
The Black Death And Anti-semitism

Prejudice has been a constant throughout human history with anti-Semitism possibly the most appalling example of it. The Black Death, or the Bubonic Plague, was a frightening experience for the people of medieval Europe as it was beyond their understanding and experience. Consequently, fear generated a political opportunity for authorities in a Christian majority to further their own agenda and to deflect critical assessment of their own inaction by using the centuries old practice of anti-Semitism. Authorities were able to achieve this by capitalizing on a deep history of anti-Semitism already embedded in the communities, they were motivated by their own inadequacies and propelled by the opportunity it provided to strengthen their political and economic positions.

Hatred of Jews, also known as anti-Semitism, has been around throughout all of Jewish history. Anti-Semitism is defined as, “a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of anti-Semitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities” (IHRA, 2018). Gabriel Wilensky, respected author of Six Million Crucifixions, argues that the “ordinary medieval Christian reflexively blamed[ed] Jews for any problem, irrespective of how unfounded and preposterous it may be” (Wilensky, 2009). Some of the first accusations of animosity towards the Jewish dates back to the 1st century, after Jews were accused of killing Jesus Christ. What followed was a competition between Jews and Christians for adherents and often the truth was lost in the battle. Professor of Social Ethics, Rev John Pawlikowski agrees with Wilensky, suggesting that ‘John’s gospel associates the Jews with darkness and with the devil’ (Re. John Pawlikowski, 2019). The Bible gospels blame the Jewish faith for Jesus’ crucifixion causing many congregations of Christians to become hateful towards the Jews. Matthew states the Jews said, “His blood be on us and on our children” (Matthew 27:25, 1973). The sentiment lasted for centuries as “...around one-thousand years ago, one-thousand years after Christ’s death, the Jews of London were killed by Pogroms on the day of the King’s coronation due to their part in the death of Christ (The British Library Board, 2017). Further, resentment to the Jews was also directed at the fact they were wealthy, ironically a state that was aided by early Christians. The Church tried to stop Christians charging interest to other Christians, however Deuteronomy 23:20 permitted Jews to lend to Christians at interest (How The Church Turned Jews Into Money Lenders, 2102). A melting pot of bitterness towards Jews was brewing and it would boil over at the first sign that it could be taken advantage of.

As the Plague swept across Europe there was an air of desperation as all sections of society sought answers for the pestilence. The usual authority on such a matter was the Church since all facets of daily life were influenced by this institution, therefore, Christians turned to it to provide answers for the pandemic and the social disorder it caused (Musgrove, 2019). Unfortunately, Church authorities were unable to provide answers as to why it was occurring, let alone provide a cure. Furthermore, many of the clergy contracted the disease, leaving young and less experienced priests at the helms of their communities. This meant the strength of the Church was being challenged and a way to stem the loss of faith in Christianity was to blame the Jewish faith. Tom James of the University of Winchester reasons that “the Church lost a lot of people, and its political and social power was greatly weakened during the time of the Black

Death” (James, 2017). Tzafrir Barzilay of Columbia University argues that ‘rumours abounded that the Jews had poisoned the water wells and that these accusations were created to justify and drive the persecution and marginalization of [Jews]’ (Barzilay, 2016). In response Pope Clement VI issued two Papal Bulls in an attempt to stop the persecutions: “We have taken the Jews under the shield of our protection” (Winkler, 2005). However, Albert Winkler of Brigham Young University argues that the Pope’s directive was only heeded where he had a lot of control, such as that around Avignon, but plague hysteria gripped Christians in places where Clement had little direct influence (Winkler, 2005). The Papal Bulls were delivered in 1348 and yet perhaps the worst of the slaughtering of the Jews, the Strasburg massacre, occurred in 1349. The Papal Bulls were also immediately countered by Holy Roman Emperor who stated, “Forgiveness is granted for every transgression involving the slaying and destruction of Jews” (Winkler, 2005). Christian theologian Howard Lupovitch argues that this ‘implicitly [gave] immunity to rioters’ (Lupovitch, 2009) and historian Joseph Cummins agrees, suggesting that Charles IV gave authorities the ‘right to expel Jews, which led to severe pogroms, particularly in Germany’ (Cummins, 2008). French Carmelite nun, Jean De Venette, witnessed at the time as “Christians massacred Jews and many thousands were burned” (Venette, 2001).

The persecution of Jews not only allowed authorities to deflect critical appraisal of their dealing with the crisis, it also provided an opportunity to actually benefit from it, both economically and politically. During this time of social decay, a common enemy in the Jews was used to unite the people in a shared cause. It also allowed the Christian church to regain the ground they had lost in the communities and increase the devotion of the faithful. Charles IV often used Jews as a source of revenue and Winkler argues that the Black Death was an opportunity to free himself from debt, thus strengthening his economic position (Winkler, 2005). Charles also allowed seized Jewish land for Christians to build market places and churches. This created favour from the Christians to Charles and subsequently it strengthened his political position as well (James, 2017). For the common Christian, resentment had long been brewing about the Jews elevating their social statuses as they worked with merchants and aristocrats. Yuzpa Shammes, a Jew who wrote of the Jewish experience during the Plague in 1696, recounts that this resentment gave ‘ordinary folk’ a reason to kill Jews (Black Death Jewish Persecutions, 2018). Well known rabbi and lecturer, Berel Wein, also argues that the social decay meant those in debt to Jews, especially Kings, now had a chance to end their financial commitments (Wein, 2011).

The Black Death had an immense impact on medieval structures, ultimately breaking down the old feudal society and a new order emerged. In an effort to maintain their economic and political power by deflecting critical assessment of their actions, or lack of action, authorities used the centuries old practice of anti-Semitism.