

## The Plague

As a demographic fact the Plague is almost without parallel. The Black Death of 1348 alone killed perhaps a third of Europe's population, and the plague returned subsequently again and again. Is it also a major fact in religious history? Strenuous efforts have been made to relate it to transformations of religious sentiment – Italian cities receiving particular attention. One theory is that it led to a more 'civic Christianity' (at least in Italy): that is, to an emphasis on helping people in this life, at the expense of concentration on the next life. That theory has been convincingly criticised, as has the almost opposite interpretation, which postulated a reversal of early Trecento developments and a return to a negative, ascetic and world-rejecting form of piety. It is very hard to find uniform patterns across one region of Italy, let alone Europe. It is almost impossible to disentangle effects of the plague from trends already discernible before 1348.

A more promising approach is to turn an empirical eye on discussion of the plague in late medieval religious texts. One of the most interesting from this point of view is a long 'model' sermon on the plague by Leonardo da Udine (see Bibliography under Leonardus de Utino), a fifteenth century Dominican. Sermons 'are as necessarily bound to the preconceived notions, as to the language, of those whom they have to exhort. . . . because they must follow and cannot lead, sermons are the surest index of the prevailing religious feeling of their age' (Mark Pattison). Leonardo is a surer guide than artistic trends or testamentary statistics to the plague's place in religious history.

He gives a vivid picture of the plague's effect on religious experience. 'Think how horrible it is to see clerics and laity, morning, noon and night, running around anxious and exhausted, with the sacraments and the cross, through the city and outside the city, giving communion to the sick, extreme unction to those near death, and burial to the dead - so that they do not have a moment to eat or rest . . . '. Or again: 'Unhappy souls do not go to confession and communion, are not comforted by divine words [in sermons presumably], are not helped by prayers, are not mindful of their sins . . . '

He also tries to make sense of it. The explanations of the plague's causes are fascinating because they combine scientific and medical with religious explanations. Conjunctions of stars, the heat of the summer, vapours of the air all enter into his account. Though the science is incorrect it is undoubtedly intended to be science. But this line of causation is compatible with explanation in terms of sin. He goes beyond analysis of causes, however, to reflect on the function of the plague. Some observations will strike us as hard hearted: God uses it to show his impotence, and to show his mercy by sparing some people. He also says that God draws good out of evil. In time of plague, fear leads many people to convert, when otherwise they would have been presumptuously overconfident and headed for damnation. Some go straight to heaven when otherwise they would have gone to purgatory – presumably because their suffering in the plague takes the place of suffering in the next life.

The experience of the plague is almost impossible for us to imagine, but Leonardo's contemporary view shows how later medieval people tried to make some sense of it with the help of their religion.

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Millard Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1979)

E. H. Gombrich, in his *Reflections on the History of Art. View and Reviews*, ed. R. Woodfield (Berkeley, etc.: University of California Press, 1987): chapter 6: 'The Impact of the Black Death'

R. E. Lerner, 'The Black Death and Western Eschatological Mentalities', *American Historical Review*, 86 (1981) pp. 533-552

Leonardus de Utino, *Sermones Floridi* (Johannes Trechsel: Lyons, 1496) Sermon XLVII