

Conspiracies

So often believed,
so rarely based in fact



A museum should be a safe place, but there are exceptions. A few months ago a 5-year-old boy was sexually molested in one of the bathrooms of a Dutch museum. Within minutes the child told his parents and the museum staff was alerted. The police were called, and they decided to lock all gates to the museum grounds. All 2,500 visitors were then asked to provide their names and telephone numbers before they were allowed to leave. The story was in all the papers, but I also found it rather prominently on the Web site of one of the more sensational dailies. To my surprise I noticed that in a very short time more than 150 readers had left their reactions to the short item on the Web site. I am no great fan of this particular newspaper, nor of its Web site, but I was curious why so many people had reacted, so I continued to read.

Many of these reactions were rather predictable complaints that in today's world you cannot be sure of being safe anywhere, not even when you take your children to a museum. Some applauded the police; for once they had acted quickly and efficiently! But quite a high percentage of the reactions was of a different kind. Several readers thought that the whole thing was, in fact, some kind of police exercise that spoiled the Sunday afternoon of a few thousand museum visitors. But quite a few commented that this was a typical government strategy (and that we are going to see more of this!): any excuse will apparently do to collect as much personal data about the citizens as possible. And who knows what the government will do with the information they collect? One of the respondents even referred to Nazi practices. Among those who had not only read the news items itself but also the various reactions, there again were several who wholeheartedly agreed with the idea that this was a government conspiracy.

Why do so many people jump so enthusiastically at conspiracy theories? Why are they so ubiquitous in the area of politics, in times of financial crisis (as we are currently experiencing), and, in particular, in the realm of religion?

My country not long ago had the misfortune to have been visited by an Adventist lecturer who travels the world and gets himself invited to all continents to preach about the events that lead to the end of time. His approach resembles that of best-selling author Dan Brown. The recipe seems to be: You take a few undisputed facts; you then add a large number of unknown facts that are extracted from obscure sources no one can check, and which are at most only partly true; and you mix all this until you have a powerful concoction for the sensation-hungry consumer. It seems to enhance the attractiveness of the resulting product when the speaker assures his audience that the official church, with its ecumenical tendencies, neglects to proclaim these precious truths. And no wonder, for the church has been infiltrated by the very same forces of darkness that he has come to expose!

The recipe is as successful as it is dangerous. It results in fear. It polarizes churches. It cultivates suspicion to church leadership. It fuels that prejudice in the mind of many around us that Adventism, after all, is a sub-Christian sect. But, most serious of all: it eclipses the good news of the message of the gospel by irresponsible innuendos and speculation and by an unhealthy sensationalism. It was good to see how the Week of Prayer readings of 2008 sounded a clear warning against this approach and highlighted the signs of Christ's coming as signs of hope! The message of the Advent hope is not to be correlated with theories about secret religious societies and the apparently omnipresent Freemasons. The greatest sign of the end is not the spread of New Age thinking or the alleged development of some form of world government but is instead the powerful preaching of the message of Christ's soon coming to every nation and people group, and in every language spoken on earth.

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