

**Chicago Literary Club**

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**Presentation: Death and Destruction: Any Silver Lining?**

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**My paper is an Inquiry into the 14th Century Black Death  
And its Shock to and Consequences for Society, Including a  
Focus on the Renaissance and the Reformation**

As a preface, when I set out to prepare this paper, I discovered that an earlier paper had been written on the Black Death, this one by my friend and fellow Literary Club member Bob Strong [Robert Strong, “Blind Chance or Divine Retribution”, March 1, 2004]. I like the idea that we presenters sometimes stand on the shoulders of our predecessors. Bob thoroughly and meticulously detailed the grizzly evidence of the plague. He took off in a different direction from mine, and explored the modern questioning of the belief, held for long, that the cause of the Black Death was bubonic plague. As I mention in a bit, I pass over that questioning, content myself with the traditional diagnosis, and look toward the consequences following the plague. Still, I commend to your attention Bob’s interesting analysis.

Distance and time make it hard to absorb the enormity of what Barbara Tuchman, writing in *A Distant Mirror*, calls “the most lethal disaster of recorded history”. [Tuchman, p.xiii, 123] The Plague, or the Pestilence, or the Black Death, hit Europe in 1347 and remained virulent until 1350. England was affected in an even more compressed period, from December, 1348 to June, 1350. Records are inadequate to determine with any precision the magnitude of the human mortality. Informed estimates range from 33% to 40% or even 50% of the entire western European population, with some cities suffering up to an 80% mortality. A third of that

population would mean about 20 million deaths. It would take a long time to recover. As Norman Cantor writes in his book, *"In the Wake of the Plague"*, the population of western Europe did not again reach its pre-1348 level until the beginning of the 18th Century. Not until the 18th Century did England's population rise again to the 6 million of pre-plague England. [Cantor, p.68] Although the Plague exhausted itself temporarily in 1350, there were subsequent outbreaks in 1361, 1368-9, 1371, 1375, 1390 and 1401. The later ones were severe but not as severe, at least by comparison. One of the first consequences of the 1347-1350 outbreak, therefore, is that the plague became firmly implanted in England. [Ziegler, p.188] Let us try to imagine the extent of a comparable disaster today. First, a couple comparisons: it is thought that U.S. deaths from the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918-19 reached some 550,000 (about 1.5% of the population), and the death toll - military and civilian - from the civil war were 700,000-800,00, or 2% of the U.S. population [Brittanica Library Research]. Is it possible to conceive of 100 million people - 1/3 of the population of the United States today - dying in three years? How could we cope even with the task of disposing of the bodies? What does the country look like following such an apocalyptic event? What happens to its economy? Its political structure? Its religious structures? My undertaking here is to explore the consequences of the 14th Century Black Death in England and Europe: social and economic, and religious as well, with an inquiry as to what connections there might be between the catastrophe and the Renaissance and Reformation.

The phantom enemy had no medical name. "Plague" or "the pestilence" is what shows up in contemporary accounts. The term "Black Death" was first coined in the sixteenth century to describe the event, and came into common usage in the nineteenth century. The underlying disease is now largely accepted as bubonic plague. It was not at all understood at the time.

Bubonic plague is a bacillus carried by fleas on the backs of rodents. It was present in two forms: one that infected the bloodstream, causing buboes (black swellings in the armpits or groin, and the source of the disease's name) and internal bleeding, and was spread by contact; and a second, more virulent pneumonic type that infected the lungs and was spread by respiratory infection. There is some thought that the parasite has existed in animals and maybe even in humans for millennia. It continues to exist today. In addition to the renewed outbreaks in the 50 years following 1350, there were others, and of particular interest to the historian is the reappearance in England in Restoration London, from 1664 to early 1666, killing perhaps more than 75,000 people of an estimated population of 460,000. And as recently as 1994 there was said to have been an outbreak of plague and plague pneumonia in India. And in 2007, one monkey is reported to have died and 17 others were infected with bubonic plague at the Denver Zoo - a reminder of both its continuing viability and its ability to survive in both humans and other mammals. (New York Times, May 23, 2007, pg. A12) Today if treated early with antibiotics the disease is seldom fatal. However, as with many parasites, this one, known medically as *Yersinia pestis*, may well be developing a resistance to the available antibiotics. It may be undergoing, by variation and selection, an evolution that will enable it to evade the effectiveness of the antibiotics.

It is thought to have originated in Central Asia, spread through China to India, Persia, Syria, and to have reached Europe in 1346. According to the account of one Gabriel de Mussis, a contemporary Italian, the Genoese had established a walled trading outpost at the city of Tana, now Feodosia in the Ukraine on the Crimean coast. A Tartar force, part of an already infected population, decided in 1346 to attack the Genoese, whether for monetary gain or to punish a convenient scapegoat for its medical agony is not clear. The plague took its toll on the attacking

Tartars. They lobbed over the walls the corpses of the Tartar victims, in the hope that this would spread the disease in the city. (Ziegler, p.5). Such a lobbing action was within the technical ability of the Tartars at the time. While catapults were common in medieval Europe, their maximum capacity was about 60 pounds. The more sophisticated “trebuchet”, however, was developed in China in the 3rd to 5th Century B.C.E. and was known in the eastern Mediterranean by the 6th Century, C.E.. And it could launch missiles of a ton or more. The author of a recent article on the subject asserts that the trebuchet was used to hurl diseased corpses into the city. (Chevedden, et.al.,1995) Notwithstanding the dispatch by the Genoese of the bodies in the adjacent sea, the plague became active in the city. What an early and devastating example of biological warfare! The besieged Genoese abandoned the city and took to their galleys and headed for the Mediterranean. The plague accompanied them. With the Genoese merchants the disease traveled to Europe. Most likely it touched in at Genoa. It moved quickly. It penetrated France in January 1348 via Marseilles. It arrived in England late in 1348.

To many, the wrath of God was the explanation for the plague. They believed that the plague was God’s punishment for man’s wickedness, and that those who were spared had better repent and improve the state of their moral lives. [Ziegler, p.221] Coming from this conviction, self-flagellation was a phenomenon which emerged in a frenzy across Europe. The proponents, stripped to the waist, traveled publicly from city to city, scourging themselves with leather whips tipped with iron spikes until they bled. They saw themselves as redeemers who, in a mimicking of the scourging of Christ, would atone for human wickedness and earn relief for mankind. To its credit, the Church outlawed such behavior. In 1348 Pope Clement prohibited public flagellation, although the movement was far too powerful and popular to be suppressed. [Herlihy, p.68] Not satisfied with a divine explanation, other people looked to a human agent

upon whom to vent their hostility. The Jews were a handy target. Often, and occasionally with the assistance of a torture-extracted confession, Jews were convicted of poisoning a city's wells, summarily rounded up, expelled and executed. Such persecutions were invariably accompanied by the seizure of Jewish property, a particularly motivating factor. In Narbonne and Carcassonne, Jews were dragged from their houses and thrown into bonfires. [Tuchman, p.109] Again, to his credit, Pope Clement attempted to check the hysteria, saying that Christians who imputed the pestilence to the Jews had been "seduced by that liar, the Devil" and that the massacres were a "horrible thing". [Tuchman, p.113]

In Geraldine Brooks' novel *Year of Wonder*, written about the plague hitting England in the 17th Century, the heroine Anna Frith captures the sense of confusion and searching for answers that must have troubled the 13th Century mind as well, and points to the evolving sense that something other than the wrath of God must be at work:

"It came to me then that we, all of us, spent a very great deal of time pondering these questions that, in the end, we could not answer. If we balanced the time we spent contemplating God, and why He afflicted us, with more thought as to how the Plague spread and poisoned our blood, then we might come nearer to saving our lives. While these thoughts were vexing, they brought with them also a chink of light. For if we could be allowed to see the Plague as a thing in Nature merely, we did not have to trouble about some grand celestial design that had to be completed before the disease would abate. We could simply work upon it as a farmer might toil to rid his field of unwanted tare, knowing that when we found the tools and the method and the resolve, we would free ourselves, no matter if we were a village of sinners or a host of saints."

There were other reactions. Some were of the opinion that a sober and abstemious mode of living considerably reduced the risk of infection, and they lived in isolation. Others took the

opposite view, and maintained that an infallible way of warding off this appalling evil was to drink heavily, enjoy life to the full. For those who could afford it, flight to the country, away from towns and urban centers, seemed the solution of choice. Boccaccio, writing in the *Decameron*, wrote a first person account of the plague in Florence:

“Some people, pursuing what was possibly the safer alternative, callously maintained that there was no better or more efficacious remedy against a plague than to run away from it. Swayed by this argument, and sparing no thought for anyone but themselves, large numbers of men and women abandoned their city, their homes, their relatives, their estates and their belongings, and headed for the countryside, either in Florentine territory or, better, still, abroad.”

[Boccaccio, p. 8] *Decameron* itself is a fictional but semi-autobiographical account of a group of young aristocrats who flee Florence to a villa to observe the outbreak from afar. None of these remedial actions gave their takers any better chance at survival than any other.

The plague was no respecter of class. Concentrations of people in urban areas, therefore poorer, did seem to suffer particularly heavy mortalities. But the well-off suffered as well. King Alfonso XI of Castile was the only reigning monarch killed, but the King of Aragon lost wife, daughter and niece in a period of six months. [Tuchman, p.99] The English King Edward III's second daughter, Joanna, who was on her way to marry Pedro, the heir of Castile (thereby hoping to cement a political tie in England's continuing contest with France), died in Bordeaux. Similarly, mortality in the Church was not reserved for the lowly parish priest. In England, the Archbishop of Canterbury died in 1348, his successor in 1349 and the next successor three months later, all within one year. [Tuchman, p.100] Monasteries, wealthy though they were, were hit heavily. Philip Ziegler, in his book “*The Black Death*”, concludes that close to half of

the friars, monks and nuns died. Their numbers would never rise again to their earlier peak.

[Ziegler, p.215]

The consequences of the epidemic were varied and many, and not altogether clear. First and foremost was the shock to the demographic and economic system. Workers were in great demand, and their wages began to reflect that demand. For example, the job of burying the dead (in the height of the plague bodies would simply be piled up in the streets outside the houses in which they died) gave employment to beggars, urban jobless and other lower class persons. Boccaccio comments negatively on the gravediggers, who prior to this point worked without pay: “a species of vulture born from the lowly.” Ziegler asserts that pre-plague England was grossly over-populated [p.189], but concludes that wages in England roughly doubled during and after this period [p.191]. The increase in wages is thought to have been at least a factor in, if not the sole cause of, the change of the system of land tenure in England, as laborers became more mobile, and landlords in an effort to find the needed bodies to work the farms began to loosen the traditional feudal ties between landlord and laborer. Legislation was passed in 1349 and 1351 to limit the increase of wages and the mobility of laborers. And that led in turn to the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381. David Herlihy, in *“The Black Death and the Transformation of the West”*, speaks of the pre-plague situation in Europe as a Malthusian deadlock. By raising the specter of Malthus he does not argue that the population was greater than the land could support and that somehow the overpopulation caused the plague. Rather, the deadlock was in the paralysis in the economic situation and its capacity to improve the ways it produced its goods. Much of the labor force was employed in the feudal system of agriculture. The plague broke the deadlock and allowed Europeans to rebuild their systems in ways more admissive of further development.

[Herlihy, p.81]

As might be expected, the ranks of physicians were especially pressed. 20 out of 24 physicians in Venice were said to have lost their lives. [Tuchman, p.100] And their ranks were filled with individuals less qualified than their predecessors. Again, Boccaccio: “the numbers [of physicians] had increased enormously because the ranks of the qualified were invaded by people, both men and women, who had never received any training in medicine.” [Horrox, p.27]

Stories abounded of priests abandoning their flocks in the plague, out of fear for their own physical safety. They would have heard reports of other priests who attended to a parishioner with confession or the like and contracted the disease and died before the penitent whom he had gone to comfort. The bishop of Wells and Bath in England addressed the problem facing him in 1349: “The continuous pestilence of the present day...has left many parish churches...without parson or priest...We understand that many people are dying without the sacrament of Penance...all men...should make confession to each other, as is permitted in the teaching of the Apostles, whether to a layman or, if no man is present, even to a woman [sic].” No longer would the ordinary Catholic be able to have the Church’s comforting rite of burial, to soothe the pain of departure for the survivors, to ensure that the body would be placed respectfully in consecrated ground, and remind the faithful of the temporary nature of death, which constitutes merely a prelude to the everlasting happiness promised by the Church.

With mortality high among priests, the bar was lowered to rebuild their ranks, and the result was a lowering of educational and moral quality. During and immediately after the plague priests were ordained at twenty rather than twenty five; monastic vows could be administered to adolescents at age fifteen rather than twenty; and priests took over parish churches at age twenty instead of twenty five. [Cantor, p.206] In what seems an astonishing denunciation, Pope Clement VI leveled this diatribe at his priests in 1351: “[A]bout what can your preach to the



people? If on humility, you yourselves are the proudest of the world, arrogant and given to pomp. If on poverty, you are the most grasping and most covetous....If on chastity -- but we will be silent on this, for God knoweth what each man does and how many of you satisfy your lusts.” And he accused them of wasting their wealth “on pimps and swindlers and neglecting the ways of God.” [Ziegler, p.217] The stage was set for a diminishing of respect for the clergy.

For 1350 Pope Clement declared a Jubilee Year, in which a visit to Rome merited the pilgrim a plenary indulgence - free of charge, providing, of course, that he could afford the trip to Rome. At the same time, Pope Clement set forth a stunning (from a historical perspective) pronouncement. He set the theory of indulgences, and fixed its fatal equation with money. The sacrifices of Christ on the cross and of the Virgin and other saints had established an inexhaustible “treasury” for the use of pardons. Anyone could buy a share in this treasury by contributing sums to the Church. What the Church gained in revenue by this arrangement was matched in the end by loss in respect. [Tuchman, p.121] It was an ominous development, with undeniable connection to the posting by Martin Luther of his Theses on the church door in Wittenberg some 160 years later and the commencement of the Reformation.

Europe faced the daunting task of maintaining and rebuilding its cultural heritage. A truly remarkable change occurred in institutions of learning. The universities trained the theologians, the lawyers, the academic doctors and the physicians. The number of enrolled students at Oxford declined from a pre-plague high of some 30,000 or even higher to 6,000 in late 14th Century. In all Europe, the number of universities numbered about 30 before the plague, and of these five were closed. On the other hand there were a number of new institutions founded. This paradox is explained in part by the fear of travel: it was regarded as dangerous, and a local university saved the student from the risk of a long journey to a distant school. Other

factors influenced the creation of the new universities; the many plague deaths produced a flood of pious bequests, and that was combined with a realization that universities were the places where educated clerics were produced. Cambridge University acquired four new colleges: Gonville, Trinity Hall, Corpus Christi and Clare Hall, all by 1362 and all associated with the Black Death. Oxford saw two new colleges by 1372: Canterbury and New College. In the 25 years following the plague, universities were founded on the continent at Vienna, Cracow, Hungary and Heidelberg. Authorizing charters of these institutions mention the decay of learning and the shortage of priests as reasons for their founding. [Herlihy, p.70]. Furthermore, mortality among men of learning, and the consequent shortage of people qualified to teach in French, resulted in the growth of teaching in the vernacular and translation from Latin directly into English. A further weakening of the international language was a blow to the Church. [Ziegler, p.203-204]

I started this investigation looking for a connection between the Black Death, on the one hand, and the Renaissance and the Reformation, on the other. The first task facing us is to seek a starting date for the beginning of each - a shorter time gives more of a hint of cause and effect. Neither Renaissance nor Reformation has a firm date, since each was an event taking place gradually over time. The Reformation is easier: the posting by Luther of his 95 theses on the cathedral door in Wittenberg in 1517 (although the posting on the cathedral door part is largely believed to be apocryphal) is certainly an important date, and one that we can hang our hats on. The Renaissance is trickier. That ever reliable source, Wikipedia, states flatly that the Renaissance began in the 14th Century. Some have called the Decameron in mid-14th Century Italy the first - or at least an early - work of Renaissance literature. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel was completed in 1512. Michelangelo's David was completed in 1504. Copernicus

published in 1543 his *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*, introducing an alternative to the Ptolemaic view of the universe. In short, given that the period was so complicated and interwoven, it should not surprise us that a firm date is hard to settle upon.

I find direct cause and effect to be tenuous. Historians differ. Tuchman puts it tentatively: “[T]he Black Death may have been the unrecognized beginning of modern man.” [Tuchman, p.123] Survivors could find no Divine purpose in the pain they had suffered. This scourge had been too terrible to be accepted as God’s plan without questioning. The absolutes of a fixed order were loosed from their moorings. Minds that were opened to admit these questions would never again be shut. The turn to individual conscience lay ahead.

Ziegler takes a similar tentative approach. “The Black Death did not cause the Reformation, it did not stimulate doubts about the doctrine of the Transubstantiation; but did it not cause a state of mind in which doctrines were more easily doubted and in which the Reformation was more immediately possible?” [Ziegler, p.219] The Church was a victim of the Black Death because of the legion of its most competent and dedicated officers who had perished and, still more, because of the honor and respect which it had forfeited in the minds of men. The unquestioned authority over its members to which it had been accustomed was never to be recovered. To this decay the Black Death made a signal contribution.

Herlihy sees a somewhat more direct connection. In his view, the plague broke the Malthusian deadlock which Europe found itself in, overpopulated and paralyzed in its capacity to improve the ways it produced goods. It allowed Europe to rebuild their demographic and economic systems in ways more admissive of further development. It thinned the ranks of skilled and learned classes, and weakened schools and universities. The plague set the stage for a protracted and divisive debate over the nature of pure religion. “The sounds of religious dispute

echo down the centuries of the late Middle Ages and the early modern epoch. And the debate helped provoke eventual schism in the Christian community.” [Herlihy, p.81]

Cantor also sees a more direct connection to the Renaissance. The argument is intuitive, given the closer proximity in time: history tends to have the Reformation commence with Luther’s posting of his Theses on the door of the chapel in Wittenberg in 1517, a full 167 years after the end of the most disastrous plague attack. On the other hand, the Renaissance in Italy was about to flower as the plague hit: Boccaccio as observer of the plague is considered one of the launch-pads of the Italian Renaissance. “Perhaps the Black Death weakened faith in traditional medieval Catholic spirituality and set off a quest for a deeper naturalistic understanding of human psychology and behavior and the expression of a more personal sensibility.” [Cantor, p.210]

So what can the observer conclude? First and foremost, the Black Death was a traumatic event in the late Middle Ages - Herlihy calls it the “great watershed”. It is hard for us who live in the industrialized West and are long unaccustomed to such tragedies - even the (still in memory) military and civilian casualties of WWII as a percentage of the European population pale by comparison. It brought out the worst in people, as witnessed by the attacks on Jews as scapegoats (and isn’t that an interesting parallel to the WWII analogy!). I am struck by the dislocations and the tectonic shifts in the social fabric. Labor became the scarce resource, as compared with land and capital. Labor became more mobile, appearing to put the last nail in the coffin of feudal relationships and restraints. Cantor argues that the one truly direct result of the plague was its effect on the Hundred Years War, causing England to cede forever its holdings on the western part of France. The educated and professional ranks were devastated, and the cultural heritage imperiled. The closing of five European universities and the founding of six

new colleges at Oxford and Cambridge reflect the turmoil, although the latter certainly left room for optimism. And the relationship of man to his Church was changed, as the number and quality of the clergy was adversely affected. The Church's connection of indulgences with money, as outlined by Tuchman, is to me a striking event which had a direct connection to the Reformation: those indulgences featured prominently in Luther's theses some 160 years later. I think Herlihy's close connection between the Black Death and the Reformation is overstated. Still, what seems to me clear is that the Black Death certainly did not hold back the forces leading toward both the Renaissance and the Reformation, and most likely added to those forces.

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