

## ANNUAL FALL MCGINLEY LECTURE



# Pandemics and the Blame Game:

How Plagues Have Affected  
Jews, Christians, and Muslims

---

**The Reverend Patrick J. Ryan, S.J.**

Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society  
at Fordham University

RESPONDENTS

**Rabbi Abraham Unger, Ph.D.**

Department of Government and Politics  
Wagner College

**Ebru Turan, Ph.D.**

Department of History  
Fordham University

**FORDHAM**

THE JESUIT UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK



### **Fordham University's McGinley Chair**

in Religion and Society was established in 1988 to attract distinguished scholars interested in the interaction of religion with the legal, political, and cultural forces in our pluralistic American society.

The chair is a tribute to the Reverend Laurence J. McGinley, S.J., who first attained distinction as a professor of theology and served as president of Fordham University from 1949 to 1963. In 1979, he was appointed president emeritus, a position he held until his death on August 15, 1992. Father McGinley's educational vision and dedication to New York City led to the creation of the Lincoln Center campus, and he was a founding director of Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

**ANNUAL FALL MCGINLEY LECTURE**

# **Pandemics and the Blame Game:**

How Plagues Have Affected  
Jews, Christians, and Muslims

---

**The Reverend Patrick J. Ryan, S.J.**

Laurence J. McGinley Professor  
of Religion and Society at Fordham University

RESPONDENTS

**Rabbi Abraham Unger, Ph.D.**

Department of Government and Politics  
Wagner College

**Ebru Turan, Ph.D.**

Department of History  
Fordham University

**FALL 2020 | FORDHAM UNIVERSITY**

# Pandemics and the Blame Game:

How Plagues Have Affected  
Jews, Christians, and Muslims

**The Reverend Patrick J. Ryan, S.J.**

Laurence J. McGinley Professor  
of Religion and Society

We have been living through a pandemic, the spread of a contagious virus throughout the planet. Pandemics have come and gone before. They differ from other outbreaks of disease mainly because of their scope: a widespread infection that touches every population (in Greek, *demos*) is called a pandemic. The word endemic, now largely reduced to its adjectival usage referring to some specialty or practice typical of a particular area, still survives in the rarely used noun endemic, meaning a disease only locally prevalent. Between an endemic and a pandemic is the more usual epidemic, a widespread but not quite universal outbreak of a disease. To use an analogy from the racetrack, in the derby of infectious diseases, endemics come in at show, epidemics at place, and pandemics enter the winners' circle.

How do endemics, epidemics, and pandemics differ from what we usually call the flu? The flu, once spelt with an apostrophe before it ('flu), abbreviates the Italian word *influenza*, a contagious respiratory illness caused by a virus that infects the nose, the throat, and the lungs, with some spillover effects possible in the gastro-intestinal tract. In pre-scientific cultures, viral infections were all too often attributed to an astral visitation, a conjunction of stars and planets exercising a malign influence—whence *influenza*—on sublunary creatures. In an age affected by scientific medicine, astral explanations don't cut the mustard any more. Even avid readers of horoscopes in the tabloids go to their local health provider when winter brings them sniffles, a cough, fever, pains and aches, and what we used to call in West Africa "tummy palaver."

Another and more lasting explanation of viral infections, discredited in the late nineteenth century, was the influence of a miasma, a fog or polluted air thought to bring with it infectious diseases. Night air was often blamed for such infections; in Roman Jesuit houses in the sixteenth century their denizens were told to keep the windows closed at night, despite the heat, to keep out “bad air,” better known as *malaria*. When Mussolini cleaned up the Pontine marshes south of Rome in the 1930s, it was finally recognized that the female of the anopheles mosquito, which used to breed in those marshes and only bites at night, was the real culprit. Roman Jesuit houses I have lived in during the summer months still do not have screens.

A century ago, the Spanish influenza that marked the end of World War I, was caused by the H1N1 virus with genes of avian origin. Despite the name “Spanish,” it was birds, including poultry, rather than Spaniards, who spread it. Neutral in World War I, Spain had newspapers that honestly reported the outbreak of the virus, while the newspapers in the countries that were belligerents in “the war to end all wars” minimized its impact for propaganda reasons. The Spanish flu killed at least fifty million people worldwide, and infected ten times that many, at a time when the world’s population was around two billion. By way of contrast, the loss of life among all the military and civilians on all sides in World War I had been slightly less than half the number killed by the Spanish flu. In the United States, the Spanish flu killed—one is tempted to say, *only* killed—675,000 between 1918 and 1920.

Like all pandemics, the current COVID-19 virus has wreaked its worst havoc on poor and marginalized populations, especially on those with inadequate health systems, as well as those suffering from compromised immune systems, pulmonary diseases, and the simplest and greatest underlying condition of all, old age. What Pope Francis has called a “throw-away culture” has consistently ignored the lives of the most vulnerable in the United States and throughout the world. As of November 2020, well over a million people have died worldwide, even if that is, as noted, far less than the number who died of the Spanish flu a century ago. The Spanish flu, however, had two years to wreak its havoc, and—ten months in—we may not be finished with Covid-19 quite yet. Not by a long shot.

Bad as the Spanish flu was a hundred years ago, the worst pandemics in all of recorded human history were the three great outbreaks of plague caused by infection with a bacterium known scientifically today as *Yersinia pestis*, a bacterium carried by fleas that were in turn transported by rats and other rodents.<sup>1</sup> Three varieties of this plague

have manifested themselves. The first, and the most common, is bubonic plague. When the bacterium attacks someone, it causes painful swellings around the lymph nodes in the neck, the thighs, and the groin; these swellings are called buboes. These buboes darken in color and become necrotic, discharging pus and rotting nearby tissue, adversely affecting the whole body, leading to infection of others and widespread mortality. Less common is the second variety of plague caused by *Yersinia pestis*, pneumonic plague, borne by human phlegm infected with the virus, often developing when bubonic plague reaches the lungs. The third variety, the least common but the most deadly, is septicemic plague, an infection in the blood signaled by subcutaneous bleeding, also indicative of exposure to bubonic plague. Once infected, the victim of septicemic plague lives only a few hours.<sup>2</sup>

There have been three historically documented outbreaks of bubonic plague, although fossil evidence from Sweden and elsewhere suggests that there were undocumented outbreaks of bubonic plague in that part of northern Europe as long as 5000 years ago.<sup>3</sup>

1. The first documented outbreak of bubonic plague occurred in the sixth-century reign of the Eastern Roman emperor, Justinian I (r. 527–565 CE). Justinian and his consort Theodora, based in Constantinople, had just reunited much of the Western Roman Empire to the Eastern Empire. Bubonic plague arrived in Byzantine–colonized Egypt at the port city of Pelusium in the Nile Delta in 541, possibly taking its origins from grain shipments coming from Central Asia or even from East Africa.<sup>4</sup> Rats and other rodents in the grain shipments transported the fleas that hosted the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*. Eighteen more outbreaks of the bubonic plague over the next two centuries recycled the Justinian plague until the year 755, affecting not only the Byzantine Empire but also its rival for hegemony in the area between the Nile and the Oxus, the Sasanian Persian Empire, and, as we shall see, the early Islamic caliphate. Palaeopathologists have found fossil evidence for the spread of that bubonic plague of the Justinian era in sixth-century skeletal remains dug up as far away from Justinian’s Constantinople as Bavaria.
2. A much more disastrous outbreak of bubonic plague began in Europe in the fourteenth century, and it reoccurred periodically until the early nineteenth century. It is probable that one-quarter to one-half of the population of Europe in the fourteenth century died in the Great Mortality, as it came to be called. Starting in China in the 1330s, this bubonic plague followed the Silk Road until it reached the Genoese trading port of Kaffa on the Black Sea. Genoese traders

had purchased Kaffa from Mengü-Timur (r.1266-1280), Khan of the Mongol Golden Horde, in the thirteenth century. That entrepôt enabled the Genoese merchants to purchase slaves as well as the various luxury goods Europeans craved from Asia seven or more centuries ago. Jani-Beg, a later commander of the Golden Horde, while besieging Kaffa in 1347, found that his own army was being devastated by an outbreak of bubonic plague. This inspired Jani-Beg to catapult diseased corpses over the walls into Kaffa, thereby infecting the Genoese trading community through this early version of biological warfare. That gruesome super-spreader technique was probably not necessary to communicate bubonic plague; rats and their fleas could cross the battlements more easily. In any case, Genoese ships brought bubonic plague from places like Kaffa and the Mongol ports in Crimea on the Black Sea to Constantinople and to port cities in Italy. From Italy the plague infected the rest of the Mediterranean basin and Europe. Realistically, the novelist Sigrid Undset presents the heroine of *Kristin Lavransdatter* as a victim of the plague when it reached Norway in 1349.

3. The third and most recent outbreak of bubonic plague dates to the nineteenth century in eastern Asia, tracing its origins to China in mid-century but reaching Guangzhou (Canton) and Hong Kong in 1894. From there it moved to port cities as varied as Honolulu, Sidney, and Naples. It wreaked terrible harm in India where the British Raj did little to protect the inhabitants of crowded cities like Mumbai and Kolkata. Nearly fifteen million died in India, but only seven thousand in Europe and five hundred in the United States, mainly in the port cities of San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New Orleans. *Yersinia pestis* still hovers in the United States, but the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported just over one thousand cases between 1900 and 2016, mainly among hunters and campers in the southwest of the United States who have had close encounters with rodents bearing the fleas that spread the disease.<sup>5</sup>

Pandemic plagues have played their part in the history of religion, especially in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions of faith. Usually they have inflicted terrible harm, but sometimes they have worked for the good, or at least the good of some actors in certain situations. As the proverb says, one person's loss can be another person's gain. Let me concentrate on the historical and theological perspectives of Jews, Christians, and Muslims on previous pandemics. Who has benefited, who has suffered, and who has been blamed?

## PANDEMICS IN THE FAITH OF ISRAEL

With perhaps less than precise historical foundations, some writers have suggested that the escape of the Children of Israel from Egypt under the leadership of Moses was divinely abetted by a series of pandemics or plagues hitting Egypt in the late second millennium BCE.<sup>6</sup> Even if the details of Exodus are hard to verify by strictly historical standards, they certainly evidence a sense of peoplehood among the Children of Israel forged in shared suffering and shared deliverance. According to the Book of Exodus, ten plagues or blows from God (Ex 9:14) struck Egypt at the command of Israel's leaders, Moses and Aaron, and the tenth and worst of those plagues eventuated in Israelite liberation from slavery. "Thus says the Lord: About midnight I will go through the land of Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on the throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock" (Ex 11:4-5). *Pesach* or *Passover*, the central feast of the Jewish year, takes its name from the destroying angel "passing over" the houses of the Israelites, their lintels marked with the blood of a lamb (Ex 12:13).

Plagues sent by God have punished Israelites as well, not just their oppressors. The Hebrew word for plague, or variants with the same tri-consonantal root (*nun-gimel-feh*), have characterized various disasters, not all of them strictly pestilential. God meted out a plague on the Israelite spies who reconnoitered the Promised Land at the bidding of Moses and brought back a negative report (Num 14:37). Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, along with 250 other Levites rebelling against Moses and Aaron, met their plague when they were swallowed up by the earth and sent down to the underworld (Num 16:33). Nothing deterred by the fate of these Levites, a larger crowd of malcontents also rebelled against Moses and Aaron. Aaron managed to save some of them from plague with atoning and possibly purifying incense (Num 16:46-49)<sup>7</sup>. Twenty-four thousand Israelites are said to have died of plague as punishment from God when some male Israelites intermarried with Moabite women in what is now Jordan and worshipped the Baal of Peor (Num 25:18).

At the less than glorious end of his reign, King David, punished by God for taking a census to determine how large an army he could muster, was offered a choice of consequences for his royal arrogance. He chose three days of plague in Israel rather than three years of famine in the land or three months of flight for himself. When the plague he chose

had killed seventy thousand Israelites from one end of the country to the other, David saw, near the threshing-floor of Araunah the Jebusite, an angelic messenger of God sparing Jerusalem. In gratitude for that divine intervention, the king offered a sacrifice: “So the LORD answered [David’s] supplication for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel” (2 Sam 24:25). That cessation of plague only happened after seventy thousand had died, a huge figure given the rather small population of Israel a thousand years before the Common Era. The kingship, not a long experiment in Israel and seldom a great success, deteriorated after the reign of David, with only a few glimpses of virtue among the monarchs of the southern and northern kingdoms. It must be admitted however, that one of the more virtuous kings of Judah, Hezekiah (r. 715–687 BCE), was saved, along with Jerusalem, from Assyrian conquest when the Assyrian ruler Sennacherib and his army were apparently struck by plague while besieging Jerusalem. “That very night the angel of the LORD set out and struck down one hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians; when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies” (2 Kings 19:35).

One particular plague mentioned in the Hebrew Bible bears a strong resemblance to bubonic plague, and like all outbreaks of bubonic plague, it began in a port city, the Philistine port of Ashdod on the shore of the eastern Mediterranean. The people of Ashdod saw in that plague their punishment for capturing the Ark of the Covenant from the Israelites. “The hand of the LORD was heavy upon the people of Ashdod, and he terrified and struck them with tumors, both in Ashdod and in its territory” (1 Sam 5:6). Moving the Ark on to another Philistine area, Gath, the people there experienced the same affliction (1 Sam 5:9). A further move of the Ark to Ekron ended just as badly, prompting the citizenry of Ekron to return the Ark to Israel along with a guilt offering, a symbolic banishing of the bubonic tumors (1 Sam 5:12). “[The Philistine lords] took two milch-cows and yoked them to the cart, and shut up their calves at home. They put the ark of the LORD on the cart, and the box with the gold mice and the images of their tumors” (1 Sam 6:10-11). Imaging in gold both buboes and mice—the latter a more benign image of the rats which bore the fleas that spread bubonic plague—the Philistines symbolically drove the plague away from their land.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, by an irony of history, the bubonic plague brought the Ark of the Covenant to the Jerusalem area for the first time, but not quite to Jerusalem. It stayed for three months “in the house of Obed-

edom the Gittite” (2 Sam 6:10), a man whose name suggests that he was a native of Gath living near Jerusalem. Obed-edom, a figure of liminality bridging Philistia and Jerusalem, quarantined the Ark on David’s behalf. When the Ark’s presence blessed Obed-edom and his household, David ventured to take the Ark up to his new capital with festal dancing.

The later history of Israel with its Jerusalem and Samaria kingships, Babylonian exile, Persian, Syrian-Greek, and Roman colonization, ended tragically with the Roman destruction of the Herodian-expanded Second Temple in 70 CE. The Romans banished Jews from Jerusalem and finally even from Galilee, thus beginning the longest era of *galut*—exile rather than diaspora—for the Jewish people. Babylonia in what is now Iraq flourished as a great center of Jewish life and learning until the ‘Abbasid caliphate collapsed in 1258 CE, when the Mongol warlord, Hulagu Khan, invaded Baghdad and executed the caliph. Even before the Mongol conquest, however, the caliphate in Baghdad had fallen under the domination of Turkic praetorians, a historical factor motivating Jewish migration out of Babylonia.<sup>9</sup> From the tenth century onwards, Jews dwelling in territories of the caliphate had gradually migrated east and west, especially into southern Europe where they were able to reconstruct their lives as devotees of Torah and its studied elaborations, as well as merchants and other participants in local economic life.

Although the Jews of medieval Europe tended to live separately from their Christian neighbors, their availability in Gentile society as lenders of money at interest made them both friends and enemies. As early as the eleventh century, European Jews had been accused of fictive crimes, especially the use of the blood of Christian children in making *matzoth*. This version of the “blood libel” promoted by Christians against Jews has survived in various anti-Semitic outrages, medieval and modern. When the bubonic plague arrived in Europe in the fourteenth century, Jewish communities suffered fewer infections than the general population, although not a few Jews died of the bubonic plague. Jews seem to have practiced higher standards of personal cleanliness than European Christians at the time, guided as they were by laws of purity (*tahara*), which included regular bathing in the *mikvah* and the washing of hands before eating.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Jewish minorities were often settled in medieval cities at a distance from Christian majorities may have entailed some health advantages for Jews in a time of pandemic. Among those advantages were the possession of wells within their settlements from which they could draw pure

water. Resentment of Jews by Christians had been rising steadily by the middle of the fourteenth century, often because of Jewish participation in the market economy.

With the advent of bubonic plague, pogroms aimed at Jews exploded, promoted by resentful petty merchants. Mobs accusing Jews of poisoning wells roamed every major city of western and central Europe. A typical example was Strasbourg, a city that today straddles the cultural traditions of Germany and France. In fourteenth-century Strasbourg, the city administration attempted to protect the Jews but a mob led by the guilds of butchers and tanners, egged on by impecunious nobles indebted to Jews, slaughtered the Jews of Strasbourg indiscriminately on February 14, 1349. A contemporary source narrates the events with chilling detail:

On St. Valentine's Day...they burnt the Jews on a wooden platform in their cemetery. There were about two thousand people...Those who wanted to baptize themselves were spared...Many small children were taken out of the fire and baptized against the will of their fathers and mothers. And everything that was owed to the Jews was cancelled, and the Jews had to surrender all pledges and notes that they had taken for debts. The council, however, took the cash that the Jews possessed and divided it among the working-men proportionately. The money was indeed the thing that killed the Jews. If they had been poor and if the feudal lords had not been in debt to them, they would not have been burnt. After this wealth was divided among the artisans, some gave their share to the Cathedral or to the Church on the advice of their confessors.<sup>11</sup>

Catholics in Europe led the mobs attacking and killing Jews during the fourteenth-century bubonic plague. One Avignon Pope, however, Clement VI (r. 1342-1352), issued a bull—a papal decree marked with a lead seal (in Latin, *bulla*)—in an attempt to defend the Jews against the calumny, although he continued to express in the same context the Christian theological bias against Judaism typical of that era. That bull, originally issued on 6 July 1348, was reissued on 26 September of the same year; it is known by the first Latin words of the main text, *Sicut Judeis*. “We decree,” the Pope writes, “that no Christian should presume to wound or kill the persons of these same Jews or take away their money or demand forced labor from them.” On the bubonic plague, the Pope notes that God has sent it for the punishment of Christian sinfulness, and furthermore, that Jews themselves have suffered from the plague.<sup>12</sup>

It must be admitted with great sadness, however, that the slaughter of medieval European Jews at the time of the Great Mortality only presaged a much worse slaughter of Jews in the Nazi era. That *Shoah* was no longer linked to misunderstood disease, but to a much worse spiritual and cultural pandemic—the oldest of them all, in fact, the plague of anti-Semitism.

## PANDEMICS IN THE FAITH OF CHRISTIANS

Luke's Gospel associates earthquakes, famines, pestilences, and signs in the heavens with the revelation of the end of time (Luke 21:11). The Book of Revelation introduces the four horsemen of the Apocalypse, the last of whom rides a horse that looks particularly unwell. "I looked and there was a pale green horse! Its rider's name was Death, and Hades followed with him; they were given authority over a fourth of the earth, to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth" (Rev 6:8). Elsewhere, the Book of Revelation counts plagues as the last act of the end-time scenario: "Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and amazing: seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended" (Rev 15:1).

The first major outbreak of bubonic plague in the Christian era dates, as noted earlier, to the reign of the Emperor Justinian and his consort, Theodora, beginning precisely in the year 541, but returning, over and over again, for the next two centuries. Our source for that first outbreak of the bubonic plague is the Byzantine historian, Procopius of Caesarea (ca. 500–565). Procopius gives us a vivid account of the advent of bubonic plague in the Eastern Roman Empire. Although he knew it had entered the Empire through the port of Pelusium in the Nile Delta, he had no idea of the biological causality involved. The magnitude of the plague drove him to attribute its causality directly to God rather than to the prevailing medicinal theories of conflicting and combining humors popularized by Galen of Pergamon more than three centuries earlier.

[F]or this calamity, it is quite impossible either [to express in words or to conceive in thought any explanation, except indeed to refer it to God. For it did not come in a part of the world, nor upon certain men, nor did it confine itself to any season of the year, so that from such circumstances it might be possible to find subtle explanations of a cause, but it embraced the entire world, and blighted the lives of all men, though differing from one another in the most marked degree, respecting neither sex nor age.<sup>13</sup>

Procopius also noted how it came in waves, sometimes revisiting areas that had previously been exempt, a phenomenon also known with Covid-19.

[I]f it had passed by any land, either not affecting the men there, or touching them in indifferent fashion, still at a later time it came back; then those who dwelt round about this land, whom formerly it had afflicted most sorely, it did not touch at all, but it did not remove from the place in question until it had given up its just and proper tale of dead, so as to correspond exactly to the number destroyed at the earlier time among those who dwelt round about. And this disease always took its start from the coast, and from there went up to the interior.<sup>14</sup>

Procopius supplemented his official account of the history of the reign of Justinian and Theodora with his *Secret History*, a tell-all narrative that vilified Justinian and Theodora for many reasons, but laying particular blame on Justinian for his cupidity expressed in taxation during the years of the bubonic plague.

The pestilence, which had attacked the inhabited world, did not spare the Roman Empire. Most of its farmers had perished of it, so that their lands were deserted; nevertheless, Justinian did not exempt the owners of these properties. Their annual taxes were not remitted, and they had to pay not only their own, but their deceased neighbors' share. And in addition to all of this, these land-poor wretches had to quarter the soldiers in their best rooms, while they themselves during this time existed in the meanest and poorest part of their dwellings. Such were the constant afflictions of mankind under the rule of Justinian and Theodora; for there was no release from war or any other of these calamities in all their time.<sup>15</sup>

The fourteenth-century outbreak of bubonic plague in Europe has found many narrators contemporary with the events, but none more stylistically elegant than the Renaissance story-teller Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375). In his introduction to *The Decameron*, Boccaccio strikes a solemn note:

I say, then, that the years of the beatific incarnation of the Son of God had reached the tale of one thousand three hundred and forty eight, when in the illustrious city of Florence, the fairest of all the cities of Italy, there made its appearance that deadly pestilence,

which, whether disseminated by the influence of the celestial bodies, or sent upon us mortals by God in His just wrath by way of retribution for our iniquities, had had its origin some years before in the East, whence, after destroying an innumerable multitude of living beings, it had propagated itself without respite from place to place, and so calamitously, had spread into the West. In Florence, despite all that human wisdom and forethought could devise to avert it, as the cleansing of the city from many impurities by officials appointed for the purpose, the refusal of entrance to all sick folk, and the adoption of many precautions for the preservation of health; despite also humble supplications addressed to God, and often repeated both in public procession and otherwise by the devout; towards the beginning of the spring of the said year the doleful effects of the pestilence began to be horribly apparent by symptoms that shewed as if miraculous.<sup>16</sup>

More than a little pandemic weariness manifests itself in Boccaccio's later remarks describing obsequies for the dead:

It was the common practice of most of the neighbours, moved no less by fear of contamination by the putrefying bodies than by charity towards the deceased, to drag the corpses out of the houses with their own hands, aided, perhaps, by a porter, if a porter was to be had, and to lay them in front of the doors, where anyone who made the round might have seen, especially in the morning, more of them than he could count; afterwards they would have biers brought up, or, in default, planks, whereon they laid them. Nor was it once or twice only that one and the same bier carried two or three corpses at once; but quite a considerable number of such cases occurred, one bier sufficing for husband and wife, two or three brothers, father and son, and so forth. And times without number it happened, that as two priests, bearing the cross, were on their way to perform the last office for some one, three or four biers were brought up by the porters in rear of them, so that, whereas the priests supposed that they had but one corpse to bury, they discovered that there were six or eight, or sometimes more. Nor, for all their number, were their obsequies honored by either tears or lights or crowds of mourners rather, it was come to this, that a dead man was then of no more account than a dead goat would be to-day.<sup>17</sup>

It is easy to understand from this gruesome narrative how the Catholic clergy of Europe, so often pressed into service in these harrowing circumstances, were most affected by the fourteenth-century bubonic plague; almost half of them died as a result.<sup>18</sup>

At a later period in Europe, by now half Protestant, the English historical novelist, Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), reflected on the bubonic plague that had broken out in London when he was a child in 1665. In 1722, Defoe published *A Journal of the Plague Year*, purportedly a memoir of a survivor, a memoir that reflects the predestinarian thought of Defoe and his fellow Dissenters, Presbyterians who had survived an era of militant Anglicanism. This theological stance colors his understanding of the plague and the choice his narrator makes: staying in London for the duration, rather than fleeing to the countryside.

It came very warmly into my Mind one Morning, as I was musing on this particular thing, that as nothing attended us without the Direction or Permission of Divine Power, so these Disappointments must have something in them extraordinary; and I ought to consider whether it did not evidently point out, or intimate to me, that it was the Will of Heaven I should not go. It immediately follow'd in my Thoughts, that if it really was from God, that I should stay, he was able effectually to preserve me in the midst of all the Death and Danger that would surround me; and that if I attempted to secure myself by fleeing from my Habitation, and acted contrary to these Intimations, which I believed to be Divine, it was a kind of flying from God, and that he could cause his Justice to overtake me when and where he thought fit.<sup>19</sup>

The narrator's brother, a man less given over to such predestinarian theology, tells him that he resembles Muslims, people whose Ash'ari determinism makes them unnecessarily resigned to fate.

Then he proceeded to tell me of the mischievous Consequences which attended the Presumption of the *Turks and Mahometans* in *Asia* and in other Places where he had been ...and how, presuming upon their profess'd predestinating Notions, and of every Man's End being predetermin'd and unalterably before-hand decreed, they would go unconcerned into infected Places, and converse with infected Persons, by which Means they died at the Rate of Ten or Fifteen Thousand a week.<sup>20</sup>

Almost convinced by his worldly-wise brother to leave London for a healthier setting, the narrator then turns to bibliomancy, a type of divination practiced by random opening of the Bible.

[T]urning over the Bible, which lay before me, and while my Thoughts were more than ordinarily serious upon the Question, I cry'd out, WELL, *I know not what to do, Lord direct me!* and the like; and [at] that Juncture I happen'd to stop turning over the Book at the 91<sup>st</sup> Psalm, and casting my Eye on the second Verse, I read on to the 7<sup>th</sup> Verse exclusive; and after that included the 10<sup>th</sup>, as follows: *I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in him will I trust...Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night: nor for the arrow that flieth by day; Nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness: nor for the destruction that wasteth at noon-day...*I scarce need tell the Reader that from that Moment I resolv'd that I would stay in the Town, and casting myself entirely upon the Goodness and Protection of the Almighty, would not seek any other Shelter whatever; and that as my Times were in his Hands, he was as able to keep me in a Time of the Infection as in a Time of Health; and if he did not think fit to deliver me, still I was in his Hands, and it was meet he should do with me as should seem good to Him.<sup>21</sup>

Of these three Christian voices concerned with the advent of bubonic plague in the first and second millennia of the Christian era—Procopius, Boccaccio, and Defoe—the last-named emerges not only as the most devout, but also as the most humane, the least self-centered. Plagues provide us with ways to sort out the moral character of human beings.

## PANDEMICS IN THE FAITH OF MUSLIMS

For Muslims, Islam—radical obedience to the divine command—begins with the response of creation to the command of God. In historical terms available to Muslim and non-Muslim alike, the faith tradition of Muslims traces its origins to the life and preaching of Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah, an orphaned child who as a mature adult first experiences God's command to recite words of supernal eloquence, words that when fully collected after Muhammad's lifetime became the wonders (*ayat*) of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an gives very scanty evidence of Muhammad's biography, but one early *surah* is said to narrate an event coincident with the time of the Messenger's birth, approximately 570 CE, three decades after bubonic plague of the Justinian era arrived in the Nile Delta. *Surat al-fil* ("The Surah of the Elephant": Qur'an 105) alludes to an attempt by Abraha, the ruler of an Aksumite Ethiopian colony in south Arabia, to conquer Mecca, bringing along for the expedition at least one hapless elephant, which died in the process.

Did you not see how your Lord dealt with the elephant's people?  
Did [your Lord] not cause their machinations to fail?  
[Your Lord] sent against them winged creatures in swarms,  
Pelting them with burning stones  
Making them [look like] devastated fields. (Qur'an 105).<sup>22</sup>

Could it be that the swarms of winged creatures were avian bearers of some plague? Was the disease possibly smallpox? That could explain reference to faces looking like devastated fields. The burning stones might also be the buboes typical of those infected with the bubonic plague, carried by minuscule winged creatures, fleas. The defeat of Abraha's invasion of Mecca seems also to have coincided with the collapse of the Ma'rib dam in Yemen, then called Saba' (Sheba). The Qur'an refers to this disaster:

A sign [from God] was given to [the people of Saba'] in the places where they lived: two gardens, one on the right and the other on the left. 'Eat from what your Lord has provided and give thanks to Him'—a lovely land and a generous Lord.

They, however, turned away [from God], and so We sent down on them the flood of 'Iram and gave them in exchange for their two gardens two gardens bearing bitter fruit, [bitter] tamarisks and an occasional nettle tree" (*Surat al-Saba'*: Qur'an 34:15-16).

Neglect of the dam's infrastructure had as much, or more, to do with its collapse, but that catastrophe unleashed possibilities for disease of many varieties. In any case, we can be sure that Muhammad was born in Arabia at a time of environmental and medical crisis.

Not long into the Muslim era, which dates from the migration of Muhammad and his closest disciples from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE, Muslim sources narrate how the plague of 'Amwas (Emmaus) broke out in newly conquered Muslim Syria and Iraq in 638-639, halfway through the caliphate of Muhammad's second successor,

‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-Khattab (r. 634–644). Another recycling of the Plague of Justinian, the plague of ‘Amwas claimed the lives of several of Muhammad’s companions, including Abu ‘Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrah, a near contemporary of Muhammad and one of his most loyal allies. Later Muslim scholars have debated whether the Caliph ‘Umar should or should not have traveled into Syria to deal with the effects of the plague, a debate much wrapped up in theological controversies of the eighth through tenth centuries about predestination. Many sources assert that the plague of ‘Amwas caused the deaths of over 20,000 people.<sup>23</sup>

The mid-fourteenth-century outbreak of bubonic plague devastated the Muslim world as well as Europe, including North Africa. A Tunisian who was seventeen years of age in 1349, ‘Abd al-Rahman ibn Khaldun, has provided us with an eloquent short account of the bubonic plague. Ibn Khaldun’s Yemeni ancestors had migrated to Iberia shortly after the arrival of Muslim Arabs at Gibraltar in 711. They held positions of eminence in Iberia from the eighth to the twelfth centuries, but his paternal grandparents eventually moved to Tunis; his father resigned from governmental administration to take up a career as a man of letters, a career choice probably made possible by his wealth. All that ended when the bubonic plague reached Tunis and left Ibn Khaldun an adolescent orphan, both of his parents dead.

Political upheaval in Tunis after the advent of the bubonic plague did not prevent Ibn Khaldun from obtaining prestigious civil service appointments, starting at age 20, first in Tunisia and later at Fez in Morocco. In Fez his luck ran out for the first, but not the last, time in his career, and he went to jail for two years, accused of sedition. He moved on to Granada in Spain, where he served as ambassador for the Sultan of Granada to the Christian court of Pedro I of Castile. Tensions within the Granada Sultanate, however, convinced Ibn Khaldun to return to North Africa, where political involvements continued to cost him dearly. He withdrew from public life in 1375 for a few years, hoping to write an enormous history of the world as he knew it and also to elaborate a theory of history and social change—what he called *‘ilm al-‘umran*, the science of culture or civilization. That work, which he commenced in 1375, occupied most of his remaining lifetime, even when he returned to active but always unlucky involvement in political life in Tunisia and later in Egypt. His last, and most dangerous political involvement, brought him into diplomatic contact with Timur Lenk, better known

as Tamerlane (1336-1405), the Uzbek military conqueror, who had extended his power as far west as Syria.

Ibn Khaldun's major literary achievement is his seven-volume work, *The Book of Lessons: a treatise on the beginnings and the history of the Arabs, non-Arabs, Berbers, and the great rulers of their time*. A Germanic scholar before Germany and its scholars existed, Ibn Khaldun prefaced *The Book of Lessons* with an enormous work he called *al-Muqaddimah*, "the Introduction." His reflection within that work on the bubonic plague that killed his parents is particularly poignant.

[In] the middle of the eighth [fourteenth] century, civilization both in the East and the West was visited by a destructive plague which devastated nations and caused populations to vanish. It swallowed up many of the good things of civilization and wiped them out. It overtook the dynasties at the time of their senility, when they had reached the limits of their duration. It lessened their power and curtailed their influence. It weakened their authority. Their situation approached the point of annihilation and dissolution. Civilization decreased with the decrease of mankind. Cities and buildings were laid waste, roads and way signs were obliterated, settlements and mansions became empty, dynasties and tribes grew weak. The entire inhabited world changed. The East, it seems, was similarly visited, though in accordance with and in proportion to (the East's) more affluent civilization. It was as if the voice of existence in the world had called out for oblivion and restriction, and the world had responded to its call. God inherits the earth and whomever is upon it.<sup>24</sup>

The cultural and civilizational pessimism of Ibn Khaldun in this passage has its roots in the Quranic narratives of how ancient cities of pre-Islamic times, including Pharaonic Egypt, were destroyed for their lack of response to prophets sent to them.

Have you not seen what your Lord did with [the people of] 'Ad?  
Iram [fitted out] with columns  
—None created anywhere like them?  
[Or what He did] with [the people of] Thamud who carved out the  
rocks in the river valley?  
[Or what He did] with Pharaoh of the tent poles?  
[They all] spread wickedness in their countries and multiplied  
corruption in them (Qur'an 89:6-12).

Always a bit defensive about Berber civilization, admitting that “the East” was more affluent than the originally Berber but now Arabized “West,” Ibn Khaldun acknowledged that the bubonic plague had brought the entire civilized world to its knees, East and West. As a citizen of the West, he took it on himself to chronicle its less known history and culture, and it is certainly true that without the work of Ibn Khaldun, the history of the Islamic West (the Maghrib) would be sorely impoverished. Ibn Khaldun had some inkling that his work would be of monumental importance.

This should be a model for future historians to follow. In this book of mine, I shall discuss as much of that as will be possible for me here in the Maghrib, in conformity with my intention to restrict myself in this work to the Maghrib, the circumstances of its races and nations, and its subjects and dynasties, to the exclusion of any other region.<sup>25</sup>

Devastated as he was in family terms by the bubonic plague, Ibn Khaldun scapegoated no one for it, or for any of the other disasters he had experienced, submitting instead to the will of God. “God inherits the earth and whomever is upon it.”

Contemporary Muslim thinkers like Ahmad al-Raysuni, the Moroccan head of the International Union of Muslim Scholars, along with his colleagues who are intellectual leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood, issued in April 2020 a formal statement in Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, and French dealing with the religious and health problems posed by Covid-19. At times they sound like the advice of some American politicians and ecclesiastics who see no reason for a shutdown of houses of worship.

Two issues should be kept in balance in terms of religious life. Muslims should pay attention to health measures. But they should not allow the health measures to eliminate religious principles by creating an air of panic. In particular, Islamic practices such as five daily prayers, Friday prayers, Hajj and Umrah visits, which have social aspects, should be performed in accordance with health measures and it should not be allowed these practices to lose the importance that they have created in the spiritual world of our people.<sup>26</sup>

The government of Saudi Arabia paid no attention to this IUMS declaration and limited the Hajj of 2020 to people already living in the Kingdom. The IUMS sets itself up as an alternate source of religious instruction for its Muslim Brotherhood adherents, not entirely ignoring medical science, but adding theological nuances.

Heavenly calamities are sometimes sent as a test, and sometimes they are sent because of sins that have become widespread. The widespread calamities, which affect everybody, are mostly due to bad acts that are common in this society and made publicly. The Islamic scholars should make the society understand that such general calamities are caused by sins, and they should widely explain the importance of repentance and forgiveness in order to overcome these calamities.<sup>27</sup>

The blame game continues in statements like this, attributing the spread of Covid-19 to human sinfulness. Sinful or not sinful, people all over the world are suffering from this breakdown of public health because of bad decisions made in circumstances as varied as meat and fish markets, vegetable stalls, hospitals, classrooms, political rallies, parties, places of worship and pubs.

## CONCLUSION

We live, to put it mildly, in interesting times. There has been much discussion over the years as to whether the phrase, “May you live in interesting times” is a Chinese blessing or a Chinese curse, or whether it is even Chinese at all. The late Senator Robert F. Kennedy thought of it as a Chinese curse. He quoted a version of it during an address he gave in 1966 to students in Cape Town, South Africa, at a time when the apartheid regime was still firmly ensconced in power. He knew his audience, though, and he saw in and through them the future of multiracial South Africa. He spoke about the dangers inherent in trying to change any long-established system of oppression:

For the fortunate amongst us, the fourth danger is comfort; the temptation to follow the easy and familiar path of personal ambition and financial success so grandly spread before those who have the privilege of an education. But that is not the road history has marked out for us. There is a Chinese curse which says “May he live in interesting times.” Like it or not, we live in interesting

times. They are times of danger and uncertainty; but they are also the most creative of any time in the history of mankind. And everyone here will ultimately be judged—will ultimately judge himself—on the effort he has contributed to building a new world society and the extent to which his ideals and goals have shaped that effort.<sup>28</sup>

The interesting times in which we live derive their identity not only from political and social complexities, but also from the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, a pandemic that surges and declines, and surges again. As of November 2020, the United States—with a population estimated at 335 million—has recorded over 235,000 deaths due to Covid-19 infection. The Republic of South Africa—with a population of 60 million—has recorded a little less than 20,000 deaths due to Covid-19 infection. Seven-tenths of one percent of Americans have died of Covid-19 thus far, three-tenths of one percent of South Africans. There are many reasons why the United States infection rate is so much higher than the South African rate; better and more accurate health statistics come readily to mind. There are also many reasons why the South African death rate is lower: better weather all year long, more of life lived outdoors rather than indoors.

How should we as people of faith—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—respond to the reality of pandemic around us? Political and religious leaders among us need to face up to scientific realities, avoid magical thinking, or pious platitudes, lest we go down in history as fools, or worse, as villains. It is time to build a new international order where worldwide health is recognized as a human right. Pope Francis, on a rainy night, 27 March 2020, prayed in Saint Peter's Square for the city of Rome and for the world—*urbi et orbi*—a city and a world in the grip of Covid-19. He had just read the Gospel narrative (Mark 4:35-41) in which the disciples in a storm feel they have to wake up Jesus asleep in their foundering boat.

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our repackaged ideas

and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people's souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly "save" us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity. In this storm, the facade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging, of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters.<sup>29</sup>

We live in interesting times indeed.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *Yersinia pestis* takes its name from a student and younger colleague of Louis Pasteur, Alexandre Yersin, who isolated it in Hong Kong in 1894. A Japanese physician named Shibasaburo Kitasuto, a protégé of Pasteur's rival, Robert Koch, made the same discovery at the same time, but his name did not become attached to the bacterium. See Frank M. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2019), 40. Hereafter referred to as Snowden.
- <sup>2</sup> See the descriptions on the website of the Center for Disease Control available at [www.cdc.gov/plague/index.html](http://www.cdc.gov/plague/index.html).
- <sup>3</sup> See Cell Press, "An ancient strain of plague may have led to the decline of Neolithic Europeans," available online at <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/12/181206120035.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> See Michael W. Dols, "Plague in Early Islamic History," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (94, no. 3: July-Sept. 1974), 381.
- <sup>5</sup> For a brief overview of all three major outbreaks of bubonic plague, see Snowden, 33-39.
- <sup>6</sup> N. Joel Ehrenkranz and Deborah A. Sampson, "Origin of the Old Testament Plagues: Explications and Implications," *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 81 (2008), 31-42. The epidemiologists who authored that opinion probably knew more about epidemiology than they do about biblical scholarship.
- <sup>7</sup> On the healing properties of incense, at least in Kabbalah, see Yehuda Shurpin, "Jewish Responses to Epidemics Throughout History," available online at [https://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/4882766/](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/4882766/).
- <sup>8</sup> See Frank R. Freeman, "Bubonic plague in the Book of Samuel," (letter to the editor), *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 28 (September 2005), 436.
- <sup>9</sup> See Marina Rustow, "Baghdad in the West: Migration and the Making of Medieval Jewish Traditions, *AJS Perspectives: The Magazine for the Association of Jewish Studies*, available at <http://perspectives.ajsnet.org/the-iran-iraq-issue-fall-2010>.

- <sup>10</sup> For some of these details, see Itamar Kremer, “700 years before Coronavirus: Jewish life during the black death plague” by Beit Hatfutsot: <https://www.bh.org.il/>.
- <sup>11</sup> For this account, see the work of Jakob Twinger von Königshofen (1346–1420), who relied on the work of the Strasbourg historian one generation older, Fritsche Closener, a probable eyewitness of these events. This account can be found online at Fordham University’s medieval history database <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/jewish/1348-jewsblackdeath.asp>.
- <sup>12</sup> Shlomo Simonsohn, *The Apostolic See and the Jews: Documents: 492–1404. Studies and Texts 94* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1988), 396–401, esp. 397.
- <sup>13</sup> *Procopius, History of the Wars* II. xxii, in Procopius I, trans. H. B. Dewing, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914, rpt. 1961), 453. Hereafter referred to as *Procopius I*.
- <sup>14</sup> *Procopius I*, 455.
- <sup>15</sup> *Secret History of Procopius*, trans. Richard Atwater, (New York: Covici-Friede, 1934) XXIII (page 221).
- <sup>16</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. James Macmullen Rigg (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1930), I: 4–5. Hereafter referred to as *The Decameron*.
- <sup>17</sup> *The Decameron*, I: 10.
- <sup>18</sup> For deaths among the clergy in England at this time, see John Kelly, *The Great Mortality: an Intimate History of the Black Death, the Most Devastating Plague of All Time* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 224.
- <sup>19</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, ed. Louis Landa. (New York: Oxford University Press, revised ed., 2010), 11. Hereafter referred to as Defoe.
- <sup>20</sup> Defoe, 11–12.
- <sup>21</sup> Defoe, 12–13.
- <sup>22</sup> All translations from the Qur’an are my own.

- <sup>23</sup> See Justin K. Stearns, “Amwas, plague of” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 3rd edition, available online only at <https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3>.
- <sup>24</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Bollingen Series for Princeton University Press, 1958), 80.
- <sup>25</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>26</sup> For this 31 October 2020 edition of the statement of the 5th Meeting of Islamic Scholars, see <https://www.cinarinsesi.com/5th-meeting-of-islamic-scholars-ends-with-the-final-declaration-229410h.html>.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid. I am indebted to my student in Hong Kong, Arthur Liu, for helping me retrieve the internet connection for this IUMS statement.
- <sup>28</sup> The text of this 1966 Cape Town speech by Senator Robert F. Kennedy can be found online at <https://www.jfklibrary.org/learn/about-jfk/the-kennedy-family/robert-f-kennedy/robert-f-kennedy-speeches/day-of-affirmation-address-news-release-version-university-of-capetown-capetown-south-africa-june-6>.
- <sup>29</sup> For the text of this “Extraordinary Moment of Prayer Presided Over by Pope Francis” see [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200327\\_omelia-epidemia.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200327_omelia-epidemia.html).

# Jewish Response to the Annual Fall McGinley Lecture

Rabbi Abraham Unger, Ph.D.

## THE THEOLOGICAL BACKDROP TO JEWS AND SUFFERING

The Talmud reports that when plagues come, Jews fast. Well before the advent of modern medicine recognizing viral spread, the Rabbinic sages of antiquity had a gut feeling that contagion resulted from close contact and travel. But, that epidemiological instinct didn't prevent these towering Judges of the Law from articulating that the most effective cure to stay disease was an act of contrition. When the third century Babylonian Rabbi Rav Nahman heard there was an epidemic in the Land of Israel, he declared a local fast in his Persian district. A clause in the text coming soon after the mention of this judicial order indicates that fear of contagion was part of the rationale of fasting in a place at some distance from the plague's point of origin.<sup>1</sup> Yet, it was spiritual medicine that was prescribed. The ancient Rabbis certainly understood the concept of medicine. There are various remedies mentioned throughout the Talmud.<sup>2</sup> But, communal leaders' first reaction was to issue edicts based on faith, not science. Medicine was clearly a secondary follow up to the more immediate need for a religious response whenever plague came.

Fasting though was not the only possible pathway towards stopping a virus' spread. Good deeds mattered too. When an epidemic broke out in another Babylonian town where a famous Rabbi lived, it didn't appear there, as the Talmud reports, not because of the renowned scholarly resident. Rather, the townspeople were spared because of the humble kindness of an unnamed individual, known only as *hahu gavra* in Aramaic, meaning "that man," who lent his hoe and shovel for the digging of graves.<sup>3</sup>

So, the question then is begged, and eventually, its answer will also illuminate how Jews have coped with the blame they have received for post-Talmudic plagues, such as the medieval Bubonic one. For the Rabbis, what is it about simple fasting and good deeds that had the power to end pestilence, especially since these scholars from the turn of the Common Era, living during the epochs of the Persian and Roman empires, already had an awareness of medical treatment? For that answer, we jump from ancient Persia to post-modernity, but that shouldn't matter too much, since, if we follow the model of traditional Rabbinic scholarship, historicism is bested by Socratic method.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the pre-eminent postwar theologian of Halakha, Jewish law, suggests that “suffering...has a redemptive function.”<sup>4</sup> There is no better exemplar of this axiom than Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, seen by Judaism across denominations as the quintessential act of religious expression. It is a day of affliction, most notably that of fasting from food and drink, in order to wipe the slate clean in a petitionary act of asking G-d forgiveness for all spiritual debts. It is, as Rabbi Soloveitchik advises, an experience of abnegation that “restores man’s spiritual viability.”<sup>5</sup> He does not ask about the “why” of suffering. The closest we get to an answer to that question is by implication only; in that, through repentance, we may yet draw closer to G-d. We must therefore have failed in some way in that respect. But, there is utter silence on the details there.

Soloveitchik’s interest is not in a systematic explanatory theodicy that washes away the existential issue of personal struggle in the face of incalculable evil.<sup>6</sup> Rather, in keeping with Judaism’s thrust of “deed” over “creed,” he asks what the Jew should *do* in order to “maintain continuity and commitment within the relationship of covenant.”<sup>7</sup> Soloveitchik was compelled to confront this question regarding the *Shoah*, the Holocaust, but his response was one expressed in terms that could apply to any temporal tragedy of seemingly inexplicable loss, whether by plague or human hand. The telos of his theology was to navigate the stormy waters of faith in a G-d who cares for His people Israel.

As an existentialist, Soloveitchik saw each person as continually in crisis. Suffering then only heightens the awareness of one’s own loneliness and pain. Soloveitchik, revealing his thorough Kantian philosophic training,<sup>8</sup> taxonomizes the human condition into two simultaneous strata of existence. One is a life of fate, whereby the individual must simply recognize that he or she is subject to the whim of suffering that may happen upon him or her as an object. But, at the same time, a person also walks with destiny, and in that role,

is active in forging a personal destiny that can overwhelm fate and reconstruct a life of willfulness in joining with G-d in the ongoing act of creation of the world.<sup>9</sup> In this volitional realm, there is the Halakha, which provides the rubric within which the human being can actively respond to even the worst of circumstances.

## THEOLOGY AND PRAXIS IN A TIME OF TROUBLE

While there is some scholarly lack of consensus regarding whether Jews suffered the same amount of losses as non-Jews during the medieval era's Bubonic plague, known as the Black Death, there is evidence that fewer Jews died than Gentiles. Historian Yaffa Eliach succinctly notes that, "the mortality rate among Jews tended to be lower than among the neighboring non-Jewish population."<sup>10</sup> Perhaps this was due to Halakhic practices such as regular bathing in the Mikvah, the ritualarium,<sup>11</sup> and other ceremonial acts that coincide with good hygienic habits, such as washing of hands before eating, or washing down the dead.

It did not take long for medieval Europe to seek out a scapegoat. Whole Jewish communities were massacred. Even the noble effort of Pope Clement VI, who put down anti-Jewish riots in his court's city of Avignon, and issued a Papal Bull to stop attacks on Jews, was unsuccessful.<sup>12</sup> Jews had the chance to avoid the sword through Baptism, but apostasy proved no option at all. In the German cities of Worms, once the home of a great Yeshiva, Talmudic academy, where the foremost Bible and Talmud exegete Rashi had studied, the Jews "set fire to their homes" and martyred themselves.<sup>13</sup>

But, there were other reactions as well beyond the extreme of martyrdom. These were more in line with the Rabbinic mandate to find some practical religious way within the Halakhic tradition to confront, absorb, and move beyond, tragedy. The most common practice that emerged out of the ceaseless and widespread effort at violent destruction of Jewish communities throughout Europe, from Germany to Spain, was in the area of liturgical poetry. These laments were often added on as *Kinot*, dirges in verse recited on Tisha B'Av, the fast day on the Jewish calendar dedicated to the tragedies of Israel's history, starting with the Biblical razing of the First Temple.<sup>14</sup> One scholar was astonished that, throughout these dirges, there was no "rupture" with Jewish conventions and its accounting through faith of losses suffered during this time of trouble.<sup>15</sup> As Soloveitchik articulated centuries later when reviewing the nature of Rabbinic theology in its view of suffering, there is no retreat from the world or massive rethinking of

the structure of the Biblical and Talmudic spiritual edifice. Nor is there any deeper an attempt at understanding the reason for trauma, except to try to draw closer to G-d through a Halakhic act such as fasting, and of course, through intensified *Maasim Tovim*, good deeds. The response to trauma, which surprised the author of a recent book on the Jewish response to the plague, was simply a reaffirmation of accepted Halakhic communal norms, and the use of established rituals as experiential manifestations of the recognition of loss.<sup>16</sup> And then, the day after, a new Halakhic day begins, and the hours are to be measured precisely so that one's obligations can be met timely. We fast, and we will ourselves to create again. That is the Jewish way.<sup>17</sup> Reflection has its place, but only subsumed within the formalities of the Law. The triumph over a deadly fate is through a renewed covenantal commitment to destiny.

## THE PANDEMIC OF 2020

The Jews know something of pandemics and tests of faith. We have been fasting over these outbreaks intermittently for several thousand years. There is no shock to the communal system when a killer virus comes into the air, and human frustration starts to abound. Additionally, there is ingrained in the historical memory of Israel a recollection of anti-Semitism that may accompany widespread and grave illness, such as that recounted above in the narrative of the Black Death. I recall my grandmother, Brooklyn born and bred, telling me how the Jews of Germany survived the Bubonic Plague because of our Halakha, and we were killed for it. I recall my grandfather, her Polish born husband, telling me “We were from the Rhineland, but during the Crusades, we went East, because things got bad for the Jews.” It is not a far leap from there to the Holocaust less than a millennium later.

The nature of this moment is not yet fully clear, because we are not far enough away in time from it to gain the benefit of hindsight. COVID-19 only made itself felt in the U.S. less than a year ago. So far, it has not brought trouble to the Jews, except for its own viral onslaught. Special prayers are being said, and a community acclimated to gathering in quorums to pray and observe its rites now has to figure out how to do that in more solitary ways. But that is a different kind of challenge than being blamed for pestilence. All communities of faith are trying to reconfigure their congregational lives. In that regard, the Jews are part and parcel of the broader tapestry of the universe of religious groups.

As far as I know, the Rabbinate has not declared any fasts. But, there are telling symptoms that the Halakhic *Weltanschauung* is alive and well as a means towards concretizing great suffering into a juridical framework that asks not why, but what, we do now. There are *teshuvot*, Rabbinic legal briefs, beginning to emerge. These short essays detail just how to modify religious life in response to the Coronavirus.<sup>18</sup> There is a theology in this kind of use of Talmudic language to engage in a current attack of plague. It is a discourse that sustains an unswerving faith that the only sensible response to suffering is to draw closer to the Creator of the Universe by continuing to act as His partner in history. There is something deeply empowering about that effort granting humankind decision making authority over its struggle with fate. Destiny, and the ability for us as creatures of flesh and blood to make it ours, is within our grasp. If the Law is in our hands, then so too may be the strength to face the prospect of substantial loss. The Halakha stands by ready to act in service not only of G-d, but of the furtherance, without abatement no matter the circumstance, of the human project.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> *The Treatise Ta'anit of the Babylonian Talmud*, trans. Henry Malter, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1967), 312-313, 21b.
- <sup>2</sup> Julius Preuss, *Biblical and Talmudic Medicine*, trans. Fred Rosner, (Maryland: A Jason Aronson Book, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004).
- <sup>3</sup> *The Treatise Ta'anit*, 310-311, 21b.
- <sup>4</sup> Rochelle L. Millen, "Like Pebbles on the Seashore: J.B. Soloveitchik on Suffering", *Modern Judaism*, Vol. 24, No. 2, (May 2004), 150-164, 154.
- <sup>5</sup> Pinchas H. Peli, On Repentance: *The Thought and Oral Discourses of Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik*, (Maryland: A Jason Aronson Book, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004).
- <sup>6</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Kol Dodi Dofek: Listen-My Beloved Knocks*, trans. David Z. Gordon, ed. Jeffrey R. Woolf, (New York: Ktav Publishing House and Yeshiva University, 2006).
- <sup>7</sup> Millen, 154.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.
- <sup>9</sup> Soloveitchik, 2006.
- <sup>10</sup> Yaffa Eliach, *There Once was a World: A 900-Hundred Year Chronicle of the Shtetl of Eishyshok* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 204.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.
- <sup>12</sup> James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews: A History*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), 339.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 340.
- <sup>14</sup> Lucia Raspe, "The Black Death in Jewish Sources: A Second Look at Mayse Nissim", *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, Vol. 94, No. 3, (Summer 2004), 471-489, 471.
- <sup>15</sup> Susan L. Einbinder, *After the Black Death: Plague and Commemoration among Iberian Jews*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018), 15.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Man*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983).

<sup>18</sup> Asher Weiss, *Minhat Asher Anthology of Lectures, Responsa, and Discourses Related to the Plague of Corona*, (Hebrew, Jerusalem: Makhon Minhat Asher, 2020).

# Muslim Response to the Annual Fall McGinley Lecture

**Ebru Turan, Ph.D.**

I thank Father Ryan for an informative and interesting lecture. Needless to say, as the coronavirus scourge surges to new levels of horror, the choice of the topic for this year's McGinley lecture could not be more apt! In my response today, I will first give a presentation of the medieval Muslim responses to plague in historical context and then discuss briefly the challenges the Covid-19 outbreak has brought to the Muslim community at large.

Two different perspectives shaped the Muslim responses to plague in the medieval era. Firstly, we have the religio-legal view that emerged in the context of theological debates revolving around the questions of predestination, the status of Muslim sinners, and contagion. The religio-legal perspective drew on the prophetic traditions attributed to the founder of Islam, Muhammad, as well as the anecdotes related to the early caliphs and the Prophet's other companions. The second perspective encompasses the medical response to plague, which was based on the famous second-century Greek physician and philosopher Galen's humoral theory.

Let's start with an overview of the theological approach. For the Muslims, the first experience of plague that prompted them to develop a response to the epidemic was the Plague of 'Amwas, which Father Ryan briefly mentioned. Named after a village in Palestine, the epidemic broke out in 639 CE and affected a large area, stretching from Syria to Arabia.

It occurred when the Arab Muslims under the leadership of the second Caliph, 'Umar, were consolidating their conquests in Syria, following the victory at the Battle of Yarmuk won against the Byzantine forces in 638. The Islamic tradition reports that when the Caliph 'Umar and a group of his followers were on their way from Medina to Syria, they met

the Arab commander Abu Ubaydah. Abu Ubaydah informed the Caliph that a plague was raging in Syria. Upon hearing this, 'Umar decided to go back to Medina. Abu Ubaydah, however, raised objections, stating that interrupting the journey would mean escaping from God's judgment. In response, Umar noted that he was merely running from the will of God to the will of God. Later, Muslim scholars coupled this anecdote with a prophetic tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. The tradition reports: "If you hear that plague is in a land, do not approach it; but if it occurs in a land while you are there, do not leave to escape it."

Medieval Muslim scholars derived three theological principles regarding the correct Islamic response to plague from the anecdote associated with the Caliph 'Umar during the Plague of 'Amwas, as well as the quoted prophetic tradition ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad. The first was that the plague was a mercy sent from God; it signified martyrdom for believers, and punishment for non-believers. The second was the belief that Muslims should neither enter nor flee from a plague-affected area. The third was that the plague was not a contagion, but an affliction directly imposed by God. These three principles were adopted almost universally by authors of all plague treatises in medieval Islam, and they were used to define the correct religious and legal Islamic position regarding epidemics until the nineteenth century, when modern scientific approaches to pandemics began to replace the traditional convictions.

Although the first principle identifies plague as a mercy from God, entailing the honor of martyrdom and is only a punishment for infidels, historical evidence suggests that, in fact, Muslims also considered plague as a form of divine retribution or warning, inflicted by God in response to lax morals in the Muslim community. For example, during the plague of 'Amwas, contemporary Muslims blamed the consumption of wine as the prime cause of the epidemic, which brought down God's wrath. Allegedly, the Caliph Umar ordered the lashing of drinkers to punish them. Associating the plague with loose morals and other vices committed in violation of Islamic law also appears in the fifteenth-century Ottoman sources. For instance, a text composed to narrate the Crusade of Varna in 1444, which threatened the Muslim community in the Balkans with complete annihilation, writes that the grand scale Christian attacks such as those seen at Varna, and other natural catastrophes such as plagues, only arise when Muslims become negligent of God's commands.

The association of plague in Muslim societies with God's wrath, putatively engendered by the incorrect communal behavior to the Islamic law, indicates Christian influence on medieval Muslim attitudes. Nevertheless, sharp contrasts divided Muslim and Christian perceptions and reactions to the plague in medieval times.

As Father Ryan pointed out, in Christian societies, plague was perceived as a divine punishment for men's sins. This belief was based on the idea of original sin and the corresponding need for redemption. Hence, Christian collective behavior regarding the plague focused on delivering individual and collective expiation. The search for individual and communal redemption found expression in various practices, such as the flagellant movement, the persecution of non-Christians, most notably Jews, and the growth of apocalyptic ideas heralding the imminent end of the world. In the Islamic context, however, where the doctrine of original sin did not have any theological significance, Muslim scholars and elites were never preoccupied with the sins of members of the Muslim community, even though they may have admitted a causal link between the violation of divine rules and the experience of an epidemic. Instead, Muslim elites organized communal prayers of supplication to request God to lift the disease. These prayers, however, were not penitential prayers asking for atonement for sins.

Furthermore, mass funerals for the victims were conducted in fulfillment of traditional Islamic burial rites. An orator would usually lead them, offering prayers to supplicate God to end the plague and save Muslims. Yet, there would be no mention of the victims' sins or any comment as to why they died and others lived. In other words, for Muslim leaders, priority was not given to cleansing their co-religionists from sin, but to assuage the desperation afflicting the community, and to protect the social and religious life of the Muslim community from disruption and disorder.

Although most Muslim scholars employed a theological framework to understand and respond to the plague, there was also a second medical approach, which presented challenges to the religio-legal understanding.

As mentioned previously, the medieval Islamic medical knowledge drew heavily on the teachings of Galen. Galen's theories were incorporated into Arabic medicine in the eighth century, following the building in 762 of the new imperial capital Baghdad where Nestorian Christians, fluent in Arabic and Greek, translated Galen's works into

Arabic. More specifically, Muslim medical treatment of the plague relied on Galen's humoral theory.

According to this theory, the plague was caused by corrupted air, also known as miasma. A disturbance in the balance of the four elements gave rise to the corruption of the air, which subsequently affected the balance of the humors in human bodies. Three causes were identified for plague miasma: the irregularity of seasons; putrid fumes released by decaying organic matter, contaminated soil, and stagnant water; and astrological events. The most famous eleventh-century Muslim physician, Ibn Sina—known in the West as Avicenna, and regarded as the greatest authority in medicine West and East until the sixteenth century—wrote that the coming of plague could be predicted by the appearance of various environmental signs, such as the colors of the evening sky, cloud formations, heavy rains, and violent winds. In sum, the miasma theory argued that infectious diseases were caused by environmental factors such as contamination of air and water, in addition to poor hygienic conditions. The proponents of this theory recommended public hygiene and believed that cleaning up the filth was the best way to halt epidemics.

The miasma theory of plague was challenged by the contagion theory, which posited that plague could be spread by the touch of infected people, clothes, or food, and endorsed quarantine to control its transmission. Many Muslim scholars rejected the theory of contagion on religious grounds. If one could agree that disease could be transmitted from one person to another, how could one sustain that epidemics were sent by God to reward the believers with martyrdom and punish the sinners?

Muslims tried to reconcile the religious and medical approaches by claiming that while admitting the existence of contagion, it was entirely in God's hands whether one would become infected or not. Nevertheless, several Islamic scholars subscribed to the theory of contagion. The most famous of them was the well-known fourteenth-century Andalusian Arab physician, Ibn al-Khatib—also a friend of Ibn Khaldun, whose comments on the Black Death plague were quoted by Father Ryan. Ibn al-Khatib observed a correlation between the spread of the Black Death and the arrival of infected people, and noted that isolated communities, such as the nomadic societies in North Africa, remained uninfected. Passionate debate between the supporters of the two hypotheses continued until the nineteenth century when scientific studies developed the germ theory and adopted the microbiological approach to understanding and treating infectious diseases.

Caused by a strain of coronavirus, Covid-19 is a viral infection that cannot be treated with an antibiotic. As of today, there is still no vaccine or cure for this virus. The lack of definite treatment has made radical social-distancing measures the only way to curb the spread of the infection. Social-distancing restrictions have affected Muslim life and religious practices worldwide in drastic ways that were previously unthinkable. Congregational prayers at mosques have been suspended; religious events, gatherings, and activities were restricted; pilgrimages to Mecca and Medina's holy sites were temporarily terminated. The pandemic also had a severe impact on Islamic burial rites. The obligatory rites carried out for a deceased Muslim include the ritual washing of the body with soap and water, and the shrouding of the dead in white cotton sheets. No coffin is used for burial. The congregational prayer for the deceased is conducted with large numbers attending, according to Islamic tradition, and congregants stand close together to pray for the deceased. The coronavirus has forced Muslim communities to adapt religious burial obligations to the new circumstances imposed by the pandemic. In some countries, the dead are not even given ritual washing, to reduce the risk of splashing and the duration of exposure to the deceased. Bodies wrapped in plastic bags are buried in coffins. The congregational prayer is performed by a smaller number of congregants, attended by a minimum number of individuals maintaining a distance of six feet from each other.

The circumstances that Covid-19 dictated for Muslims differed significantly from the historical experience of Muslim societies that had endured epidemics. As previously mentioned, at the time of epidemics, Muslim elites' priority had always been maintaining the social and religious fabric of Muslim life. To preserve the religious and social cohesion of the community, they had organized communal supplication prayers at mosques, conducted large processions in cities, and undertaken joint funeral ceremonies to pray for the souls of the dead and help the survivors to cope with the anxiety and guilt for having survived the death of their loved ones. However, social distancing measures adapted due to the coronavirus outbreak marked the first time in Islam's history that communal religious life was disrupted. Renunciation of the communal prayers at mosques, suspension of pilgrimages, and restrictions imposed on obligatory burial rites for the first time gave rise to apocalyptic beliefs in the Islamic world, associating the Covid-19 pandemic with the end of Islam and thus the end of the world.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Akasoy, Anna. "Islamic Attitudes to Disasters in the Middle Ages: A Comparison of Earthquakes and Plagues." *The Medieval History Journal* 10, no. 1-2 (2006): 387-410; Conrad, Lawrence I. "Tā'ūn and Wabā' Conceptions of Plague and Pestilence in Early Islam." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 25, No. 3 (1982): 268-307; Dols, Michael W. "The Comparative Communal Responses to the Black Death in Muslim and Christian Societies." *Viator*, no. 5 (1974): 269-87; Legan, Joseph A., "The medical response to the Black Death" (2015). *Senior Honors Projects, 2010-current*. 103. <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/honors201019/103>.

## PATRICK J. RYAN, S.J.

Patrick J. Ryan, S. J., is the Laurence J. McGinley Professor of Religion and Society at Fordham University. He earned bachelor's and master's degrees in English language and literature at Fordham, and a Ph.D. in the comparative history of religion from Harvard University (with a specialization in Arabic and Islamic studies).

Father Ryan lived and worked in West Africa for 26 years, principally in Nigeria and Ghana, where he taught Islamic studies and comparative religion at both the University of Ghana and the University of Cape Coast. He also taught for briefer periods at Fordham; Hekima College in Nairobi, Kenya; and at the Gregorian University in Rome. From 1999 to 2005, Father Ryan was the president of Loyola Jesuit College in Abuja, Nigeria. In March 2014, he received a Fulbright Specialist Award to teach at Arrupe College in Harare, Zimbabwe.

Father Ryan held numerous positions at Fordham before becoming the McGinley Professor in 2009. He taught Middle East studies, held the Loyola Chair in the Humanities, and served as Fordham's Vice President for University Mission and Ministry. His latest book, *Amen: Jews, Christians, and Muslims Keep Faith with God*, was recently published by the Catholic University of America Press.

## RABBI ABRAHAM UNGER, PH.D.

Rabbi Abraham Unger, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Department of Government & Politics at Wagner College and campus rabbi at the college's Center for Spirituality. He is a senior fellow at the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America Center for Communal Research.

Dr. Unger examines the processes of urban economic development through research and consulting on public/private partnerships, with a special focus on Business Improvement Districts and their impact on local democracy. Dr. Unger also publishes on public theology and how globalization speaks to traditional forms of identity. He has served as a member of the Staten Island Borough President's Strategic Policy Advisory Committee.

Dr. Unger is the author of three books: *Business Improvement Districts in the United States: Private Government and Public Consequences* (Palgrave, 2016), *A Jewish Public Theology: God and the Global City* (Lexington Books, 2018), and *The Death and Life of the American Middle Class: A Policy Agenda for American Jobs Creation* (Palgrave, 2019). Unger co-authored the entry on Jewish philosophy for the current edition of *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*.

## EBRU TURAN, PH.D.

A native of Istanbul, Turkey, Professor Ebru Turan received her Ph.D. in Near Eastern languages and civilizations from the University of Chicago.

Dr. Turan specializes in early modern Ottoman history with a special focus on the Ottoman-Habsburg imperial rivalry in the 16th-century Mediterranean. Her research interests include apocalyptic and messianic movements in the early modern world, the later crusades, and Muslim-Christian cross-cultural interactions in the early modern era.

Currently, she is an assistant professor in the Department of History at Fordham University, where she teaches classes on the cultural, intellectual, and political history of Islam, the Middle East, and Muslim-Christian relations in the Mediterranean from late antiquity to modern times.

Formerly a recipient of a postdoctoral fellowship from the Historical Studies Institute at the University of Texas at Austin, Dr. Turan has published articles on 16th-century Ottoman history and has written several entries for the *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, 3rd edition.

Currently, she is working on a book project titled *The Origins of Ottoman-Habsburg Imperial Rivalry in the Apocalyptic Mediterranean*.



FORDHAM  

---

THE JESUIT UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK