
Conspiracy and Imagination

An article from the *Cathedral Times*.

I received another tired email distribution last week. You know the type: a huge group email, touting some strange story, alleging conspiracy, embarking upon a full-fledged attack on known facts, and seemingly making up outright lies. Where does this stuff come from? At one time in my life, I used to take it upon myself to write back to the whole list, discounting the story, and pleading with other readers not to forward such lying and libelous stuff around; it disobeys the ninth commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness!” Alas, false witness is prevalent in the world; and the ease of group emails serves sadly to speed ignorance throughout the world.

Then, a few days later, I was at a dinner party where another guest was the remarkable man, Hugh Aynesworth. I knew only vaguely of Aynesworth, and I had not read his wonderful book, *November 22, 1963: Witness to History*. But I hereby heartily recommend it, a clear account of the basic evidence around the tragic assassination of John F. Kennedy, Jr. It so happened that Aynesworth, who was actually a science and aerospace reporter in 1963, was at the scene of three historic events: the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the arrest of Lee Harvey Oswald, and then the shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald.

Many of us have heard story after story about some sort of conspiracy that supposedly lay behind the tragic assassination of Kennedy. There are so many of them! Perhaps we have even heard the stories so dressed up in movies and television shows that we might wonder if maybe one of them has some truth. In his book, however, Aynesworth sets out to deliver objective facts, backed up with careful and meticulous reporting; and the result is wonderful. In the fifty years since that tragedy, Aynesworth reports, he has found no evidence at all to indicate anything except that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone, and that Jack Ruby was in no way connected with him.

Obviously, I must admit that I am no expert on that matter. But I applaud Aynesworth’s book because I do know something about the anxiety of groups, and the easy tendency of groups to believe strange things, and the tendency of people to lie in order to gain a reputation. I have experienced the falsity of those who claim conspiracy! Aynesworth’s book is a worthy representative of how to correct false claims in the world; check them out!

In fact, the religious world—where I do work—has more than its fair share of those who see conspiracy everywhere, and those with highly exaggerated imaginations! Furthermore, we in the religious world, by some common courtesy and grace, feel like we should give everyone a voice! However, that does not mean we must believe every voice. What makes religious people at the same time so trusting, and yet so untrusting, too? People become “true believers” in the negative sense, unable to accept any fact that would damage their carefully constructed conspiracy theory or strange dogma. They trust the strange fantasies, but not the facts! I love creative and faithful imagination; but I find myself cautioning the world against the negative and outlandish imaginations often found among religious “true believers.”

It is in this conspiracy-laden world that Aynesworth writes clearly with sharp and incisive facts, like a good old-fashioned reporter should write. That is why I recommend this book: whatever you might know about the JFK conspiracy theories, I recommend this book for a dose of honest truth in today’s world!

Again, I love imagination, and I count the healthy imagination as one of the marks of true spirituality. But good spirituality always needs honest observation, careful critique, and strong reason. We don’t get to believe our own versions of the facts. One of the tasks of the Christian Church is that of guiding our imaginations in creative and world-saving ways. I applaud

those among us who can be carefully honest and truthful, and who can also let their imaginations inspire us to love and generosity.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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