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Doomsday diversions

False prophecies take a guise relevant to their culture

After 20 years of terrorizing northern Ugandans, Joseph Kony and his hoods in the Lord's Resistance Army have made it to the big time. Their story, and that of the thousands of children they've killed or made into child soldiers, has made "Oprah."

The UN and Washington are also, finally, showing more interest in this motley crew of East African guerilla fighters, a cult that wants to see Uganda's constitution replaced by the Ten Commandments. Apparently they've somehow missed "Thou shalt not kill."

Uganda actually has a history of false prophets, self-styled leaders who seemingly wake up one day to declare they've heard God's voice, before they con innocent seekers and give bad names to those who truly do know the Divine's thoughts.

Kony's cousin, self-proclaimed prophetess Alice Lakwana, previously led the so-called Holy Spirit Movement. She sent hundreds to their deaths after telling them her special body oil would protect them against government bullets, and her stones would turn to bombs.

Then there are Uganda's doomsday cults. About 600 followers died in one mass suicide at the turn of the millennium.

Affecting more folks here, though, are the everyday quacks pushing doctrines of blessings-and-curses to grow their congregations, sometimes into the thousands. Big churches, big cars and big miracles are all good for the so-called "Born-Againists" or "Balokoles," Christians who have bought into the American Dream, African-style.

Unlike traditional Charismatics, Catholics or Anglicans, they wield authority because they recognize and fight old African customs like ancestral worship and witchcraft. Leaders attract money from members who simply want freedom from such fears.

What hasn't really caught on in this corner of the planet, though, is this type of thing: "Beyond Armageddon," a western-made, End Times documentary I recently spotted while in a Kampala supermarket.

Watching the video at home, I wasn't surprised to see it full of premillennial dispensationalist theory, that view of Christian eschatology that links the birth of modern Israel to the end of our age and the imminent second coming of Christ. The world is coming to an end. Now.

Originally popularized by English minister John Darby, the theory has roared to life in 100 or so years, growing huge with blockbusters like Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, and more recently, Tim LaHaye's and Jerry Jenkins' *Left Behind* novels, which have sold more than 50 million copies.

It has some problems. One is pernicious date-setting, something that really doesn't help the Church's credibility. Lindsey, for example, predicted Christ's return by 1988.

And when theory is presented as fact, ask yourself how the Church, especially in the powerful West, approaches, say, justice in the Middle East, specifically the Arab world, where I've lived and seen things rather closely.

The truth is that dispensationalism is one interpretation of mysterious biblical prophecies, and in time it may or may not be proven right. Justice for the marginalized, on the other hand, is something the Bible speaks about rather clearly.

In a Third World context, promises of the prosperity gospel are like bounty to the starving. Which is, maybe, the most interesting aspect about false prophecy. Whether in Africa or the other side of the ocean, it takes a guise that's most relevant to its culture.

If you're physically comfortable, you have the luxury of wondering about that age-old question of how big a bang, or how helpless a whimper, in which the world will end. If you're homeless and hungry, your theology will be dominated by more material ideas.

Too bad the former can become such a preoccupation and the latter, a fixation: meaningless diversions and hollow purchases, and so far off the path of real life.

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