

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

October 21, 2010 at 3:57pm

The assassination of JFK: A parable for our times

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NCR Today

Writer Jim Douglass says it is "no secret" John F. Kennedy's assassination was a government job, CIA coordinated but involving people in other federal agencies.

The JFK Records Act passed in 1992 made it a crime to withhold information on the former president's death. Anyone can consult files on the topic that are now stored in a huge building in Columbus Park, Maryland.

Douglass, a theologian, long-time peace activist and Catholic Worker, pored over these records while working on *JFK and the Unspeakable: Why He Died and Why it Matters* (Orbis 2008), a heavily-researched tome with a hundred pages of endnotes.

This month Douglass has been lecturing throughout the northeast. On Wednesday he spoke at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. His talk "JFK, Obama, and the Unspeakable" will be published in the next issue of *Tikkun* magazine.

Those of you worried about being subjected to another "who-shot-JFK" wacko, keep reading. The evil doings of the CIA are not Douglass' preoccupation. Instead he regards the Kennedy presidency, despite its violent end, as a tale of hope -- relevant for our day -- in which God is the primary character.

According to Douglass, Kennedy's turn toward peacemaking during his presidency -- his implementation of the Partial Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, his initiation of a secret dialogue with Fidel Castro to normalize US-Cuban relations, his signing of a memorandum calling for troop withdrawal from Vietnam, and most significantly, his communication with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev -- put him violently at odds with the Joint Chief of Staffs and the CIA.

Amidst a Cold War that was rapidly heating up, the American and Soviet leaders secretly corresponded.

Khrushchev, the atheist, compared their predicament in a nuclear-saturated world to being on Noah's Ark. It mattered not whether 'clean' or 'unclean' boarded. All were committed to keeping the boat afloat.

Kennedy, the Catholic, agreed. 'Whatever our differences, our collaboration to keep the peace is as urgent -- if not more urgent -- than our collaboration to win the last world war,' he wrote to Khrushchev.

The two men's common belief that the world was worth saving helped avert the Cuban Missile crisis, argues Douglass.

At the peak of the conflict Kennedy rejected pressure to retaliate for the Soviet downing of a U.S. reconnaissance plane over Cuba and turned to Moscow for help. His brother Robert secretly met with the Soviet Ambassador to, as Robert puts it, 'personally convey the president's great concern.'

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'We have to let Kennedy know we want to help him,' was Khrushchev's reply.

'Neither John Kennedy nor Nikita Khrushchev was a saint,' says Douglass. 'Each was deeply complicit in policies that brought humankind to the brink of nuclear war. Yet, when they encountered the void, they turned to each for help. In doing so, they turned humanity toward the hope of a peaceful planet.'

Both men paid high prices for their choice. Kennedy was killed and Khrushchev removed from office in 1964, never to serve again.

Kennedy's assassination is a history many writers have already dissected. So what is new here? Perspective.

Douglass views the JFK story as 'a parable of turning' and like any good parable this one instructs. Kennedy's assassination reveals the dark quandary looming over the highest office in American government.

'Can a peacemaking president survive a warmaking state?' wonders Douglass, who finds parallels between the Kennedy and Obama administrations. 'The president's vulnerability, while he tries to turn a massive Washington warship toward peace and disarmament, is the unspeakable fact of our politics.'

Yet even here Douglass finds hope. During his recent interview with *The Catholic Agitator*, a publication of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker, he said:

The major character in the [JFK] story is God (or to put it in different terms: Enlightenment, or the Power of the Universe that Bends toward Justice as Dr. King put it).

An absolute miracle occurred. Here we find the two most powerful men in the world -- engaged in a titanic struggle on behalf of irreconcilable ideologies, as they saw it at the time -- both holding the power to destroy the entire world.

One of these men reaches out to the other and says: "I need your help," and the other says: "We need to help him."

They come together fulfilling the teaching of Jesus in the gospel: Love your enemies.

And that is not a sentimental kind of love. It is the kind of love Gandhi understood Jesus to be talking about -- recognizing the truth in your enemies.

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