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History and Conspiracy - Part I

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December 05, 2010

History and Conspiracy



How does conspiracy fit together with history? Recently some students brought to my attention the popularity of certain videos by an Adventist layman who gives lectures on various conspiracy theories about history being controlled by some combination of the [Masons](#), the [Illuminati](#), and the [Trilateral Commission](#), among other entities. This led into a class discussion of conspiratorial views of history, which hold that major events of history are caused by some small, elite cabal whose identity remains secret—except from those blessed with the “secret knowledge” of this conspiracy.

The discussion caused me to reflect on some basic question about history and causation. What, if anything, is fundamentally wrong with conspiracy theories of history? Are there genuine conspiracies that explain historical events? How does one distinguish conspiracies within history from alleged conspiracies that attempt to explain the entire course of history? Finally, does the [Bible](#) give any credence to conspiracy views of history?

Defining of Terms – Mere Secrecy versus Grand Conspiracy

First, we must define our terms. No one doubts that from time to time a few people make secret plans to accomplish some private agenda. Criminal laws recognize the reality of such conspiracies, and law enforcement agencies target conspiratorial organizations such as the [Mafia](#), [Al Qaeda](#) and price-fixing corporations. But there is another type of conspiracy theory that has to do with attempting to explain large historical events as being controlled by a small group of discrete actors working from the shadows. I will call this latter view the grand conspiracy theory of history, or grand conspiracy for short.

There is one more kind of secret plotting that we need to distinguish from grand conspiracy theories, and that is the notion of state secrets. Governments frequently try to keep certain of its activities or events secret from the public. A good example is the [Watergate scandal](#) that unseated [Richard Nixon](#) from the presidency, or the [Tuskegee Medical Experiments](#), where the U.S. Government studied, but failed to treat, a group of African-American men suffering from syphilis.

These were discrete projects that involved secrecy, but they differ from the grand conspiracy theory in that neither event can

be considered to have manipulated larger historical events. Indeed, the Watergate scandal shows the difficulty that the most powerful government leaders have in keeping even small transgressions secret. The Tuskegee project, while tragic on its own terms was limited in its impact to those actually participating in the study, or their close relatives.

The grand conspiracy theory claims that small groups or organizations can have huge influence on the unfolding of history. The claim is that some shadowy group, whether the Masons, Illuminati, the Trilateral Commission, or perhaps some Jewish cabal, are really pulling the strings that determine the outcome of Presidential elections, the timing and outcome of wars, and the rise and fall of the economy. Recently, such conspiracies have tried to explain large, tragic events, such as 9/11, claiming that the U.S. Government either had knowledge of the attacks ahead of time, or actually even orchestrated them.

If you have tried to engage and debate grand conspiracy theorists, you know that it is an arduous and usually unsatisfying process. By their very nature, grand conspiracy theories cannot be disproved, as the very evidence against them, becomes evidence for the breadth of the conspiracy. (“Of course government officials deny it, and of course there is no evidence for it, as they are in on the conspiracy, and they have destroyed the evidence.”)

Principled Problems with Grand Conspiracy Theories

It is a time consuming process to watch dozens of hours of conspiracy videos and to engage in arcane evidentiary debates over the temperature of burning jet fuel and the melting point of steel, or the historic origins and identity of the Masons and the Illuminati. Is there a more efficient way of detecting and refuting these grand conspiracies? There will always be the need for the careful handling of both historic and scientific evidence to fully defeat grand conspiracy theories. But I believe that there are also some general principles of history that can be called upon as a kind of short cut in helping detect and refute various kinds of grand conspiracy theories. Consider the following principles:

1. Proportionality of Cause and Effect – a fundamental principle of both science and history is that an effect can be no bigger than its cause. Grand conspiracy theories violate this principle by proposing that small groups of people with little or no visibility can control historical events or at least influence them far more than very large groups of people or people with obvious power and influence in society. The very study of history is based on the proportionality of cause and effect. If the largest effects can be produced by the most obscure and minimal causes, then the meaningful study of history becomes impossible.

If WW II was entirely caused by something Adolph Hitler ate one May morning, or if the Great Depression was caused by the failure of one homeowner to pay his mortgage on time, then history really is bunk. As most obscure acts and events are historically untraceable, then one will have to continually guess at the most basic causes of the largest events of history.

Individual actors matter, but they merely catalyze rather than cause larger historical events. For instance, WW I may have been triggered by the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austria by a Yugoslav nationalist. But the bloody worldwide conflict was caused by the long-term political and economic conflict caused by the imperialism and colonialism of Europe’s great powers. In positing a gross disproportion between historical causes and events, grand conspiracy theories undermine any meaningful knowledge of history. These theories become a kind of gnosticism, a secret knowledge, that only the enlightened possess—or at least those willing to pay \$19.99 for the latest set of exposee DVDs.

2. Difficulty of Widespread Secrecy – Grand Conspiracy theories assume that lots of people will remain entirely silent about some of the most profound and darkest secrets of history. This is quite contrary to human nature. Anyone who has served on an institutional board knows that confidences usually have a way of leaking out. The small conspiracy theories we know to be true, Watergate, the Lincoln assassination, the Holocaust, generally prove that even a small group of powerful, highly motivated, and disciplined people cannot retain explosive secrets for long.

Those that claim that the U.S. Government orchestrated the events of September 11, 2001, have to believe that dozens, if not hundreds, of civil servants helped orchestrate events of mass murder of thousands of innocent Americans, and then kept entirely quiet about it. In this day and age where tabloid journals pay thousands of dollars for trivial secrets about the rich, beautiful and powerful, this kind of explosive, powerful secret could not stay secret for long.

Even during WW II, secrets surrounding the Holocaust began to leak out to the West, and general information about the campaign was known by at least segments of the German people. If the U.S. Government really did plan the 9/11 tragedies, this would be an even more politically explosive secret than the Holocaust. In Nazi Germany the government targeted an unpopular minority and thus German public reaction was muted. The violence of 9/11 targeted mainstream American citizens, including powerful political and financial leaders. Any sense that the government had been involved in such deplorable, and wildly unpopular, acts would have provoked massive outrage and tremendous political fallout.

And that brings us to the next point, government ineptness in orchestrating events and keeping secrets and the moral complexity of civil servants. We will take this point up next week, and also visit the one great, grand conspiracy theory that the Bible actually supports.

Posted by [Nicholas Miller](#) on December 05, 2010 in [Church and Society](#), [Church History](#), [Philosophy of History](#) | [Permalink](#)
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Comments

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Nicolas,
Thank you for addressing this issue. It is long overdue. I became aware of the grand conspiracy theories when the young people in my church made a presentation on the music industry and the new world order. After study this issue I have concluded that Adventists who embrace these conspiracy theories are unwittingly adopting the ideas of futurism. Accordingly, many are concerned about the "real id cards" and chip implants; others are leary of a new age antichrist; some believe that the there is a coming one world government and one world currency.

I simply do not understand why Adventists would embrace these ideas. Ironically, Desmond Ford sought to harmonize adventism with the three main branches of prophetic interpretation. His views were rejected. Now, conservatives within the church are taking up this mantle and attempting to harmonize futurism with historicism. I look foward to your concluding thoughts on this issue.

Posted by: John Ashmeade | [December 11, 2010 at 07:56 AM](#)

Thank you for your encouragement, John. Yes, there is an irony here that you point out. Some of these conspiracy theories, especially the ones that relate to the New Age movement and the United Nations, are evangelical attempts to find new identities for the little horn and anti-Christ figures of Daniel and Revelation now that they have moved away from historicism. Insofar as we buy into these theories, we are unwittingly accepting a futurist substitute for our historicist view of these figures. It shows that the extreme right and the extreme left in the church can come to similar positions for very different reasons.

Posted by: Nicholas Miller | [December 11, 2010 at 10:27 PM](#)

Professor Miller, you stated, "a fundamental principle of both science and history is that an effect can be no bigger than its cause". You refined this principle by identifying agents that act as catalysts rather than causes. Although the scientific and historical principle of conservation energy/cause and effect identifies the interaction between kinetic and potential energy there remains the spiritual dimension of synergy that if applied to both disciplines not only produces providence but also miracles.

Posted by: David de la Vega | [December 12, 2010 at 09:05 PM](#)

Well, David, I think that spiritual impacts, perhaps we can call them miracles, invoke the very large cause of God and His power. So yes, there is a spiritual dimension to reality, but it does not violate this principle, as God is the ultimate cause of all, and if he chooses to act within the natural world in a special way, whatever is caused is still smaller than God.

Posted by: Nicholas Miller | [December 12, 2010 at 11:40 PM](#)

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