

THE BLACK DEATH AND ITS IMPACT ON THE CHURCH AND POPULAR
RELIGION

by
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ABSTRACT

MCLAURINE H. ZENTNER: The Black Death and Its Impact on the Church and Popular Religion
(Under the direction of Jeffrey Watt)

This thesis concerns the religious impact of the Black Death, the plague that devastated Europe during the middle of the fourteenth century. It explores the effect of the Black Death on the Catholic Church and the religious movements that emerged in response to it. The conclusions drawn here are based on the research of both primary and secondary sources. The Church played a significant role during the Middle Ages because religion was an important aspect of daily life for European Christians. When the Black Death struck Europe in 1347, the Church struggled to cope with the plague's damaging consequences and its reputation suffered as a result. This thesis concludes that the Black Death contributed to the decline in the confidence and faith of the Christian laity towards the institution of the Church and its leadership. The scope of this paper focuses on the plague's impact on the clergy, the rise of the flagellant movement, and the widespread Jewish persecutions that ensued in the wake of the plague. The Black Death was a significant event in the history of Western society with profound cultural and demographic consequences, and its impact on the Church and religion in medieval society justifies the study of this topic.

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Introduction

The Black Death, the pestilence that ravaged Europe during the years from 1347 to 1351, left a mark on Western society that would leave it forever transformed. Not only did the plague drastically reduce the European population; it also radically changed the medieval world by challenging the institutions that provided its people with stability and guidance. Perhaps the most important of these institutions during this time was the Church. Medieval Europeans turned towards the Church and its leaders in times of crises because they were in search of answers that provided a degree of order and solidity.¹ The overall confidence and faith in the Church from the laypeople diminished during the plague and its subsequent outbreaks because the Church suffered just as they did. People were able to see the “human” side of the Church that was unable to save them from the onslaught of the plague.

A major reason why the plague had such a damaging effect on the Church was due to the deterioration of its hierarchical bureaucracy before the onset of the plague had even begun. The Catholic Church had already begun experiencing a decline before the arrival of the plague. The Church had gradually become more secular as its focus turned toward wealth and political power. Thus, the Church already found itself at a disadvantage during this time because of its weakened state. The papacy had been moved

¹ Elizabeth Leffeldt, ed. *The Black Death* (Problems in European Civilization) (Boston: Cengage Learning, 2004), 123.

from Rome to Avignon, a city located today in southern France, and its reputation suffered as a result. When the Black Death struck Europe in 1347, the increasingly secular Church was forced to respond when its religious, spiritual, and instructive capabilities were found wanting.² The Black Death exacerbated this decline of faith in the Church because it exposed its vulnerability to Christian society. Despite this view, it is important to note that the majority of Europeans did not experience a decline in their faith in God, but rather a decline in their confidence in the ability of the institution of the Church.

Part of the reason why the Catholic Church was so negatively affected by the plague was due to the deterioration in the quality of its clergy. A great number of priests succumbed to the pestilence, and the individuals whom the Church recruited to take their place could not adequately perform their duties. The Black Death also saw the rise of the flagellant movement, groups of men and women who publicly flogged their bodies while they traveled to and from European cities, preaching their version of Christianity without the permission of the Church. These bands posed a great threat to the authority of the Church and exposed its weakened hold over the Christian laity. Another disturbing movement that emerged in the wake of the plague was the widespread violence directed against the Jewish population. The Church vehemently opposed this slaughter, but this did not stop the maddened public from taking action. Jews had long held a tense relationship with their Christian neighbors, and when the plague arrived, European Christians violently attacked the Jews in the belief that Jews had spread the plague. All of these events point to how the Church began to lose its influence over the Christian

² Robert S. Gottfried, *The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe* (New York: The Free Press, 1983), 83-84.

people. If the process had already been occurring before the pestilence, it became even more amplified when the Black Death reached Europe. Although Western society eventually recovered from the onslaught of the plague, it was no longer the same Europe. Its population had been significantly diminished, but more importantly, the structure of its society was changed in lasting ways.

Chapter I: The Decline of the Clergy

The institution of the Catholic Church greatly suffered from the Black Death, and one of the major factors was the decline in the reputation of the clergy. The clergy were significant members of medieval society because they served as a direct link between the laity and the Church. During times of crisis, it was the clergy to whom people looked for guidance. When the Black Death struck Europe, however, both the Church and its clergy were found wanting in the eyes of European Christians. The significant reduction in the ecclesiastical population, combined with the deterioration in quality of clerical services, created an untrustworthy image of the Church in the minds of medieval Christians. Although the Church had already begun to lose its power and influence over the Christian world, the Black Death amplified the growing division between the Church and laity.³ Ultimately, there was a decline in the faith of the Christian population towards the Church due to the extreme mortality rate of the clerical populace, the failure of the Church and its leaders to serve the people effectively in their time of need, and the numerous moral shortcomings among priests that were evident throughout the Black Death.

The loss of life among clergy members during the Black Death was substantial, and the repercussions of this were severe because it markedly weakened the manpower of

³ Alexander C. Flick, *Decline of the Medieval Church* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1967), 337.

the Church when the Christian world needed it most. Hamo Hethe, the Bishop of Rochester in 1349, wrote on the many suffering churches he saw as a result of the plague. He stated that “parish churches have for a long time remained unserved, and the cures (of souls) there are in danger of being almost abandoned, to the grave peril of souls.”⁴ The Church was looked to for guidance when the plague swept through Europe, and it often failed to provide this sense of security for people due to the limited number of clergy it had at its disposal. An early study by Hamilton Thompson revealed an estimated death rate of 40 percent among beneficed clergy during the first epidemic in York, England, and it is very possible that the death rate among the clergy was even higher than the rest of the population, due to their exposure to the sick and dying.⁵ During the height of the plague in 1349, roughly 45 percent of the priests in ten dioceses throughout England died, with some rates reaching as high as 50 percent in Exeter and Winchester. One of the highest rates of mortality recorded among priests during the Black Death was in the diocese of Barcelona, where it reached 60 percent between 1348 and 1349.⁶ These figures show the vulnerability of the clergy against the plague when compared with the mortality rates of the laypeople, as analysis of remaining manorial and tax records reveal mortality rates of 40 to 70 percent among the English peasantry.⁷ Norman Cantor writes, “Its direct impact on the Church was more in the way of affecting personnel. At least 40 percent of the parish clergy, equal to the mortality rate among the peasants and workers they ministered to, were in the late 1340s carried off. Some cathedrals’ chapters were close to

⁴ John Aberth, ed. *The Black Death: The Great Mortality of 1348-1350: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2005), 107.

⁵ Rosemary Horrox, *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester Medieval Sources, 1994), 235.

⁶ Aberth, *Black Death*, 95.

⁷ Aberth, *Black Death*, 95.

being wiped out, and many abbeys were similarly devastated, even though these were privileged precincts.”⁸ Almost half the diocesan clergy had died during the first plague, and recurring epidemics continued to dwindle the clerical population and prevent it from effectively answering the religious needs of the European Christian population.

The demographic result of the plague had an enormous impact on the Church because it “created a short-staffed institution struggling to meet the pastoral needs of the laity.”⁹ The smaller and poorer parishes also suffered greatly because of their lack of resources. There were fewer curates to do the required pastoral work, and these individuals were often strained with added responsibilities. These smaller churches, often located in the remote and secluded European countryside, felt this effect and were forced to survive with much reduced resources and staff. This problem can be seen in a response to the Archbishop of York from Pope Clement VI, who allowed a request from a province for extra ordinations after observing their limitations. The pontiff stated, “Because of the mortality from plague which overshadows your province at this time, not enough priests can be found for the cure and rule of souls or to administer the sacraments. We want to find an appropriate solution to the problem, because we fervently desire an increase of worship and the health of souls, and have therefore inclined favourably to your request.”¹⁰ The impact of the death toll among clergy members was significant because it resulted in the loss of the Church’s most experienced and valuable members. Philip Ziegler writes, “The abrupt disappearance of nearly half the clergy, including a disproportionately great number of the brave and diligent, inevitably put a heavy strain on

⁸ Norman F. Cantor, *In the Wake of the Plague: The Black Death and the World It Made* (New York: Free Press, 2002), 206.

⁹ William Dohar, “The Black Death and Pastoral Leadership,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 6.

¹⁰ Horrox, *Black Death*, 273.

the machinery of the church and reduced its capacity to deal effectively with movements of protest or revolt.”¹¹

The monasteries were also severely depleted as a result of the Black Death. Before the onset of the plague, the total number of monks, nuns, and friars in the religious houses throughout England was around 17,500. Ziegler maintains, “Not far short of half these appear to have perished in the two years of the epidemic; probably more than half the friars and rather less than half the monks and nuns.”¹² Many of these houses would never see their populations return to their original size. While the impact of the plague was felt everywhere, some of the houses deteriorated much faster. Some were even completely destroyed.¹³ The shock of the plague in its first year had a profound impact on religious provinces throughout the countryside, and many of these institutions were unable to recover. Francis Gasquet states, “The religious houses were never able to regain the ground lost in that fatal year [1349]. Over and above this, moreover, the sudden change in the tenure of land, brought about chiefly by the deaths of the monastic tenants, so impaired their financial position, at any rate for a long period, that they were unable to support the burden of additional subjects.”¹⁴

Not only was the Church expected to alleviate the chaos and anxiety of European Christians during the first year of the plague, but it was expected to do so in a weakened and debilitated state. Robert Gottfried remarks that “death seemed nearer, and salvation more important, than ever, and the clergy were put to a real test. If, in one fashion or another, they acted responsibly and were able to relieve the anxiety – and, in some cases,

¹¹ Philip Ziegler, *The Black Death* (Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co., 1969), 212.

¹² Ziegler, *Black Death*, 215.

¹³ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 215.

¹⁴ Francis A. Gasquet, *The Black Death of 1348 and 1349* (Charleston: BiblioLife, 2008), 249.

hysteria – of their flocks, their position would be strengthened. If not, the faithful would follow another path to heaven.”¹⁵ The laity was experiencing death at every turn, and the Church was often physically unable to fulfill its obligations. The frequent inability of the Church to perform effectively its responsibilities to the laypeople reveals the struggles it faced in the aftermath of the plague to adapt to the extreme losses of its clerical members. Giovanni Boccaccio described this when he stated, “In this great affliction and misery of our city, the revered authority of both divine and human laws was left to fall and decay by those who administered them. They too, just as other men, were all either dead or sick or so destitute of their families, that they were unable to fulfill any office. As a result, everyone could do just as he pleased.”¹⁶ European Christians observed the impact that the mortality of priests had on the Church, and many felt the repercussions of this at home due to the failure of their priests to perform their expected services. Ziegler writes of the change in perception towards the village priest by the laity: “With his ordination, surely he acquired too a touch of the superhuman; remained a man but became a man apart? After the plague, his vulnerability so strikingly exposed, all trace of the superhuman must have vanished.”¹⁷

During the Black Death, people were constantly reminded that their lives could end at any moment because of the speed at which the plague killed. Gottfried explains that the Black Death, “that sudden, precipitous, painful, and omnipresent killer, intensified the medieval preoccupation with death, judgment, heaven and hell.”¹⁸ The concept of death became more terrifying, and as a result, people became more

¹⁵ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 82.

¹⁶ David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 64.

¹⁷ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 211.

¹⁸ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 82.

preoccupied with sin and their fate in the afterlife. David Herlihy argues, “The shock of plague disrupted the customary ways by which society coped with the passing of its members.”¹⁹ The transition from the living world to the afterlife was an obviously frightening concept to many Christians, and the Church was expected to alleviate the fears associated with it.

The *ars moriendi*, or art of dying, was an important tradition for European Christians that helped them prepare for the journey after death. Confessions and the giving of last rites were an important part of this tradition because they “encouraged the living to accept the loss of their loved ones, recruit others to continue the work of the departed, mend the rift in the social fabric that death had caused, and return to their quotidian labors.”²⁰ In ordinary circumstances, after people died, their bodies were removed from their homes to the burial site, where their friends and family gathered and a priest blessed the deceased before the bodies were placed in the ground. Through this process, “not only the dead but the living too were introduced into a new phase of existence. Rituals helped restore mental and social equilibria.”²¹ These rituals and sacramental services were important because they allowed the Church to help calm the fear of death among European Christians, but priests struggled to perform them effectively in the wake of the plague. The deadly rate at which the plague killed and the “inability of the clergy (either due to their own mortality or because they had fled) to meet the sacramental demands of so many deaths, threw the comfort of the *ars moriendi* into array.”²²

¹⁹ Herlihy, *Black Death*, 59.

²⁰ Herlihy, *Black Death*, 60.

²¹ Herlihy, *Black Death*, 60.

²² Dohar, “Pastoral Leadership,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 125.

Bishop Ralph Shrewsbury of Bath and Wells delivered a renowned decree in 1349 on the matter of Christians dying without the sacrament of penance. He explained the cause of this when he stated that “priests cannot be found to take on the cares of these places, neither out of devotional zeal nor for payment, or to visit the sick and administer the Church sacraments to them, perhaps because they are infected or have a fear of being infected.”²³ The Bishop ordered the clergy of his diocese to publicize the fact that a sick or dying individual should make a confession to a layperson if a priest was not available. He added that if people, “when on the point of death cannot secure the services of a properly ordained priest, they should make confession of their sins to any lay person, even to a woman if a man is not available.”²⁴

Many similar instances are mentioned by those who observed this decline in services offered by the clergy. Giovanni Boccaccio described hasty burials that were performed by priests in the wake of the plague: “Nor were these dead honored with tears, candles or mourners. It had come to such a pass that men who died were shown no more concern than dead goats today.”²⁵ Traditionally, burials were witnessed by the family and friends of the deceased, and it was important for the living to experience the rituals as well. It is not surprising that people began to comment on the absence or lack of these sacramental services. A witness at Avignon spoke of a similar instance: “No priest came to hear the confession of the dying, or to administer the sacraments to them. People cared only for their own health [and that of their families].”²⁶ Gottfried also writes on how the Church did not provide proper spiritual comfort to the laity during the plague. He states,

²³ Aberth, *Black Death*, 95.

²⁴ Aberth, *Black Death*, 271.

²⁵ Herlihy, *Black Death*, 61.

²⁶ Herlihy, *Black Death*, 62.

“Many parish priests fled, leaving no one to offer services, deliver last rites, and comfort the sick. Flight might have been intellectually explicable, but it was morally inexcusable.”²⁷ In the English dioceses of York and Lincoln, almost 20% of the parish priests in various deaneries fled the onslaught of the Black Death. The fear and paranoia that people experienced during the plague only worsened when they witnessed their local priests abandon their posts. These instances were notable because “in a world in which performance of an appointed role was very important, many clerics no longer seemed to be doing their jobs.”²⁸ The clerical leaders were just as powerless against the plague as the ordinary laypeople. They feared that if God showed no mercy even to his priests, then they were surely doomed. Boccaccio remarked, “As the ferocity of the plague increased, such [services] ceased either totally or in part, and new ones took their place.”²⁹ The absence of religious and sacramental services provided by the Church contributed to the growing sense of abandonment felt by European Christians towards the clergy during the Black Death. Ziegler asserts, “Yet the slender evidence that exists shows that [the clergy] lost in popularity as a result of the plague. They were deemed not to have risen to the level of their responsibilities, to have run away in fear or in search of gain, to have put their own skins first and the souls of their parishioners a bad second.”³⁰ The Black Death had created a world where every man was concerned only with his own wellbeing, and many members of the clergy, individuals who were supposed to live by the principles of selflessness and charity, were found in the eyes of European Christians to be no different.

²⁷ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 84.

²⁸ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 94.

²⁹ Herlihy, *Black Death*, 61.

³⁰ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 211.

The massive depopulation caused by the Black Death affected not only the availability of priestly assistance to the Christian population but also the standard of quality in the work that was performed. The lack of competency among the clergy was a major repercussion of this depopulation. One of the major causes of this was the increased number of unqualified individuals the Church was forced to accept into its ranks. Ziegler writes, “During and immediately after the plague the usual rules governing the ordination of priests were virtually abandoned.”³¹ The Church found itself so decimated and in such a need of an ecclesiastical labor force that it was frequently forced to take in inexperienced and unskilled individuals to fill the vacancies left over from the death toll of the plague. He observes, “The Bishop of Norwich obtained a dispensation to allow sixty clerks aged twenty-one or less to hold rectories on the grounds, more or less categorically stated, that they would be better than nothing.”³² Another instance can be seen in Winchester during the years of 1349 and 1350, when twenty-seven new appointees “became sub-deacons, deacons and priests in successive ordinations and thus arrived virtually unfledged in their new offices.”³³

In many cases, Church leaders were obliged to reduce the minimum age requirements in order to fill the depleted ranks of the clergy. While the age of these new candidates was not the only factor in the decline in quality of the clerical services performed, it no doubt had an impact on the need of the Church to react quickly and effectively to the current crisis. Norman Cantor supports this claim, asserting, “During and immediately after the Black Death, priests were ordained at twenty rather than twenty-five. Monastic vows could be administered to adolescents at age fifteen rather

³¹ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 212.

³² Ziegler, *Black Death*, 212.

³³ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 212.

than twenty. Priests took over parish churches at age twenty instead of twenty-five. It was a younger, much younger Church that came suddenly into being, and one now staffed heavily with undereducated and inexperienced people.”³⁴ Before the Black Death, age and experience were vital traits required by the Church. After the first year of the plague, it was evident that this had changed.

Experience and discipline were two of the most important qualities valued by the Church in its clerical members, and the Black Death transformed it into an institution severely lacking both. Older clerics were greatly respected and looked to for guidance by the clergy and laypeople alike. Francis Gasquet explains, “It need hardly be said that the scourge must have been most demoralizing to discipline, destructive to traditional practice, and fatal to observance.”³⁵ Wadding, a Franciscan annalist who observed the negative impact the plague had on clerical standards in his own order, wrote, “This evil wrought great destruction to the holy houses of religion, carrying off the masters of regular discipline and the seniors of experience. From this time the monastic Orders, and in particular the mendicants, began to grow tepid and negligent, both in that piety and that learning in which they had up to this time flourished.”³⁶ He added, “Then, our illustrious members being carried off, the rigors of discipline relaxed by these calamities, could not be renewed by the youths received without the necessary training, rather to fill the empty houses than to restore the lost discipline.”³⁷ The city of Hereford provides historians with blatant examples of instances where clergy members were often incapable of performing their clerical duties. William Dohar writes that in the diocese of Hereford

³⁴ Cantor, *Black Death*, 206.

³⁵ Gasquet, *Black Death*, 250.

³⁶ Gasquet, *Black Death*, 251.

³⁷ Gasquet, *Black Death*, 251.

there were “glaring cases of misfits at the altar, men who were patently inept at exercising the arts of arts, some on account of ignorance, poor training and spare opportunity for learning, others out of an incompetence that was not adequately challenged by the usual pastoral authorities of rural dean, archdeacon or bishop.”³⁸

Whether these new clerical members were youthful or not, the lack of experience that the majority of them held was detrimental to the Church’s mission to restore stability to the Christian world. Many of them were also uneducated, which is an obvious problem when the clergy were unable effectively to read and understand the texts about which they were meant to preach to the laity. The confidence and belief in the leaders of the Church was significantly waning, and the incompetence of its new members only worsened its reputation among the Christian population. Ziegler concludes that during the aftermath of the first few years of the plague, “when society was slowly pulling itself together, the Church must have been singularly ill-equipped to give a lead.”³⁹

Another major reason European Christians experienced a decline in trust and confidence in the clergy was due to the increased wealth they accrued during the aftermath of the Black Death. When the Black Death greatly diminished the ecclesiastical population, many members of the clergy saw an opportunity to increase their own wealth. Ziegler writes, “among these novice priests and the survivors of the plague there was noticeable a new acquisitiveness: a determination to share in the wealth which fell free for the taking after the Black Death.”⁴⁰ Part of the problem was the egocentric attitude that had become prevalent among all classes of European society during the first years of the plague. This was especially prevalent among the clergy. When priests began to realize

³⁸ Dohar, “Pastoral Leadership,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 156.

³⁹ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 213.

⁴⁰ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 214.

the opportunities that arose from the dwindling number of the clerical population and the increased rarity of a qualified cleric, they made sure to take advantage of the situation by demanding higher fees due to their increased demand. Ziegler writes of a monk who observed, “In this plague many chaplains and hired parish priests would not serve without excessive pay.”⁴¹ The increase in salaries demanded by priests rose so dramatically that Edward III ordered his bishops to make certain that they were paid no more than their usual salary and did not abandon their posts in search of higher pay.⁴² The efforts of moral leaders in the Church often proved futile, however, with the continued outbreaks of the plague in later years. Simon Sudbury, the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1378, wrote a letter to the bishop of London describing these same problems with clergy members. This is significant because it shows how clerical greed persisted during further outbreaks of the plague later in the fourteenth century. Simon complained of how these priests “gorge their bellies and afterwards work themselves up into a lather of lechery over various fleshly delights, until at last they are dragged down into the very vortex of the whirlpool of evil – a detestable scandal to the clergy and the worst possible example to the laity.”⁴³ It can be seen that many priests after the Black Death began to recognize that their labor had suddenly become more valuable, and they were intent on taking advantage of the benefits that could be gained.

Not only did priests seek higher wages, they also made an effort to gain wealth through their services and other means. One way was to serve private chapels where wealthy patrons paid great amounts to have them direct private masses. Simon Islip, the Archbishop of Canterbury at the time, complained that because some priests were not

⁴¹ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 211.

⁴² Horrox, *Black Death*, 241.

⁴³ Horrox, *Black Death*, 311.

satisfied with their current salaries, “they demand for their services excessive wages, and thus they win more profit for themselves than curates do, in exchange only for their status and little work.”⁴⁴ While priests during this time could often be justified in their demands for greater wealth, given the economic difficulties many of them faced during the plague, it did not serve as an adequate excuse to the Christian laity for a man of God. Ziegler writes, “Insistence upon his financial due is rarely becoming to a minister of the Church and sometimes they were greedy and excessive in their exactions.”⁴⁵ Henry Knighton, an Augustinian canon who served in Leicester, England, also observed this behavior among his fellow clergymen: “A man could scarcely get a chaplain to undertake any church for less than 10 pounds or ten marks. And while there had been plenty of priests before the plague and a man might have had a chaplain for five or six marks or for two marks and his daily bread, at this time there was scarce anyone who would accept a vicarage at 20 pounds or twenty marks.”⁴⁶

Another way that clergymen sought to gain a larger profit was through the greater importance they placed on indulgences. Gottfried notes, “From the 1350s, apparently on papal orders, new stress was put on indulgences, or grants of time off from purgatory bestowed by the church, which drew on what it termed a ‘treasury of merits’ or good deeds accumulated from Christ, the patristic fathers, and saints.”⁴⁷ Because there was a greater emphasis on death and the afterlife, people became even more concerned with their fate after death and how their past sins would affect their judgment by God. He continues, “Indulgences were not given freely, but usually in anticipation of a gift of

⁴⁴ Aberth, *Black Death*, 105.

⁴⁵ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 214.

⁴⁶ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 214.

⁴⁷ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 88.

money; always mindful of turning a profit, church leaders began to sell them in increasing numbers to a richer public.”⁴⁸ While it would be rather bold to make the argument that the Black Death was the major cause of the Protestant Reformation, these instances nevertheless were significant in that they pointed to the practices that incited the radical change that transformed the Church in the sixteenth century. Gottfried supports this claim by writing, “While indulgences were not the only thing that spurred Martin Luther, their use and sale inspired him to nail up his 95 Theses.”⁴⁹

The differences in pay among clergy members also increased tension among the classes. William Dohar maintains, “This discrepancy only added to the anxieties over class and opportunity that distinguished the fewer beneficed clerics from their more numerous non-beneficed brothers.”⁵⁰ These conditions made it almost impossible to maintain morale and discipline among the poorly paid clergy, which further contributed to the problems laypeople were experiencing with the Church. Herlihy argues that these conditions “further added to the growing distrust of the Church among European Christians.”⁵¹ Islip also notably cited clerical greed as the cause of priests abandoning their posts as opposed to the fear of infection.⁵² The tensions between the clergy and laypeople were further strained by the gluttony of the clergy, and it caused them to lose faith in the institution of the Church itself. Although these actions were not representative of the entire clerical population, the actions of some of them were enough to paint the general reputation of the clergy in a negative light. Gottfried notes, “The idealized selfless image of the Christian clergy suffered during and after the Black Death. Many

⁴⁸ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 88.

⁴⁹ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 88.

⁵⁰ Dohar, “Pastoral Leadership,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 157.

⁵¹ Herlihy, *Black Death*, 64.

⁵² Aberth, *Black Death*, 95.

people believed that the clergy were greedy, self-centered, and filled with a sense of their own importance.”⁵³ The priests and leaders of the Church were expected to serve as examples for the laity and show them the proper way to live one’s life in devotion to God. Islip writes that the surviving priests “do not blush for shame when their insatiable greed provides a wicked and pernicious example for other workers, even among the laity, now have no regard for the care of souls.”⁵⁴ The Church found itself in a problematic situation because of the actions by its clergy. It found it difficult to denounce selfish and gluttonous behavior of the laypeople when its own clergy were doing the same.

Part of the problem faced by the Church was its failure to adapt to the new environment created by the Black Death. Ziegler explains, “Some writers have also ascribed to the Black Death the responsibility for an increase in the number of pluralities among those who held benefices. It would not have been surprising if the dearth of priests had led to more cases in which a single parson held two or more benefices.”⁵⁵ Pluralism, or the practice of holding more than one office or church benefice at a time, was yet another controversial temptation for priests during this time. While the religious structures of fourteenth-century Europe were challenged greatly in the wake of the plague, part of the problem was due to the rigid and inflexible systems that were already in place. Dohar describes how “the institutional demands of the diocese remained pretty much the same after the plague as before, but there were far fewer priests to administer them and far fewer innovations provided by visionary leaders of the post-plague church.”⁵⁶ These conditions made it easier for vices such as simony, or the buying or

⁵³ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 87.

⁵⁴ Aberth, *Black Death*, 104.

⁵⁵ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 214.

⁵⁶ Dohar, “Pastoral Leadership,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 157.

selling of ecclesiastical privileges, to spread throughout clerical positions. Heinrich von Herford, a Dominican friar of Westphalia, accused the clergy of these evils in his chronicle: “The heresy of simony also grew so strong among the clergy, and overwhelmed them so completely, that everyone, of whatever degree (great, middling or humble) and of whatever status (secular or regular) in some fashion openly bought and sold spiritualities of all sorts.”⁵⁷ Corruption was already prevalent throughout the Church before the plague struck Europe, and the problem worsened among clergy members throughout the aftermath of the Black Death. Heinrich complained that “every office and appointment among them could only be secured by money, or favoritism, or some other useful gift.”⁵⁸ Gasquet states, “To the great dearth of clergy at this time may, partly at least, be ascribed the great growth of the crying abuse of pluralities.”⁵⁹ Examples such as these show the often corrupt nature of many priests during this time and how their actions further worsened their reputation.

The failures of the Church and its leaders to serve effectively the laity in the aftermath of the Black Death were a major reason why many Christian Europeans sought other ways to practice their faith. One direction that people took was through charity, a practice that became very popular after the Black Death.⁶⁰ Family chapels and private masses also became widespread, and they gave the affluent another way to maintain their relationship with God when the Church failed to aid them. Gottfried writes, “This charity system of private worship played a large role in late medieval religion and represented a considerable blow to monopoly over church services held by the traditional Christian

⁵⁷ Horrox, *Black Death*, 128.

⁵⁸ Horrox, *Black Death*, 129.

⁵⁹ Gasquet, *Black Death*, 248.

⁶⁰ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 85.

hierarchy.”⁶¹ The increase in charity was also significant because a large portion of the money that was donated was given to hospitals. Records from testators’ wills show that before 1348, only 5% of them gave money to hospitals, but this number increased to 40% between 1350 and 1360.⁶² The increase in charity was significant not only because it “was the kind of good work that counted toward salvation, but it could [also] be done directly without clerical involvement.”⁶³ Another movement that gained popularity after the Black Death was the increase in pilgrimages undertaken by Christians. Between 1349 and 1360, the number of pilgrimages taken to Rome and other shrines increased dramatically.⁶⁴ The increase in pilgrimages was a significant movement that further detracted from the reputation of the clergy because it was another way for the laity to find their path to salvation without their assistance. In making pilgrimages to shrines, “the faithful were performing a religious act directly, using a saint rather than a priest to intercede in their behalf.”⁶⁵ This new emphasis on “good works” revealed the desire of the public to continue their faith and obtain salvation without the help of the Church, which in the eyes of many people, had lost its way with God.

Although the earlier complaints by the Franciscan friar Wadding suggest that even the mendicant orders were experiencing this same decline in reputation, they were often nonetheless viewed in a better light than the parish clergy. It is difficult to discern the reasons for this, but “the very fact that they had no territorial responsibility increased their chances of making an impression on the laity.”⁶⁶ One example that supports this

⁶¹ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 85.

⁶² Gottfried, *Black Death*, 86.

⁶³ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 86.

⁶⁴ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 217.

⁶⁵ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 86.

⁶⁶ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 216.

negative opinion of the parish clergy compared to the friars was the public berating given to the former by Pope Clement VI himself. In 1351, a group of parish clergymen presented a signed petition to Pope Clement VI in anger due to the emergence of these mendicant orders. They were upset because the mendicants were providing the laity with religious services, and they believed that the right to give those services belonged only to them. The Pope defended these friars and “accused the clergy of wasting their wealth ‘on pimps and swindlers and neglecting the ways of God.’”⁶⁷ The fact that the Pope himself was voicing the same complaints held by the laity speaks to the damaged reputation of the Church at this time. Moreover, the fact that “he himself, with his superior sources of information and personal responsibility for the doings of the Church, should have endorsed that opinion is a clear verdict of guilty against the priesthood.”⁶⁸

Another consequence that resulted from the Church’s failure to fulfill all the spiritual needs of the laity was the emergence of mysticism and lay piety. Mystics held the belief that God lived through every person and that individuals could strengthen their relationship with God through austerity and commitment. One important example of lay piety was the Brethren of Common Life, a group founded in the Netherlands in the fourteenth century.⁶⁹ They were a group of commoners that aimed to live a simple life of devotion to God, without the need for money or the structure of the Church to guide them. Gottfried writes on the significance of these movements: “Aside from their profound sincerity, the most striking characteristic of mysticism and lay piety was the lack of need for a formal clergy to lead the way to paradise. Many post-plague Christians

⁶⁷ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 217.

⁶⁸ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 217.

⁶⁹ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 88.

felt they could communicate directly with God.”⁷⁰

As the plague swept through Europe, individuals found it increasingly difficult to place their faith in the hands of the clergy. The Black Death exposed the weaknesses of the Church and its inability to serve the laity effectively when they needed its guidance most. The plague also proved to European Christians the immoral qualities of both the surviving and newly ordained priests. Many of the clergymen who avoided death by the plague took advantage of the new environment that it created. They comprehended the fact that their services were at the moment in dire need and that great wealth and prosperity could be gained from those who desired it most. The newly-recruited priests, however, faced the issue of inexperience. Although it is difficult to blame the Church for this problem, it was rare to find sympathy from the Christian public. The relationship between the laypeople and the clergymen had obviously been strained, and it caused them to find other ways to replace the stability and structure that had vanished from their lives. The Black Death played a significant role in this because “it gave birth, in many cases, to a smouldering feeling of discontent, an inarticulate desire for change.”⁷¹ The clergymen and bishops were a vital part of the Catholic Church that allowed them to foster positive relations with the Christian community. The Black Death drastically changed the image of the priest in the minds of European Christians and ensured the decline of their reputation for centuries to come.

⁷⁰ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 88.

⁷¹ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 219.

Chapter II: The Heretical Nature of the Flagellants

When the whole of European society began to question the ability of the Church to guide them safely through the onslaught of the plague, Christians instead looked inwards for ways to relieve their tension and fear. One outlet in this search was found in the flagellant groups that emerged in the wake of the Black Death. Flagellation, or the practice of wounding one's body as a form of religious penance, had been performed long before the arrival of the plague. But the flagellant movement reached its peak in Europe during the Black Death. The majority of society felt that humanity was being punished by God for its sins through the destruction of the plague, and their solution was to "punish" themselves in hopes of receiving God's mercy. The flagellant movement that began during the plague seems to have started in late 1348 in the areas of Austria and Hungary. It was clear that this movement began in response to the arrival of the plague. By the spring of 1349, the flagellant movement had reached central Germany, where many scholars believe that it was at this point that the movement reached its most popular and radical stage.⁷² As the flagellant bands grew with increased popularity, their influence on European Christians flourished as well. Flagellants traveled to towns and cities and made great claims about their abilities to perform miracles and grant salvation to sinners. This was something the Church could not allow. Although the Church

⁷² Aberth, *Black Death*, 118.

encouraged it at first, it was only a matter of time until the Pope was forced to denounce the movement altogether. The flagellant movement was inevitably condemned because of the social disruption it caused and the threat it posed to the influence and power of the Catholic Church.

The flagellant movement quickly gained popularity in Europe, and the pace at which its reputation grew in 1348 was almost as rapid as the spread of the plague itself. Gilles li Muisis, an Abbot of St. Giles at Tournai, wrote two accounts of his experiences with the plague, and he described the proceedings of the flagellants groups that he witnessed late in 1348. He stated, “Men were inciting one another and gathering in crowds of 200, 300, even 500 and more, depending on the size of the local population.”⁷³ The flagellants sometimes increased their size dramatically after visiting cities, and many of them found it easy to attract new recruits. One reason why the flagellant groups grew at this speed can be attributed to the savage nature of the plague’s onslaught. The European population had never experienced death in such numbers, and when they realized that the plague spared no one, regardless of their faith or amount of good works performed, they grew desperate to find protection for their souls.⁷⁴ Europeans realized that they could no longer rely on the Church to grant them protection from God’s wrath, and as a result, many embraced the flagellant groups that came to their town because they viewed their arrival as a means of protection. This, along with the mass paranoia that struck Europe, helps explain the rapid emergence of the flagellant movement. Medical authorities frankly admitted that they could do little or nothing if the plague sprang directly from the will of God, which further added to the appeal of joining the

⁷³ Horrox, *Black Death*, 50.

⁷⁴ Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 125.

movement.⁷⁵ John Aberth argues that “what gave the movement a popular flavor was that not only individual Flagellants were thereby immune from the disease, but towns that welcomed them could share in their penitential benefits.”⁷⁶ The flagellants often depended on public support and participation when traveling to cities because it helped solidify their legitimacy.⁷⁷ The flagellants’ early alliance with the public was important for its growth because it sent an implicit message to the Church that that it was no longer the primary institution looked to for religious salvation.

As the plague continued to rage throughout Europe, chaos became a recurring theme in European society. The flagellant groups that arose in reaction to the plague also consisted of chaotic elements, but in other ways it was an organized movement as well. Ziegler maintains, “The Flagellant Movement, at first at least, was well regulated and sternly disciplined.”⁷⁸ Although they were often viewed as uncontrolled and disorderly groups, these movements were not without rules and customs. Many scholars hold the belief that the flagellants became increasingly heretical and radical in later years, but at the beginning, the flagellants were mostly a broad and disciplined movement.⁷⁹ Throughout the early stages of the activity, when the flagellants were still determining what they wanted to achieve, they developed a system of how they would travel to and from cities. Flagellants divided themselves into separate bands, each with its own leader. As part of their penance, they slept without shelter in the cities they traveled to, and each

⁷⁵ John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2009), 114.

⁷⁶ Aberth, *Brink*, 155.

⁷⁷ Aberth, *Brink*, 157.

⁷⁸ Ziegler, *The Black Death*, 68.

⁷⁹ Aberth, *The Black Death*, 119.

band's leader preached at the city square to its inhabitants.⁸⁰ The flagellants sang religious hymns, partook in ritualistic dancing, and denounced themselves for their past sins. The flagellation often occurred during the climax of the ritual, when the flagellants "fell to earth and took positions that indicated the types of sins they had committed – usury, perjury, adultery, murder. They then stripped to the waist and whipped themselves with knotted cords."⁸¹ After this public display of self-punishment, the flagellants redressed themselves and marched on to the next city.

The dramatic manner and structure of the flagellants' processions were important; they allowed them to add esteem to their actions and to spur spectators to join them. The disciplined nature of early flagellant groups was appealing to many individuals because it offered a feeling of structure during such a chaotic period. In some of the central territories of Germany, "without coming under ecclesiastical or governmental control, the flagellants there are said to have imposed rigid discipline on themselves."⁸² Much of this discipline had to do with the procedure of the flagellation itself. Members of these flagellant groups were often bound by rules that forbade them from bathing, changing their clothes, and required them to whip themselves twice daily.⁸³ The flagellants, at least in the beginning stages of the movement, practiced strict discipline on its members and its structure offered a sense of stability for many Europeans in the wake of the Black Death. Throughout most of 1348, the beginning year of the movement, "the flagellants

⁸⁰ William M. Cooper, *Flagellation & the Flagellants: A History of the Rod* (Amsterdam: Fredonia Books, 2001), 105.

⁸¹ Herlihy, *Black Death*, 68.

⁸² Richard Kieckhefer, "Radical Tendencies in the Flagellant Movement of the Mid-Fourteenth Century," in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 105.

⁸³ Aberth, *Brink*, 157.

remained well-organized and straightforward in their goals, and were seldom challenged by lay or church authorities.”⁸⁴

There were many instances when the flagellants incited extreme emotions from their spectators. Several primary sources from this period “testify to the exceptional emotion, even hysteria, the ceremonies could arouse in both participants and spectators.”⁸⁵ Despite this, however, many European Christians continued to show their support when flagellant groups marched through their cities. Even when the flagellants were later labeled as heretics by the papacy in 1350, many Europeans continued to listen to and approve of their proceedings.⁸⁶ Muisis revealed the positive opinion of the flagellants held by many commoners in his chronicle of their movements. He recorded, “And the majority of the common people, reckoning such penance to be acceptable, approved of it even more than of the divine office; because so much evil was changed to good when the penitents arrived, as is expressed above, the people very often derided ecclesiastical men who held the opposite opinion.”⁸⁷ In the Rhineland, for example, many of the townspeople grew excited when the flagellants came to them, and they often thought of it as an honor to host these traveling flagellant groups.⁸⁸ Gottfried writes, “Spectators sobbed, cried, howled, and tore at their hair. The flagellants were seen as martyrs who atoned for the sins of the world and, hence, helped to avert further suffering from the plague and future visitations.”⁸⁹ Church bells were often rung upon the arrival of the flagellants, usually without permission from the clergy, for they saw their own

⁸⁴ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 71.

⁸⁵ Aberth, *Black Death*, 118.

⁸⁶ Aberth, *Black Death*, 134.

⁸⁷ Aberth, *Black Death*, 134.

⁸⁸ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 71.

⁸⁹ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 71.

positions being threatened as a result. There were also instances when local villagers opened their homes, fed the flagellants, and gave them candles for their rites.⁹⁰ In some towns, especially those of central Germany, civic councils sometimes contributed financial aid to the flagellants. The movement attracted a variety of followers, even sometimes including clergymen themselves, which further added to their prestige and increased their chances of being accepted by the towns they traveled to.⁹¹ Villagers throughout Europe's towns and cities were commonly pleased to receive the visits of the flagellants and often went out of their way to meet their simple desires. It was easy for spectators, especially those of the lower classes, to join the public penances of the flagellants and many of them took comfort in their demonstrations of modesty and humbleness.⁹² The actions of the flagellants were sometimes exciting for many Europeans, and it allowed many of them to express their sentiments during such a chaotic and depressing time. Ziegler argues that "their arrival was an event in the drab lives of the average German peasant; an occasion for a celebration as well as for the working off of surplus emotion."⁹³ Moreover, even if the plague had already struck a village, people could hope that some form of public penance might bring God's mercy. The same can be said for a village that had not experienced the plague; flagellants might have been even more welcome in this scenario because people believed their actions might prevent the arrival of the plague altogether. The flagellants were welcomed throughout towns and cities because the Church was no longer seen as an institution that could grant the public salvation from God's wrath.

⁹⁰ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 68.

⁹¹ Eugene Louis Backman, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine* (Westport: Praeger, 1977), 163.

⁹² Cantor, *Wake of the Plague*, 157.

⁹³ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 68.

As the flagellant movement continued to spread throughout Europe, the tensions between its members and the Catholic Church inevitably increased. Part of the reason for this were the symbolic elements and Christian images that were prevalent in the flagellant movement. Heinrich von Herford, a Dominican from Westphalia, wrote on the flagellant activity that he witnessed. He described how flagellant groups attempted to portray the sufferings of Jesus by donning red crosses on their clothes and bearing crucifixes when they marched.⁹⁴ People identified this cross-bearing element, and the flagellants often prostrated themselves in the shape of a cross during their proceedings.⁹⁵ In the flagellant groups of Germany and its surrounding areas, one particularly notable flagellant group known as the Brothers of the Cross, wore white robes and marched through the country for thirty-three day periods.⁹⁶ The purpose of this was to have each day symbolize a year of Jesus' life on earth. Muisis wrote that these groups "went through the countryside twice a day for thirty-three days, barefooted and naked except for their drawers, wearing hoods and beating themselves with whips until the blood flowed."⁹⁷ The theatrical nature of the flagellants' processions were important because it helped inspire confidence among the spectators that they could find salvation by participating in the movement. The dramatic elements that characterized the actions of the flagellants further increased their appeal to many European Christians.

The whips used by the flagellants were also religious symbols themselves, for they represented the pain and suffering that Jesus experienced during his death on the cross and the whipping he received before the crucifixion. The members of these groups

⁹⁴ Aberth, *Brink*, 157.

⁹⁵ Horrox, *Black Death*, 150.

⁹⁶ Hecker, *Black Death*, 35.

⁹⁷ Horrox, *Black Death*, 50.

took their name from the word “flagella,” meaning whips, which was their primary tool to display their penance publicly.⁹⁸ Each whip was comprised of a stick with three knotted cords hanging from the end. Two sharp metal pieces were inserted through the center of the knot, again forming the shape of a cross. Herford stated, “I have seen, when they whipped themselves, how sometimes those bits of metal penetrated the flesh so deeply that it took more than two attempts to pull them out.”⁹⁹ The violent manner in which flagellants performed public penance reflected their desire to raise parallels to the pain experienced by Christ.

Eugene Backman argues in his book, *Religious Dances in the Christian Church and in Popular Medicine*, that the dramatic elements of religious song and dance that were prevalent in the marches of the flagellants were instrumental in gaining the support of townspeople throughout Europe. Flagellants frequently carried pilgrims’ staffs while they marched barefoot wearing pointed hats and clothing donned with red crosses.¹⁰⁰ The images showed their melancholy nature but also the organization that was present. They used these rituals in an effort to share their penance with the public. Backman includes many images of the flagellants’ rituals in his book. The pictures depict their somber aspects and how villagers got on their knees in awe of its members as they marched through the village square.¹⁰¹ Flagellants sometimes began singing hymns to the public after they reached a town in an effort to involve the spectators in their penance. Herford described how the flagellants “formed themselves into a procession, with hoods or hats pulled down over their foreheads, and sad and downcast eyes, they went through the

⁹⁸ Horrox, *Black Death*, 150.

⁹⁹ Horrox, *Black Death*, 150.

¹⁰⁰ Backman, *Religious Dances*, 163.

¹⁰¹ Backman, *Religious Dances*, 165.

streets singing a sweet hymn.”¹⁰² Backman comments on these proceedings: “This, then, is the purpose of the pilgrimage, the object of the self-castigation: that men’s souls shall tremble, and their hard hearts may weep in secret, and that God and Christ and Mary may be prevailed on to bring to an end all plague and sudden death, and to guard and protect the pilgrim band.”¹⁰³ The manner in which flagellant groups began their penance in towns varied between different groups, but many times the groups formed a large circle, whipping themselves while they sang religious hymns. Other times they simply fell on their backs after the scourging. Frederick Closener, a priest who wrote about the flagellants in his chronicle that he completed in 1362, described how flagellants incorporated song and dance in their procedures. He maintained that the “pilgrims moved ‘round the circle two by two, while the brethren sang just as people still sing for the dance.”¹⁰⁴ The elements of music and dance in the flagellants’ actions increased their appeal to residents of European towns and cities and made their movement easier to relate to.

Hymns and songs were tools in the arsenal of the flagellants that appealed to many townspeople. They habitually sang religious songs, perhaps as an attempt to solidify their rituals as a form of worship to God. Aberth describes how during the flagellants’ whipping, two members often stood tall in the middle of the procession and sang “in a high voice a religious song with a pleasant melody, singing through one verse out of the whole song.”¹⁰⁵ Mary was an important symbol for many of these hymns, and one hymn used by the flagellants, the *Stabat Mater*, began with the words “Mary, Mother,

¹⁰² Horrox, *Black Death*, 151.

¹⁰³ Backman, *Religious Dances*, 168.

¹⁰⁴ Backman, *Religious Dances*, 169.

¹⁰⁵ Aberth, *Black Death*, 124.

and Maiden pure, have mercy on thy Christendom, have mercy on thy children, living in this evil world.”¹⁰⁶ This thirteenth-century poem reminded people of the agony experienced by Mary as she witnessed the crucifixion of Jesus. The flagellants sang this hymn during a public penance as a way of asking God to share in this suffering. Christians found solace in the image of Mary because it helped soothe their fears and anxiety caused by the constant death around them. Horrox asserts, “Mary was regularly invoked against the plague and its terrors, and the image of her as the Mother of Mercy, shielding mankind with her cloak, became popular in the century and a half after the plague’s arrival, with the figures clustering around her sometimes represented with the characteristic plague buboes.”¹⁰⁷ The incorporation of song by the flagellants was beneficial to their goal of recruitment, but it also sometimes added to the widespread hysteria present in many of the towns they visited. Flagellants reacted more violently to certain parts of a religious song than others, especially when a song mentioned the suffering of Christ, and it could sometimes incite their spectators to do the same. Herford observed in his chronicle “that whenever in the course of their psalmody they come to a part of the song where the passion of Christ is mentioned, all together they suddenly throw themselves to the ground from a high incline, either on the earth, or on mud, or thorns, or thistles, or nettles or stones.”¹⁰⁸ It was after this that many of the flagellants would fall on their stomach and face in the shape of the cross; this was another way in which they could portray an image of Christ’s suffering.

The familiarity of the songs that flagellants used was just as important as the religious message they sent. If a song was known to the flagellants’ witnesses then they

¹⁰⁶ Backman, *Religious Dances*, 166.

¹⁰⁷ Horrox, *Black Death*, 97.

¹⁰⁸ Aberth, *Black Death*, 124.

could expect to have a better chance of gaining the crowd's approval. William Cooper argues, "Their new songs, which soon became well known, operated strongly on the minds of the people."¹⁰⁹ One example of such a melody, which originated during the Crusades, was reintroduced during the Black Death by the flagellants and was remembered by townspeople during flagellants' marches. The lyrics read: "Now passes the holy host of pilgrims. Christ himself road to Jerusalem. He had a cross in his own hand. Help us, Holy Ghost."¹¹⁰ The familiarity of these songs, combined with its religious meaning, added to the dramatic and violent elements of flagellants' rituals that made them so appealing. Herford commented in his chronicle on the flagellants' actions as a whole when he wrote that "one would need a heart of stone to be able to watch this without tears."¹¹¹ This positive opinion, however, was not shared by all European Christians. The recognition of the hymns used by flagellants during the Black Death enhanced their message and further legitimized their image to European Christians.

Although the papacy initially gave its blessing to the flagellant groups, the conflict between the two groups inevitably reached a point where any notion of a compromise became impossible. One reason many Christians began to sympathize with the flagellants was tied to the decline of their confidence in the Church's leadership, as discussed in the earlier chapter. Europeans were wary and suspicious of the activity of the papacy, and many no longer felt that they could gain salvation through their guidance. Because so many Christians, like the flagellants, believed that the plague was a punishment for human sin on earth, many of these people also attributed this blame to the sinful nature of the Church at the time. Gottfried argues, "Much of this reflected the

¹⁰⁹ Cooper, *Flagellation*, 108.

¹¹⁰ Backman, *Religious Dances*, 166.

¹¹¹ Aberth, *Black Death*, 124.

general dissatisfaction with the clergy, who were seen as corrupt and incapable of assuaging the pain of the Black Death in any way.”¹¹² People quickly turned against the hierarchy of the Church and began to look elsewhere for salvation, and to find other ways in which they could repent for their own individual sins. Joining the ranks of flagellants was a solution for many people to achieve this goal. As the flagellant movements increased in popularity and continued to gain more followers, the threat to the papacy grew with it as well.

There are several reasons why the Church felt so threatened by the practices of the flagellant groups. Herlihy notes, “The plague undermined confidence in the Church’s spiritual leadership.”¹¹³ The flagellant groups were an example of a spontaneous religious movement that arose in the aftermath or in anticipation of the Black Death. It represented a movement that “mounted a direct challenge to its monopoly over spiritual direction.”¹¹⁴ The flagellants claimed divine authorization for their mission, and in doing so implied that there was no need for the Church’s presence anymore. The relationship between the flagellants and the Church only worsened when the flagellant groups began to assert their power to forgive the sins of the laity, preach on Christianity to neighboring towns, and claim the ability to perform miracles. Although the Church and its members initially encouraged Christians to partake in the flagellant movement, these circumstances led Pope Clement VI to condemn the flagellants publicly in October of 1349.¹¹⁵ While he felt justified in his actions, the flagellant movement had become far too popular among the Christian population to subdue it effectively at the time. The moment Pope Clement VI

¹¹² Gottfried, *Black Death*, 71.

¹¹³ Herlihy, *Black Death*, 66.

¹¹⁴ Herlihy, *Black Death*, 66.

¹¹⁵ Horrox, *Black Death*, 96.

prohibited public flagellation and declared such groups heretical was a significant occurrence during the Black Death; it revealed to Europeans that the Church had lost its control over the Christian populace. The public denouncing of the flagellants was unavoidable because “these men seemed to be supplanting the clergy in the role of the intermediaries between heaven and earth. This the Church could not allow.”¹¹⁶

Ecclesiastical leaders realized the “heretical” nature of the flagellant bands was a direct challenge to their power. Richard Kieckhefer maintains, “The movement seems always to have had anticlerical leaning. It was essentially a lay movement – not only in the sense that its members were mostly lay, but in the more important sense that it was outside clerical supervision.”¹¹⁷

The flagellant movement posed a serious threat to Church authority because of the characteristics that it acquired throughout its evolution. Particularly upsetting to the clergy, for instance, was the flagellants’ practice of absolving one another of their sins. In the eyes of the Church, this power belonged only to them. This powerful assertion allowed the flagellants to become more appealing to European Christians, many of whom had lost confidence in the capability of the clergy to lead them toward salvation. Aberth argues that one disturbing aspect of the movement to the clergy was the supposed “salutary power of the flagellants’ extraordinary penance – and lack of ecclesiastical guidance and authorization, thus relegating the flagellants to the status of a mere ‘sect.’”¹¹⁸ Europeans were desperate for a miracle to gain redemption, and many of them found hope in the extreme practices of the flagellants. Kieckhefer comments in an article that historians have frequently maintained that the flagellants were initially a

¹¹⁶ Herlihy, *Black Death*, 68.

¹¹⁷ Kieckhefer, “Radical Tendencies,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 101.

¹¹⁸ Aberth, *Black Death*, 118.

conventional and pious group, without the intentions of replacing the clergy and that they became more radical only in the final months of their existence.¹¹⁹ Although lay confession was not deemed a heretical practice, the underlying meaning of it represented problems for the Church. The frequency of lay confession only increased the tensions associated with it, “and relations between the flagellants and the ecclesiastical establishment no doubt suffered greatly because of this usurpation of sacerdotal function.”¹²⁰ The idea that other men, without permission from the Church, could absolve Christians of their sins was obviously a major factor in the clergy’s change of attitude towards the flagellants.

Another significant manner in which the flagellants conflicted with the Church was their refusal to acknowledge clergy members as the only group that could preach to the laity. It angered the Church when the flagellants preached in towns and cities with complete disregard to its traditional sacraments. One chronicler noted that the members were not content with penitential whippings alone and “annoyingly and persistently took upon themselves the job of preaching.”¹²¹ By not speaking directly of the clergy or the sacraments of the Church with proper respect, flagellants alienated themselves from conventional Catholicism. Flagellants believed that any man could preach and that it served them no purpose to continue to listen to the word of the clergy because God seemed to be punishing them as well. Pope Clement VI pronounced that these flagellants were heretics because some of these men claimed to be messengers sent from God.¹²²

The conflict with the Church was inevitable because the flagellants were preaching the

¹¹⁹ Kieckhefer, “Radical Tendencies,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 102.

¹²⁰ Kieckhefer, “Radical Tendencies,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 103.

¹²¹ Horrox, *Black Death*, 152.

¹²² Horrox, *Black Death*, 153.

message to the laity that the clergy was no longer needed. Church officials were prohibited from becoming “masters” or “fathers” in the movement, and many of the flagellants took pride in knowing that their movement was independent from the Catholic Church. Ziegler argues that “without at first being overly anti-clerical the movement gave the villager the satisfaction of seeing his parish priest manifestly playing second fiddle, if not actually humiliated.”¹²³ As the role of the flagellants in serving the religious needs of the population increased, so did tensions with Church authority. During the beginning of the year 1349, when the flagellants reached their peak of influence, Pope Clement VI requested the faculty of the Sorbonne for its opinion and advice on how to deal with the fanatical movement. He was advised to prohibit the flagellants from partaking in future public penance by any means necessary and to enforce this with the power of the Church.¹²⁴ Jean de Venette, a French friar and chronicler, also wrote on the Pope’s actions and argued that “his prohibition was just, for the flagellants, supported by certain fatuous priests and monks, were enunciating doctrines and opinions which were beyond evil, erroneous and fallacious.”¹²⁵ While the flagellant movement was certainly at odds with ecclesiastical leadership, many of the clergy who opposed the movement were unable to provide proof of the flagellants’ doctrinal conflict. Kieckhefer argues that “with only a few exceptions, the flagellants’ critics failed to indicate specific doctrines attributable to the penitents.”¹²⁶ This did no favors for the Church and only added to the doubts European Christians had about the Church. Nevertheless, “the mere fact that they

¹²³ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 68.

¹²⁴ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 72.

¹²⁵ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 72.

¹²⁶ Kieckhefer, “Radical Tendencies,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 103.

conducted their devotions without clerical supervision was enough for clerics to brand them as ‘heretical.’”¹²⁷

A common complaint of the flagellants was their refusal to pay respect when a priest elevated the host or read from the gospel. The German flagellants were especially known for this practice, and some scholars argue that the reason German flagellant bands were more radical was due to the lack of secular power in the Holy Roman Empire. These men were known for “ridiculing the sacrament of the Eucharist and refusing to revere the host.”¹²⁸ Surely, the flagellants’ blatant disregard for liturgical tradition and the movement’s lack of ecclesiastical guidance and authorization were extremely disturbing characteristics to the Catholic Church.

The flagellants also conflicted with the Church because of their reputation of performing miracles. One chronicler recorded, “And the common people held such a good opinion of the penitents that in many places, miracles were affirmed to have been performed by their penance.”¹²⁹ It was unavoidable that the Church would take offense, for they could not allow a group of laymen pronouncing to the public that they had the power to carry out miracles that not even the Church could perform. They began to declare to the public their ability to expel satanic forces, heal any injury, and even resurrect the dead.¹³⁰ One flagellant speaker even made an attempt to make a parallel with Jesus himself. He proclaimed to his witnesses that he was able to drink from a barrel of wine and never worry of refilling it.¹³¹ Claims such as these were sometimes easy to believe for desperate Christians during the Black Death. Sometimes frantic commoners

¹²⁷ Leffeldt, *Black Death*, 103.

¹²⁸ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 69.

¹²⁹ Aberth, *Black Death*, 134.

¹³⁰ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 69.

¹³¹ Aberth, *Black Death*, 131.

brought loved ones infected with the plague to the flagellant groups and begged for their cure.¹³² One can imagine the anger of clerical elites when flagellant members were claiming powers that not even they had. Some members of the flagellant movement felt they were no longer human; it was their duty to replace the priests who had failed them. As they grew more confident, they became “possessed by such chiliastic convictions that they saw themselves more and more, not as mortals suffering to expiate their own sins and humanity’s, but as a holy army of Saints.”¹³³

Another significant heretical element of the flagellant groups was the millenarian aspect that the movement absorbed. Millennialism, or the belief in an approaching apocalyptic event, was embraced by the flagellants who predicted that “Christ would come, the Black Death would end, and a new age would dawn.”¹³⁴ These flagellants believed that they were receiving divine revelations from God, and that they were chosen to prepare the world for God’s judgement when the Church could not. The writings of Herman Haupt point to this claim. A witness to flagellant processions, he believed that “the flagellants felt called upon to prepare the way for the coming kingdom of God.”¹³⁵ The flagellant groups hinged on the idea that “a ‘heavenly letter’ claimed divine inspiration for the processions.”¹³⁶ The chaos that was happening around them only helped their cause, and it proved to be evidence for people who began to listen to their message of a final judgment. The millenarian beliefs that the flagellants adopted only added to the revolutionary character of the movement and made it more appealing to

¹³² Gottfried, *Black Death*, 71.

¹³³ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 78.

¹³⁴ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 72.

¹³⁵ Robert E. Lerner, *The Black Death and Western European Eschatological Mentalities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 535.

¹³⁶ Aberth, *Brink*, 158.

individuals seeking security. Kieckhefer argues that “the influence of popular millenarian beliefs sufficed to make the movement radically and violently anticlerical.”¹³⁷

Some flagellant leaders were more direct and hostile in their opinions of the clergy, and used their new role as religious prophets to cast the Church in a negative light. They spread reports to the public of how a wise astrologer had studied the alignment of the stars, and predicted the rise of a powerful ruler who would cast out the clergy and give power to the people.¹³⁸ John of Winterthur wrote that in Germany and its surrounding areas, the people “were eagerly awaiting the resurrection of the Emperor Frederick who was expected to massacre the clergy and break down the barriers between rich and poor.”¹³⁹ This kind of statement not only made known the flagellants’ opposition towards clergy members but also represented a direct and violent threat against the Pope and his cardinals.

The primary way in which flagellants groups defied the rule of the Church was through passive methods, such as refusing to abide by Church doctrine and attempting to replace the role of priests. There were some cases, however, in which clergy members were attacked directly by flagellant members. These usually occurred when priests interrupted or interfered with flagellant proceedings. This was an obvious invitation for violence, and flagellant members sometimes stoned and attacked them, often inciting its followers to do the same. Referring to such cases, Norman Cohn writes, “Anyone, including any member of their own fraternity, who tried to moderate their fury against the Church, did so at his peril.”¹⁴⁰ The best documented such case took place in Tournai

¹³⁷ Kieckhefer, “Radical Tendencies,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 100.

¹³⁸ Cohn, *Pursuit*, 136.

¹³⁹ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 69.

¹⁴⁰ Cohn, *Pursuit*, 138.

when two Dominican friars disturbed a flagellant group's rituals. A witness to this incident noted that the flagellants "were so infuriated by their exhortations that they tried to kill them, and although the more nimble managed to make his escape they stoned the other, and left his body under a pile of stones."¹⁴¹ Although these incidents were rare, the fact that priests and other clerical members were sometimes victims of physical violence reflected the fanaticism of the flagellants during this period.

The flagellant groups that swept through Europe during the Black Death were representative of the widespread chaos that affected European culture and society. For many people, joining the flagellant bands allowed them to express their fear of God's wrath and gave them hope of salvation after death. To them, the Church had failed to provide solace, and they felt it necessary to seek other ways to distract their minds from the destruction around them. Although flagellant groups continued to remain popular in parts of Germany into the fourteenth century, the combined efforts of secular authorities to subdue it and the gradual healing of society caused the movement to dissipate during the later years of the plague.¹⁴² What is impossible to ignore, however, is the threat of the flagellant groups to the authority of the Church. For many individuals, the flagellants had taken the roles of the priests and bishops, and the movement was often embraced wildly during the beginning years of the plague. Clerical leaders realized the danger of allowing such a movement to spread throughout Europe because it undermined their influence on the laity, and European Christians were aware of this effect as well. The flagellant groups, while violent in their practices and heretical by their nature, were both a

¹⁴¹ Horrox, *Black Death*, 152.

¹⁴² Ziegler, *Black Death*, 71.

consequence of the plague's destruction and a reminder to people that the Church was unable to guide them through the chaotic world shaped by the Black Death.

Chapter III: The Persecution of the Jews

The great pestilence that raged through Europe brought death and despair everywhere it appeared, and it also dismantled the stability of western society. The Black Death created an environment ruled by fear and chaos, and the Church could do nothing to resolve it. European Christians believed the plague to be a punishment from God for their sins, and some blamed the Jews for the pestilence. To the rest of European society, the Jews were viewed as outsiders due to how their religious doctrine opposed Christianity; people joined pogroms and began to attack Jews in hopes of appeasing the wrath of God. Jews were quickly accused of absurd plots against Christians, and many of them became the targets of mass genocide.

According to the sources, it seems that the beginning of the persecutions originated in southern France during the spring of 1348. Despite the attempts of the clergy to stop the violence, massacres erupted in Provence, Narbonne, and Carcassonne.¹⁴³ As word of the Jewish plot spread, other regions in Europe quickly joined in the effort to eradicate the Jews. Apart from the sheer violence that accompanied these assaults, it is also significant that they continued in spite of the strict condemnation by Pope Clement VI himself. The Pope represented the entire institution of the Church, and it is noteworthy that his public word did nothing to calm the hysteria that had taken

¹⁴³ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death: A Chronicle of the Plague* (Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2006), 182.

control of Europe. Individuals lost faith in the ability of the clergy to guide them through the disaster of the plague, and most Christians refused to heed their demands for the protection of the Jews. The Christian persecution of the Jewish population is a striking example of the paranoia that swept through Europe during the plague, and the little power that the Church had in controlling it.

Scholars have argued whether the Jewish pogroms were a purely emotional reaction to the plague or whether they were planned, coldly calculated attacks on a minority group. The historical sources reveal that it is difficult to generalize the characteristics of the Jewish massacres because they varied throughout the plague's process and that different factors contributed to how the pogroms unfolded. A significant trait of the persecutions that remained consistent across Europe was the hatred that fueled many of the attacks. Many Europeans believed that Jews had developed a plot to destroy the Christian populace, and their reaction to this idea was to eradicate the Jews before this conspiracy could be made a reality.

The motives for attacking the Jews fluctuated among Christian Europeans, but the majority believed that the plague was a punishment for the sins of humanity, specifically those of the Jewish population. Their religious views were in direct opposition to Christian doctrine, and many people believed that by punishing the Jews, they could gain the favor of God by undertaking his bidding. Ziegler argues, "The Black Death concentrated this latent fear and hatred of the Jews into one burning grievance which not only demanded vengeance but offered the tempting extra dividend that, if the Jews could only be eliminated, then the plague for which they were responsible might vanish too."¹⁴⁴ Christians came to the conclusion that the best route for gaining salvation was to

¹⁴⁴ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 74.

eradicate the population that was responsible for the death around them, for they felt that the clergymen could no longer save them from God's wrath. Chaos followed everywhere the plague spread, and the already tense relations between Christians and Jews were exacerbated by the mass disorder in society caused by the Black Death. The paranoia that infected Europe contributed to the ease with which European Christians were able to blame the horrors of the plague on a group that conflicted with their religious principles. The Black Death revealed the religious and ideological stimulus of these groups to be a motivation to reestablish order and stability in the wake of disaster. The plague exposed the belief that "a kind of natural Jewish evil was the source of the disturbance in the natural order and the contamination of the Christian world."¹⁴⁵

During times of catastrophe in the Middle Ages, such as famine or disease, individuals struggled to find answers when confronted with the reality of death. According to David Nirenberg, the medieval act of "scapegoating" was frequently used to remedy the chaos that ensued in the aftermath of disaster.¹⁴⁶ This reaction was also seen in response to the Black Death. As the plague raged through Europe, people were confused as to why God was punishing society in such a horrid manner. Because of the crisis of faith that was experienced by many Christians during the plague, individuals struggled to find answers to this predicament. Naturally, many of them sought ways to relieve this tension, and unfortunately, the labeling of minority groups as scapegoats served this purpose. John Aberth writes that "scapegoating of minority groups seems to be a common failing in times of crisis, and medieval Christian society during the Black

¹⁴⁵ Anna Foa, *The Jews of Europe after the Black Death* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2000), 17.

¹⁴⁶ David Nirenberg, "Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages," in *Black Death*, ed. Lefffeldt, 111.

Death was no exception.”¹⁴⁷ The violence that emerged in the attacks on Jews differed greatly from rebellions by peasants and laborers against secular leaders before the arrival of the plague.¹⁴⁸ These latter protests were more organized with clearer goals in sight; the rebels in the revolts before the plague aimed to solve issues concerning class struggle and manorialism.¹⁴⁹ The violence associated with the Jewish pogroms, however, was markedly different. The Christians involved in these attacks, “rather than struggling for concrete goals or redressing specific political, economic or social grievances, [instead] targeted forces outside political and economic hierarchies to resolve anxieties, fears and anger.”¹⁵⁰ The outsiders in European society, such as the Arabs, lepers, beggars, and Jews, were easy targets for Christians looking for a group to blame. The residents of Languedoc even suggested that the lepers were bribed by the Jews to poison the wells in the surrounding area.¹⁵¹ As a result of this claim, members of both groups were burned at the stake. While the relationships Europeans held with the beggars, lepers, and Jews of society were always tense, violence was not the usual reaction between the groups. Jews, for instance, were the largest of the minority groups in Europe, and for the most part maintained peaceful relations with European Christians. Jews also benefited from the right to practice their religion without interference, which accorded with Roman and canon law.¹⁵² They were allowed to live in peace with European Christians free from persecution under the protection of the papacy. The Black Death changed this. Although

¹⁴⁷ Aberth, *Black Death*, 117.

¹⁴⁸ Samuel Cohn Jr., “The Black Death and the Burning of Jews,” *Past and Present* 196 (2007): 8.

¹⁴⁹ Samuel Cohn Jr., “Popular Insurrection and the Black Death: A Comparative View,” *Past and Present* (2007): 196.

¹⁵⁰ Cohn Jr., “Burning of Jews,” 9.

¹⁵¹ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 72.

¹⁵² Herlihy, *Black Death*, 64.

there were other minorities that were embattled for their supposed role in the spread of the plague, the Jews were undoubtedly the most often accused.

One factor that contributed to the hatred directed towards the Jewish population was their common role as moneylenders in European society. Although it is audacious to claim that this was the primary cause for the attacks on Jews, it is worth mentioning in order to examine the factors that contributed to the tension between Jews and Christians before the onset of the plague. Usury, or the lending of money at any amount of interest on loaned funds, became a stereotyped profession for medieval Jews. While Jews were mostly able to avoid violence with their Christian neighbors, they were nevertheless a despised minority throughout the Middle Ages. But before the outbreak of the plague, Jews witnessed a rare increase in their economic and political power as financiers. Perhaps the major reason why Jews were so involved in the field of usury during the Middle Ages was due to the few number of alternative occupations available to the Jewish population of the time. Many times the Jew had no choice but to pursue a career in moneylending, for it was forbidden to Christians according to canon law.¹⁵³ This activity was open to medieval Jews and was often the only economic activity that was obtainable for them. The occupation usually proved to be successful for Jews, and many of them thrived in cities throughout Europe during the High Middle Ages. This would be short-lived, however, when the recession of the fourteenth century abated their success.¹⁵⁴ Christian financiers, especially the Italian bankers, experienced an increased economic role that further contributed to the decline of Jewish moneylenders and their access to the market. The Jewish response to this economic decline further contributed to their already

¹⁵³ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 73.

¹⁵⁴ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 73.

negative reputation. Ziegler notes that the “Jewish moneylenders often reacted to insecurity and persecution by deploying a ruthlessness of their own.”¹⁵⁵ Many Jews felt that they had no choice but to harass their clients in order to raise the money they needed. The increased bitterness that resulted further strained the relationship between Jews and Christians, and Jews “therefore became the targets of pollution anxiety and [were] attacked by Christians in an effort to reinforce the social structure.”¹⁵⁶ Their role as moneylenders was a major reason why this hatred was directed more towards the Jewish population. European Christians generally did not persecute other minority groups because of economic motivations; this was not the case concerning their opinion of the Jew.¹⁵⁷ The increased animosity targeted against the Jews sometimes made attacks even more violent. In Strasbourg on February 14, 1349, before the plague had reached the city, two thousand Jews stripped of their clothing and killed. Their attackers removed their clothes before their murder in an attempt to find any gold they were hiding.¹⁵⁸ Events such as this expose the disdain and hatred for the Jewish population. Their opposition to Christian doctrine combined with their reputation as moneylenders had caused the Jew to “become a figure so hated in European society that almost anything might have served to provoke catastrophe.”¹⁵⁹ Despite the evidence that points to economic stimuli as a primary reason for their persecution, “the overwhelming motivation appears to have been religious hatred and not opportunistic gain.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁵ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 73.

¹⁵⁶ Nirenberg, “Communities of Violence,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 112.

¹⁵⁷ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 73.

¹⁵⁸ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 77.

¹⁵⁹ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 77.

¹⁶⁰ Cohn Jr., “Burning of Jews,” 26.

Jews were also persecuted during the plague because medieval Christians associated Jews with the image of the Antichrist, which had become more prominent by the onset of the Black Death. The figure of the Antichrist was a powerful symbol in the minds of individuals during the Middle Ages, and it added to the paranoia that people were already experiencing. Jews were associated with this image due to their reputation as “Christ killers;” they were persecuted for rejecting Jesus Christ and betraying him to Pontius Pilate. This conviction by the Christian populace was a major reason why Jews were so strongly linked to popular medieval demonology.¹⁶¹ During the midst of the plague, some members of society truly believed the Antichrist was among them and had been sent by unknown forces to destroy their world.¹⁶² The Jews played a major role in the drama of the apocalypse because if they could not be converted before the final judgment of God, then their eradication was the only alternative. Horrox writes that the Antichrist was “envisaged not only as the arch-enemy of Christ, but as his total opposite; his life a blasphemous inversion or parody of the life of Christ. The reign of Antichrist would see a vicious persecution of Christians and the apostasy of many of them, leaving only a faithful remnant.”¹⁶³ The Jew was an obvious suspect for this figure.

Part of the blame for associating the Antichrist with Jews can be placed on the Catholic Church.¹⁶⁴ Some clergy helped spread this idea among the public, and it was perhaps a factor in the distrust people began to have with the Church when it suddenly changed its opinion towards the Jewish population during the Black Death. In an attempt to represent the Jews in this way, some priests even spread reports of Jews kidnapping

¹⁶¹ Cohn, *Pursuit*, 60.

¹⁶² Horrox, *Black Death*, 99.

¹⁶³ Horrox, *Black Death*, 99.

¹⁶⁴ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 74.

and torturing Christian children. These priests depicted the Jews as “demons attendant on Satan, portrayed in drama or in pictures as devils with the beards and horns of a goat, passing their time with pigs, frogs, worms, snakes, scorpions and the horned beasts of the field.”¹⁶⁵ This certainly cast the Jews in a damaging light in the minds of European Christians, and the attempt by the clergy to reverse their efforts to demonize the Jews proved to be futile when Christians sought to eliminate their population.

The reasons for which Jews were blamed for the onslaught of the plague varied among the sources, but the absurdity of many of them spoke to the chaos and paranoia that were rampant throughout the Christian world during this time. One shared characteristic of the majority of the rumors directed against the Jews was that they had used some means of infection to bring about the plague. Some chroniclers even suspected the Jews of tainting the air as a means of killing Christians. Others believed that the Jews were taking orders from a secret organization based in Toledo.¹⁶⁶ It was rumored that this conspiratorial group had created a plot to smuggle a poisonous powder into Christian cities to murder their children. Regardless of the variation in rumors concerning the Jewish conspiracy, the absurdity of them remained consistent. While it is hard to believe that these ideas could have taken such a strong hold of the medieval mind, the Black Death had created an environment in which such beliefs could easily be conceived.

Of all the different reports concerning how the Jewish population succeeded in spreading the plague, the rumor of poisoning wells was by far the most common. Once the rumor of the wells emerged, thousands of Jews were immediately placed in chains or

¹⁶⁵ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 74.

¹⁶⁶ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 75.

burned.¹⁶⁷ One chronicler recorded, “The Jews were suddenly and violently charged with infecting the wells and water. The whole world rose up against them cruelly on this account. In Germany, they were massacred and slaughtered by Christians, and many thousands were burned everywhere, indiscriminately.”¹⁶⁸ Perhaps one of the reasons why Jews were the primary suspects was tied to notions about Jewish lifestyles. Some individuals believed and noted that Jews had a higher knowledge of sanitation and cleanliness, and that Jews favored water from natural sources as opposed to drinking water from wells. Ziegler argues that “such a habit, barely noticed in normal times, would seem intensely suspicious in the event of a plague.”¹⁶⁹ Others believed that the Jews’ familiarity with science and astrology allowed them to foresee the plague and avoid the same fate as the Christians. It was this knowledge that purportedly gave them the necessary confidence and ability to poison the wells.¹⁷⁰ In spite of the claim by clerical elites that such accusations were preposterous, European Christians sought any evidence they could find to support their ideas. When the local population had gathered sufficient evidence, “it was immediately concluded that some class of people must have introduced into the water-supply a poison concocted of spiders, frogs, and lizards – all of them symbols of earth, dirt and the Devil – or else maybe of basilisk-flesh.”¹⁷¹ It is clear from these examples that medieval Christians had refused to believe the word of the Church and the Pope himself.

A significant characteristic of the Jewish pogroms was the refusal to acknowledge the order of the Church. What is clear from the sources is that the stance of the Catholic

¹⁶⁷ Horrox, *Black Death*, 49.

¹⁶⁸ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 73.

¹⁶⁹ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 75.

¹⁷⁰ Horrox, *Black Death*, 50.

¹⁷¹ Cohn, *Pursuit*, 74.

Church was strictly opposed to the persecution of Jews and that the majority of the secular and lay people refused to acknowledge its command. There had always been tensions between the Church and the Jews, but “by the fourteenth century there was also a long tradition whereby Church fathers argued for toleration of Jews, because their conversion at the end of time would serve as witness to the final triumph of Christianity.”¹⁷² The papacy’s defense of the Jews was made public in 1348 when Pope Clement VI issued two bulls condemning the violence against Jews. The Pope also tried to convince Christians that the plague was caused by other means. He pronounced that men were not capable of creating such a disaster and that it was most likely due to natural origins or God’s will.¹⁷³ In his later bull of 1348, supporting the same message, the Pope argued that the Jews could not be the perpetrators behind the plague because their people were dying as rapidly as Christians were. He also argued that there were places where Jews were absent, such as England, where Christians were still dying from the plague.¹⁷⁴ Clearly many Christians paid no heed to these claims. Christians took matters into their own hands and sought the justice they felt they deserved. Horrox argues, “In spite of intellectual reservations and papal disapproval, popular pressure to hunt out and slaughter the Jews usually proved irresistible.”¹⁷⁵ The result of this rebellion to Church leadership was widespread genocide that further cast Europe into disarray.

What is striking about the Jewish persecutions during the Black Death is the ease with which the laity was convinced of a Jewish plague conspiracy despite the arguments of the Church. The rumors of a secret plot by Jews against Christians spread throughout

¹⁷² Aberth, *Black Death*, 117.

¹⁷³ Foa, *Jews of Europe*, 14.

¹⁷⁴ Cohn Jr., “Burning of Jews,” 14.

¹⁷⁵ Horrox, *Black Death*, 110.

Europe just as quickly as the plague itself, and individuals showed no mercy when enacting their revenge. Many people, including secular authorities, refused to acknowledge the Church's desire to protect the Jews and felt the need to take matters into their own hands. Henry of Diessenhoven chronicled the Jewish attacks that he witnessed in November of 1348, just one month after the Pope's decree. Entire groups of Jews were murdered and burned alive in Switzerland and Germany.¹⁷⁶ In Speyer, Germany, anti-Semites gathered the bodies of the dead Jews in wine casks and dumped them into the Rhine so spectators could watch as they floated down the river.¹⁷⁷ These attacks were extremely violent and hysterical, and there were usually no survivors. Also significant of these assaults was the defiance its participants showed to Church authority. The timing of the Jewish carnage varied geographically; sometimes it was spurred by the plague itself, while other times the news of the plague's approach was enough to enrage the city's inhabitants to violence. In Mainz, Germany, where the large Jewish population enjoyed significant wealth and status, all 3,000 Jews were murdered despite their resistance.¹⁷⁸ Similar instances of violence despite papal warnings transpired in Strasbourg at the hands of the local merchants. When the town council endeavored to defend the Jews against further persecutions, the members who favored the Jews were removed by the merchants' guild and replaced by individuals who shared the same anti-Semitic beliefs. As a result, the entire Jewish population was burned in February of 1349.¹⁷⁹

This repeated aggression against the Jews was only encouraged by the rapid spread of rumors by local writers. Chroniclers coldly recorded the numbers of murdered

¹⁷⁶ Samuel Cohn Jr., *The Black Death Transformed: Disease and Culture in Early Renaissance Europe* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2003), 232.

¹⁷⁷ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 77.

¹⁷⁸ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 74.

¹⁷⁹ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 74.

Jews in surrounding cities and defended the reasons for their deaths in order to recruit more Christians for the movement. The “World Chronicler” was a monk at the monastery of Albert in Cologne, which was known for these actions and made its opinion on Jews clear. One document emphasized the “horrible means by which the Jews wished to extinguish all of Christendom, through their poisons of frogs and spiders mixed into oil and cheese.”¹⁸⁰ Michael de Leone, a chronicler of Wurzburg and a clerk of its bishop, expressed similar opinions in his poems. Not only did he agree with the rumors of a Jewish conspiracy, but he also supported the continued attacks on Jews, asserting that they “deserved to be swallowed up in the flames.”¹⁸¹ When rebellious movements such as the Jewish pogroms emerged, there was not much that authorities could do to quell these movements.¹⁸² It is not surprising, therefore, that individuals showed such a lack of obedience when the Church gave its order to leave the Jews in peace.

More concerning, however, was the frequency at which secular figures disobeyed the Church as well. Ziegler argues that “even the lay authorities seemed intent on fostering public belief in the malevolence of the Jews.”¹⁸³ One example of this happened in Switzerland, where city and town officials propagated and encouraged mass anti-Semitic movements.¹⁸⁴ In September of 1348, the authorities of Zurich burned the Jews and permanently banned them from their city, and the Jews in Basle were gathered together by the town council and burned alive in wooden structures.¹⁸⁵ Even the Holy Roman Emperor defied the pope. In Bohemia, Emperor Charles IV made his opposition

¹⁸⁰ Cohn Jr., “Burning of Jews,” 17.

¹⁸¹ Cohn Jr., “Burning of Jews,” 17.

¹⁸² Ziegler, *Black Death*, 78.

¹⁸³ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 74.

¹⁸⁴ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 74.

¹⁸⁵ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 77.

to the Jewish population clear to his people. When the Pope ordered the assistance in stopping the Jewish pogroms, the emperor instead prepared for the removal of Jewish holdings from his land and protected any bishops or knights who took part in their executions.¹⁸⁶ Some rulers committed and encouraged violent acts against the Jews because they genuinely believed they were the cause of the plague and because they sought to gain the approval of their people. In May, 1349, Frederic of Thuringia sent a message to the city council of Nordhausen justifying his stance against the Jews. He proudly declared that he had “burnt his Jews for the honor of God and advised them to do the same.”¹⁸⁷ He not only refused to protect the Jews, but also encouraged his subjects to continue the massacres, and the Church was powerless in stopping him. The absurd suspicions that were already prevalent among the Christian population were enough to sway the public to persecute the Jews, and these beliefs were only amplified by the secular rulers who emboldened them. Many administrators worked together to legitimize the belief in the evil of Jews and “created an atmosphere of ready belief in which each piece of evidence fired men to hunt out more offenders.”¹⁸⁸ Samuel Cohn argues that the secular leaders were in fact the main initiators of the Jewish massacres. He states that these officials, “from urban oligarchs and rural knights to the Holy Roman Emperor himself, were the ones so suddenly threatened by Europe’s most monumental mortality into believing that Jews wished to destroy all Christendom, and, as a result, they instigated and carried out the horrific massacres.”¹⁸⁹ While secular elites did in fact lead many of the attacks on Jews, it is not clear if they were the major instigators. Jewish

¹⁸⁶ Cohn Jr., “Burning of Jews,” 15.

¹⁸⁷ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 78.

¹⁸⁸ Horrox, *Black Death*, 109.

¹⁸⁹ Cohn Jr., “Burning of Jews,” 36.

pogroms often emerged quickly without guidance from rulers; sometimes the rumor of a Jewish conspiracy or even the mere sight of a concentrated group of Jews was enough to infuriate the populace. What is clear, however, is that the majority of both lay and secular groups believed in the accusations against the Jews and made efforts to eradicate them despite the threats of excommunication from the Pope. It is obvious from the sources during this time that Jews were targeted and attacked in the wake of the plague. While the motivations behind these attacks varied, the consistency of violent assaults being focused on Jews never faltered.

Despite the general hatred directed toward the Jewish people by the European Christian population, there were some secular and ecclesiastical leaders who attempted to protect the Jews from harm. While these efforts were honorable and courageous, they typically failed. It is important to examine these rare instances because of the backlash that they provoked. The most notable figure who defended the Jews was Pope Urban VI, for, as noted above, it was his bull that demanded the protection of Jews from pogrom violence. But the fact that so much of Christendom defied the head of the Church so as to exterminate the Jews revealed the breakdown of Church authority in the plague's aftermath.

Apart from the Pope, there were also some secular leaders who made efforts to protect the Jews from injury. In 1349 in the city of Cologne, Germany, the city officials pleaded with their contemporaries in Strasbourg to show mercy toward the Jews living in their region.¹⁹⁰ Their message was not heard, however, and their efforts proved futile when Cologne's own Jewish population was burned by the populace. Another example of the attempt to protect Jews can be seen in the Kingdoms of Castile and Aragon, where

¹⁹⁰ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 78.

there had been a large and prevalent Jewish population before the Black Death. The peninsula of Iberia offered a more suitable location for Jews because the treatment they received there had been far better when compared to any other Christian territory at the time.¹⁹¹ The Jewish population benefited from serving as royal tax collectors, doctors, and land owners throughout the country. The generally peaceful relationship between the Spanish Jews and Christians was only temporary, however, as rumors of Jewish plots to poison European communities spread in the Iberian population. Gottfried argues that many of the Spanish populace in Iberia did not need the justification of the poisoning story since “the general breakdown of law and order made Jews especially vulnerable, particularly if they were wealthy.”¹⁹² It was a struggle for Spanish rulers to counter this social collapse, and the chaos lasted almost two years until order was reestablished throughout the land. The damage, however, had already been done. When the Black Death neared its end, the Jewish population of the Iberian Peninsula had been reduced to a quarter of its original size.¹⁹³ Of all the endeavors made to safeguard Jews from Christian attackers, Casimir of Poland seems to have been one of the few, if only, rulers to have successfully guarded his Jewish inhabitants from the massacres.¹⁹⁴ Some scholars believe that his Jewish mistress influenced these actions, but he was nevertheless a rare and honorable exception among the genocides that took hold of Europe.

Some authorities failed to defend the Jews against violence and persecution out of fear of suffering the same fate. An example of this can be seen in the case of Strasbourg, mentioned earlier, where the majority of the council members were removed by force. As

¹⁹¹ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 52.

¹⁹² Gottfried, *Black Death*, 52.

¹⁹³ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 53.

¹⁹⁴ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 78.

the Jewish massacres raged through his land, Duke Albrecht of Austria at first objected to the attacks but later succumbed to the pressure and threats from the mob and local rulers.¹⁹⁵ Royal leaders in Winterthur and Diessenhoven confronted the Duke's stance on the Jews, and in January of 1349, the Duke burned all Jews living under his sovereignty out of fear of the public's reaction. This fear was significant because it worked to undermine the established leadership of local authorities.¹⁹⁶ As a result, moral courage was hard to find among secular and ecclesiastical leaders due to the risk involved in such actions. Ziegler asserts, "Their silence might imply that they thought the idea too ridiculous to mention but it is more likely that they shrank from expressing publicly an unpopular view on an issue over which people were dangerously disturbed."¹⁹⁷ The power had transferred to the laity, and no order from any ruler or Church official could halt the violence they pursued.

The primary reason why the Jews were blamed for the plague was simply the desire to have a reason to persecute the Jews. Contributing to this process was the fact that some Jews forced to confess through torture and other means. The judgment found against Jews after these confessions was swift and final; mercy was rarely shown and they were usually burned at the stake upon the close of the trial.¹⁹⁸ There were also instances where such confessions initially started the rumor itself. The motivations of Jews confessing to false crimes varied, but many of them did so in an attempt to protect their loved ones and to avoid greater consequences from their oppressors.¹⁹⁹ It is indeed conceivable that these reports might not have extended throughout Europe had it not been

¹⁹⁵ Cohn Jr., "Burning of Jews," 14.

¹⁹⁶ Herlihy, *Black Death*, 66.

¹⁹⁷ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 76.

¹⁹⁸ Aberth, *Brink*, 158.

¹⁹⁹ Aberth, *Black Death*, 140.

for the trials of these cases. The trial at Chillon in Switzerland in September of 1348, which occurred without the consent of the Church, was a prime example of the consequences that arose from the hearings. Balovignus, a Jewish doctor, was accused of poisoning wells and finally admitted his “guilt” after undergoing torture by his captors. He declared that a young Jewish boy had been sent to him from Toledo to assist him in poisoning the wells using a poison in powder form.²⁰⁰ The results of the trial quickly spread from Switzerland to Germany and surrounding areas, and the pogroms began to appear throughout Christian territories. The Jew’s admission of guilt was false, and he, like many others, would make such claims in order to stop their agony and gain a swift death. The results of these trials were significant, for “so incriminating a confession settled the doubts or perhaps quietened the consciences of many who might have otherwise have felt bound to protect the Jews.”²⁰¹ There were also similar instances in Savoy, France. These trials were unique because the secular powers and councils also took part in the hearings and worked with the laity to persecute the accused Jews, despite the opposition from the Church. The outcomes of the proceedings there revealed that the “authorities were not interested only in extracting admissions of individual guilt, but in proving the existence of an international Jewish conspiracy.”²⁰²

The Jewish pogroms and the flagellant bands that both appeared during the Black Death are sometimes linked together in the sources. Some cases show that due to the hysteria provoked by the flagellants, some towns were stirred to assault Jewish communities so as to prevent the plague from reaching their homes.²⁰³ Horrox argues that

²⁰⁰ Gottfried, *Black Death*, 52.

²⁰¹ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 76.

²⁰² Horrox, *Black Death*, 110.

²⁰³ Kieckhefer, “Radical Tendencies,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 102.

the flagellants' "passionate penitential desire to cleanse the individual soul of sin could easily become a desire to cleanse the world of the enemies of Christ."²⁰⁴ It is still somewhat unclear if the majority of flagellants were concerned with punishing the Jews, but the few instances that transpired point to how mass paranoia led to other forms of aggression. While it is certainly possible that flagellants and anti-Semites shared similar motivations, the wide consensus among scholars is that they were fundamentally separate groups with distinct goals. While the flagellants and Jewish pogroms were similar in ways, the "arrival of the flagellants in various cities does not overlap with the Jewish pogroms that took place throughout Germany and Switzerland during the Black Death."²⁰⁵ Aberth states, "One can imagine that the extreme emotionalism whipped up by the flagellants would easily lend itself to other acts of violence. But in many cases, the timing was not quite right."²⁰⁶ One illustration of this argument is the massacre that occurred in Strasbourg, where the persecution of the Jews began before the flagellants even reached the city four months later.²⁰⁷ The main objective of the flagellant groups was to punish themselves for their sins in an attempt to assuage God's ire. In contrast, the Jewish pogroms aimed at eradicating a minority population believed to be the root cause of the pestilence. While both groups had the same aspiration in the long run, which was the desire to placate the wrath of God, they went about achieving this goal in different manners. It is important to note, moreover, that although these movements were different, both groups significantly threatened the authority of the Church.

²⁰⁴ Horrox, *Black Death*, 110.

²⁰⁵ Aberth, *Brink*, 156.

²⁰⁶ Aberth, *Black Death*, 120.

²⁰⁷ Aberth, *Black Death*, 120.

A major reason why European Christians might have more easily disobeyed the Church on the Jewish massacres was due to the hypocrisy of some of its clergy. While the majority of ecclesiastical leaders made it clear they were against the persecution of Jews, there were some who did not share this opinion. In the massacres of Strasbourg, one chronicler pointed to the anti-Semitism of the bishop in the region as an encouraging factor for the pogroms.²⁰⁸ In 1351, the bishop of Valencia wrote to city officials on his concerns of the Jewish population. He commented on his fear: “By their sins, our lord God all-powerful might wish to send pestilences about the land.”²⁰⁹ Yuzpa Shammes recounted a famous narrative that had been passed down among Jewish families of the Middle Ages.²¹⁰ In the tale, the Jews of medieval Worms pleaded for help from the local bishop, who guaranteed their safety from persecution. However, when the Christian attackers advanced, he betrayed the Jews and refused to interfere with the massacres.²¹¹ While this is thought to be only a fictional story, the popularity that it garnered among the Jewish population speaks to their apprehension of Christian elites. Some historians argue that even the Pope himself had wavering opinions on the Jewish population. While he pleaded to the public to stop the Jewish attacks, it is possible that he actually felt little sympathy for their sufferings. Cantor argues that he “believed as strongly as any pope in the principle of preserving the Church from corrupt influences through expulsion and isolation.”²¹² Although the Pope made efforts to discourage violence against the Jews, it is possible that people were less inclined to follow his order if they believed his

²⁰⁸ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 77.

²⁰⁹ Nirenberg, “Communities of Violence,” in *Black Death*, ed. Lehfeldt, 110.

²¹⁰ Lucia Raspe, *The Black Death in Jewish Sources: A Second Look at "Mayse Nissim"* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 472.

²¹¹ Raspe, *Jewish Sources*, 473.

²¹² Cantor, *Wake of the Plague*, 159.

intentions to be hypocritical. Pope Clement VI stated in his bull in October of 1348, “Even though we justly detest the perfidy of Jews, who, persisting in their stubbornness, refuse to interpret correctly the sayings of the prophets and the secret words of their own writings and take notice of Christian faith and salvation, we nevertheless are mindful of our duty to shelter the Jews.”²¹³ Despite his efforts to protect the Jews, the Pope did not shy from making his feelings toward Jews known to the public. It is clear that it was not just individual clergy members who held this opinion towards the Jews; the teachings of the Catholic Church had ingrained in the minds of European Christians that Jews were followers of a false doctrine. For years before the arrival of the plague, “the laity had been accustomed to hear the Jews bitterly condemned from the pulpit – as perverse, stubborn and ungrateful because they refused to admit the divinity of Christ.”²¹⁴ This apparent contradiction in regard to the Jews convinced many people that the Church was without answers to the plague and that it was their responsibility to save themselves from destruction.

The mass genocides directed against the Jews during the Black Death constituted a dark and appalling chapter in the history of Western society. Europe had never experienced a catastrophe on such an epic scale, and its people struggled to find ways to deal with the chaos left in the wake of the plague. When the aggression and tension from the plague were directed against the Jewish population, the damaged authority of the Church was unable to protect them. The plague was significant not only because of the mass destruction and death it caused but also because of its consequences on European society. The violence directed towards Jews by the Christian pogroms exposed the lack of

²¹³ Aberth, *Black Death*, 158.

²¹⁴ Cohn, *Pursuit*, 61.

control the Church and governing institutions had on the Christian population. The massacres of the Jewish population point to the upheaval and the mass chaos that struck at the heart of European society during the Black Death.

Epilogue

The Black Death was detrimental to European society in many ways, but one of the most damaging consequences was its blow to one of Europe's most important institutions, the Church. The Church was perhaps Europe's most significant cultural institution, and the Black Death detracted from its influence on the laity by attacking its structure and the reputations of its leaders. But it is important to reiterate that the plague profoundly shook only the faith of the laypeople towards the institution of the Church, not their faith in God. The Black Death made this change possible through the decline of the clergy after the plague, the radical flagellant groups, and the anti-Semitic violence that ensued despite the attempts of the Church to protect the Jews. The relationship of the laypeople with the Church was forever altered after the Black Death, and this consequence would prove to be enduring even after the plague had vanished from Europe.

While it may be a stretch to claim that the religious repercussions of the Black Death caused the Protestant Reformation, it is nonetheless fair to argue that the plague created a world through these changes that made it possible for such movements to take place. Although it cannot be denied that the Church continued to be recognized as a powerful institution in the second half of the fourteenth century, it is distinctly clear that the power and influence "which it had used to exercise over its members was never to be

recovered.”²¹⁵ Medieval society was fundamentally changed in the aftermath of the plague, for its physical, cultural, and religious consequences marked a point of no return. The Black Death exposed the mortal qualities of the Church to the Christian world and forever transformed religious attitudes held towards its leaders and structure.

²¹⁵ Ziegler, *Black Death*, 219.

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