

Effects of Black Death on Religious Aspects of European Society

John S. Hurt '26

Abstract

The focus of this paper is to research and analyze how the Black Death of the 1300's affected the multiple religious groups of Europe at the time. In the execution of researching this topic, it was found that European society was permanently influenced by the repercussions of the spread of bubonic plague in multiple ways, some of the largest of such changes being found in the Catholic Church. Sources indicate that Catholicism was influenced long past the end of the Black Death. Although it began over 150 years after the Black Death ended, it is possible that the reformation of the Church was catalyzed by the problems seen in the Catholic Church during this epidemic.

The discussion of this research paper is based upon the actions and reactions of religious groups and religious authorities during times of widespread illness, specifically during the Black Death. This research seeks to give insights into how religious authorities act when their groups look to those in charge in the midst of pervading death and sickness, as well as how the groups as a whole react to these authorities' actions. Although modern technology assures that diseases are caused by bacteria, the populations of hundreds of years ago did not understand this concept; instead, people had a habit of blaming epidemics on the anger of their god due to either their own actions or another group's actions. Today, most people are taught and understand the reasons for disease outbreaks, but religion can still play a very large role in the levels of hysteria in a population. Understanding any possible trends from the past could potentially help during future epidemics, especially when populations that are at risk are very religiously-inclined. Therefore, this research paper specifically seeks to answer this question: how did the Black Death affect Europe in religious aspects?

Literature Review

Many referenced sources specifically sought to answer a question similar to the one asked in this research paper. Throughout the different sources, multiple different perspectives and viewpoints were analyzed. One reviewed article (Mark, 2020) investigated how Europe was affected as a whole by the Black Death of the 14th century. By researching death toll numbers and certain demographics of people, the author found a significant connection between the numbers of dying Catholic clergy and the structural integrity of European society. Joshua Mark (2020) found evidence that a large amount of the general Catholic population in Europe had a newfound distrust in the church authorities, destabilizing the structure of European society.

Another article, focusing on the different ways that the Black Death affected religion specifically, also claimed that the Black Death strongly contributed to the lack of Catholic faith seen in the years following the epidemic. Zentner (2015) describes this decline as well as unauthorized actions taken by Catholics to repent and hopefully put an end to the plague. The author describes the flagellant movement, a religious movement in which followers traveled from town to town in large groups, whipping themselves for their sins in repentance. This, of course, was not endorsed by the Church. Nevertheless, the movement grew in popularity quickly as many people saw the flagellant movement as protection from the plague. Zentner also researched and discussed the Jewish persecution from the Catholics of the time. As described in his article, while some Christians opposed the Church by joining the Flagellants, others opposed the Church by deciding that the Jews caused the plague. Attacks on Jewish communities rose significantly in the form of "pogroms" or large assaults in which Catholics murdered Jews in huge numbers.

Discussion

As the Black Death ravaged Europe in the 14th century, the three main religious groups in Europe reacted in very different ways to the spread of the bubonic plague. Christians, Jews, and Muslims were all affected very differently, due to differing reasons. Both the Christians and the Muslims saw the outbreak of the plague as a sort of punishment from God; these religious groups had the idea that the disease was brought upon them to exterminate any non-believers and those of weak faith. The Muslims mainly kept to themselves due to this, and found in this reasoning an assurance of their religious beliefs. Many Christians, however, specifically blamed the Jews for the epidemic. Jews all over Europe were massacred both for vengeance and in hopes that their deaths would end the black plague's spread. As Christianity was the predominant faith, Jewish Europeans were constantly at risk of being persecuted as scapegoats for the plague. While the different religious groups each had their own responses to the plague, their reactions affected each other, causing even more reactions in the form of a domino-effect. The bubonic plague had a massive effect on all of Europe, but these groups affected each other at a magnitude that rivaled the bubonic plague on its own.

As was found in Joshua Mark's (2020) research, lots of the members of the Catholic Church lost trust in their authorities. This distrust caused the structure of society to shift, as common people began to reason that church authorities were no better than

they were. This was the beginning of multiple large-scale problems. The first problems occurred for the Church when their clergy began to die of the plague. Obviously, a lack of clergymen would create some immediate issues, but over time issues escalated into a widespread distrust in the Catholic Church.

The problems started when members of the ministry began to die of the bubonic plague. As more and more clerics died of the illness, the Church was forced to replace each one with newer and less experienced priests. The lack of experience that was now so commonly found amongst the clergy created problems with the normal proceedings of the Church, which in turn added to the already increasing distrust of the Church that could be found ubiquitously in the more common Catholics. The initial distrust in the Church, however, came from the fact that priests were dying of plague at all in the first place. While the Church made itself out to be untouchable and above disease and illness, average Europeans found it clear that the ministry had no more immunity to the black plague than they did.

The Flagellant Movement

The common distrust in the Church led to the formation of multiple new movements around Europe. One of the largest of these movements was the flagellant movement. The Flagellants was a group of people who, against the judgment of the Catholic Church, repented for their sins by publicly admitting to their sins and whipping themselves with knotted cords (Zentner, 2015). The Flagellants traveled all of Europe from town to town, recruiting new followers along the way. This movement became extremely popular very quickly, as its followers saw this form of repentance as the only protection against the plague, although traveling between towns could only enhance the plague's spread. So many people were joining this movement in spite of the Church that the highest ranking Church official of the time, Pope Clement VI, was eventually forced to denounce the flagellant movement publicly. People were leaving the Catholic Church in order to seek free salvation from the Flagellants, causing the ministry to lose money. To the dismay of the Pope and the Church, however, their constituents had already lost so much trust in them that Pope Clement's words had very little to no effect on the public's actions whatsoever.

Jewish Persecution

While some Catholics left the Church to find salvation in the flagellant movement, others left to seek out the source of the plague. The idea that the Black Death was a plot manifested by the Jews in order to kill off the rest of Europe became extremely popular as

well. Large groups of Christians set off in pogroms that actively sought out Jewish communities and massacred extremely large numbers of Jews at once. The paranoia of the Catholics began in France (Dinkins, n.d.) when Christians accused Jews of poisoning their wells with plague. These accusations quickly spread around Europe, and pogroms grew larger and more common all over the place. Pope Clement VI was quick to speak out against the persecution as well, but again, the public did not listen at all. Christian hysteria increased anyway along with the massacre of Jews all over Europe.

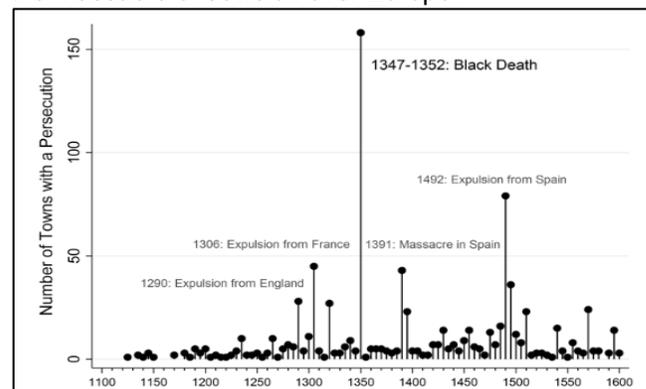


Figure 1: Number of towns with a minority persecution over time (CEPR)

Figure 1, which depicts the number of towns with some sort of persecution against minorities between the years 1100 and 1600, shows how much of an impact the Black Death had on European society. It is reasonable to say that the spike in social paranoia seen during the Black Death affected future anti semitic perceptions that lasted long after the end of the plague. Each historical event labeled in Figure 1 is specifically associated with Jewish persecution. Although there were instances of large Jewish persecutions before the spread of the plague in the 1300's, as is shown in Figure 1, there is a very visible plateau in which these instances rose in number significantly after the Black Death.

Analysis & Conclusion

The Black Death made a massive impact upon European society in the 14th century. The plague killed massive numbers of people, leaving Europe's population at a fraction of what it had previously been, but even when the population reestablished itself, the social structure had changed dramatically. With so many accusations of Jews plotting against the rest of Europe, anti semitic views rose and, even at the distress of the Catholic Pope, many Christians found a distrust of Jewish people. However, lots of distrust for the Catholic Church also became evident. As the Black Death created so much disagreement with the Catholic

Church's methods, average Europeans who were part of the Church decided that it was corrupt. To deal with this, other movements were created in which people of faith could worship God without dealing with the corruption of the Catholic Church. Technically beginning almost 200 years later, the reformation of the Church would likely not have occurred for much longer if not for this event. Although the Catholic Church had already begun a decline before the Black Death, the implications of the plague sped the process up vigorously (Zentner, 2015). The spread of the black plague in the 1300's had major implications on Europe. The structure of European society changed massively due to both the massive amount of people killed by the plague as well as the religious effects on the surviving populations.

REFERENCES

- Boas, Alex V. (2020). Spirituality and Health in Pandemic Times: Lessons from the Ancient Wisdom. *Spirituality in Healthcare—Multidisciplinary Approach*, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/345377374_Spirituality_and_Health_in_Pandemic_Times_Lessons_from_the_Ancient_Wisdom
- Dinkins, Courtney P. (n.d.) Persecution of the Jews during the Great Plagues of the 14th Century. *Montana State University*, <https://www.montana.edu/historybug/yersiniaessays/pariera-dinkins.html>
- Krzysztofik, Małgorzata. (2020, June). The Image of Disease in Religious, Medical—Astrological and Social Discourses: Old Polish Literature as an Example of Early Modern European Mentality. *Journal of Religion and Health*, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10943-020-01056-x>
- Lee, Alexandra R. A. (2022). Plague and Popular Revival: Ecclesiastical Authorities and the Bianchi Devotions in 1399." *Cambridge University Press*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/studies-in-church-history/article/plague-and-popular-revival-ecclesiastical-authorities-and-the-bianchi-devotions-in-1399/1469DF3F5D25620C3AA8AF6C4A9FFC18>
- Mark, Joshua J. (2020, April). Effects of the Black Death on Europe. *World History Encyclopedia*, [https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1543/effects-of-the-black-death-on-](https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1543/effects-of-the-black-death-on-europe/)
- Mehfooz, Musferah. (2021). Understanding the Impact of Plague Epidemics on the Muslim Mind during the Early Medieval Period. *Islamic Origins*, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/12/10/843>
- Pennisi, Elizabeth. (2011, Aug.). Does Religion Influence Epidemics?. *Science*, <https://www.science.org/content/article/does-religion-influence-epidemics>
- Zentner, McLaurine H. (2015). "The Black Death and Its Impact on the Church and Popular Religion." Honors Theses. 682. https://egrove.olemiss.edu/hon_theses/682