The Pope, the Plague, and Popular Religion

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In line with Roman and Greek views of medicine, medieval conceptions of disease are inseparable from sin and morality. In the case of the Plague, where, from 1347 to 1353, around sixty percent of Europe's population died, a serious moral crisis arose.[1] This introspection often erupted into vilification, usually along what Paul Slack calls the "preexisting divisions" of European society, "highlighting its fundamental weaknesses" and prejudices.[2] Naturally, this led to extensive scapegoating and persecution of the Middle Age's classic and hated bogymen: the Muslims and the Jews. However, a new target also arose: The Catholic Church. The Plague brought out generations of dissatisfaction with the corruption of the Catholic Church which turned lay piety down other avenues of devotion. Including a renewed interest several Saints and visionaries whose were specifically associated with the Plague and an explosion of popular religious movements that existed outside of the traditional Church hierarchy. Common people were drawn to these *en masse* because they promised a direct line of communication with God which bypassed a corrupt clerical bureaucracy. In this paper, I will first examine the most relevant source of this perceived corruption, the so-called "Babylonian Captivity of the Church," alongside several sources that the describe how widespread the dissatisfaction in traditional worship had become. Then, I will discuss several popular religious practices and movements that arose

1 Anna Jones, *Epidemic Disease in Western History*, Class Lecture.

2 Paul Slack, The Impact of Plague in Tudor and Stuart England, (Oxford, 1985), 192.

in response to the Plague and the Church that, in the eyes of some, caused it.

Lasting from 1305 until 1377, the then ongoing "Babylonian Captivity of the Church" was the most apparent instance of institutional corruption within the Catholic Church. The Captivity began after the French King Philip IV invaded Italy, sacked Rome, and captured Pope Boniface VIII who later died in French custody.[3] Possibly due to further influence from Philip IV, a French cleric was soon elected Pope Clement V; sparking massive riots in Rome itself. In response, Clement decided to move the papal seat from Rome to Avignon, a city in Southern France. The Papacy, which had long been drawing criticism for its increasing role in Europe's secular politics, was now popularly seen as firmly under the thumb of the French crown.[4]

Therefore, it was not beyond belief to suggest that fourteenth-century Christians, who already attribute disease to sin and divine retribution, would connect the outbreak Plague with God's desire to purge an increasingly polluted Church and clergy. The Italian chronicler Gabriele de Mussis reflects this in his *History of the Plague*. Framed as a dialogue between God and Earth, de Mussis, writing in the voice of God, explicitly criticizes secular and religious authorities for leading the world astray. Before sending the Plague, de Mussis' God asks his creation "what are you doing, Earth, held captive by gangs of worthless men?"[5] While de Mussis is not explicitly writing about the current state of the Church, he certainly would have been aware of the criticisms of the Avignon Papacy and, as we will see later, could well have shared them. His personification of Earth is an effective narrative tool that implies a greater, transnational moral failing within the Christian world—one that could easily include decadence and moral laxity within the clerical hierarchy. The Catholic Church itself, wasting away under its Babylonian Captivity, seen by some as a major factor for why the Plague had struck Christendom.

Other writers have clearer criticisms of the Church. Simon Islip, the Archbishop of Canterbury during the height of the Plague,

3 Jones, *Epidemic Disease*.

4 Ibid.

5 Gabriele de Mussis, "History of the Plague," in *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350*, ed. John Aberth, (Bedford & St. Martin, 2005), 99

is unambiguously clear in his blame of the corrupt English Clergy for causing the Plague. In his eyes, much of the clergy had become more interested in garnering wealth, land, and power than actually caring out the precepts of the Church; they had not only corrupted themselves but also their congregations and the Catholic institution as a whole.[6] Hamo Hethe the Bishop of Rochester and Thomas de Lisle also mention negligent and incompetent priests who had neglected their clerical duties for so long that the "cures there are in danger of being almost abandoned, to the grave peril of souls."[7] Urgent criticism of the established hierarchy by clerics illustrate a recognized need for reform from within the Church. Popular action shows how far the fever had spread.

These accounts should not be taken to suggest that the whole population thought the Catholic Church was an entirely corrupt institution. What is clear, though, is that a notable percentage did. Enough European Christians wrote about corruption within the Catholic Church across a wide enough area and across a long enough period to suggest that these concerns were indeed shared by a significant number of European Christians. Furthermore, these criticisms were not confined to the ivory towers of theologians and reform-minded clerics in Canterbury, Rome, and Avignon but were shared across all levels of society. The popular religious movements that asserted themselves during the Plague years suggest that common people felt that both their souls and bodies were not being adequately cared for by the Catholic Church and so looked elsewhere for religious fulfillment, like, for instance, local saints.

Saints had always played an important role in medieval Christian popular belief. Rather than praying directly to God or Christ, it was common practice to pray to a saint who was associated with a specific place or issue, who would then intercede to God on that person's behalf. To contend with the Plague, saints Roch of Montpellier, the Blessed Anastasia, and Agatha of Catania all become cornerstones in popular religious devotion. Importantly, however, all these saints developed a following beyond the walls of the Church. Saint Roch, for instance, was

6 Simon Islip, "Effrenata (Unbridled)," in *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350*, ed. John Aberth, (Bedford & St. Martin, 2005), 104-05.

7 Hamo Hethe, in *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350*, ed. John Aberth, (Bedford & St. Martin, 2005), 107.

cast out of Rome after he developed the Plague on a pilgrimage to the city. He eventually wandered into the woods, where a miraculous stray dog licked his plague sores and cared for him until the disease subsided.[8] The allegorical significance of a plague victim being cast away from the traditional center of Christianity, only to find relief through less than traditional means, cannot be ignored. Gabrielle de Mussis, when noting the role of St. Anastasia played in Plague victim's beliefs, reiterates his previously mentioned dissatisfaction with the Church hierarchy. It is not a priest or other traditional cleric but "a certain (anonymous) holy person," having visions who first encourages people to pray to St. Anastasia.[9] Furthermore, it seems that many people felt they would be better of praying to a saint rather than relying solely on standard religious practice as "many held the opinion that (by turning away from Church institutions and toward theses saints) they could preserve their health against the plague's arrows."[10] As almost an afterthought at the end of his document, de Mussis mentions that Pope Clement VI also issued an indulgence to whoever genuinely repented their sins.[11] Clearly, though, clerical and popular imaginations alike had been captured by these new targets of worship.

Michele de Piazza's description of the Plague in the Sicilian towns of Messina and Catania expresses how fanatical saint worship became in some Plague infected towns. After Messina became infected with Plague, de Piazza suggests most of the Messianese marched to the nearby city of Catania for the relics of St. Agatha: "For we believe," he quotes, "that with the arrival of the relics, the city of Messina will be completely delivered from this sickness."[12] Not wanting to give up their relics, which were presumably keeping them safe from the Plague, the people of Catania wrested the keys to the Church away from the priest who had nearly capitulated to the Messianese and appealed to the town's secular authorities. After a tense stand-off, it was decided that Messianese would be given holy water made from contact with the relics; the relics themselves, however, would stay in Catania.[13] Reportedly, the holy water worked as intended and many were cured

8 Gregory Cleary, "St. Roch." In *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 13 (Robert Appleton Company, 1912), on newadvent.org (March, 2018).

9 Gabrielle de Mussis, in *The Black Death*, 100.

10 Gabrielle de Mussis, in *The Black Death*, 100.

11 Ibid.

12 Michele de Piazza, "Chronicle," in *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350,* ed. John Aberth, (Bedford & St. Martin, 2005), 101.

13 Da Piazza, in *The Black Death*, 101.

with it, but the people of Messina then had to contend with packs of wild dogs now roaming the city. One large and especially ferocious black dog brandished a drawn sword in its paw and rushed around the local church breaking things and terrorizing people.[14] Understandably, people were slightly terrified so they decided to appeal to another local religious figure—the Blessed Virgin of Santa Maria de la Scala. After the townspeople return from the shrine with an image of the Virgin, the Virgin decided the city was sinful and would rather not be there and turned away from the city, causing a large hole to suddenly open up, swallowing the horse carrying the image up whole.[15]

De Piazza's description illustrates how important the role of saints during the Plague became. Rather than praying through a corrupt clergy, led by a man in city hundreds of miles away, whose actions may have played a significant role causing the current Plague epidemic, it makes sense that people would turn to a direct, relatable, and effective line to God. Furthermore, the more fantastical elements of de Piazza's give us an insight into the reasoning behind the actions these people took. When faced with such ever-present and horrific disease and suffering, it would not have been that hard to think the world was ending, or that devil dogs were prowling around every corner. The immediacy offered by the Cult of Saints must have been extremely comforting. This same desire for immediate relief from the Plague helped give rise to several, mass religious movements outside the confines of the Catholic Church, the most famous being the flagellants.

According to Heinrich of Herford, the Flagellants get their name from the *flagella*, or whips, they used to beat themselves with until their "scourged skin swelled up black and blue and blood flowed down" over their bodies.[16] They were among the most radical of the lay religious movements, so they should not be taken to represent the population as a whole. However, they reiterate several of the same concerns about traditional Catholic practice previously illustrated. Their influence was inflammatory enough that the authorities felt compelled to crack down on them through both spiritual and secular punishments.[17] This should be expected as groups of rogue peasants roaming around the countryside, beating themselves bloody would likely alarm lay and religious authorities, a fear that would have been magnified during the crisis of the Plague. Importantly, the Flagellants began to preach very

14 Da Piazza, in *The Black Death,* 102.

15 Ibid, 103.

16 Heinrich of Herford, "Book of Memorable Matters," in *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350*, ed. John Aberth, (Bedford & St. Martin, 2005), 123.

17 Heinrich of Herford, in *The Black Death*, 125.

specific, anti-institutional messages. Herford mentions an instance in which, when asked what gives them the right to preach when they are not part of the clergy, a group of Flagellants answers, “and who sent you, and how do you know that what you consecrate is the body of Christ, or that what you preach is the Gospel truth?”[18]

Gilles Li Muisis mentions that the contents of Flagellant sermons were borderline heretical. One flagellant preacher even went so far as to liken the flagellants to Christ, saying that “aside to from the shedding of the blood of our Savior, there is no nobler shedding as that which comes from those who whip themselves.”[19] At the movement’s height, as Fritsche Closener points out, the fervor surrounding the flagellants reached the point that priests became afraid to speak out against them.[20] The flagellants even seem to have usurped clerical authority for, as Closener says, “(the people) believed the flagellants words more than those of the priests.”[21] Closener and many like-minded clerics attempted to disparage the group by saying that only laymen and uneducated clergy joined the group. Yet, this criticism further reiterates the popularity this decidedly non-hierarchical message with laymen.

To return to Paul Slack’s point that, in times of crisis, divisions tend to erupt along lines where hate and anger already exist, popular movements in the Plague years reflect a tectonic gulf between the laity and the clergy. While the “Babylonian Captivity” is the most obvious example, clerical corruption, whether real or merely imagined, had become a serious sticking point for many European Christians. The Plague was the metaphorical straw that broke the camel’s back. While most Christians found solace within more traditional means of faith by reinforcing their devotion to the Cult of Saints, a significant population found its voice in more radical lay movements like the Flagellants. And, while these groups may have been quelled relatively quickly, the dissatisfaction with the religious status-quo they reflected would remain to grow and fester and eventually burst, like a Plague sore, into the Reformation movements of the sixteenth century.

18 Heinrich of Herford, in *The Black Death*, 125.

19 Gilles Li Muisis, “Chronicle,” in *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350*, ed. John Aberth, (Bedford & St. Martin, 2005), 133.

20 Fritschie Closener, “Chronicle,” in *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350*, ed. John Aberth, (Bedford & St. Martin, 2005), 129

21 Fritschie Closener, in *The Black Death*, 128.