



CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM IN THE AGE OF PANDEMICS: PAST AND PRESENT

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Abstract : Religion is often perceived as a system of answers to environmental phenomena. When it comes to crises, religious communities tend to behave according to their beliefs and inherited values. Religions and religious actors are expected to comfort believers by giving them answers to painful events, as well as providing them with different variations of support. Therefore, the current Coronavirus pandemic challenges the two largest religions in the world, Christianity and Islam, in primarily two different ways. The following essay intends to compare past and present Christian and Muslim reactions to pandemics; the first part will illustrate the contemporary interventions of the COVID-19 virus; the second half will discuss past pandemics (e.g., Bubonic Plague).

INTRODUCTION

The world witnessed a vast variety of pandemics in the past centuries, such as HIV/AIDS, Flu, Cholera, and the Black Death/ Bubonic Plague. COVID-19 has joined the list when the WHO declared it a pandemic, not only an epidemic affecting China alone.¹ Yet, what is common among these pandemics is the state of fear and distress that accompany them. People panic because they do not know what to do or what to expect. Subsequently, the people who practice religion would tend to look

for answers, interpretation, comfort, and hope through a religious lens. Given the essentiality of religion during various diseases and calamities, the scholar Duane J, Osheim emphasized that "the epidemic disease may be best seen as a frame, a constantly shifting frame, subtly influencing illness and human response to it."²

light on some sub-topics in this regard. It will begin with a short, general overview of religion within the Coronavirus pandemic, followed by

a summary of the religious Coping-Theory as our theoretical framework. In the first part, we will emphasize on contemporary theological interpretations, as well as practical responses by religious authorities within Christianity and Islam of the COVID-19 pandemic. The second part will focus on history and the plague pandemics. The goal is to find significant similarities, as well as differences, between past and present religious views of pandemics.

It should be emphasized that this is just a glimpse of a diverse reality. There is an endless variety of different religious views and reactions to the matter, and it is impossible to give all of them their due in a short paper. Therefore, this paper must be read, as a very brief introduction to an otherwise much wider topic.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

At the time of writing this article, the world has witnessed approximately 5,907,813 deaths due to COVID-19 since its outbreak in 2019.³ This disease is caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus in which it is transmitted from an infected person to another through small liquid droplets of mouth or nose when they cough, sneeze, speak or breathe.⁴

Although pandemics are not a new phenomenon for humanity, COVID-19 surprised us with its shocking effects and unavoidable consequences such as lockdowns, curfews, and quarantines. Consequently, these uncertainties created a state of fear, panic and anxiety for people in all parts of the world who haven't faced something of that magnitude in the past 100 years.

While the ongoing pandemic is directly linked to public health measures that were

imposed to slow the spread of the virus; other social, political, economic and psychological effects were also triggered. Focusing on the social aspect, we noticed that public responses varied in many ways due to the social implications of the lockdown measures.⁵ The religious communities were among the categories that reacted towards the national measures. In a sense, some people felt that it is a very crucial moment to perform religious activities more than ever, such as praying and mourning the death of their beloved ones. However, they needed to comply to the lockdown policies. As one group of authors put it, there was a rise in "demand" for religious rituals, yet a very limited and decreased "supply" of religion. A central point to the investigation into how this global pandemic influenced the religious scene, is that religious institutions, congregations and individuals were directly affected by halting public worship services, closure of religious buildings, and imposing social distancing. Since religious rituals have social and psychological implications, halting or changing the traditional form of some of these rituals resulted in tensions among religious groups, such as the internal conflict among the Polish Catholic communities regarding the way of receiving the holy communion.⁶

CONTRADICTING RESPONSES TO COVID-19

Religion brings multifaceted sides when it comes to crisis or natural calamities; it can exacerbate the problem, as we will later discuss in the behaviors of some religious communities, or it can be part of the solution. Building on the religious orientation theory, of which Maltby differentiated between two major categories of orientation: 'extrinsic' or personal; meaning when people, on the one hand, use religion as a source of comfort, while on the other hand, the 'extrinsic' or social orientation entails that people dealing with religion for the reason of social participation and social gain.⁷ These

theories can explain the reason why religious people were unhappy in regards to the COVID-19 measures, however their disapproval to the measures was not restricted to feelings of discomfort, some also attempted to break the rules. Examples of super spreading religious events, to name the obvious, where held in the U.S., South Korea, Germany, Iraq, and India by people who resisted state-orders in order to perform their rituals.⁸

RELIGION IN DIFFICULT LIFE SITUATIONS: COPING AS A WAY OUT

During times of uncertainty and traumatic experience, people often tend to search for ways to make sense of what they consider unusual. In other words, they tend to consult their belief system in search for meaning.⁹ They seek religion to help them interpret the difficult situations in search for a sense of meaning and hope. Religion has always been a key factor throughout previous pandemics as well as during the current one. When humans had to face the sudden crisis of COVID-19, the unprecedented hospitalization rates and rapid contagion, they started to consult their faiths to look for answers and perhaps comfort or hope.

Part of religion's role is not to stop crisis from happening, but to help believers find the meaning to endure the pain in the midst of that crisis. The ban on rituals was among the international governmental regulations to curb the spread of the virus in many parts of the world, which in turn intensified the situation for religious people who use religion to cope as a mechanism to adapt to various episodes of life. The expression 'religious coping' was first adopted by Kenneth I. Pargament in his book, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping* in which he explored the fact that religion is not silent on painful experiences, rather it provides some answers to it.¹⁰ Hence, he also stresses the idea that religious coping mechanisms are more explicit for those who consider religion to be

part of their orienting system. According to Pargament's definition, religious coping methods are ways of dealing and interpreting difficulties in life through the lens of the sacred.¹¹ The impartial aspect of Pargament's theory is that he and other researchers empirically analyzed and tested the two sides of the spectrum.

Positive religious coping methods (e.g., relating any stressful situation to God's plan and hanging onto religious rituals) in which they found out that those groups of people - on which the study was conducted- enjoyed health and well-being. While on the other hand, those who tend toward the negative religious coping methods (e.g., assuming that God has abandoned them or is punishing them through that difficult situation) suffered from more depressive and negative effects.¹² Christians and Muslims used these two types of coping mechanisms during COVID-19; to either use the first one to stay persistent and putting their trust in God or to justifying God's wrath and punishment through the latter mechanism.¹³

In her article 'In Crisis, We Pray: Religiosity and the COVID-19 Pandemic, Jeanet Bentzen observes that in March 2020, Google searches for prayer skyrocketed to a record number. Not only that, but the data showed that more than half the world's adults prayed for an end to this pandemic. Moreover, this increased interest in prayer came from almost all major religions as well as all continents. This study confirms again that religion can play a paramount role in providing a coping strategy to people during the pandemic which can result in stress relief and contributes to the overall well-being of societies.¹⁴

INTERPRETATIONS: A PUNISHMENT OR PART OF THE NATURAL WORLD? IN CHRISTIANITY

Christian scholars have been presenting a wide variety of explanations and interpretations to the pandemic, some of which are affected by their geographical location, denominational background, political factors and other dimensions.

Dr. Yohanna Katanacho illustrates the COVID-19 pandemic according to three pillars; firstly, pandemics are just natural disasters, and the main theological cause is the sin of Adam and Eve. Therefore, pandemics are part of God's redemption plan for humanity in which He will send His only son to redeem mankind and show God's immense love. Secondly, the Bible mentions natural disaster in relation to a spiritual aspect; this turbulence is linked to warnings, judgment, and a call for repentance in order to shape history and challenge the power-balance. Thirdly, we need to see God as the Savior, the Holy, the Creator who ask Humans to keep the social and political justice, maintain the moral standards, and love their neighbors.¹⁵

Another interpretation from the famous author N. T. Wright states that in the book of John, chapter 11, we do not see Jesus link the disease and death of Lazarus with sin. On the contrary, he weeps with Lazarus' family orders him to come out of the tomb.¹⁶ Wright also explains that in the New Testament, there is emphasis on repentance as a means to make oneself ready for God's Kingdom, and not because of famine or plagues.¹⁷

Furthermore, making sense of the current pandemic, Wright reflects on Romans 8, where it is mentioned that the whole creation is groaning and will go through pain, yet believers are called to have faith and pray: "For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, with the hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." (Rom 8:20-21)

Tolmie and Venter collect the various essays written on the pandemics and theology and offer a summary of contemporary Christian scholars and theologians' interpretations of the pandemic. Their overview captured some of following themes: the influence of social location on the interpretation of the pandemic in light of the Bible, the reluctance to interpret the pandemic as a punishment from God, the importance of interpreters' views of God.¹⁸ John Goldingay and Kathleen Scott Goldingay challenge the belief that pandemics are punishments from God. While some are described as punishments, many of the pandemics mentioned in the Old Testament seem to have come rather coincidentally.. Finding an explanation for the pandemic should therefore not be the focus. Rather, believers should focus on repentance and neighbourly love.¹⁹ Peter Lampe takes the story of Mark 3:1-6, where Jesus is healing a man with a withered hand, as the base of his theological interpretation. Jesus heals the man during the Sabbath, therefore focusing on the reality of pain and the issue at hand. Jesus however still invokes the law, as he is granting the man rest, during the Sabbath. Lampe concludes that laws cannot be applied in an inhumane way. Referring to a crowd in Berlin, protesting measures back in 2020, he states that one cannot insist on one's rights, while endangering the health of others.²⁰

IN ISLAM

Like their Christian counterparts, Muslim scholars and institutions had different views on the current pandemic; this can be noted in the document published by the Boston Islamic Seminary, one of the most comprehensive guides on that matter. The document includes some questions and answers as well as theological topics that concern every Muslim believer. For example, the basic question of whether COVID-19 was a punishment from

God or not? We find a Hadith in which the Prophet's wife Aisha - asked him the same question about the plague and he responded: "It is a punishment sent by Allah on whom He wants to punish." "And Allah made it a source of mercy for the believers," then elaborates "If one in the time of an epidemic plague (sic) stays in his country (or stays in his house as mentioned in different narrations) patiently hoping for Allah's reward and believing that nothing will befall him except what Allah has written for him, then he will get the reward of a martyr." (Sahih Al-Bukhari, Hadith no. 3474)

The document explains this Hadith by making the distinct conditional statement that to get the reward you must stay in your house/town and trust the divine wisdom of God. Despite the fact that one might not die from the deadly virus, they will be considered martyrs. Moreover, any pandemic could be either a punishment or a mercy depending on one's own response to it (trusting God or not). On another note, the Hadith mentions that one must be patient in the face of calamities and challenges like pandemics, and in order to earn God's mercy one must not blame others and must follow the prescribed health measures.²¹

Speaking of diseases, the Quran and the Hadith seem to be completing each other: "And when I am ill, it is He who cures me." (Surat al-Shu'ara V. 80), "There is no disease that Allah has created, except that he also has created its treatment." (Sahih Al-Bukhari, Hadith no. 5678) The verse²² power of the Almighty in healing the diseases while the document explains the hadith; diseases were created to test the believers, yet there is no disease without a cure. Even though scientists have not been able to discover a treatment for the Coronavirus, Muslims believe, according to the above-mentioned hadith, that it is the religious responsibility of every Muslim doctor and scientist to find a cure. Hence, it is also a religious responsibility to prevent the

contagiousness of that disease.²³ It is important to note here, that the majority of Muslim scholars nowadays accept the scientific fact of contagion and infectious diseases.²⁴

CHANGES IN REGARDS TO PRACTICES AND RESPONSES

Stemming from the scriptures and religious traditions, the notion of 'protection of life' is embedded in both religions' values.²⁵ Since such value is considerably crucial in public health settings, we will try to briefly discuss the impact of religious rituals and religious authority in relation to health measures like social distancing and quarantine. As an example, the authorities of famous places of pilgrimage for Christians and Muslims (eg, The Vatican and Mecca) have been canceling all forms of religious tourism during the first wave of the pandemic to pause the spread of virus.²⁶

CHRISTIANITY

Churches around the world tried to do what they could by either halting the congregational prayers or allowing them to take place but without an audience. For instance, the Vatican used to issue a daily bulletin to discuss the updates in regards to the spiritual rituals with the faithful. In March 2020, the bulletin included advisory for churches that are about to celebrate the Pascal (the holy week before Easter) to issue norms in accordance with the measures established by the local authorities. It also contained recommendations for ritual performances, such as broadcasting the prayers online to be followed at home by the people, avoidance of choir singing inside the church, and a reminder of the importance of the authentic ecclesial prayer whether personal or with the family.²⁷ Besides, a decree named "In Times of COVID-19", was also stressing that since Easter's date cannot be transferred to another day, the celebrations will take place at the Vatican cathedral and the faithful can follow it online from their homes at the same time.²⁸

ISLAM

The idea of "stay at home" was adopted during ancient times of plagues, when prophet Muhammed himself advised the believers: "If you hear that there is a plague in a land, do not enter it; and if it (plague) visits a land while you are therein, do not go out of it" (Sahih al-Bukhari, hadith no. 5728)

Al-Azhar and the Council of Senior Scholars in Saudi Arabia are considered authoritative institutions, Muslims around the world follow their Fatwas (Islamic legal rulings). Using Qur'anic references and prophetic reports, both issued statements in regards to one of Islam's five pillars - prayer. The Fatwas declared - in an attempt to enforce the concept of social distancing without compromising religious duty - shifting the congregational Friday prayer that normally takes place at mosques to regular Friday noon prayer at home, either individually or with the family. The Saudi institution also stressed the need to prevent harm in all possible ways.²⁹

DIFFERENT RELIGIONS - SIMILAR MISLEADING DISCOURSE

A key dimension of religiosity for religious communities is the influence of religious leaders authorities on the lay people which sometimes can be more significant than the rules of the national authorities. We will mention two examples from different contexts that point out this issue.

In Pakistan, amidst the first wave of COVID-19 in April 2020, a devout Muslim dismissed the government's measures and announced that he goes to the mosque every day with dozens of worshippers. In his interpretation he said: "Our prayer leader told us that the virus can't infect us the way it does Western people, we wash our hands and we wash our face five times a day

before we say our prayers, and the infidels don't, so we need not worry. God is with us."³⁰

In Egypt, a home for the majority of Christians in the Middle East, we find another example of spreading misleading information from a Coptic Orthodox Bishop who publicly addressed his parish in Asyut saying: "If a few people in Assiut pray with all their hearts, [COVID-19, will not harm any of us." He asked the crowd to repeat these words again after him.³¹

Religious scholars need to be aware that despite the authoritative statements from international religious leaders about the pandemic, there will still be examples like the above mentioned who mobilize people to falsely act against science.

CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM DURING THE PLAGUE PANDEMICS

Before dealing with the religious response to the plague, a few words on what the plague is, where it came from and how it spread. The disease we call "plague" is caused by the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria. The bacteria are often spread by infected fleas and transmitted to humans through rats. The plague comes in four different variants: bubonic plague, septicemic plague, pneumonic plague and abortive plague. Bubonic and pneumonic plagues are considered the two most common and widespread types.³² According to Dols, there have been three major plague pandemics in human history: The first Plague pandemic, starting with the Plague of Justinian in the mid-6th century, the second pandemic, the "Black Death", and the Bombay Plague in the late 19th century. There were however several outbreaks after and in-between these four major pandemics.³³ Kevin Madigan estimates the death toll of the first pandemic to roughly 50 million people.³⁴ The Black Death killed at least 20 million people in Europe and more than 100 million worldwide.³⁵ In the following, we will focus on examples which fall

in the period of the first two plague pandemics. We will start with the theological explanations of Christian and Muslim religious authorities, followed by the measures taken by said authorities against the pandemic.

WRATH OF GOD OR DIVINE MERCY? INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PLAGUE

In Christian Europe, the Black Death was usually perceived as a divine punishment. Dols notes that while various interpretations may have existed, this was by far the most dominant, which heavily shaped the reactions to the pandemic.³⁶ Rosemary Horrox quotes an English poem from the 14th century, listing a whole number of sins, which allegedly caused the plague. The anonymous author names greed, unchaste priests and women, lavish life styles and a lack of love and justice. The beginning of the poem reads as follows³⁷:

See how England mourns, drenched in tears. The people stained by sin, quake with grief. Plague is killing men and beasts. Why? Because vice rule unchallenged here. Alas! The whole world is now given over to spite. Where can a kind heart be found among the people? No one thinks on the crucified Christ, and therefore the people perish as a token of vengeance. (Horrox, The Black Death, 126.)

The Archbishop of York, William Zouche, wrote one of the earliest clerical reactions to the pandemic. He stated in a sermon, dating back to July 1348, that the plague was caused by the sins of men, who enjoyed the worldly lives, but failed to acknowledge these pleasures as divine gifts. He ordered the people therefore to seek forgiveness from God, because God's mercy would overcome his justice.³⁸ Other English clergymen would see the cause in the fashion of women, and the disobedience of children.³⁹ The Lombard lawyer Gabriele de Mussis went even further, assuming that God may have totally forsaken humanity. In 1348, he wrote a fictional dialogue between God and the Earth, in which

God tells the Earth, that she is held "captive by worthless men" and commands her to "demand vengeance with human blood."⁴⁰ The idea of a divine punishment would also stick with the plague, during its later outbreaks after the pandemic of the 14th century. For example, in the early Modern Age, some would accuse either the Catholic Church or the Protestant reformation - depending on whom you ask - of being the reason for the outbreaks.⁴¹ Other examples can be found in Florence of 1630 where people believed the plague to be caused by the ongoing wars in Italy.⁴² The diverse amount of explanations we could find on why God would punish the people of Europe so severely, are nearly always connected with significant social and political changes of the time. We can then assume, that these happenings all effected the perception of the pandemic.

However, John Aberth and Michael Dols both also pointed out that, Christians believe in original sin. Original sin would, according to the dominant Christian theology, automatically burden mankind with sin and guilt. The premise of original sin, would therefore support the perception of divine justice and punishment. While some Muslim scholars also believed that the plague was a torment and punishment, it was still not that widespread as among their Christian counterparts. Presumably because the idea of original sin, in the common Christian sense, doesn't exist within Islamic theology.⁴³

Islam was familiar with the bubonic plague since the very beginning. In Arabic, the disease is known as *tā'ūn*, which derives from a word which roughly translated means "to stab" or "to pierce". Another known word is *wabā'*, which translates to "epidemic".⁴⁴ Islam emerged during the period of the first plague pandemic, which started with the Plague of Justinian in and the hadith say Muslims were things of fate. With thalau related to this topic. An-Nawawi

mentions five main plague outbreaks, during the early times of Islam, starting with the plague of Shirawayh - named after the Sassanian King - in the year 6 A.H/627-628 A.D.⁴⁵ The reign of Umar in al-Khattab was challenged by a plague outbreak, which falls in the period of the first pandemic. The Plague of Yezdigrid was named after the Sassanian emperor at the time, Yezdigrid III. Plague of Amwas" because it heavily affected the Muslim troops stationed at Amwas (ancient Emmaus)

Dols states that while some contemporary Muslims interpreted the plague as a divine punishment against infidels, or Muslims who went astray, many considered it a sign of divine mercy.⁴⁶ The interpretation of the plague as a form of punishment was supported by a Hadith in which the prophet Muhammad stated, that at-ta'un was a torment (rijz) sent by God, to the Children of Israel and other people who came before⁴⁷:

Usamah bin Zaid narrated that: The Prophet mentioned the plague and said: 'It is an abiding punishment or chastisement that was sent upon a group of the children of Isra'il. So, when it occurs in a land while you are in it, then do not leave it. And when it occurs in a land while you are not in it, then do not enter it.'

*(Jami' at-Tirith, Hadith no. 1065
[https://sunnab.com/tirmidhi:1065.](https://sunnab.com/tirmidhi:1065))*

Ayman Shabana mentions that at-Tabari made a connection between rijz and the plague. In his commentary to Verse 59 of Surah al-Bagara, at-Tabari notes that the term rijz is clearly used in the sense of torment and punishment. He therefore concludes that the plague should be interpreted as such a torment.^{48 49} Others have however referred to Hadiths which described plague victims as martyrs.⁵⁰ Therefore, they consider the disease a mercy and blessing for the faithful, who will be rewarded in paradise, similar to martyrs of

Jihad. During the plague of Amwas, the "brave horsemen and beautiful, chaste women" were all considered martyrs. In Aleppo 1348, the scholar Abu Hafs ibn al-Wardi elaborated on the idea that the plague is a punishment for infidels, yet mercy and blessing to the believers. He witnessed the pandemic forcing the people in Aleppo to reflect on their deeds and their fate in the afterlife. People would start to free their slaves, look after orphans and reconcile with former enemies. He therefore concluded, that the plague is a trial and testing for the believing Muslims.⁵¹

Besides the question of whether the pandemic is a punishment or mercy, Muslim scholars also heavily debated the matter of contagiousness. In the Christian European context, it was generally accepted that the plague is contagious and even Pope Clement VI fled his seat in Avignon because he has acknowledged the threat. Muslim Hadith scholars, like Ibn Hajar, however claimed that the prophet Muhammad has rejected the pre-Islamic belief of infection and contagion. God was considered the only cause of the plague, who absolutely decides the fate of every single one. This led to a fatalistic attitude towards the pandemic.⁵² Shabana notes that the Hadith are, however, really not in agreement on this matter. Some seem to reject the idea of contagion, while others seem to imply that contagion exists.⁵³ Not all Muslim scholars therefore denied the contagiousness of the plague. The scholar and physician Lisman ad-Din in al-Kathib, who survived the plague years of 1349 to 1352 in Granada, stressed that contagiousness in an empirically proven fact. Statements like these led to accusations of heresy against Ibn al-Kathib.⁵⁴ The theological interpretations of Christian and Muslim authorities respectively would of course shape the reactions to it. As we shall see, the idea of a divine mercy and non-contagiousness would cause somewhat fatalistic reactions on the Muslim side, while the understanding of a

punishment would lead to penance but also scapegoating in Christian Europe.

PRAYER, FLIGHT AND FATALISM: REACTIONS TO THE PLAGUE

Since the dominant understanding of the pandemic was that it was a punishment of God, most Christian responses were focused on masses, prayers, ceremonies, asking for God's forgiveness and mercy. Among the many rituals and ceremonies that were common during the plague, the importance of veneration to the Virgin Mary definitely stands out. Horrox mentions the prayer *Stelle Celi Extirpavit* dedicated to the Virgin Mary as being popular in England during the time of the Black Death.⁵⁵ The Sicilian annalist Michele de Piazza, highlights the importance of cities, sanctuaries and pilgrimage sites associated with Saints, specifically the Virgin Mary. He narrates that many of the people of Messina fled the city, but that most of them went to Catania, hoping to get a blessing from Catania's Saint, Virgin Agatha. The patriarch of Catania agreed to send the relics, related to Virgin Agatha, to Messina, with the hope of helping the people who were still in the city.⁵⁶ These kinds of spiritual measures would still exist during the occasional plague outbreaks in Europe after the Black Death. During the plague of 1630 in Florence, the Archbishop Cosimo Bardi de'Conti di Vernio ordered sermons for every Sunday in the Duomo, held by representatives of all main orders. He also called for further devotions to the Virgin Mary, asking her for mercy and to intervene with God. Besides that, a weeklong fasting was prescribed, starting on August 15th with the festival of the Assumption of Virgin Mary. Public gatherings were, however, strictly forbidden by the public board of health. The archbishop did not oppose these measures. He was familiar with the contagiousness of the plague and therefore declared everyone who stole from a potentially plague-infected house to be excommunicated, as well as to lock the

doors of the Duomo, except for two side entrances.⁵⁷ During the Black Death, the church was, however, also challenged by the flight of parish priests, especially in England. The Archbishop of Canterbury from 1349, Simon Islip, witnessed two of his predecessors dying from the plague. By 1350, he was challenged by more and more rural communities in England, who lacked spiritual support. Priests who survived the plague would often relocate to other communities, with the outlook of a potentially higher salary. Archbishop Islip accused the parish priests of greed and neglecting their duties. He asks the other dioceses of England to implement a fixed salary of parish priests. It is clear that the archbishop considered the main duty of the church, in the times of the plague, to provide spiritual comfort and guidance to the community.⁵⁸ But there were also other challenges. Not all religious reactions to the plague were officially caused or sanctioned by the church. Such an example is the flagellant movement and the pogroms against Jews. The flagellant movement started in the year 1348 in central Germany. Based on the interpretation of the plague as a rightful punishment, the flagellants would inflict severe harm to themselves in public penitential ceremonies.

The flagellants were also accused of violence against Jews. The flagellant movement, as well as the attacks and pogroms against Jews, were condemned by most senior members of the clergy.⁵⁹

Muslim society differed in this regard. The plague didn't cause any major violence against non-Muslim minorities. The question of contagiousness however, remained a controversial topic, as well as the prohibition of flight.

According to Hadith literature, the prophet Muhammad has prohibited flight from region stricken by the plague. This ruling became

especially controversial during the reign of Umar ibn al-Khattab and the plague of Amwas. Around 25,000 Muslim soldiers succumbed to the disease. The plague kept spreading throughout Syria, Iraq, Egypt and Palestine and Caliph Umar ordered his military commander in Syria, Abu Ubaydah, to return to Medina in order to prevent his death. He refused however, referring to the prohibition by the prophet to flee from a plague-stricken region. Umar, however, managed to persuade him to move the troops to a different area. Abu Ubaydah and two of his successors would later succumb to the plague.⁶⁰ Dols states that this specific ruling has shaped future attitudes towards the plague. He also remarks that it seems to be somewhat conflicting with the rejection of contagion. Because of the obvious, pragmatic reason to stay in a plague infested region is prevention of spreading the disease. Dols also mentions that Abu Musa al-Ash'ari asked visiting friends not to stay in his house because an inhabitant was sick with the plague. Therefore, we can neither conclude that the rejection of contagion was always widespread, nor that the reactions of Muslims were uniformly fatalistic in nature.⁶¹

Questioning the contagiousness of the plague, however, still had its effects. Since the contagiousness of the plague was still regularly doubted, public gatherings did occur, with sometimes devastating consequences. The scholar Ibn Kathir also narrates the importance of public ceremonies in Damascus, during the Height of the plague. Ibn Kathir mentions public readings of Sahih al-Bukhari, as well as Qur'an recitations. In the year 1348, a huge crowd came together, reciting the verses related to the flood of Noah. According to Ibn Kathir, mortality increased during these days, rising to a daily average of 100 people.⁶²

Beside these ritual reactions, some Muslim polymaths also argued for proper medical measures. Abu Jafar Ahmad in Kathima, a

physician from Almeria, wrote treaties on the origins of the plague as well as the proper measures against it. Like his friend Ibn al-Kathib, Ibn Kathima did not deny the existence of contagion. He stressed however, that the disease still comes from God. He describes infection and contagion as natural laws implemented by God. As proper ways of prevention, Ibn Kathima recommended fresh air, hygiene, minimum movement, proper sleep, a diet based on clean water and barley as well as psychological support, through reading the Qur'an or books on history, humor and romance. He recommended bleeding as a preventive therapy for patients with both strong and lighter symptoms.⁶³

CONCLUSION

Religions remain highly diverse and heterogenous phenomena. Therefore, we can never refer to a "single" or "universal" Christian or Muslim understanding of pandemics. We can, however, recognize certain trends and tendencies. In the case of Christianity, the theological aspect of original sin remained present from the times of the plague until today. That being said, we have also recognized significant changes. While during the Black Death the idea of a divine punishment was mostly dominant, religious experts within Christianity perceived the Corona-Virus as part of natural calamities and not necessarily as a torment from God. We can see something similar within Islam. A unified Islamic understanding of pandemics never existed. However, there are and have been trends and tendencies. Until this day, Muslims dying in a pandemic are considered martyrs. The ruling of the prophet Muhammad about not leaving or entering a plague-stricken region became even more relevant today in the times of global lock downs. But like in Christianity, we can also recognize significant change. While during the plague the question of contagion was highly controversial, Muslim religious authorities these

days seem to acknowledge the scientific fact of infectious diseases.

The effectiveness of practical responses, on the other hand, depend on the religious interpretation of the disease. Then and now, religious authorities either took the pandemics seriously and implemented useful measures for countering them, like minimizing travel or prohibiting huge gatherings or they've disregarded them, causing superspreading. Regarding religion as support for coping, we can conclude that this is the common

characteristic of past and present. Since the plague of Justinian, the religious leaders of Christianity and Islam tried to give pandemics meaning. They were always perceived as either punishments, trials or mercies, upon humanity. And we can also see that the demand for spiritual and theological answers to such catastrophes remained high and relevant till this day.

NOTES

1. "WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 11 March, 2020," WHO, accessed 12 February 12, 2022, WHO. <https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19--11-march2020#:~:text=WHO%20has%20been%20assessing%20this,to%20use%20lightly%20or%20carelessly>.
2. Duane J. Osheim, "Religion and Epidemic Disease" *Historically Speaking*, Volume 9, Number 7, (September/October 2008): 36-37.
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