On March 17, news started to come in of a tragedy of over 300 members of an obscure little sect known as the “Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God” in the Kanungu (Rukiingiri district, 217 miles southwest of Uganda’s capital of Kampala). One of the first news agencies to break the story was Reuters, which wrote the following:

More than 100 members of a Ugandan Doomsday cult have set themselves ablaze in a ritual mass suicide, police said on Saturday.

Followers of the obscure “Ten Commandments of God" sect gathered in a church 320 km (200 miles) southwest of the capital Kampala on Friday and set themselves on fire after several hours of chanting and singing, a police spokesman told Reuters.

The story assumed a few things. First it was a doomsday cult; second the deaths were due to a mass suicide. The assumption of mass suicide most likely originates from the example of the Heaven’s Gate tragedy and before that the Jonestown event. The development of events is perhaps even more horrifying than originally suspected. As of March 31, the death toll has risen to about over 900, perhaps a

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1 This is confirmed in a story from The East African (Nairobi) datelined “Kanungu Deaths Similar To Other Cult Suicides.” Another story in the same paper by Harriet Kivumbi Nkalubo gives the reasons for such behavior in her story, “Why Cult Members Commit Suicide.”

1000, with the discoveries of five mass graves and the bodies children now numbering in the hundreds, which suggests very strongly that we are dealing with mass murder. The events that took place point more to mass murder than to mass suicide. The chronology of events is as follows:

January to March: the killings begin, with bodies buried in Buhunga
March 17: the church fire in Kanunga killing over 500, an assumed mass suicide
March 21: six bodies exhumed from a latrine
March 22: the police report that bombs caused the church fire, so murder is suspected
March 24: 153 bodies found at the sect compound in Buhunga
March 27: 74 bodies exhumed from compound of Kataribabo's house in Rugazi
March 28: 28 bodies found under floor inside Rugazi house
March 29: Another 53 bodies found at Rugazi in a small pit inside the house of Father Dominic Kataribabo. This brings a total of 81 bodies found in the pit, 48 of them children
March 30: 155 bodies have been unearthed in the garden of Kataribabo’s Property.
March 30-31: Another mass grave of 81 bodies found at Rushojwa at the home of Joseph Nyamurinda about 35 km from the sect headquarters at Kanungu. This is the fifth mass grave discovered. Forty-four of the 81 were children.

What we know of the Movement is very little. Its size has been described as very small (235 registered members) to about 5000 members. Founded in the mid 1987 by a number of Roman Catholics including an ex-prostitute, Credonia Mwerinde (1960-2000), and Joseph Kibwete(e)re (1932-2000?), a lay worker within the Catholic Church (but perhaps ordained in a non-Roman church) and former
politician of the Catholic-based Democratic party in the 1970s, known for his activism, who left the church in 1994. According to one report (Reuters, March 25) Kibwetere claimed to have heard a conversation between the Virgin Mary and Jesus in 1987 predicting the world would be destroyed for not obeying the Ten Commandments. Even prior to this event, as early as 1984 Kibwetere claimed to have seen the Virgin Mary. Five years later Credonia Mwerinde also claimed to have seen her not far from Kibwetere’s home.3 The latest stories reveal that Credonia, known as “The Programmer,” was the leader of the sect.4

The leadership of the movement lay with three other former priests—Dominic Kataribabo, Credonia Mwerindi and John Kamagara—and two nuns, all of whom had been excommunicated from the Roman Church. As is often the case in Roman Catholicism, the problems with the Catholic hierarchy involved apparitions of the Virgin Mary, a common enough occurrence within the Catholic world and viewed by the Church hierarchy with skepticism and even as aberrant behavior. The center of the movement was Kanungu was designated as "Ishayuriro rya Maria" (Rescue Place for the Virgin Mary). It was here that continued messages were received from the Virgin. In addition, the basic message of an apocalyptic event, the end of the world, if the Ten Commandments were disregarded and the type of behavior demanded by its followers—refraining from sex, the separation of family members, separate dormitories for men and women, wearing uniform green, black, and white clothing, keeping the members from forming friendships by moving them around frequently and unexpectedly, hard labor, communicating only through gestures except for prayer and singing, reduced contact with non-members, and the giving up of all earthly goods for the promise of heaven. These actions are viewed as typical of cults and sects. In this


4 “Uganda sect Death toll at 924.” Apparently, “12 Apostles” formed the general leadership. Credonia was one of them, three of her relatives were included.
case, the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God is viewed as a sect because of its close affinity to Roman Catholicism and because of Kibwetere’s affinity to the religion. We must be mindful of the fact that there is evidence of non-Catholic practices and members. A few members were Muslims, others were originally connected with the African Initiated Churches and from local spiritualist circles. The Catholic stamp is most pronounced with the leadership. In a Reuters dispatch of March 20 is the story of Marcellino Bwesigye, whose late father Kibwetere and other leaders at his Kampala home for several nights in 1999. He remarks:

``Kibwetere was a hard working, enterprising man but a terrible conservative in his religious beliefs,'' Bwesigye told Reuters. ``He was a Catholic who wanted to be more Catholic than the Pope."

All this leads to the final mystery. Why the suicides (if any) and killings? We know the apocalyptic message of the Movement predicted the destruction of the world on December 31, 2000. One thing is certain. Most of the deaths were clearly not suicides, not with the number of women and children and evidence of deaths due to strangling. Since it obviously did not occur, were the atrocities enacted because the leaders had come under increasing pressure to return the money? I suspect there is much more to it than this, keeping in mind that many African Initiated Church movements, according to J. Gordon Melton, are identified with tribes and tribal violence, that the tragedy took place in a very

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5 From the *New Vision* (Kampala), March 23.

6 See the L.A. Times story on March 24, “Uganda/Uganda Cultists Believed Slain by Their Leaders.” In the story is mentioned a seven-page, typewritten letter, on file with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which presented a summary of the group’s 13-year existence before advising, “Our mission is coming to an end.”

   It concluded, “Whether you believe it or not . . . the year 2000 will not be followed by the year 2001, but it will be followed by the Year One in a new generation. We are faithfully yours.”

dangerous region (near Rwanda and the Congo), that there is an attempt by Congolese rebels to overthrow the Congo government, and that this area was near the location of the genocide of 1994. We need to examine the events in the context of the region before definitive judgements can be made.

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