

“At All Times Deserving Ill”: Bubonic Plague in Christian Thought and Practice (Rosenberg, E.)

[Persecutors] consider that the Christians are the cause of every public calamity and every misfortune of the people... I ask you, before the reign of Tiberius, that is, before the coming of Christ, what [many] misfortunes befell the world and its cities? And at all times the human race has deserved ill at God's hands.¹

“Black Death”: The Bubonic Plague of the 14th Century

In 1347, more than 1100 years after Tertullian of Carthage wrote these words in defense of persecuted Christians, plague-stricken merchant ships docked in the busy ports of Italy. Authorities were alert to a disease that, they had on excellent authority, had already devastated other lands. Aware of its novel character, rapid spread and course, and high mortality, they quickly imposed quarantines and sent urgent warnings to other ports. It was too late. In 1348, Europe's human population was at or near what was then a record high. Three years later, half of it was dead.

Christians facing what was later identified as the bubonic plague (*Yersinia pestis*) did not turn directly to Tertullian to address their spiritual concerns. Their reactions to the disaster were nevertheless informed by a theology that finds its earliest clear expression in his works. That theology is developed by Christianity's single most important theologian, Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) and his intellectual heir Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109). But none of these theologians ever faced any disaster on the scale of the bubonic plague.

When the plague struck, Christians, like Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, animists, and Zoroastrians, were unprepared for the calamity. Nor could they have been prepared. No epidemic of this scale had occurred since the so-called “plague of Justinian” in the sixth century CE. Eight hundred years later, the Christian world orbited around Rome rather than Constantinople, and its physicians, products of the new education system that was emerging in Europe, offered remedies that were ineffective at best. Traditional methods of healing were no more helpful. Furthermore, the very healers who attended the sick thereby contracted the disease, and a disproportionate number may have died or been frightened away from their work in the epidemic's earliest phases. The same seems to have been true of priests, who were summoned to administer last rites to the dying. Jean de Venette, the great chronicler of the so-called “Black Death,” says that ordinary parish priests who continued their ministry “were more daring[, so that in] many places not two out of twenty remained alive,” while “a very great number of the saintly [nuns]” who ran hospitals “not fearing to die, nursed the sick in all sweetness and humility, with no thought of honor... rest in peace with Christ”² as a result of their labors. This left the laypeople (lay in medical and religious terms) substantially on their own to understand the how and the why of the horrifying situation, and the “what” of the appropriate response to it.

The “How”

¹ Tertullian, *Apologia* 40.2–3, 10. In Robert Sider, ed., *Christian and Pagan in the Roman Empire: The Witness of Tertullian*, Selections from the Fathers of the Church (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), 63.

² In Alfred J. Andrea, *The Medieval Record: Sources of Medieval History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), 383.

The “how” was in some respects the most difficult question, and examining it reveals some of the most troubling human impulses. When Tertullian wrote, Christians were a small, although rapidly growing, minority within the Roman empire, vulnerable to scapegoating when plagues occurred. A century after Christianity became the empire’s own religion, it was still necessary for Augustine to refute charges that neglect of the old religion was responsible for Germanic invaders’ sacking of Rome. By Anselm’s time, though, Christians were far likelier to be persecutors than scapegoats. During the so-called “Black Death,” conspiracy theorists explicitly disobeyed church and state directives by accusing Jews and an assortment of “many bad Christians”³ of deliberately contaminating wells. Mob violence against these groups was commonplace and devastating.

But destructive as these conspiracy theories were, they proved difficult to sustain. It became too obvious to too many people that well-poisoning could not account for the disease’s rapid spread – and that destroying the alleged conspirators did nothing to halt the epidemic. Instead, the majority of Christians in the later Middle Ages sought practical information – the “how” of what God allowed to happen – from men of science, who were able to assure them that “the deadly pestilence [was] disseminated by the influence of celestial bodies,”⁴ especially the planet Saturn.

“The Why”

The “why” of the plague’s occurrence – the reason that God was allowing it occur – was a much easier question. Christians knew the answer full well without asking even their parish priest, much less a scientist or an academic theologian. Periodic outbreaks of deadly infectious diseases had been a fact of life (or, sometimes, death) for all Christian communities since the religion’s emergence, as well as for their many neighbors of different religions. How could any benevolent divinity allow them to happen?

This question, the technical name for which is theodicy, is age-old. It is the theme of at least two entire books of the Bible – Job and Ecclesiastes – neither of which attempts a tidy answer. In Tertullian’s world, the “pagan” majority assumed that the gods took care of people who pleased them. When the gods were displeased, they allowed – although they did not directly cause – calamity to befall the people who collectively deserved it. Against this, Tertullian argued that everyone, collectively and individually, deserved divine punishment – *without* conceding that plagues, earthquakes, etc. were necessarily such.

Tertullian did claim that pagans chose to reject their innate, if imperfect, knowledge of the one true God and their impulse to seek him as best they could, instead worshipping abominations of their own devising. This established their guilt. But he and other early church figures were also well aware of Christians’ propensity to sin. Christians may have distinguished themselves from others around them, in views like Tertullian’s, by believing and worshipping correctly, but they were no less prone to deceit, stinginess, cruelty, licentiousness, or hypocrisy. What is more, Christians lacked even the excuse of not knowing better. Whether a given calamity was designed and directed as a divine punishment, for pagans or for Christians, was unknowable. What was certain is that it was deserved.

Tertullian’s mentality often seems strange in the contemporary world. Today, the question is usually why God allows bad things to happen to good people. But this formulation

³ Ibid, 384.

⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*. In *Renaissance, Reformation, and Absolutism, 400–1600*, edited by Thomas G. Barnes and Gerald D. Feldman (Berkeley: University of California, 1979), 29.

would have been unthinkable before Martin Luther's time and extremely strange prior to the Enlightenment. God does not allow bad things to happen to people who do not deserve it, because no such people exist. Human beings have an innate knowledge of good and evil – are born subject to original sin – and freely choose to commit actual sins that they know are wrong. This is a crude summary of Augustine of Hippo's view, which remains the accepted theology not only of the Roman Catholic Church but also of Lutherans, Anabaptists, Calvinists, and the Church of England. Anselm of Canterbury made these terms vivid to medieval Europeans by likening God to a nobleman and human sin to a commoner who had grievously offended him and was totally unable to recompense his honor. The incarnation and death of Jesus was the only atonement, for it allowed God to remain both just (rendering account for sins) and merciful (sparing human beings damnation). Jesus' atonement was effective, but human choices to commit sin remained an affront to God. The mercy of his eternal forgiveness did not obviate justice, which did not allow human responsibility to be wished away.

This, then, was the framework within which medieval Christians responded to plagues and other disasters. Previous generations may have been spared disasters of comparable magnitude, but they had been no less guilty of any particular sin than the current one. Perhaps people today had grown particularly self-indulgent in confronting their own sins, or become lax in their religious practice or lukewarm in their faith. But it was impossible to identify any *specific* sin that had provoked God's wrath in this instance. Many individuals tried to, but no real pattern of opinion ever emerged. Besides, claiming to have so precisely decoded God's will in current events might have verged on irreverence, or even heresy.

And there was no need to venture any such claims. It was obvious that God was allowing the plague to occur because people deserved it. People were aware that they had committed sins and, instead of meaningfully repenting, invented self-justifications to placate their consciences and then continued sinning. They were aware that they repeated choices they knew to be wrong. They knew that they were not exceptional and that even the most serious sins – blasphemy, murder, robbery, etc. – were not exceptional either. The enigma was God's sparing equally sinful people the same punishment. But people neither expected nor systematically tried to unravel that enigma. God's will was a holy mystery, and its inner workings were not for human beings to know.

The “what next”

While the working of God's will was a mystery, his mercy was such that people were aware of the need to repent and assured that his love exceeded his anger. In terms of repentance, more and more people turned to dramatic penitential practices such as self-flagellation, which the church did not condone but could no longer control. In terms of spiritual comfort, as fewer and fewer priests survived, lay people might take over administering last rites to the dying and similar duties, sometimes with church officials' approval. Visual representations of Christ's death, as well as devotional practices, began to focus increasingly on the depth of his suffering, emphasizing divine participation in human pain in a way that was immediately relatable. At the same time, the *memento mori* – a warning to be mindful of death – entered the repertoire of religious communication. For the next two centuries, images of inattentive people of all walks of life being swept up in the *danse macabre* or in the harvest of death exhorted viewers to be prepared at every moment to meet their maker.

In the later sixteenth and the seventeenth century, a series of new crises roiled the Christian world. It was also at this time that many Protestant groups rejected the extensive

Catholic iconography of Christ's suffering and some of the theology associated with it. Some Catholic traditions began to de-emphasize these things accordingly, even as others embraced them enthusiastically. Meanwhile, the development of herd immunity reduced the still-tremendous danger *Y. pestis* to a lesser order of magnitude. The *danse macabre* and grand expressions of *memento mori* fell out of fashion in visual art and religious exhortation. At the same time, their visual repertoire evolved into an iconography of the sin of vanity. And [as we have seen/will see elsewhere in this series – link as appropriate] the socio-political consequences of the bubonic plague remain integral to modern systems of economy and government. All the while, most of us (quite reasonably) rarely think much of this world-shaping catastrophe or the still-existing pathogen that caused it – until, occasionally, circumstances compel us to remember.

Further reading

- Aberth, John. 2017. *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents*. Second edition. The Bedford Series in History and Culture. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's Macmillan Learning.
- Kelly, John. 2005. *The Great Mortality: An Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time*. 1st ed. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Martin, Sean. 2007. *The Black Death*. Pocket Essentials. Harpenden, Herts.: Oldcastle.
- Slack, Paul. 2012. *Plague: A Very Short Introduction*. Very Short Introductions 307. New York: Oxford University Press.



Unsuspected revelers are carried off in the *danse macabre*.
Pieter Bruegel the Elder. 1562. *The Triumph of Death* (detail). Oil on panel. Museo del Prado, Madrid. WGA [https://www.wga.hu/art/b/bruegel/pieter_e/05/02death.jpg]



An unprepared knight is confronted by Death.
Albrecht Dürer. 1510. *Death and the Landsknecht*. Woodcut. British Museum, London.



Master of the Berswordt Altar. Ca. 1400. *The Flagellation*. Oil and tempera on wood. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Acc. no. 2001.216.2.