

MERLIN AGAINST THE CONSPIRACY THEORISTS



Unpublished

A friend of mine has recently shared on Facebook a news report about the Tunisian student who submitted a doctoral thesis where she claimed the Earth is flat.

While the student's reason was clear to me - to propose a kinematic approach that conforms to the Quran - I was not so sure about my friend's motives for sharing that story. So I decided to reach out to him.

"Is Earth actually flat?" I asked.

"Of course it's flat! We've been screwed for centuries!" came the reply.

Flabbergasted, I stared at the screen. This guy, graduated from one of the most prestigious Italian universities, genuinely believed the Earth to be flat. Sharing that link was the equivalent of swinging a sword in front of Copernicus before beheading him, Games of Thrones-style. Feeling like an entomologist observing a dipteran specimen, I asked him in as neutral a tone as possible:

"You got any evidence?"

“Evidence?” he answered. “Everyone knows that!”

Definitely “everyone” must refer to a very exclusive club, I thought, if not even Galileo was invited to join it.

In order to bring me around, my friend sent me a number of links to Youtube videos of individuals claiming that the greatest scientists and astronomers were actually just a bunch of idiots.

Faced with my polite yet firm objections, he then blocked me on Facebook.

That episode made me think of a scene from Disney’s “The Sword in the Stone” where Merlin the Wizard, the tutor of Wart, shows the amazed boy two images of the world, first a medieval map with the image of a flat Earth, then a globe, and teaches him the secrets of the heliocentric system. For centuries we have been sharing Wart’s amazement, contemplating the globe in all its glory, learning about the determination of men who faced incarceration or death for the love of progress. Thinking about Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo made us feel a bit closer to each other, a bit more human.

Yet today, judging by what circulates on the web, many people don’t seem to believe Merlin the Wizard any more though, and conspiracy theories (Earth is flat, AIDS doesn’t exist, the Americans are behind 9/11, Stanley Kubrick faked the moon landings and so on) appear to be the prevalent cultural model. Pick any event in history and you will find millions of individuals ready to dismiss it as fake news.

I believe that the one responsible for that has a name: God (I don’t know his last name).

Accepting the idea that a thirty year old moron may be able to sign up for flight lessons and crash a plane into the Twin Towers is terrible, as it actually means to accept the idea that any individual on this planet has virtually infinite freedom, and that anything may happen at any time.

But people are scared of freedom and of the choices it entails. They prefer to postulate the existence of a superior mind, a corrupt, evil, perverted Puppet Master in control of events. Come what may, even a tragedy, as long as it can be attributed to an evil master plan. Anything rather than accept the Chaos generated by freedom as the only ruling principle of human existence.

To limit the importance of freedom and of its consequences, a religious society postulates the existence of God and burns alive whoever dares say otherwise. On the other hand, a secular society like ours - where God has long gone - sees the surge of conspiracy theories and comes up with the evil Puppet Master.

People stop believing in anything because they're afraid of everything, and outcome is the same in both cases: the end of the Enlightenment Era, the rise of Obscurantism.

That's why it is no use arguing with conspiracy theorists like my friend. Freedom, the raw material of science, terrifies them. Without freedom there's no culture, without culture there's no dialogue, and so Merlin the Wizard teaches us again the only thing we are left to do: rocketing out of the room like a firework, yelling "Blow me to Bermuda!".