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The Comparative Communal Responses to the Black Death in Muslim and Christian Societies, 1974

Here a modern historian compares the impact of the Black Death in Christian Europe and the Muslim Middle East. He is particularly interested in how Christian and Muslim communities had different group responses. What similarities or differences does he see in the actual disease and its death toll? How is his description of the disease similar to, or different from, those in the previous selections? How might you account for any differences in the descriptions? How would you summarize the author's thesis or argument? How were the responses to the plague different in Christian and Muslim societies? What is his explanation for these differences?

THINKING HISTORICALLY

In modern society, we tend to give greater credence to scientific and medical explanations of disease. We are even inclined to dismiss the religious explanations of our medieval forbears. But Dols suggests that the religious ideas of the fourteenth century caused the different responses to the plague. Thus, the consequences of the Black Death were different in Europe and the Middle East. What sort of argument could be made to dispute Dols's idea of causes and consequences?

In the middle of the fourteenth century a devastating pandemic of plague, commonly known in European history as the Black Death, swept through the entire Mediterranean world. This cataclysmic event caused a dramatic demographic decline in Muslim and Christian countries and provoked definable communal responses. . . .

The pandemic was transmitted from central Asia and spread throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. Based on contemporary Arabic and Latin sources, we can be certain of the existence of the three

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major forms of plague (bubonic, pneumonic, and septicaemic)[1] in these regions. In any historical comparison of the role of the pandemic in Muslim and Christian societies we can assume as a constant the medical nature of the disease itself. In addition, almost all of the medieval physicians believed that the immediate cause of this disease was a pestilential miasma or corruption of the air; this belief was broadly accepted in both societies due to their common reliance on the theory of epidemics found in Hippocrates and elaborated by Galen and Ibn Sina (Avicenna), the greatest medical authorities for the fourteenth century physicians. Therefore, in the Oriental and Western plague treatises there is similar advice for improving or changing the air in a plague-stricken community. . . .

The Black Death was variously interpreted by contemporary European writers. The pandemic was considered, however, by most European observers to result directly from the pestilential miasma, and it was believed that the disease was contagious, which accounts for the important protective measures taken by the Italian cities and the widespread advocacy of flight as the best means of escaping the epidemic. The physicians mention natural causations of the disease (such as an unfavorable conjunction of the planets, or earthquakes) among the remote causes of the miasma. Yet only one European treatise gives a concrete remedy against the astrological causes of plague; the customary recommendations were flight and prayer.

The most commonly held opinion about the ultimate cause of the plague pandemic was religious: the European Christian viewed the Black Death as an overwhelming punishment from God for his sins and those of his fellow Christians. Despite the other interpretations of the disease, this view is the only one that satisfactorily explains the extraordinary forms of communal behavior that took place in many parts of Europe during the Black Death. This supernatural solution was propagated by the Church and is reflected in contemporary European art and literature. The chronicles of the fourteenth century almost always attribute the affliction to divine retribution for the wickedness of European society. [William] Langland[2] summarizes the common view succinctly: "These pestilences were for pure sin."

Based directly on biblical and classical precedents, a conviction of personal guilt and a need for individual and collective expiation were engendered in the faithful Christian. His attitude to the Black Death is well illustrated by the European communal response. This response took the forms of the flagellant movement, the persecution of alien groups (particularly the Jews), and a pessimistic preoccupation with imminent death.[3]

[1] All three are produced by the virus *Yersinia pestis*; *bubonic* is named for "buboes" or lesions on the skin (see Figure 12.1), *pneumonic* (like pneumonia) is in the lungs, and *septicaemic* is in the blood. [Ed.]

[2] Contemporary author (c. 1330–c. 1400). [Ed.]

[3] See Figures 12.2, 12.3, and 12.4. [Ed.]

The flagellant movement was based on a belief in the mortification of the flesh as suitable penance for men's sins. Beginning in mid-thirteenth-century Italy, a series of natural disasters convinced many that God's wrath was visiting men as a punishment for their sinfulness. This concept was acted out in expiatory pilgrimages and processions in an attempt to divert or allay God's chastisement. The processions recurred continually during the later Middle Ages. From their inception, an implicit element of the flagellant movement was its participation in the millennial ideas that Professor Cohn[4] has shown to be a significant theme of late medieval Christendom, stemming especially from the millennial scheme of Joachim of Fiore.[5] Self-flagellation was "a collective *imitatio Christi*,[6] a redemptive sacrifice which protected the world from final overwhelming catastrophe, and by virtue of which they themselves [the flagellants] became a holy elite."...

The flagellant movement was a complex social phenomenon. Its apocalyptic ambitions proved to be an incentive to personal mysticism, anticlericalism, and social revolutionary ideas such as the destruction of private wealth. The flagellants were also intimately associated with the second major feature of the European reaction to the pandemic: the persecution of the Jews.

The massacres of the Jews during the Black Death were unprecedented in their extent and ferocity until the twentieth century. The first attacks on the Jews resulted from the accusation that this inassimilable community had caused the pestilence by poisoning wells; this was neither new (Jews had been accused and massacred in southern France and Spain during the . . . epidemics of 1320 and 1333), nor confined to the Jews alone. Lepers, gravediggers and other social outcasts, Muslims in Spain, or any foreigners were liable to attack. . . . But in September 1348 the forced confessions from ten Jews in Chillon[7] were adduced to support this fantasy and to implicate all European Jews. A second wave of massacres from the middle of 1349 was instigated by the propaganda of the flagellants. In many cities of Germany and the Low Countries (Frankfort, Maine, Cologne, Brussels) the destruction of the Jewish population was led by the flagellants, aided by the masses of the poor. Pope Clement VI finally condemned the flagellants in 1349 after two bulls in the same year against the persecution of the Jews had been ineffectual. . . .

In the complex psychological response to the Black Death, the natural preoccupation with death was therefore not inconsistent with

[4]Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. [Ed.]
[5]Twelfth-century theologian; predicted New Age of universal harmony based on Book of Revelations. [Ed.]
[6]Imitation of Christ, in suffering. [Ed.]
[7]A castle on Lake Geneva in modern Switzerland. [Ed.]

a vision of the biblical Apocalypse.[8] Many believed that the end of the world had come, plague being the apocalyptic rider on the white horse. In an account of the island of Cyprus during the pandemic, an Arabic chronicler testifies to the Christian belief by his remark that the Christian Cypriots "feared that it was the end of the world." The Black Death did not create these forms of reaction or the ideology that lay behind them; it was a stimulus, despite its irregularity of attack, which exposed the nerve system of late medieval Christian society.

The Middle Eastern interpretations of the Black Death display a diversity of opinions similar to that of the European accounts. Yet, the dominant Muslim view of plague was set forth in the formulation of three religio-legal principles, which directly affected communal behavior: (1) plague was a mercy from God and a martyrdom for the faithful Muslim; (2) a Muslim should not enter nor flee from a plague-stricken land; and (3) there was no contagion of plague since disease came directly from God. . . .

All three traditions were attributed to the Prophet. Muhammad was reputed to have prohibited flight from a plague-stricken community. . . . Accordingly, Muhammad was understood to have denied the pre-Islamic Arab belief in contagion. Consistent with this idea that plague was a divine selection is the principle that plague was a mercy from God for the faithful Muslim but a punishment for the infidel. . . .

The importance of these three principles to Muslim society was in what they did *not* affirm: they did not declare that plague was God's punishment; they did not encourage flight; and they did not support a belief in the contagious nature of plague—all of which were prevalent in Christian Europe. These principles appear to be borne out by the reports of the general communal responses to the Black Death in the major cities in the Middle East.

The Muslim reaction to the Black Death was characterized by organized communal supplication that included processions through the cities and mass funerals in the mosques. There is no indication of the abandonment of religious rites and services for the dead but rather an increased emphasis on personal piety and ritual purity. . . .

It is reported that pious men were stationed at various places of worship in Cairo and Fustat[9] in order to recite the funeral prayers. Many men left their normal occupations to profit from the funerals, as by chanting the funeral prayers at the head of processions. These processions from the mosques or homes to the cemeteries filled the streets of Cairo during the Black Death. They were so numerous that they could not pass in the roadways without disturbing one another. Moreover,

[8]The end of the world. See Chapter 6, Book of Daniel, for origins of idea. Also see Book of Revelations. [Ed.]

[9]Old Cairo. [Ed.]

there were pious visitations to the graves in the common belief that the souls of the deceased resided in the tombs. . . .

An important part of urban activity in response to the Black Death was the communal prayers for the lifting of the disease. During the greatest severity of the pandemic, orders were given in Cairo to assemble in the mosques and to recite the recommended prayers in common. Fasting and processions took place in the cities during the Black Death and later plague epidemics; the supplicatory[10] processions followed the traditional form of prayer for rain. . . . As the Black Death worsened, a proclamation was made in Damascus inviting the population to fast for three days and to go out on the fourth day (Friday) to the Mosque of the Foot, in order to supplicate God for the removing of this scourge. Most of the Damascenes were reported to have fasted, and several spent the night in the Umayyad Mosque[11] performing the acts of faith as in the ritual during Ramadan and reading al-Bukhari.[12] On Friday morning the inhabitants of Damascus came out from all sides, including Jews, Christians, Samaritans, old men and women, young infants, the poor, amirs, notables, and magistrates. Before the morning prayer, they marched from the Umayyad Mosque to the Mosque of the Foot and did not cease chanting the prayers throughout the day. . . .

The plague treatises also attest to a large number of popular magical beliefs and practices concerning plague, which should be interpreted as a significant element in the total religious response of Muslim society. The amulets and talismans, incantations, and magical inscriptions that were directed against plague were not unique phenomena; they were only part of a vast body of magical beliefs and practices that are more familiarly associated with the "evil eye." . . .

The comparison of Christian and Muslim societies during the Black Death points to the significant disparity in their general communal responses. . . . [In Christian Europe] mass communal funeral services, processions, and journeys to the cemeteries were greatly limited by the common European belief in contagion. . . . Conversely, the Arabic sources do not attest to the "striking manifestations of abnormal collective psychology, of dissociation of the group mind," which occurred in Christian Europe. Fear and trepidation of the Black Death in Europe activated what Professor Trevor-Roper has called, in a different context,[13] a European "stereotype of fear"; the collective emotion played upon a mythology of messianism, anti-Semitism, and man's culpability for his sins.

[10] Pleading, begging. [Ed.]
[11] The great mosque in Damascus, the capital of the Umayyad Caliphate. [Ed.]
[12] Compiler of *hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet). [Ed.]
[13] *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1978). [Ed.]

Why are the corresponding phenomena not found in the Muslim reaction to the Black Death? The stereotypes did not exist. There is no evidence for the appearance of messianic movements in Muslim society at this time which might have associated the Black Death with an apocalypse. . . . Furthermore, the fact that there was no certainty that plague was a divine punishment for sin removed the impetus for a cohesive puritanical and revivalist popular movement.

The impact of the Black Death poses the question of the Muslim attitude toward minorities. The unassimilated communities were tolerated in medieval Muslim society and, in this instance, were not held responsible for the ravages of the pandemic. However theoretical, the legal tenet against contagion of plague would have militated against the accusation of the minorities. In no case is there a direct causal relationship to be found between the Black Death (and subsequent plague epidemics) and the active persecution of minorities as in Europe.

The Christian belief in plague as a divine punishment for men's sins was preached by clergymen deeply committed to the idea of original sin and man's guilt arising from his essential depravity, as well as to a fundamental contempt—both Christian and Stoic—for this world. The Black Death was the occasion for the vigorous realization of these ideas. However, there is no doctrine of original sin and of man's insuperable guilt in Islamic theology. The Muslim writers on plague did not dwell on the guilt of their co-religionists even if they did admit that plague was a divine warning against sin. Prayer was supplication and not expiation.

In contrast, the general reaction of Muslim society to the Black Death was governed by its interpretation as only another common natural disaster. . . . Further, obedience to the decision of the communal leader (*mukhldr*) with regard to moving away or remaining must be preserved. If changing the air by flight cannot be undertaken because: (1) the epidemic is universal; (2) the fear that the plague victims would be neglected; or (3) the need to preserve the commonweal of the community (which is an essential tenet of Islam) from disruption and disorder, the people are simply to remain and improve their circumstances by cleaning their houses and fumigating the air with various scents and fresh fruits.

The prescriptions . . . for a Muslim community at the time of a plague epidemic bring into focus the contrasting orientations of the two religions. The Black Death touched upon the central theme of Christian teaching concerning evil and human suffering; Western man took the plague epidemic as an individual trial more than a collective, social calamity. The Islamic tradition, however, has not concerned itself to the same degree with personal suffering; the central problem for the Muslim is the solemn responsibility for his decisions that affect other men's lives and fortunes within a purposeful creation. The cosmic settings of the two faiths are wide apart in their emphasis: where the Muslim's primary duty was toward the correct behavior of the total community based on the

sacred law, the Christian's was with personal redemption. Where the Qur'an supplied guidance, the Bible furnished consolation. For the Muslim the Black Death was part of a God-ordered, natural universe; for the Christian it was an irruption of the profane world of sin and misery.

In sum, it would be as great an error to discount the religious interpretations of plague as motives and limits to communal behavior as to discount the classical medical theories of plague which underlay most of the medical remedies and treatments in both the East and West. Taken together, the medieval Christian ideas of punishment and guilt, militancy toward alien communities, and millennialism are raised to crucial significance in contrast to the Muslim understanding of the Black Death. The operative European Christian concepts were lacking in Muslim society as were their unattractive consequences of religious fanaticism, persecution, and desperation. The predominant theological views of the two societies set the framework for normative attitudes and the prescriptions for communal behavior in which human nature found expression and form when confronted by the Black Death.

REFLECTIONS

It might seem that there would be little more we could learn about a plague that occurred over 650 years ago. But that is not the case. Historians are constantly asking new questions about the past, sometimes armed with new sources of information or new techniques of investigation. One recent line of inquiry has centered on the causes of the disease. In *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Harvard University Press, 1997), David Herlihy questions whether the Black Death was in fact the plague. His student, Samuel K. Cohn Jr., answers a vigorous "no." Cohn's *The Black Death Transformed: Disease and Culture in Early Renaissance Europe* (Arnold, 2003) argues that the disease resembled a viral infection rather than the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* that causes the plague. Cohn writes that the Black Death, like the flu pandemic of 1918, was highly contagious, moved very rapidly, apparently on droplets in the air, taking enormous casualties. By contrast, the last wave of plague, which originated in Hong Kong in 1894 (and from which *Y. pestis* was identified), traveled slowly as it was transferred by fleas from rats to humans, infecting only those who were bitten, and killing only about 3 percent of those exposed. Further, Cohn points out, we do not hear of rats and fleas in the accounts of the Black Death. He adds that twentieth-century plague deaths in India and Manchuria continued year after year, providing no immunity from exposure, whereas the Black Death occurred only in the summer of 1348 (when incidentally the hot, dry weather meant few fleas) and then again for about one year every decade, causing fewer and fewer fatalities, except for children—who had no immunity. This would seem to be

a good case for DNA testing. In fact, a disputed test of a bone from a possible Black Death victim in France revealed the existence of *Y. pestis*, but other samples have not, leaving the issue still in doubt.

Scholars have also explored the dimensions of the Black Death beyond Europe. Until recently, the subject was a virtual monopoly of European historians, but we can now ask about the Black Death in Egypt and the Middle East, as we do here with Michael W. Dols's comparison of the consequences of Christian and Muslim beliefs. Stuart J. Borsch, in *The Black Death in Egypt and England: A Comparative Study* (University of Texas Press, 2005), asks about longer-term consequences: Why did Europe recover and thrive after 1350 whereas the economy of Egypt began a long decline? He finds the answer in the differences between the landholding systems of English peasants, who prospered as their numbers declined, and the disinterested absentee landlords of the Egyptian Mamluk regime (1250–1517), who just cut their losses and left. Other factors may account for the long-term economic decline of Egypt and other Muslim regimes in contrast to the revival of Christian Europe. Whereas Michael Dols emphasizes the role of religious ideas, others have commented on the changing balance of religious and secular explanations in both cultures. Religious explanations were, in fact, more common in Christian Europe in 1348 than they were in Muslim Egypt, where secular explanations outnumbered religious ones. Yet this imbalance was reversed in later years. After 1350 Europeans increasingly described the event in secular terms, crediting individual doctors and medical treatments rather than supernatural factors for their survival. The Islamic world of the Middle East moved in the opposite direction after 1350, becoming less secular and more religious. Cohn offers the rise of secular humanism in the European Renaissance as further evidence that the Black Death was like a flu that abated as people developed immunity and therefore felt more confident about human effort; but a similar response to the same disease did not occur in Egypt or the Middle East, more generally.

We still do not know how global the Black Death was. We trace its origins to Central Asia because we have no anecdotal or literary evidence for China or India. But we know that the population of China declined drastically from about 1200 to 1400[1] and that India was part of the Eurasian zone of shared diseases and immunities. We also do not know if the Black Death penetrated beyond the Sahara or up the Nile to sub-Saharan Africa. So there is still a lot more to learn, even to answer today's questions.

[1] In 1400 the Chinese population was actually about the same as it had been in 1200, but in both the previous and the subsequent 200-year period, it increased by 40–50 percent. A continuous population increase between 1200 and 1400 would have added about 150 million people. But this was also the period of the Mongol conquest and the revolt against the Mongols that issued in the Ming dynasty, both extraordinary killers.