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VIII

CONCLUSIONS

Neither the sun nor death can be
looked at with a steady eye.

—La Rochefoucauld

If the full meaning of the Black Death and the recurrent plague epidemics in the Middle East could be easily expressed in concluding remarks, it should scarcely have been necessary to recount at length the story of plague and its impact on medieval Muslim society. However, the existence and nature of the pandemic and subsequent plague reappearances in the Middle East had to be determined as clearly as possible. Equally important has been the attempt to estimate plague mortality and to suggest the diffuse consequences of depopulation for most aspects of Muslim life in the latter half of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.

By the last decade of the fourteenth century, the Mamlūk Sultanate was plunged into a general crisis from which it would never fully recover.¹ The reasons for this mounting crisis are readily apparent. As the major faction among the governing élite, the Circassian mamlūks seized control of the empire in 783/1382, but only prolonged the internecine struggle for the sultanate, which may be dated from the death of an-Nāṣir in 741/1340. The factionalism led to civil wars in Egypt and Syria, while the undisciplined Circassians abused or abandoned a number of the characteristic features of the mamlūk institution.

Economically, the cultivated regions of the Sultanate were subjected to destruction by warring armies and by increased bedouin unrest. Apart from this disruption of agricultural production, famines caused by exceptional fluctuations of the

¹ *Muslim Cities*, pp. 25-38.

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Nile in the century after the Black Death and increased taxation forced the peasantry to flee the land. The contraction of the vital agrarian economy, as evidenced by the cadastral surveys, brought about the decline in incomes for the mamlūk élite and, consequently, the decline in consumption of crafts and trade, accompanied by monetary chaos and inflation of prices. The decrease of agricultural revenues entailed, in a vicious circle, the neglect of irrigation and other rural investments by the government and the individual mamlūk amirs. The decline of the Mamlūk Empire may be attributed, in this manner, to the protracted crisis in the countryside. But the carious agricultural economy only points out most forcibly what was common to all facets of mamlūk society after the mid-fourteenth century: the impairment of the state by prolonged depopulation. Along with other unfavorable demographic factors, plague helped to destroy the most abundant resource of the Mamlūk Sultanate.

While there was a rehabilitation of political conditions from 1420 to 1470, it was severely handicapped by a continually declining population and was heavily burdened by the unremitting drain on Egypt's and Syria's dwindling economic resources for military enterprises. At this time, the regime was faced with the re-emergence of external dangers: Turkoman advances from Anatolia, the invasion of Timūr in the East, and Christian piracy at sea. The increased military demands, including that of manpower, on the contracting economy diverted surplus wealth from consumption and internal investment to enormous military expenditures, which were economically unproductive. The final defeat of Egypt by the Ottomans, in the early sixteenth century, found the country economically prostrate² and the population greatly depleted. We can date this striking economic deterioration from the Black Death.

In the immediate aftermath of the Black Death in Middle Eastern and European societies, the short-term economic effects were significant and very much in line with what modern

² *Ibid.*, p. 39 and n. 71.

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economic theory would predict: a rapid rise in wages and per capita incomes of the laboring classes and downward pressure on rents and incomes of the propertied classes. Aggregate economic production declined in both societies from their previous levels. For urban workers, the century following the Black Death was a prosperous one, but the rural laborers in Egypt did not share in this prosperity, as did those in Western Europe. While the pandemic may have accelerated the decline of European manorialism and the shift to modern contractual relationships, no such change took place in the centralist landholding system of Egypt and Syria or in the nature of its agricultural production. It remains questionable whether the following century witnessed an actual decline in per capita well-being in European society; for the Middle East, the issue is far less doubtful. Except for the urban laborers, the economic evidence of the later Mamlūk Period indicates a marked decline in per capita income, together with an overall economic depression.³

At the same time that the Black Death and its recurrent epidemics had profound consequences for the economy and, therefore, the future of the Mamlūk Sultanate, they evoked the distinctive and dramatic communal reactions that we have described. As a means of both summing up and assessing the Muslim response to plague, it is instructive to relate this response to the simultaneous European Christian reaction to the pandemic.⁴

On the basis of contemporary Arabic and Latin sources for

³ Cf. Hirshleifer, *Disaster and Recovery*, pp. 10-18, 27-28.

⁴ There is a need for caution because of the lack of research on the demographic history of the Middle East. It is impossible to prove that the dramatic difference in the contemporary reactions of Muslim and Christian societies was due to a marked difference in population decline. It is improbable, in my opinion, that there was a greater decline in European population that would have caused greater social tension and alarm. A general assessment of the urban populations and the etiological conditions for plague in the Middle East would tend to suggest the opposite: a higher mortality rate in Muslim society and, almost certainly, a greater aggregate number of deaths.

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the Black Death, we can be certain of the existence of the three major forms of plague (bubonic, pneumonic, and septicæmic) in these regions. In any historical comparison of the role of the pandemic in Muslim and Christian societies, therefore, we can assume as a constant the medical nature of the disease itself. In addition, almost all the medieval physicians believed that its immediate cause was a pestilential miasma; this belief was broadly accepted in both societies, as a result of their common reliance on the theory of epidemics found in Hippocrates and elaborated upon by Galen and Ibn Sīnā, the greatest medical authorities for the fourteenth-century doctors. Therefore, in the Oriental and Western plague treatises, there is similar advice for improving or changing the air in a plague-stricken community.

This medical advice is only one element of the defensive communal reactions of the two societies. A study of the more general communal responses to the same disaster delineates the respective values and practices of late medieval European and Middle Eastern societies.⁵ After reviewing the European Christian understanding of the Black Death and the remarkable reactions to it, as well as the Muslim response, it will become evident that they were quite dissimilar, and the comparison of these differences tells us much about what is essential to the identity of each culture.⁶ Faced with the

⁵ The psychological impact of historical disasters, such as the Black Death, was the topic of William L. Langer's presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1957 ("The Next Assignment," *The American Historical Review*, vol. 63 [January, 1958], pp. 283-304, and "The Black Death," pp. 114-122).

⁶ I am conscious that there is another natural way to cope with disease, or suffering and death in general, apart from the conscious human attempts at understanding: one can simply ignore them. Temporary or partial oblivion is, perhaps, not without merit; I am less convinced of the merit or even existence of complete oblivion. In one instance, obliviousness has been used as an explanation for a society's reaction to collective disaster: Robert Lifton has described the "psychic numbing" of those subjected to the atomic attack on Hiroshima (*Death in Life* [New York, 1969], pp. 500, 503). Concerning the Black Death in Europe and the Middle East, I have found very little evidence of

specter of death in a particularly horrible form, the values and attitudes around which lives were constructed met their severest test. We shall be drawn to re-examine the *religious* roots of each culture in order better to understand their differing responses. As Professor Lapidus has written about the long history of communal life in the Middle East: "In each epoch, the prevailing religions represented a different set of values and understandings, a different type of organization, and a different form of society; but in all ages, ancient, Christian, and Muslim, community life seems to have been inextricably bound up with religion. From religious teachings come the ideals and the norms of social action; from religious organization, the structuring of social life."⁷

In Europe the Black Death was interpreted on various levels by contemporary writers. However, the pandemic was considered by most European observers to result directly from a pestilential miasma, and it was believed that the disease was contagious, which accounts for the important protective measures taken by the Italian cities and the widespread advocacy of flight as the best means of escaping the disease. The physicians emphasized natural causations of the disease (such as an unfavorable conjunction of the planets or earthquakes) among the remote causes of the miasma. However, only one European treatise gives a concrete remedy against the astrological causes of plague; the customary recommendations were flight and prayer.⁸ *The most important thing to bear in mind*

communal or individual indifference to the disaster. There seems to be a real danger here that must be resisted; the nature of the Muslim reaction to the Black Death should not be interpreted simply as psychic avoidance of or obliviousness to a real calamity.

⁷ "Traditional Muslim Cities: Structure and Change," *From Madina to Metropolis*, ed. by L. Carl Brown (Princeton, 1973), p. 57.

⁸ Campbell, p. 65. Campbell's monograph is devoted in part to an examination of the opinions on the Black Death by contemporary Europeans, particularly physicians. Although instructive about medical theory and practice, this examination is highly restrictive and cannot be said to reflect the general European interpretation of the disease. The physicians' views should be balanced by other sources, such as chron-

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is not the precise mechanisms contrived by men to explain contagion (which were wrong) but the fact that in the Middle Ages—whether in Christian or in Muslim society—one simply could not separate the physiological from the mental and moral processes.

The real cause of the plague pandemic was believed to be a moral one: the European Christian viewed the Black Death as an overwhelming punishment from God for his sins and those of his fellow Christians.⁹ Despite other interpretations of the disease, this view is the only one that satisfactorily explains the extraordinary forms of communal behavior in many parts of Europe during the Black Death. This supernatural explanation was propagated by the Church and is reflected in contemporary European art and literature.¹⁰ The chronicles of the fourteenth century almost always attribute the affliction to divine retribution for the wickedness of European society.¹¹ Langland sum-

icles, vernacular literature, and art. Particularly the homiletic literature should be studied since the medieval homilists, in general, were the disseminators of the patristic understanding of plague; through preachers' manuals, sermon collections, and devotional writings, they conveyed to the popular culture the ecclesiastical idea of plague. See, for example, G. R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1926).

⁹ Explicitly or implicitly, all diseases were believed by medieval European observers to come ultimately from God; the common moral justification for disease was that God inflicted disease on the unrepentant sinner as punishment; see Stanley Rubin, *Medieval English Medicine* (New York, 1974), p. 16. For specific examples, see the interpretation of madness in medieval European society by P.B.R. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (New Haven, 1974), pp. 1-53, and Judith S. Neaman, *Suggestion of the Devil: The Origins of Madness* (New York, 1975), pp. 50-51 *et passim*; for leprosy, S. N. Brody, *The Disease of the Soul: Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca, 1974), pp. 11-12, 60-61, 104-106, 112-189; and for epilepsy, Owsei Temkin, *The Falling Sickness* (Baltimore, 1971), pp. 85-117.

¹⁰ Johannes Nohl, *The Black Death* (London, 1961), pp. 78-79; Crawford, *Plague and Pestilence*.

¹¹ Ziegler, p. 35.

marizes the common view succinctly: "These pestilences were for pure sin."¹²

Based directly on Biblical and classical precedents,¹³ a conviction of personal guilt and a need for individual and collective expiation were engendered in the faithful Christian. His attitude to the Black Death is well illustrated by the European communal response. This response took the forms of the flagellant movement, the persecution of alien groups (particularly the Jews), and a pessimistic preoccupation with imminent death.

The flagellant movement was based on a belief in the mortification of the flesh as suitable penance for men's sins. Beginning in mid-thirteenth-century Italy, a series of natural disasters convinced many that God's wrath was visiting men as a punishment for their sinfulness. This concept was acted out in expiatory pilgrimages and processions in an attempt to divert or allay God's chastisement. The processions recurred continually during the later Middle Ages.¹⁴ From its inception, an implicit element of the flagellant movement was its participation in the millennial ideas that Professor Cohn has shown to be a significant theme of late medieval Christendom, stemming especially from the millennial scheme of Joachim of Fiore.¹⁵ Self-flagellation was "a collective *imitatio Christi*, a redemptive sacrifice which protected the world from final overwhelming catastrophe, and by virtue of which they themselves [the flagellants] became a holy élite."¹⁶

During the Black Death, this holy élite became a messianic crusade without a putative messiah. A recent historian of the Black Death in Europe has described the movement in the following manner:

¹² *Piers Plowman*, Version B, v. 13.

¹³ See Hirst, pp. 6-16.

¹⁴ Ziegler, pp. 87-88; Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, rev. ed. (New York, 1970), pp. 127-147.

¹⁵ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, pp. 108-113; see Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford, 1969).

¹⁶ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. 142.

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As the fervor mounted the messianic pretensions of the Flagellants became more pronounced. They began to claim that the movement must last for thirty-three years and end only with the redemption of Christendom and the arrival of the Millennium. Possessed by such chiliastic convictions they saw themselves more and more, not as mortals suffering to expiate their own sins and humanity's, but as a holy army of Saints.¹⁷

The flagellant movement was a complex social phenomenon. Its apocalyptic ambitions proved to be an incentive to personal mysticism, anti-clericalism, and revolutionary social ideas, such as the destruction of private wealth. The flagellants were also intimately associated with the second major feature of the European reaction to the pandemic: the persecution of the Jews.

The massacres of the Jews during the Black Death were unprecedented in their extent and ferocity until the twentieth century. The first attacks on the Jews resulted from the accusation that this unassimilable community had caused the pestilence by poisoning wells; this was neither new (Jews had been accused and massacred in southern France and Spain during the plague epidemics of 1320 and 1333), nor confined to the Jews alone. Lepers,¹⁸ gravediggers and other social outcasts, Muslims in Spain, or any foreigners were liable to attack; the hunting-down of plague salvers continued well into the seventeenth century. But in September 1348 the forced confessions from ten Jews in Chillon were adduced to support the accusation and to implicate all European Jews.¹⁹ A second wave of

¹⁷ Ziegler, p. 92.

¹⁸ Ernest Wickersheimer, "Les Accusations d'empoisonnement portées pendant la première moitié du XIV^e siècle contre les lépreux et les juifs; leur relations avec les épidémies de peste," *Comptes-rendus du quatrième congrès international d'histoire de la médecine*, ed. by Tricot-Royer and Laignel-Lavastine (Anvers, 1927), pp. 76-83.

¹⁹ The analysis by H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries and Other Essays* (New York, 1969), pp. 90-192, is remarkably suitable to the interpretation of this "craze."

massacres from the middle of 1349 was instigated by the propaganda of the flagellants. In many cities of Germany and the Low Countries (Frankfort, Mainz, Cologne, Brussels) the destruction of the Jewish population was led by the flagellants, aided by the masses of the poor.²⁰ Pope Clement VI finally condemned the flagellants in 1349, after two bulls in the same year against the persecution of the Jews had been ineffectual.

Besides the immediate economic and social causes that have been pointed out for the Jewish persecution,²¹ we must also consider the image of the Jew as Antichrist, commonplace in Europe during the later Middle Ages. As closely related to Christian millennial ideology as the reverse is to the obverse, this image was fostered by the Roman Catholic Church and gained considerable momentum from the time of the First Crusade. At its origin was a predisposition to seek a weak, unpopular, and easily identifiable scapegoat as the source of evil—the enemy of militant Christendom.

In general, European Christians reacted to the Black Death with profound guilt and fear, which religious attitudes about the mortification of the flesh often transformed into extreme penance.²² There seems to have been a deep pessimism and sometimes a renunciation of life itself.²³ The frenetic character of religious life in the fourteenth century was magnified by the preoccupation with death. "The Dance of Death, the Art of Dying, the Council of Florence's definition of the doctrine

²⁰ Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, p. 139.

²¹ Ziegler, pp. 97-109.

²² Langer, "The Black Death," p. 122: "Boccaccio, a few years after writing his *Decameron*, was overcome by repentance and a sense of guilt verging on panic. Martin Luther suffered acutely from guilt and fear of death, and Calvin, terror-stricken by the plague, fled from each epidemic. Indeed, entire communities were afflicted with what Freud called the primordial sense of guilt, and they engaged in penitential processions, pilgrimages and passionate mass preaching."

²³ Ziegler, pp. 274-276; Meiss, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*, pp. 74-78; J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York, 1954), pp. 27-52; Langer, "The Next Assignment," p. 298; George Rosen, *Madness in Society* (New York, 1969), p. 8.

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of purgatory, the practice of indulgences—all suffered life to be seen increasingly from the perspective of death.”²⁴

Professor Huizinga has suggested that a “vision of death” pervades late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century European literature; the macabre weighed heavily on men’s souls.²⁵ The awareness of imminent death and of the transitory nature of life is extraordinarily prominent in a variety of late medieval documents, as seen in sermons and poems, testaments and endowments.²⁶ It is not illogical, however, to find the opposite reaction—hedonism—as a form of defiance to this *danse macabre*.²⁷ No doubt it was a desperate kind of reassertion of life in the presence of death. Moreover, the natural desire of survivors to escape the threat of death by fleeing from a plague-stricken region was encouraged by European physicians and clerics. The pandemic brought to the fore the discontinuous view of human existence in Christianity—that is, the end of all things in the Apocalypse.

In the complex psychological response to the Black Death, the natural preoccupation with death was therefore not inconsistent with a vision of the Biblical Apocalypse.²⁸ Many believed that the end of the world had come, plague being the apocalyptic rider on the white horse. In an account of the island of Cyprus during the pandemic, an Arabic chronicler testified to the Christian belief by his remark that the Christian Cypriots “feared that it was the end of the world.”²⁹ The Black Death did not create these forms of reaction or the ideology that lay behind them; it was a stimulus, despite its irregularity of attack, which excited the nerve system of late medieval Christian society.

²⁴ John M. Headley, “The Continental Reformation,” *The Meaning of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. by Richard L. DeMolen (Boston, 1974), pp. 141-142.

²⁵ *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, pp. 138-151.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 31ff; Campbell, pp. 171-174.

²⁷ I have found no evidence for a comparable abandonment of morality in Muslim society during the Black Death or later plague epidemics.

²⁸ Rosen, *Madness in Society*, pp. 9-10.

²⁹ *as-Sulūk*, part 2, vol. 3, p. 776.

The Middle Eastern interpretations of the Black Death display a diversity of opinions similar to that of the European accounts. Yet the dominant view of plague was religious and was set forth primarily in the three religio-legal principles that directly affected communal behavior as we have seen.

It would be unreasonable to assume that these three religio-legal tenets were totally characteristic of the Muslim response to the Black Death. While there was no question that the ultimate cause of plague was divine, the legal scholars argued both for and against these precepts in their plague treatises. As for the first principle, there is historical and literary evidence that plague was considered by some men as a warning or punishment by God. There is an obvious incompatibility between the beliefs in plague as a divine punishment and as a divine reward. Within this spectrum of beliefs, there was also the deterministic view, which finds support in the Qur'ān, that plague was a calamity decreed by an unknowable God. The latter interpretation is most consistent with the historical accounts and represents the consensus of the jurists and popular attitudes. As for the unique theological claim that plague was a mercy and martyrdom, it may have been both comforting and confounding for the distressed Muslim; it had the virtue of preserving the belief in a compassionate and merciful God.³⁰ At the very least, there was no unanimity of opinion

³⁰ The only comparable instance of a disease's being interpreted as a divine blessing or mercy, to my knowledge, is the medieval Christian belief in leprosy as a divine promise of salvation (Brody, *The Disease of the Soul*, pp. 68, 101-104). Both ideas were propagated by the religious establishments and posed similar inconsistencies. Medieval Europe, according to Brody, "accommodated two incompatible ideas of leprosy: the disease was the sickness both of the damned sinner and of one given special grace by God" (*Ibid.*, pp. 100-101). Unlike the Muslim treatment of plague victims, the Christian notion of sin and punishment prevailed over the pious assurances of salvation. The different treatments of the plague victim in Muslim society and the leper in Christian society may be explained in numerous ways, but the simple fact that plague was a short-term disease compared to the life-long suffering of leprosy must account to some extent for Muslim society's receptivity to the idea of immediate salvation for the plague victim and its rejection by Christian society for the leper.

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about the specific reason for plague; this lack of agreement had its virtue in removing the possibility of a single ideological basis for social activism.

Much the same may be said for the issue of flight from a plague-stricken community. Some jurists disagreed with the prohibition against fleeing, and there is historical evidence that clearly shows that there was flight from the countryside to the major cities. The Black Death and the recurrent plagues accelerated a pattern of rural depopulation that was perceptible to Arabic historians in the following century and a half.

On the other hand, there was at least temporary evacuation of the cities as well. Yet, despite the enormous problems created by the pandemic, there is no evidence that suggests that the machinery of government and religion broke down altogether in the most important cities, such as Damascus, Cairo, and Alexandria. The historical narratives that relate the attempts by the government to count the dead, either in the mosques or at the city gates, argue strongly in favor of the maintenance of urban organization. Indeed, such activities are rare examples in Muslim urban life of what could be called "municipal" organization. The popular religious ceremonies are equally indicative of municipal activity; they also argue against massive flight from the urban regions and against a popular belief in contagion. As late as the severe plague epidemic in Cairo in 1835, Edward Lane, a keen observer of traditional Muslim society, noted during the epidemic—for which he observed no unusual popular reaction—that "from a distrust in fate some Muslims even shut themselves up during the period of plague, but this practice is generally condemned. A Syrian friend of mine who did so nearly had his door broken open by his neighbors."³¹ Concerning this third problem of contagion,

³¹ *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages*, p. 10. For the same plague epidemic in the Middle East, we have the travel account of Kinglake—*Eothen*—which is virtually "A Journal of the Plague Year." Kinglake observed, particularly, the high mortality rate in Cairo and the traditional Muslim funeral practices. Compared with the massive flight of the Europeans due to their obsession with contagion, "the Orientals, however, have more quiet fortitude than Europeans under afflictions of

the Andalusian scholar Ibn al-Khaṭīb has attracted European attention for his observation and forceful statement of the contagious nature of the Black Death. However, this points to the exceptional nature of Ibn al-Khaṭīb's belief and the weight of opinion against him.

The importance of these three principles to Muslim society was in what they did *not* affirm: they did not declare that plague was God's punishment; they did not encourage flight; and they did not support a belief in the contagious nature of plague—all prevalent beliefs in Christian Europe. These principles appear to be borne out by the reports of the general communal responses to the Black Death in the major cities of the Middle East.

The comparison of Christian and Muslim societies during the Black Death calls attention to the appreciable disparity in their general communal responses. But has not the description of the Christian reaction stressed the exceptional rather than the typical responses? For were there not comparable magical beliefs and practices, religious services and prayers? Undoubtedly there were, although mass communal funeral services, processions, and journeys to the cemeteries were greatly limited by the common European belief in contagion, as seen in the *statuti sanitari* of the Italian cities,³² and the advisability of flight.³³ Conversely, the Arabic sources do not attest to the "striking manifestations of abnormal collective psychology, of

this sort, and they never allow the plague to interfere with their religious usages (pp. 250-251). . . . There were no outward signs of despair nor violent terror (p. 268)."

³² É. Carpentier, *Une ville devant la peste: Orvieto et la Peste Noire* (Paris, 1962), pp. 131-134.

³³ See, for example, *ibid.*, pp. 124-126, and W. M. Bowsky, "The Impact of the Black Death upon Sienese Government and Society," *Speculum*, vol. 39, no. 1 (January, 1964), pp. 1-34. These two excellent regional monographs represent the most profitable manner of further investigation of the Black Death in Europe. They are based on very rich archival material; unfortunately, comparable records are not extant for the major cities of the Middle East and North Africa for the same period, which places a severe limitation on similar research.

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dissociation of the group mind,"³⁴ which occurred in Christian Europe. Fear of the Black Death in Europe activated what Professor Trevor-Roper has called, in a different context, a European "stereotype of fear";³⁵ the collective emotion played upon a mythology of messianism, anti-Semitism, and man's culpability for his sins.³⁶

Why are the corresponding phenomena not found in the Muslim reaction to the Black Death?³⁷ The stereotypes did not exist. There is no evidence for the appearance of messianic movements in Muslim society at this time that might have associated the Black Death with an apocalypse. In Islamic history the religious leader who heralds the final judgment and the end of the world is known as the *mahdī*. The doctrine and the growth of mahdist movements usually gained adherence on the fringe of Muslim civilization and are characteristic of popular Muslim culture, for there is no dogma of an all-encompassing expectation of an apocalypse in *sunnī* or orthodox Islam corresponding to its role in medieval Christianity. Orthodox Islam, as opposed to *shī'ism* and other millennial Muslim sects, has never developed a doctrine of an apocalypse.³⁸ This feature of Islamic theology may be due to the lack of a Qur'ānic basis³⁹ comparable to the Christian Book of Revelation.⁴⁰ Our sources for the Black Death in the Middle

³⁴ Hirst, p. 17.

³⁵ *The European Witch-Craze*, p. 165.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 98, 185; demonology and witchcraft may be added to this mythology.

³⁷ Von Kremer has attempted to minimize the differences between the reactions of Christian and Muslim societies to the Black Death. While he concedes that there was no persecution of Jews (or Christians) in the Orient, he uncritically associates the religious fanaticism of the flagellants in Europe with the dervish orders in Muslim society ("Ueber die grossen Seuchen," p. 102).

³⁸ For the esoteric apocalyptic literature of *shī'ah*, see *EI*²: "djafir" (T. Fahd).

³⁹ See Gibb and Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*: "ʿĪsā."

⁴⁰ On this point, the Book of Revelation was the least popular book of the New Testament in Byzantine or Greek Christian theology, which may help to explain a corresponding lack of apocalyptic expectations or

East, North Africa, and Andalusia were written, admittedly, mainly by the articulate urban '*ulamā*' or religious scholars, but they would certainly have been sensitive to the development of messianic movements in the hinterland, since they were generally opposed to violent socio-religious innovation, not to say social revolution.⁴¹ Furthermore, the fact that there was no certainty that plague was a divine punishment for sin removed the impetus for a cohesive puritanical and revivalist popular movement.⁴²

The impact of the Black Death poses the question of the

popular movements reported in the Byzantine chronicles, either for the Plague of Justinian or the Black Death. Trevor-Roper suggests a similar contrast: the Greek Orthodox Church, unlike the Catholic Church, "built up no systematic demonology and launched no witch-craze" (*The European Witch-Craze*, p. 185). Moreover, there is a closer parallel between the fatalistic Muslim attitude toward the disease and the Byzantine Greek concept of blind and arbitrary *tyche* that directs the affairs of men (see Speros Vryonis, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century* [Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971], pp. 409, 418).

⁴¹ Poliak, "Les Révoltes populaires," p. 255.

⁴² There is a large literature on the history of the millennium but very little investigation of comparative Semitic (Christian, Judaic, and Muslim) apocalyptic literature and its relation to messianic movements. Particularly, the nature of apocalyptic doctrines and their relation to millennial movements in Islamic history have not been the subject of any modern study. A clear presentation of the popular belief in the *mahdī* in the fourteenth century is given by Ibn Khaldūn, which includes its association with *sūfī* beliefs (*The Muqaddimah*, vol. 2, pp. 156-200). See also Gibb and Kramers, *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*: "al-Mahdī," "al-Dajjāl"; *ET*: "al-kiyāmā" (D. B. Macdonald); M.G.S. Hodgson, "A Note on the Millennium in Islam," *Millennial Dreams in Action*, ed. by S. L. Thrupp (New York, 1970), pp. 218-219; M. Galal, "Essai d'observations sur les rites funeraires," pp. 249-252; Ignaz Goldziher, *Mohamed and Islam* (New Haven, 1917), pp. 240-247, with bibliographical references to *mahdist* doctrine, p. 284; and L. C. Brown, "The Sudanese Mahdiyya," *Protest and Power in Black Africa*, ed. by Robert I. Rotberg and Ali A. Mazrui (Oxford, 1970), pp. 145-168. For two mahdist movements during the Mamlūk Period, see Poliak, "Les Révoltes populaires," pp. 255-256.

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Muslim attitude toward minorities. The unassimilated communities were tolerated in medieval Muslim society and, in this instance, were not held responsible for the ravages of the pandemic.⁴³ However theoretical, the legal tenet against contagion of plague would have militated against the accusation of minorities. In no case is there a direct causal relationship to be found between the Black Death (or subsequent plague epidemics) and the active persecution of minorities, as in Europe.⁴⁴

The Christian belief in plague as a divine punishment for men's sins was preached by clergymen deeply committed to the idea of original sin and man's guilt arising from his essential depravity, as well as a fundamental contempt—both Christian and Stoic—for this world. Indeed, original sin was interpreted as the cause of human degeneration; it would incline men to sin and thus provoke divine punishment in the guise of an appropriate disease.⁴⁵ The ultimate threat of disease, death, is the final punishment for the Christian for having been born in sin. On the other hand, there is no doctrine of

⁴³ There were sumptuary laws against the *ahl adh-dhimmah* ("people of the covenant" or protected non-Muslims) in the Middle East, which were enforced with varying degrees of severity. During the Mamlūk Period in Egypt and Syria, Jews and particularly Christians (Copts) were subjected to increased discrimination and violence for various reasons. For a recent review of the position of the *dhimmīs* in the Mamlūk Period, see Bosworth, "Christian and Jewish Religious Dignitaries in Mamlūk Egypt and Syria," pp. 64-66; see also Poliak, "Les Révoltes populaires," pp. 269-271. For the general study of *dhimmī* status, see *EF*: "dhimma" (C. Cahen) and Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 2, chap. 7.

⁴⁴ See Ibn Taghrī Birdī, who was strongly in favor of discriminatory practices against non-Muslims, for instances of sumptuary legislation: *an-Nufūṣ*, Popper trans., vol. 17, pp. 67-69; vol. 18, p. 5; vol. 19, pp. 109, 125, 137; vol. 23, p. 56. M. Perlmann, "Notes on Anti-Christian Propaganda in the Mamlūk Empire," *BSOAS*, vol. 10 (1942), p. 854, discusses a case of incendiarism at the beginning of the year of the Black Death in Syria (A.H. 749) taken from an anti-Christian tract by al-Asnawī (d. 772/1370); there does not appear to be any relation between the two events.

⁴⁵ Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children*, pp. 7-10.

original sin and man's insuperable guilt in Islamic theology.⁴⁶ The Muslim writers on plague, therefore, did not dwell on the sins and guilt of their co-religionists even if they did admit that plague was a divine warning against sin. Prayer was supplication and not expiation.

If we compare the Judeo-Christian tradition with the Muslim religion, we can appreciate one of its major defects, the tendency to subsume death under punishment, to leave out the possibility of death which is not punishment. The Black Death in Europe was an occasion for the vigorous realization of these ideas about sin and punishment, suffering and death. Specifically, the European writers laid greater emphasis upon the punitive aspect of plague in God's plan than upon the monitory and purgative virtues of the disease found in Muslim society.

The general reaction of Muslim society to the Black Death was governed by its interpretation as only another common disaster. This was the view of the majority of the '*ulamā*', as exemplified by the treatise of Ibn Ḥajar.⁴⁷ The Muslim attitude toward the cataclysmic nature of plague seems to be more closely related to the view found in Thucydides' description of the "Athenian Plague" rather than to the then contemporary European experience of the Black Death. A comparison may be drawn between the language in the accounts of plague in Thucydides and the Arabic historical sources, especially al-Maqrīzī. In both, detailed descriptions show the awful power of the disease as an incalculable disaster that defies human reason and control. Plague is spoken of as a permanent aspect of the human condition; for the Greeks, plague is *pathos*, like war.⁴⁸ For the Muslims, this incalculable event is fated by God for mankind, as are other diseases, droughts, or floods. It is possible to see in the Muslim communal ceremonies, as well as

⁴⁶ See Georges C. Anawati, "La notion de 'Péché originel' existe-t-elle dans l'Islam?" *Studia Islamica*, vol. 31 (1970), pp. 29-40.

⁴⁷ See above, chap. iv, part B.

⁴⁸ See A. Parry, "The Language of Thucydides' Description of the Plague," *Institute of Classical Studies, Bulletin* (University of London), no. 16 (1969), pp. 106-118.

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the more popular belief in jinn and the veneration of saints, a relatively successful defense against natural anxiety and guilt for having survived the death of others: a stereotype of submission to divine order. The sense of reverent resignation pervades the accounts of the popular Muslim reaction to plague epidemics through the nineteenth century.⁴⁹

The Muslim responses were not entirely external; the well-spring of communal activity was the personal conviction of resignation to divine order. The responses were thus *both* individual and communal; the descriptions of individual piety that took the forms of ritual purity and participation in organized religious services are proof of the unity of religious belief. If the communal activity in the urban centers has been stressed, it is because of the common emphasis that has too often been placed on the Muslims' individual means of defense and the fragmentary nature of the Islamic city.⁵⁰

It may rightly be asked whether we can really explain the apparently pacific, collective, and controlled Muslim reaction to the Black Death as largely the result of theoretical theological principles. There is good reason to believe that we can. The essential link between theory and practice was the communal leadership of the '*ulamā*', who were not only the religious élite but also the social and administrative élite in the late medieval Muslim city.⁵¹ It is instructive that, unlike contemporary European treatises,⁵² the Muslim tracts are the work not primarily of physicians, but of this communal élite. The Muslim and Christian treatises testify to a further contrast in the intellectual authority of the two religious establishments over their

⁴⁹ For a further example, see Lane, *Arabian Society in the Middle Ages*, pp. 88-92.

⁵⁰ Albert Hourani, "Introduction: The Islamic City in the Light of New Research," *The Islamic City*, ed. by A. H. Hourani and S. M. Stern (Oxford, 1970), pp. 13, 24.

⁵¹ See the excellent sociological description of the '*ulamā*' during the Mamlūk Period in *Muslim Cities*, pp. 107-115, 130-142; see also Hodgson, "Islām and Image," pp. 232-233, 236.

⁵² See Campbell, pp. 6-92.

societies during a period of crisis. On the whole, we are struck by the fact that the interpretations and arguments of the Muslim jurists take fuller cognizance of the beliefs and practices of their community than do those of the European treatise writers.⁵³ For example, the latter are almost entirely silent about the persecution of the Jews⁵⁴ and the flagellant movement. The *'ulamā'* in Muslim society were able to formulate normative attitudes and to guide the popular reaction toward the Black Death.

In this regard, the sixteenth-century plague treatise of the Ottoman jurist Tāshköprüzāde is particularly instructive. In his discussion of the question of flight from a plague epidemic, he states, as usual, that changing the air is most desirable during a plague epidemic because of the common belief in plague miasma; the author recommends that one should go to a place where the disease is ordinarily not to be expected. Due consideration must be given to certain conditions, however, such as not violating the requirements of civil responsibilities (*al-ḥuqūq al-madanīyah*) or the social ties within the family. Further, obedience to the decision of the communal leader (*mukhtār*) with regard to moving away or remaining must be preserved. Flight may not be possible because (1) the epidemic is universal; (2) the plague victims would be neglected; or (3) the commonweal must be preserved from disruption and disorder. In this case the people are simply to remain and

⁵³ A careful scrutiny of the legal treatises of the *'ulamā'* demonstrates the active application of Muslim scholarship to the problems arising from a plague-stricken community. For this reason, I take strong exception to von Kremer's interpretation of the Muslim treatises as proof of the decadent intellectual rigidity of late medieval Islam ("Ueber die grossen Seuchen," pp. 94-98). Von Kremer disregards the contemporary European views of plague and the fact that similar questions were being posed. The clerics of the Reformation, most notably Martin Luther, argue whether a Christian should flee from plague or whether his duty was to remain and trust in God.

⁵⁴ S. Guerschberg, "La Controverse sur les prétendus semeurs de la Peste Noire d'après les traités de peste de l'époque," *Revue des Études Juives*, n. s., vol. 8 (1948), pp. 3-40.

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improve their circumstances by cleaning their houses and fumigating them with various scents and fresh fruits.⁵⁵

Ṭāshköprüzāde's prescriptions for a Muslim community at the time of a plague epidemic bring into focus the contrasting orientations of the two religions. The Black Death affected the central theme of Christian teaching concerning evil and human suffering; Western man took the plague epidemic as an individual trial more than a collective social calamity. The Islamic tradition, however, has not concerned itself to the same degree with personal suffering; the central problem for the Muslim is the solemn responsibility for his decisions that affect other men's lives and fortunes within a purposeful creation.⁵⁶ The cosmic settings of the two faiths are wide apart in their emphasis: where the Muslim's primary duty was toward the correct behavior of the total community based on the sacred law, the Christian's was with personal salvation—resignation as opposed to redemption. For the Muslim, the Black Death was part of a God-ordered, natural universe; for the Christian, it was an irruption of the profane world of sin and excruciating punishment. It is indicative of something important in both the mind and the nature of Western culture that the dominant image in the history of European civilization has been that of a crucifixion. Orthodox Islam has no such central image.

In sum, it would be as great an error to discount the religious interpretations of plague as motives and limits to communal behavior as to discount the classical medical theories, which so clearly explain another level of defensive behavior. Taken together, the medieval Christian ideas of millennialism, militancy toward alien communities, punishment and guilt are raised to crucial significance in contrast to the Muslim understanding of the Black Death. The operative European Christian concepts were lacking in Muslim society, as

⁵⁵ Ṭāshköprüzāde, fol. 34a.

⁵⁶ M.G.S. Hodgson, "A Comparison of Islām and Christianity as Framework for Religious Life," *Diogenes*, no. 32 (1960), p. 70. See also Huston Smith's preface to S. H. Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam* (Boston, 1972), p. 11.

were their unattractive consequences of religious fanaticism, persecution, and desperation. The predominant theological views of the two societies set the framework for normative attitudes and the prescriptions for communal behavior in which human nature found expression and form when confronted by the Black Death.

It is possible to describe and explain a generalized Muslim response to plague because the Arabic chroniclers of the Black Death have given us vivid descriptions of social behavior. On the other hand, they furnish us with no estimates of total population and only imprecise and exaggerated mortality figures. The mortality figures, even when they are reasonably reliable, are used merely to reinforce the general impression of severe crisis and, as a secondary descriptive device, putting the cause of the calamity after the effects and interpreting the cause by means of its results.

The reasons for the non-statistical attitude of the medieval chronicler—which sets him so far apart from the modern social scientist—are the lack of data and, more important perhaps, a lack of interest in the figures. In the first instance, precise mortality figures were meaningless for the chroniclers, as they are for us, when they cannot be correlated to total population. Second, there seems to have been a cultural aversion to numbering the faithful, which may be derived from a strictly religious attitude (also found in Judaism) and best illustrated by the familiar Biblical story of God's punishment—by plague?—of David for counting the Israelites. The aversion may also be due to superstitious fear, as observed by Volney⁵⁷ and others in the Middle East and North Africa. In any case, the late medieval Muslim descriptions of plague epidemics, and particularly the Black Death, emerge as documents without measurements. To make an architectural comparison, they are like the ancient Egyptian method of building self-supporting vaults without centering.⁵⁸

Yet the medieval historians of the Black Death used their

⁵⁷ *Voyages*, p. 134.

⁵⁸ Fathy, *Architecture for the Poor*, pp. 6-10.

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natural descriptive talents to narrate the cataclysmic nature of the event, and there can be little doubt that they achieved their purpose. In general, medieval chroniclers in both the Orient and the Occident were supremely aware of such natural disasters and devoted particular attention to them. What could be more understandable than to recount the events that touched everyone's lives and livelihoods most directly and profoundly?

Even if we did possess accurate mortality records, the statistics would still have to be translated into recognizable descriptions, like those of our medieval chroniclers, to convey the effect of the plague epidemics on human society. An account of the social responses in terms of the society's cultural values and practices is a legitimate reflection of imposed change, while the exact degree of depopulation is irretrievable. Equally, the repercussions of plague epidemics can be seen in the disruption and decline of the Egyptian and Syrian economies in the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries.

While we can confidently assert that plague was not endemic to Egypt and Syria for a substantial period before the Black Death, the pandemic initiated a series of plague epidemics that contributed to a marked decline in Middle Eastern population from the middle of the fourteenth century. What must be emphasized is that this decline was continual in large part because of the recurrence of severe epidemics that included pneumonic plague. This decrease in population was the essential phenomenon of the social and economic life of Egypt and Syria in the later Middle Ages.