

Pentecost is the truest conspiracy

The church can conspire—breathe together—to bring goodness into the world.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [June 17, 2020](#) issue



(Illustration from iStock / Getty)

Conspiracy theories do not present the best face of contemporary culture. The people behind them hatch sinister plots and disseminate cruel disinformation. Their theories mutate, garnering huge online followings and creating broad distrust of reputable institutions. A generation ago, most Americans would have found it preposterous to imagine that conspiracy entrepreneurs could successfully undermine essential science and fact-based scholarship through cockeyed suspicion. Today, we're forced to put up with (or put down) every variety of incoherent claim, even or especially when there's no supporting evidence that's able to withstand the least scrutiny.

Not surprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has unleashed a flurry of conspiracy theories. Such theories tend to thrive in times of uncertainty and crisis, and the

coronavirus has provided the perfect backdrop for some crazy ideas: the “deep state” is manipulating data. Bill Gates created the virus to further his plot to vaccinate the world. COVID-19 doesn’t actually exist.

What’s fascinating to me about all conspiracy theories, including those that intentionally sow conflict or nefariously foster danger, is the sort of people who end up becoming adherents. Many of them are thoughtful, intelligent people who wouldn’t seem otherwise susceptible to ruse.

I’ve spoken to people in my congregation who seem open to entertaining outrageous and totally unsubstantiated claims about COVID-19. What I’ve concluded is that they’re actually playing out a version of their own Christian piety. It’s one where chaos feels threatening, lack of control feels like powerlessness, a predictable world is soothing, and orderly patterns are reassuring. If a story comes along or can be woven together to help make sense of unforeseen turns of events—and even connect the dots between coincidences—that’s comforting.

Members of the “everything happens for a reason” crowd, who believe that God has a purpose behind even our most unwelcome suffering, like to know that someone is in charge. When we feel powerless because we can’t control what we wish we could, God becomes the go-to party of responsibility. Plenty of believers subscribe to this idea that when inexplicably bad things happen it’s better to have an incomprehensible God who may hurt us, but who at least is in charge.

This sort of divine malevolence brings no comfort to me, but I see the coping value such conviction can bring to those who struggle profoundly with crisis or uncertainty. Much like conspiracy theories that provide an escape from inconvenient conclusions, focus blame on certain conspirators, and promote the notion that nothing occurs by accident, piety that blames or credits God for every inexplicable situation suddenly sounds reasonable.

If conspiracies are here to stay—and even emboldened by people in high power—we in the church ought to retrieve a deeper meaning to that word *conspiracy*. John Courtney Murray liked to use the term to describe the beautiful collaboration among people who are filled with the spirit of God. The root of the word *conspire* means “breathe together.” We might think of the Pentecost story as a true conspiracy: not some evil design or sinister gathering, but a consensus for good. The coronavirus is giving us all a fresh reason to band together and breathe goodness into a chaotic

world.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "The Spirit's true conspiracy."