, their main publication and their relationship with a similar cult in Australia. Finally the paper tries to understand the phenomenon of this group in terms of what can be called "doomsday apocalypticism".

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<sup>2</sup> In the sources the spelling varies between Kataribabo and Kataribaabo.

## 2. HISTORY

Introvigne (sa) takes the founding of the MRTCG back to the eighties of the previous century, when there was “an epidemic of apparitions of the Virgin Mary and Jesus in Catholic circles in Africa”. In 1987 a number of Catholics claimed to have visions of Jesus and the Virgin Mary in South-Western Uganda. Among these were Paul Kashaku (1890-1991,) and his daughter Credonia Mwerinde (1952-2000). Kashaku saw a vision of his deceased daughter Evangelista in 1960 in which she told him that he would be visited by apparitions from heaven. This happened in 1988 when he was visited by Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and St. Joseph. They called upon him to use his land, near the city of Kanungu, as a gathering place for believers.

In June 1989 Kashaku instructed his daughter Credonia Mwerinde and his granddaughter Ursula Komuhangi to take the message of the Blessed Virgin to other parts of the country. This message was understood as a commission to persuade people to keep the Ten Commandments. The two women met Joseph Kibwetere (1931-2000) in June of that year. They described to him their communication with the Virgin Mary. Kibwetere himself also claimed to have received similar apparitions since 1984. He was a member of the Catholic community in Uganda, who had been a politician and a locally prominent member of the Catholic-based Democratic Party in the 1970s.

Sharing experiences of the vision of Mary, the decision was made to form a movement. Most of the group’s members were recruited from Roman Catholic circles. A handful of Catholic priests and nuns were converted to the group’s prophetic visions. Among them was Father Dominic Kataribabo (1967-2000) a USA-educated Ugandan Dominican priest. Melton’s<sup>3</sup> (s a) information is that Dominic Kataribabo was a Roman Catholic priest. He earned a master’s degree in religious studies from Los Angeles’ Loyola Marymount University in the 1980’s. He was excommunicated in the early 1990’s, left the Roman Catholic Church and worked exclusively for the Movement. According to Robinson the Movement was founded in 1989 by excommunicated Roman Catholic priests: Joseph Kibwetere, Joseph Kasapurari, John Kamagara and Dominic Kataribabo; two excommunicated Roman Catholic nuns; and Credonia Mwerinde. Initially the Movement was established in Kibwetere’s home. They tried to merge the Movement with other “apparitionist” groups, including the one established in Mbuye by the Rwandan seer Mukantabana. These attempts were not successful. According to Introvigne (sa) a group of

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<sup>3</sup> In Apologetics Index J Gordon Melton and Massimo Introvigne are both described as members of CESNUR USA who are “cult defenders”. Introvigne (2002:214) on the other hand refers to “cult wars” and accuses his opponents of being “militant anti-cultists”. The work of scholars on cults have to be evaluated in terms of this debate.

### ***Doomsday Movements in Africa: Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God***

twelve *entumwa* (apostles), six of them women, was appointed. Kibwetere became their leader after Kashaku's death in 1991. According to Religious-movements (s a) many believers joined them in the Kibwetere's home after they sold their belongings. This created considerable stress between the members of Kibwetere's family and the newcomers.

In 1992<sup>4</sup> Kibwetere and the members were forced by his family to leave the household and moved to land belonging to a senior member in remote Kanungu, in the district of Rukungiri, close to the Congolese border. The village at Kanungu was called "Ishayuuro rya Maria" (the rescue place for the virgin Mary) (cf Introvigne s a). Money provided by the followers, who sold their homes and possessions when they joined, and money obtained from groups and individuals overseas, was used to build a church, a small complex of houses, offices and a school there (cf Robinson 2000). In 1994 they were registered as a non-governmental organization. A boarding school was also licensed. This was, however, cancelled in 1998, when the license was revoked by the government. The reasons were teachings contrary to the Constitution, breaches of public health regulations and rumours of possible mistreatment of children at the settlement (cf Introvigne s a).

The Movement also recruited new followers from nearby rural districts and as far away as the capital Kampala. There were also "centers for evangelization" in the districts of Kabale, Rukungiri, Bushenyi and Mbarara (cf Religiousmovements s a). Estimates of their numbers before the events of 17<sup>th</sup> March varies between 235 to about 650 (Robinson 2000) and even 1,000 members (cf Religiousmovements s a).

### **3. BELIEFS OF THE GROUP**

The Ten Commandments played a vital role in the existence of the MRTCG. According to their view the Ten Commandments needed to be restored to their original importance. The prominence of the Decalogue also led to peculiar behaviour. Out of fear of breaking the commandment "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour" (Ex 20:16) the members mostly used gestures and sign language to communicate with each other. The members were said to avoid sex (cf Introvigne s a) and discourage medical care (cf Robinson 2000). They participated in rituals similar to those practiced in monasteries, like nightly prayer and a bare lifestyle (cf Robinson 2000).

The complex in Kanungu was seen and referred to as Noah's Ark. Here the Second Coming of Christ would occur. Those within would pass to the new world. Linked to this name was the way the community was organised around the mentioned twelve apostles, the *entumwa* (cf Introvigne s a).

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<sup>4</sup> Sources differ on the exact year. Some have it as 1994.

Kibwetere acted as head of these six women and six men. The community was divided into three groups. The novices were the newest members. They had to wear black. The next group were those who promised to follow the commandments. They wore green clothes. The fully professed members were “*those who were willing to die in the ark*” (cf Introvigne s a). They wore green and white. Before any person could become a member of the Movement he/she was required to read the document “A Timely Message From Heaven: The End of the Present Time”, or have had it read to him/her (cf Religious-movements s a).

Most members were former Catholics. Some were, however, from the African Initiated Churches (also called African Independent Churches), and from local spiritualist groups (cf Introvigne s a). Dominic Kataribabo claimed in the Movement’s publications that the group did not consider itself a new religious movement at all, but rather an action “to revive what had been abandoned” (quoted from *Timely Message* in Walliss 2005:53). According to Robinson (2000), however, the group taught that the Catholic Church was an enemy, badly in need of reform. Many of their rituals were still similar to those performed in any other Roman Catholic Church in Uganda. They recognised the Pope as head of the Church. They took communion, but only in a kneeling position. Services were held in the vernacular (not in Latin). They did accept both ecumenism and the new ritual of the Mass introduced in the Catholic Church after Vatican II (cf Introvigne s a).

The most obvious difference with others was found in the Movement’s emphasis on moral standards dictated by the Ten Commandments and the apocalyptic beliefs espoused by the group. According to Massimo Introvigne’s (s a) analysis, the Movement “developed an archconservative brand of Catholicism ...”. Some of its leaders and members were eventually excommunicated by the Roman Catholic Church. They also broke their ties with the Ugandan Catholic Bishops, differing from them on the issue of the reliability of apparitions. The Ugandan Catholic Bishops therefore did not see the Movement as part of the Roman Catholic Church.

They claimed that their rules came from the Virgin Mary, channelled through Mwerinde (cf Robinson 2000). They also claimed that their leaders have seen Jesus, the Virgin Mary and Joseph in several different visions. In this regard they were heavily influenced both by recognized Catholic apparitions such as those of La Salette and Fatima, and by unofficial Catholic sources, including the messages of the Italian visionary priest Father Stefano Gobbi (cf Introvigne s a). They were also influenced by different United States visionaries. Another influence to which we shall return later is that of the

### ***Doomsday Movements in Africa: Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God***

Australian based Catholic prophet William Kamm, known as the “Little Pebble”.

Their views did not apparently contain a message of violence (cf Religiousmovements s a). In Introvigne’s (s a) opinion the Movement was considered in Uganda among the less violent local “apocalyptic movements”. In explaining their violent end Introvigne (s a) compares the Movement to the Order of the Solar Temple and its violent end in 1994. In the case of the Solar Temple there were three categories of victims. There were those who knew about the suicide. For them it was a “rational” way to escape a doomed world. Next to them was the larger group who expected to go to heaven but did not know how. Then there were the “traitors” who doubted the leaders’ revelations. The same categories could have existed in the Movement.

The Movement expected the Second Coming to arrive shortly and bring a new world with it. There was, however, some dispute as to when this would occur (cf Religiousmovements s a). Suspicion was aroused when Kibetweere’s prediction that the Virgin Mary would appear and take members to Heaven on the 31<sup>st</sup> December 1999 had to be changed to 17<sup>th</sup> March 2000. A number of members could have doubted the leaders, and asked the money they had contributed back. The bodies found in several mass graves at different locations after the 17<sup>th</sup> March were probably those who doubted the prediction and were branded as “traitors” and were killed in various waves prior to the final events of March 17. According to Introvigne’s (s a) theory the mystery of the mass graves can be explained as those of “weak” members, regarded to be not fully prepared to commit suicide. They were assassinated before the final fire without being regarded as “traitors.” Although theories are posed that the leadership escaped the ordeal of the 17<sup>th</sup> March, the behaviour of the leaders prior to the events confirms their suicide in the old church.

#### **4. SOCIO HISTORIC CONTEXT**

Several indicators prove that the MRTCG was in fact a “cult”. Introvigne (s a) warns against applying Western models of cultism to situations peculiar to the African continent. Conflict between “cults” and the national army, protests, violence (and even suicide) are often just new forms of pre-existing ethnic, tribal, and political conflicts. Walliss denies that the MRTCG was a cult. It could best be “conceptualized as a Catholic sect” (Walliss 2005:53) acting in a wider religious milieu of popular Catholicism. There are, however, superfluous international designators to the existence of cults that are also found with the MRTCG.

Martin (1985:26-28) identifies the following characteristics of the psychological structure of cultism: 1) closed-mindedness; 2) genuine

antagonism on a personal level; 3) institutional dogmatism and a pronounced intolerance for any position than their own; and 4) isolation.

Similar to other cults elsewhere in the world, the MRTCG claimed to have truth not available to any other groups or individuals. Usually this new truth is said to be a “restoration” of the “pure” Christianity which was in their view corrupted at some time in early church history (cf Martin 1980:20-21). In this case the main message of the MRTCG was that the Ten Commandments had been distorted and needed to be restored in their full value. They claimed not to be a sect, but a movement that endeavours to make the people aware of the fact that the Commandments of God have been abandoned.

The MRTCG also formed an isolated community (cf Robinson 2000). Like all other cults they fortified their boundaries and confined their members in various ways. Entrance to the community was restricted. They could only be initiated after studying the document “*A Timely Message* “. Those who tried to leave the MRTCG were attacked and stigmatized as defectors, traitors and deserters. If they dared to deviate from the cult’s norms they were immediately disciplined and if unrepentant ostracized completely from the group and its members (cf Martin 1980:18). They also believed that they were in constant danger, were being closely monitored and heavily persecuted. The members were told that Jesus and the Virgin Mary were closely monitoring them and would curse any that deviated from strict behaviour rules (cf Robinson 2000).

Although six men and women acted as leaders, Kibwetere was the head apostle. Like other cults they were led by a single male charismatic leader. Hunt (1980:19) remarks in this regard: “Each cult is headed by a self-proclaimed “prophet” or “prophetess,” who generally claims to have new and unique revelations. Kibwetere claimed to have regular unique apparitions of Mary and to receive personal revelations from her on the end of the world. These guided the life of the Movement.

All cults believe that there is a continual ongoing communication from God. This can contradict and even at times supersede God’s first revelation in the Bible (cf Martin 1980:20). All cults possess some scripture that is either added to or which replaces the Bible as the Word of God (cf Martin 1980:18). The Movement had Roman Catholic roots and the Bible therefore was the group’s sacred text. It must also be noted that much of the governance of the Movement relied on their book *A Timely Message*.

In the preaching of the leader heavy concentration falls on the impending end of the world (cf Robinson 2000). There was also the expectation that the group will play a major role at the end time. The members

### ***Doomsday Movements in Africa: Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God***

of the group will be the only survivors of the catastrophic events of the end time.

Another indicator of a cult is the collection of an impressive array of guns, rifles, other murder weapons or weapons of mass destruction. On the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2000 the Movement came to its end when there was an explosion in the building where the members were gathered.

Internal factors in the forming of the MRTCG pointed out by Introvigne (s a) include the personality of the leaders, their literal interpretations of prophecies about the end of the world and the crisis both of society and of the Catholic Church. Marian apocalyptic revelations were taken literally, and acted upon in an eventual violent way.

Introvigne (s a) points out that violence erupted among religious movements in Uganda because of a combination of internal and external factors. External factors that played a role in the tragedy at Kanungu include the situation prevailing in Uganda, particularly in an area ravaged by disaster, famines, and civil war. Uganda experienced an apocalypse of its own between 1971 and 1979 with the bloody regime of Idi Amin Dada (1925-2003) and the atrocities of the civil war. They also had to deal with poverty, drought, and corruption on a continent in which politicians often fail their people and where traditional social structures are coming apart (cf Robinson 2000). Hundreds of religious movements are found in Uganda, many of them apocalyptic and millenarian, expecting justice from the end of the world, not from politics (cf Introvigne s a).

Several violent religious groups are found in Uganda. Robinson (2000) names the following: The Lord's Resistance Army's objective is to run Uganda on the basis of the biblical Ten Commandments. The extreme and violent Christian cult of the Holy Spirit Movement, formed in the late 1980s, launched suicidal attacks in which hundreds of believers died convinced that magic oil would protect them from bullets of government troops. Wilson Bushara's World Message Last Warning formed in 1995, had been banned in 1999 and their leaders charged with rape, kidnapping, illegal confinement, and murder. Decomposing bodies were found at their headquarters.

## **5. A TIMELY MESSAGE FROM HEAVEN: THE END OF PRESENT TIMES**

This document was mainly written by Kataribabo. The 163-page handbook,<sup>5</sup> described by Nelson as a "paperbound tract", consisted of 16 parts. On the cover it had a crucified Christ. The first three chapters "outline in obsessive

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<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, I could not get hold of a copy of this document. All my efforts were in vain.

detail the ways in which humanity has been tempted away from the Ten Commandments by Satan, along with some of the ways this situation can be amended" (Walliss 2005:53-54). Strict ascetic rules then follow for the members who prefer to keep the commandments. This is then contrasted to the fate of those who reject the Ten Commandments, described in typical apocalyptic language of cosmic catastrophes in an agrarian African idiom. A period of chastisement will follow to mark the end of the present generation. At the end of this period the redeemed quarter of the world's population will go into buildings ("arks" or "ships") where they will await the arrival of the new earth from heaven. In terms of Revelations 22 death and the underworld will be vanquished. A beautiful new earth connected to heaven and constantly visited by people from heaven will come. Uganda itself will become the new Israel which will convert all the other nations (cf Walliss 2005:54-56).

The document further deals with various topics, mostly ethical. According to Introvigne (s a) these were themes "common in traditionalist and other Catholic archconservative circles". The MRTCG described itself in this manual as "a movement that endeavours to make the people aware of the fact that the Commandments of God have been abandoned, and it gives what should be done for their observance" (cf Nelson 2000). According to Nelson (2000) it "focuses on Uganda's afflictions, casting them as satanic, with obedience to the Ten Commandments the only cure".

Among the different topics being dealt with, Aids is seen as divine punishment on beer-drinking and perverse sexual practices. Alcohol is "now under the control of Satan" (quoted by Nelson 2000). The sole cure for the punishment of Aids is "... repenting our disobedience and the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God" (cf Nelson 2000). Evil lurks everywhere for the unwary. Traditional healers are called "witch doctors" who are in the "company of the devil". Interesting is also the view that "Cats and dogs are already possessed by the devil. From these animals Satan is actually fighting against man, particularly those who own animals" (cf Nelson 2000). Another problem was the clothing, or rather insufficient clothing of the members. They were accused of moving around half-naked and girls preferring men's trousers to wearing dresses. All of these were seen to be "symptoms of an urge to violate the Sixth Commandment. Our Blessed Mother Mary says that we, the youths, are like simpletons or fools because of having allowed Satan to dwell in us and make us do all sorts of shameful actions" (quoted in Nelson 2000).

In typical prophetic style not only Uganda is judged, but also other countries. London's "desire for doing evil will be fulfilled." With regard to Mexico: "Heavy arms that are going to destroy five countries will be transported through your roads." As far as France is concerned: "Your

### ***Doomsday Movements in Africa: Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God***

laziness will not permit you to endure the chastisement that will be inflicted upon you until you are destroyed in lamentations.” (all quoted in Nelson 2000).

The booklet also aims at buttressing the authenticity of the sect’s leaders. In three consecutive chapters the visions received from Jesus and the Virgin Mary by Joseph Kibwetere, Credonia Mwerinde and her sister Angelina Migisha are discussed. These visions are also used to give divine sanction to the sect’s bans on conversation, sex, cosmetics and short skirts. They also support the MRTCG’s harsh rules of fasting, prayer and work.

The message of the book was apocalyptic. Nelson (2000) ascribes the tendency towards apocalypticism to “the death toll caused by Aids and the reigns of terror led by former Presidents Idi Amin and Milton Obote”.

Introvigne (s a) quotes the following remark on the apocalyptic cataclysm from *Timely Message*:

All of you living on the Planet, listen to what I’m going to say: When the year 2000 is completed, the year that will follow will not be year 2001. The year that will follow shall be called Year One in a generation that will follow the present generation; the generation that will follow will have few or many people depending on who will repent ... The Lord told me that hurricanes of fire would rain forth from heaven and spread over all those who would not have repented ... This fire will also reach inside the buildings; there is no way one can escape.

Nelson (2000) quotes the following promise: “We are definitely taking you to Jesus through the Blessed Virgin Mary, who have commissioned us, and through the Pope” (cf AOL 2000).

I had to rely on the secondary sources above for the contents of the publication. This document is not any longer freely available. Some other line is to be followed also to study the contents of the Movement’s apocalyptic thinking. This is the Movement’s association with the Marian Workers of Atonement in Australia.

## **6. INFLUENCES FROM AUSTRALIA**

In documents found in the home of Kibwetere a link could be found between the MRTCG and an Australian doomsday group, the Marian Workers of Atonement (cf Foden & Borzello 2000) based near Nowra, in NSW Australia and founded between 1970 and 1972. The documents refer to four meetings William Kamm, the leader of the Marion Workers, held at the Kampala police mess between October 6 and 10, 1989. At this stage manifestations of the Virgin Mary were becoming frequent throughout Uganda and neighbouring

Rwanda. Kamm, himself a believer in apparitions of Mary, visited Uganda. Joseph Kibwetere and his wife went to hear him talk as they were interested in visions of Mary. The documents also refer to dispatches of papers sent to them from the Australian headquarters.

Kamm refers in his group's documentation to himself as "the Little Pebble" perhaps in reference to the biblical St Peter, the Rock (cf Foden & Borzello 2000). There are clear similarities between the Little Pebble and the Kanungu cults. The most obvious similarity is the claim of direct contact with the Virgin Mary. Kamm claims to be in contact with the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ as well as other heavenly beings. He claims to receive a constant stream of prophetic messages from them. Both groups refer to receiving these messages via a "voice box". The symbol of the ark is prominent in each of the cults. Kamm's organisation is also known as "Our Lady of the Ark" and the "Order of St Charbel". The followers of the MRTCG called the church they entered before burning to death, their "ark". Members of the MRTCG told friends and relatives that the Virgin Mary would come to take them to heaven. The same is promised to Little Pebble's followers on their leader's website.

The pronouncements or prophecies made by Kamm are published on his "Official Website of the Little Pebble" under the heading "Messages of the Mother of God to the Little Pebble". Kamm claims to have received 5156 messages from Jesus and Mary over the fifteen years of his "public mission" (cf Official Website s a). "They are recorded and then typed by our Office Staff at the Community of Gethsemane, Cambewarra, N S W Australia" (cf Official Website s a).

These prophecies are typically apocalyptic in contents. They usually refer to the end of the world, or the "end of days". Wars between countries and natural catastrophes on a world wide scale are predicted. In most cases these prophecies are a call to prayer or ritual ordered by Kamm's contacts. In some cases these "messages" refer to the sorry state of the church. In other cases the perceived danger of "liberalisation" of the Roman Catholic Church is pointed out. The various prophecies are also exhortations against the malice of the world, and instructions to pray constantly. These messages are "private messages". They are not to be made public, but to be passed on to the "inner circle" only. The headquarters in Nowra also consists of a fenced compound, not only to keep people out who may harm the group, but, of course, to keep people in and heighten their isolation.

## **7. DOOMSDAY APOCALYPTICISM**

On the 21<sup>st</sup> November 1978 all together 917 people died at Kaituma in Guyana in the South American Jungle. They belonged to a group called the

### ***Doomsday Movements in Africa: Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God***

“People’s Temple”. Kaituma was also called Jonestown after the leader of the group James Thurman (aka Warren Jones 1931-1978). Jones developed a belief called *Translation* in which he and his followers would all die together and would move to another planet for a life of bliss (cf The Peoples Temple s a). According to Jordan (1996:58) pathology reports revealed that only a few hundred died voluntarily, while the rest were executed by gunshot.

On the 28<sup>th</sup> February 1993 six Davidians of the Branch Davidian cult led by David Koresh died in a confrontation between agents of the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and the members of the cult at Mount Carmel, Waco USA. Koresh was formerly called Vernon Howell (cf Jordan 1996:58). The cult compound was destroyed in a final conflagration on April 19, 1993.

On the 5<sup>th</sup> October 1994 the Swiss police found the bodies of 48 members of the Order of the Solar Temple (French: *Ordre du Temple Solaire*) in Cheiry. They found another 25 corpses in three chalets in Granges-sur-Salvan further down south. This movement was established by the French esoteric teacher Joseph Di Mambro (1924-1994). Following Western esoteric tradition and its own apocalyptic ideas, the order became persuaded in the 1990s that the end of the world was at hand. Salvation was available through ritualized death which would enable a transit to another planet. Along with the co-leader Luc Jouret, Mambro promised his followers that they would be taken to a planet orbiting the star Sirius during the Winter Solstice (21/22 December).

On the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1997 the police found the bodies of 39 members of the Heaven’s Gate People who had committed suicide in Rancho Santa Fe, California. This group had been established between 1973 and 1974 by Bonnie Lu Trousdale Nettles (1927±1985) and Marshall Herff Applewhite (1931±1997), also known as Bo and Peep, and later on as Ti and Do. The members of Heaven’s Gate believed that Planet Earth was about to be destroyed. They followed a syncretistic religion, combining elements of Christianity with unusual beliefs about the nature of UFO’s. They believed a small group of humans received a special soul from benevolent extraterrestrials. They would eventually be saved by the extraterrestrials from the imminent doomsday when they would be picked up by UFO’s and removed to another planet.

The plus or minus 800 members of the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God joined this series of suicides with the tragic events at Kanungu, Uganda, on the 17<sup>th</sup> March 2000.

In all of the above cases we are dealing with a specific category of cults where mass suicide, homicide, and terrorism occurs. In the study of these

violent self destructive “new religious movements” (Introvigne 2002:214) scholars developed two sets of theories. These theories are very often used by “militant anti-cultists” (Introvigne 2002:215) for propaganda purposes. These scholars are in general opposed to all forms of cults and use their theories as anti-cult propaganda. The first theory is “that nobody can perform such extreme acts as ritualized suicide and homicide without having been brainwashed by an evil guru” (Introvigne 2002:216). The second theory was developed by the Israeli psychologist Beit-Hallahmi. In his view cult leaders are “con artists” and “religious hustlers”, money-hungry “rascals” and frauds. Followers in his mind are attracted to these gurus because their “pathology” matches that of their leaders (cf Introvigne 2002:217-218). Both these theories, however, “fail to explain what really distinguishes movements that resort to mass homicide and suicide from law-abiding religious groups” (Introvigne 2002:218).

In their study of suicidal new religious movements Mayer and Introvigne (cf Introvigne 2002:219-220) came to the conclusion that group members experienced a deep estrangement from this world and that there was no other possible escape than “to go up”. The leader’s role was decisive in persuading followers either to choose the radical option of suicide, or to adjust to adverse circumstances as well as possible. Many factors do indeed work together to persuade followers. Conversions to totalitarian ideologies are the outcome of the interaction between influence techniques, predisposing individual factors, and philosophical predispositions (cf Introvigne 2002:220). To this interaction belong different aspects: “totalized guruism” where the leader becomes the total authority; a mental picture of an apocalyptic event that would destroy the world in the service of restoration; an ideology of killing to heal; altruistic murder and altruistic world destruction; world-rejecting purification; the use of weapons of self destruction, a shared state of aggressiveness, and a claim to absolute truth (cf Introvigne 2002:221). Introvigne (2002:220) is, however, of persuasion that “academic literature on thought reform and totalitarian influence” will greatly advance the study in this field. Rather than using “content-neutral models” that focus only on external persuasion and influence techniques or the psychological state of the leaders, content-oriented criteria should be used. Although all these other factors contribute to the functioning of aggressive suicidal movements or cults, it is after all the contents of its teachings that ultimately make a religious or political group behave in a certain way, and not merely how these teachings are imparted to its followers.

The contents of their teaching, the “philosophical predispositions” Introvigne refers to above, is of main concern for understanding suicidal

### ***Doomsday Movements in Africa: Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God***

movements like that of the Restoration of the Ten Commandments. Baumgartner (cf Dodd 2002:208) describes these groups as “millennial groups”. He sees stress or deprivation (be it economic, political, religious, or personal) as the main catalyst between susceptible persons/groups and the millennial tradition captured in biblical texts. In his mind millennial movements share a common tradition that has to be studied within its social, religious and political context. Although many different factors are involved, religious or philosophical predispositions, however, play the central role in this tradition. These predispositions are informed by “millennial texts”, or rather millennially interpreted texts. Although Baumgartner uses the narrower concept of millennialism, he also recognizes a direct link between the socio-religious-political context of these movements and the basic philosophical predispositions derived from the biblical text, giving preference to the last. What is of importance then is the role biblical texts, especially apocalyptic texts, and specifically their interpretation forming the philosophical predisposition of the group, plays in these suicidal religious movements.

In this regard Martin’s observation is important. Martin (1985:19) points out that “theological term-switching” is one of the most potent tools of cult theology. Through their manipulation of terminology cults exercise the subtle art of redefinition in the realm of biblical theology. The average non-Christian cult owes its very existence to the fact that it has utilized the terminology of Christianity, has borrowed liberally from the Bible, almost always out of context, and sprinkled its format with evangelical clichés and terms wherever possible or advantageous (cf Martin 1985:20).

Cults, especially the suicidal cults referred to above, build their philosophical predispositions on the genre of apocalyptic texts of the Bible. Whatever can be said of these groups’ use or abuse of these texts, fact remains that apocalyptic texts elicit inter alia this type of application. Whatever the social or historical or psychological factors that were involved in the existence of these movements, the ideology contained in apocalyptic texts triggered or at least collaborated with these factors in the life of the religious movement. To study this aspect attention must be paid to the origin and context of biblical apocalyptic literature.

Apocalyptic texts in the Bible and contemporary literature are the products of historical movements with a particular worldview. In these texts the ideology is expressed of different groups sharing the worldview of apocalypses. The phenomenon of apocalypticism refers to different interlinked aspects, like the genre of apocalyptic literature, apocalyptic ideology and apocalyptic movements (cf Murphy 1994:148). Oswalt (1999:388) sees apocalypticism not as the result of an isolated subgroup but as representing

“one strand in the thinking of the community as a whole”. Apocalypticism “is the result of a combination of factors: the eschatological concerns and divine inspiration of classical prophecy, the mantic wisdom of the seer, the passion to know the true meaning of Scripture (coupled with the idea that every figure of speech has a hidden, mysterious meaning), the desire for certainty in uncertain times” (Oswalt 1999:386-387). The apocalyptic mindset did not arise from only one cultural or literary setting. No single social setting accounts for it either. This kind of thinking is not typical of only marginalised groups. Apocalyptic understanding does not replace the prophetic one, but complements it, existing beside it.

The worldview found in apocalypticism is primarily linked to the idea of the apocalypse. A transcendent world exists that can only be known through the apocalypse, the revelation, given to a human recipient by an otherworldly being. In this revelation a transcendent reality is disclosed envisaging eschatological salvation in which the supernatural world is involved (cf Collins 1996:7). God and the cosmic forces in the transcendent world are the true cause of much that happens here on earth. Events on earth are to be interpreted in terms of angelic activity and cosmic struggles. While prophecy translates God’s decisions made in heaven into a future on earth that can develop in more than one direction, apocalypticism thinks in teleological terms of history that will come to an end and a future in radical different terms. Events on earth are evaluated in negative terms inviting an urgent expectation of an imminent end. That end of the world will be a cosmic catastrophe. Beyond the catastrophe a restoration is expected of God’s kingdom and the salvation of the faithful. The revelation of the catastrophe does not only present a matrix to present earthly circumstances in the light of the supernatural world, but is also intended to influence the understanding and behaviour of the recipients of the revelation (cf Collins 1996:7). As the end is decreed by God, the history leading to the end is also determined by God. Periodization of history is used in apocalypticism as a mechanism to conceptualize God’s sovereign rule of the earth and all of history and his eventual glorification. It is also intended to direct the believers in the way they experience their own time.

The viewpoint of millennialism found among some of these religious movements can be understood in terms of the use of periodization of history in apocalyptic literature. An example of the abuse of this periodization can be found in the commentary of Cho (1990) on the book of Daniel. Periodization becomes quite fanciful when the New Testament is read into the Old Testament and Cho understands the difference between the two numbers in Daniel 12:12 (1290 and 1335) as 45 days when God will separate the sheep

from the goats. After his coming Jesus will put in order this world for 30 days. "Then", says Cho (1990:173), "He will judge it in another 45 days. After that, the millennial kingdom will begin on this earth. It will take 1,335 days for all of these things to be accomplished."

It is especially this periodization of history with its teleological view that history is moving towards an end found in apocalyptic literature that influenced readers of biblical apocalyptic literature and led to fanciful juggling with numbers. The apocalyptic symbols in which this periodization is articulated is often read "as steno-symbols or flat allegories, missing their multivalent symbolic meaning and their rich traditional connotations" (Collins 1996:15). The visions are interpreted as literal prophecies of political and military events to be fulfilled in their own time. Here we can refer to Hal Lindsey with his *The Late Great Planet Earth* as a typical example of this mode of interpretation in the twentieth century.

## **8. THE RESTORATION OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF GOD AS A PRODUCT OF DOOMSDAY APOCALYPTICISM**

In the case of the MRTCG the mass suicide/murder was linked to the periodization of history and the disappointment with the uneventful 31<sup>st</sup> December 1999. In his investigation into the MRTCG Walliss (2005:51, 60) comes to the conclusion that despite obvious similarities with "millenarian violence" found elsewhere such as that of Jonestown, the Solar Temple, and Aum Shinrikyo, the "MRTCG arguably traversed a different apocalyptic trajectory". While the other cases were influenced by factors external to the group, it appears "that the MRTCG leadership's decision to commit violence was a consequence of several factors intrinsic to the Movement itself" (Walliss 2005:51). In the absence of any real proof of external opposition, Walliss (2005:62) suggests that "the MRTCG deaths were precipitated by predominantly internal factors, chiefly, growing dissent among members, linked with a string of failed prophecies during the 1990s." The leadership systematically murdered dissenters over a period of several months and engineered a collective murder-suicide of the members of the Movement in the end.

An intrinsic factor that played even a greater role than internal dissent was the philosophical predisposition of literal periodization. The simplistic literal reading of apocalyptic symbolism provoked a series of unrealistic expectations linked to specific dates that could never have been met. In the evolving catastrophe that followed there was no other way out than "to go up" as Introigne (2002:219-220) formulated it. The message of the Mary

apparitions that Jesus and Mary would come and that they would be transported to heaven was a “rational” way to escape a doomed world. The real impact of death was probably “softened” by the persuasion that another and better world was awaiting the members of the movement. A new dispensation would start with Year One as it was envisioned in *Timely Message*.

What were also different in the MRTCG as “apocalyptic trajectory” were the apparitions of the Virgin Mary. This phenomenon was already well known in Roman Catholic apocalyptic circles in Western Europe since the eighteenth century. Reviewing the Marian apparitions at Rue du Bac (1830) and at La Salette (1846) in France, Sandra and Paul Zimdars-Swatz (2000:278) remark that “the concrete grounding, the devotionalizing, and finally the universalizing of apocalyptic thought that took place in these French Marian apparitions and in their aftermath have been perhaps the most important development in Roman Catholic apocalypticism in recent centuries”. While these apparitions potentially have universal appeal, the knowledge that come to be associated with them are very particular. The particular knowledge associated with Marian apparitions is therefore “perhaps best studied by looking at the “secrets” that the Virgin typically entrusts to her visionaries” (Zimdars-Swatz & Zimdars-Swatz 2000:278). Standing in a Roman Catholic apocalyptic tradition, enhanced by the Pope Pius IX declared Dogma of the Immaculate Conception of 1854, the leaders of the MRTCG continued this apparitional focus of modern Roman Catholic apocalypticism. Following the typical pattern of these apparitions consisting of an announcement of collective sin and chastisement, and the prophetic projection of a scenario of the end-time in terms of national salvation, the MRTCG prophecies identified the collective sin in Uganda in terms of an ethically understood Ten Commandments and gave in typical modern apocalyptic fashion the “assurance that contemporary events were moving toward an appropriate and desirable goal and that they could be affected by a program of appropriate behaviour” (Zimdars-Swatz & Zimdars-Swatz 2000:289).

Acting within the same Roman Catholic tradition of apocalypticism as William Kamm’s Marian Workers of Atonement in Australia, the heavenly Virgin Mary was seen in MRTCG thinking as the otherworldly being revealing God’s decisions to the human recipients. Not only the belief of the celestial world was guaranteed by her heavenly messages, but also the coming salvation and removing from this doomed world. In this case the ethically understood Ten Commandments functioned as steno-symbol for the corruptness of this world and simultaneously as the introduction into a next dispensation for “those who were willing to die in the ark” (cf *Timely Message*)

### ***Doomsday Movements in Africa: Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God***

and are ready to be taken to heaven by the Virgin Mary. Living in an agrarian community and having experienced a wide range of disappointments on political, governmental and ecclesial level, the apparitions were given a local African flavour to constitute and to motivate the members of the Movement.

Another issue that played a role in their philosophical predisposition was the continuing series of apparitions. In the case of Kamm's Marian Workers the existence of the group relies very heavily not only on once given revelations, but on the continuation of apparitions. The MRTCG was also totally dependant on ever new information given to them by Mary. When this information started to conflict with previous information, the date of the final end having to be revised again and again, the periodization becoming self contradictory, an unsolvable crisis arose. The literal understanding and application of periodization of the biblical literature, intended in the Bible to be a strategy for proclaiming God's sovereignty, changed into something greater than God and became the trigger for the horrible events of 17<sup>th</sup> March 2000. In this case we have an application of apocalypticism that can be called "doomsday apocalypticism".

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