

# Conspiracy Theories: The Product of Paranoia and Ignorance

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I don't know about you, but I've enjoyed about all the conspiracy theories I can stand. I've personally been accosted by them since John F. Kennedy's assassination in the early 60's. I really feel for the poor chaps who have had to endure them all the way back to Pearl Harbor. I have no idea how old these things are in our culture. Someone told me they started in the 1920's. If that's the case, we've now gone through four generations of Americans being duped by someone else's ignorance. And that's my point. With few exceptions, conspiracy theories are born out of ignorance. My favorite exception, of course, is the theory that Freemasons are out to establish a New World Order. Being a Mason, I rather like that one. I'll clarify what we are up to a little later on.

For now, let's say that a conspiracy theory is when we attribute the ultimate cause of an event or events to some underlying secret or deceptive ploy that is held from public knowledge by some powerful individual or alliance. Usually such individual or group is purported to have a sinister purpose which is why the whole thing is secret to begin with. We tend to lose sight of the fact that those who subscribe to these theories are usually convinced the world has always been dominated by conspirators who manipulate political, economic and future happenings behind the scenes. The events themselves eventually fall into the category of folklore or urban legends.

The perplexing thing is why so many of us believe them to be true! Unfortunately, there's no good answer because these things are so often driven by paranoia and ignorance. They can be a form of scapegoating where people with diverse or politically questionable points of view identify other people or groups as being the blame for their own political, social or economic shortcomings. It's the old blame game. The idea is that, if only we remove those who are harming us from positions of popularity or power, things will be better. If we can get enough people to believe like us, then we, the scapegoater, will be seen as the hero for sounding the alarm. Conspiracies are also a way for people to respond to events or circumstances which have an emotional impact on them. The events or topics most often talked about fall under the areas of religions, disasters, morality, politics and science.

Now, I don't have a problem with people trying to make sense of things which cannot be easily explained. What I do have a problem with is assigning blame to other people when these unexplainable events occur. It didn't used to be this way. A couple of centuries ago, it was popular when a disaster occurred to say it was "an act of God." It seemed reasonable enough to blame God for something so large that a mere mortal could not possibly have created it. But that brought on a new challenge. It gave God a kind of undeserved and seedy reputation. To neutralize this potential spiritual blunder and ease our sense of unworldly guilt, it became easier to suggest that such events were really a manifestation of God's anger toward the sins of the world. Alas! This didn't work either because most people were not willing to place a part of the blame on themselves. Disasters then quickly became acts of nature. This worked out fine until technology finally reached a point where almost anything seemed possible for man. Ah! Even better, since it then became easier for us to blame almost anything on human action or irresponsibility. Now when almost anything painful happens, the first question is, "who is there to blame?"

The sad fact is we now live in a world where we no longer accept that accidents, disasters, circumstances, or misfortunes just occasionally happen to people. Obviously, no one's to blame for acts of nature. Neither can we, in honesty, blame anyone else for our own negligence, superstition and ignorance. Yet, more than ever, we keep applying our own distorted perspectives to the cause and meaning of catastrophes and circumstances without regard for individual accountability. Of course, the media exacerbates the problem by its own rushed and short-sided receptivity to personalized, dramatic accounts of social and natural phenomena. All this creates a multiplier effect. If we can't accept that things happen occasionally which are not the fault of anyone, then we are bound to live in a world full of bitterness, fear, suspicion, isolation, and confusion. Now that is a catastrophe.

My suggestion is that we start using some common sense in assessing the likelihood of truth in these matters. Does the theory meet the test of rational thinking? Are the events upheld by structured and institutional accounts, or only by individuals or special interest groups? Are the media keeping it alive for its sensational appeal? Does the basis for the theory appear, at best, to be unfounded or speculative? Are the proofs offered for the theory well constructed, using sound methodology? Are any clear academic standards prevalent as evidence of proof or disproof? Who and what kind of people appear to be the loyal conspirators?

The bottom line is that conspiracy theories are not really worth our time if they can't meet these basic tests of verification. You are free to believe that the federal government is in league with space aliens to enslave humanity if you want. Just don't make a public nuisance of your nonsense.

And, as for the Masons being out to bring about a New World Order, I can attest to the truth in this. That was indeed our task during much of the 17th and 18th centuries when the world desperately needed to organize a model for civil society based on liberty and equality. Once we accomplished that, we have spent the last couple of centuries trying to keep it that way. You can call it a new world order if you like; we prefer to think of it as order in the world.