

# **Plague, Prejudice, and Possibility: Fourteenth- Century Lessons for Our Own Troubled Times**

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## ABSTRACT

This essay explores connections between the fourteenth-century “Black Death” and the current COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the ways in which prejudice and inequality exacerbate their impacts and considering how the upheaval created by catastrophe creates opportunity for greater equity and community, but also exploitation and oppression, depending on human response.

Keywords:  
Bubonic Plague;  
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John Lewis

# Plague, Prejudice, and Possibility: Fourteenth-Century Lessons for Our Own Troubled Times<sup>1</sup>

1. Adapted from a Simpson College's Summer Faculty Speaker Series talk given July 29, 2020. Opening image by Philip Culmacher, *Regimen wider die Pestilenz*, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/fra5xxy/images?id=cfaeuh28>

As the world wrestled with the COVID-19 pandemic in spring and summer 2020, some turned to the Middle Ages for hope and inspiration. Since “medieval” has become a byword for barbarity and ignorance, the Middle Ages itself didn't provide the hope; rather, it was what people over-simplistically think caused the end of the Middle Ages, the Black Death. Sometimes historians themselves provided fodder for this problematic parallel,<sup>1</sup> but to many it just seemed common sense, given how history has generally been taught in the West: after classical antiquity, we fell into a millennium of ignorance and error until we were rescued by the Renaissance, which ushered in enlightened modernity. In this we loosely follow Petrarch, who is credited with coining the term “Dark Ages” for his own time the decade before the Black Death struck, whereas he saw the Roman Empire as a Golden Age of accomplishment, in part because of all the Roman propaganda claiming the same. Such a narrative, however, grossly distorts the past and follows propaganda of not only the Romans but certain Humanists and contemporary scholars, some with anti-Catholic axes to grind.<sup>2</sup>

In the field of Religion, especially among those of us focusing on medieval European Christianity, we date the



Middle Ages as starting with the “fall” of Rome in 476 (although it fell before that as well, and it got back up again after), and ending with the Protestant Reformation, more precisely October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on a Wittenberg church door, according to tradition. These bookends matter, but dating the Middle Ages as 500-1500 combined with the fifth to fifteenth century, round numbers that don't quite match (the latter specifically means 401-1500), helps convey the sense that these dates are somewhat arbitrary. People didn't wake up on November 1, 1517, take a look around and say, “oooohhh, we're in early modernity now!” These eras are created centuries later, by historians trying to make sense of past patterns. Moreover, Martin Luther was far less revolutionary than people often assume. Countless

other heretics laid the groundwork for his successes over the previous centuries, and what really enabled him to succeed (apart from the protection of Frederick of Saxony's army) was a development the previous century, the printing press.

In the Middle Ages, literacy was reserved for the privileged elite, in part because communities couldn't spare the labor to allow more people the time to learn. And writing generally depended on an arduous process that turned an animal—or more precisely its skin—into vellum, or what was used for paper in medieval manuscripts.<sup>3</sup> The entire process was done by hand and took exponentially longer than creating a book did with a printing press, which also standardized content in a way hand-copying couldn't.<sup>4</sup> The printing press and its impact aren't particularly relevant for the plague, but they are for their similarities with our current time of transition, when people can communicate all around the globe in seconds through a computer that fits in our pockets. Martin Luther's ability to spread his ideas relatively quickly to others who were receptive to his views was essential for the success of the Protestant Reformation and the end of the Middle Ages, in partnership with a million other developments—just as our ability to

1. For example, Dr. Gianna Pomata, early modern historian of medicine and professor emerita at Johns Hopkins University, in Lawrence Wright's “How Pandemics Wreak Havoc and Open Minds” (*The New Yorker*, July 20, 2020). See also Adam McBride's more nuanced but still oversimplified analysis, focusing on economic aspects in *Salon*.

2. For additional context, see *Ada Palmer's useful critique* of “the myth of the golden Renaissance and bad Middle Ages.” See also Amy S. Kaufman and Paul B. Sturtevant, *The Devil's Historians: How Modern Extremists Abuse the Medieval Past* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020).

3. For an example of the process, see <https://www.bl.uk/medieval-english-french-manuscripts/articles/how-to-make-a-medieval-manuscript>.

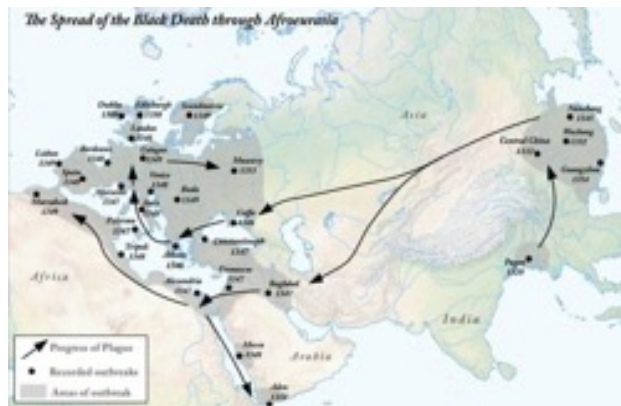
4. The Chinese had invented something similar roughly four centuries before, so this wasn't new to humanity, but new for Europeans.

share information, innovation, and ideas all around the world in seconds is combining with a million other developments as we transition into a new age.

But, returning to the fourteenth century, the Black Death clearly had a major impact on European civilization. After all, it killed at least a third of the population. But it didn't prove as decisive an end to the Middle Ages as it seems to people today, stuck in their own far less deadly pandemic, desperate to make sense of their world and its future. And any consideration must be prefaced with an awareness of how limited our sources are. We tend to rely primarily on written records, but perhaps 15% of the population was literate, the vast majority of those privileged few male, so we see things through a very selective lens when we're fortunate enough to have surviving written records at all. In contrast, the U.S. literacy rate is currently 99%, with some of the greatest resources in the world. And yet, so much still remains unknown about our current pandemic, with conflicting information given. For example, we were first told not to wear masks—not by conspiracy theorists, but [by the CDC](#). We were told instead that [if we washed our hands and didn't touch our faces](#), we'd be fine. We were told the virus didn't arrive in the U.S. until February, but it [likely was here by December](#)—before the rest of the world was even aware of its existence in China. And while various organizations and agencies have been carefully documenting identified COVID-19 deaths, "excess mortality" rates indicate that these deaths have been [woefully undercounted](#). We don't know if people who have recovered from the disease have [acquired immunity](#), and unknown numbers of us have the virus without even knowing it, because we're asymptomatic but still contagious. I note all this not to be alarmist but to emphasize that if this is how little we know about our own current circumstances, with all the resources we have available, consider how little we must know of the events of nearly 700 years ago. Hindsight might be

20/20, but only if the picture is complete. This picture has a great many gaps—and not just because a third to a half of our potential witnesses died within days, if not hours, of their community coming into contact with this disease.

Nevertheless, we know far more about the medieval plague, or the Great Mortality, or the Great Pestilence—it went by a few names; its most common name, Black Death, was given to it only centuries later—than medieval people themselves did. It first hit Europe in 1347, after emerging in China a few years earlier, spreading over trade routes, as seen in this standard transmission map that clearly omits a lot to focus on Europe:<sup>5</sup>



Its spread possibly followed an earthquake which dislodged a significant number of rats and the fleas that lived upon them. The specific bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*, can be contracted by humans in various ways, but a dominant theory is that humans were bitten by fleas who had fed on infected rats, both fleas and rats traveling over trade routes, and especially through grain supplies. A close contemporary source offers a far more sensational account of how it entered Europe, however. Tense relations at the Genoese trading outpost of Caffa (now Feodosija, Ukraine) led to a two-year siege of Caffa by Jani Beg, Khan of the Golden Horde, during which time plague struck his army. Before the Tatars withdrew, they launched their soldiers' corpses into Caffa via trebuchet.

This vivid picture comes from

Gabriele de' Mussi's *Historia de Morbo*, c. 1348, which may have derived from Caffa survivors when they arrived—along with the plague—to Piacenza.

"Oh God! See how the heathen Tatar races, pouring together from all sides, suddenly invested the city of Caffa and besieged the trapped Christians there for almost three years. There, hemmed in by an immense army, they could hardly draw breath, although food could be shipped in, which offered them some hope. But behold, the whole army was affected by a disease which overran the Tatars and killed thousands upon thousands every day. It was as though arrows were raining down from heaven to strike and crush the Tatars' arrogance. All medical advice and attention was useless; the Tatars died as soon as the signs of disease appeared on their bodies: swellings in the armpit or groin caused by coagulating humours, followed by a putrid fever.

The dying Tatars, stunned and stupefied by the immensity of the disaster brought about by the disease, and realizing that they had no hope of escape, lost interest in the siege. But they ordered corpses to be placed in trebuchets and lobbed into the city in the hope that the intolerable stench would kill everyone inside. What seemed like mountains of dead were thrown into the city, and the Christians could not hide or flee or escape from them, although they dumped as many of the bodies as they could in the sea. And soon the rotting corpses tainted the air and poisoned the water supply, and the stench was so overwhelming that hardly one in several thousand was in a position to flee the remains of the Tatar army. Moreover one infected man could carry the poison to others, and infect people and places with the disease by look alone. No one knew, or could

5. Available at multiple sites, but copied from "World History for Us All" <https://whfua.history.ucla.edu/eras/era5.php>.

discover, a means of defense.

Thus almost everyone who had been in the East, or in the regions to the south and north, fell victim to sudden death after contracting this pestilential disease, as if struck by a lethal arrow which raised a tumor on their bodies. The scale of the mortality and the form which it took persuaded those who lived, weeping and lamenting, through the bitter events of 1346 to 1348—the Chinese, Indians, Persians, Medes, Kurds, Armenians, Cilicians, Georgians, Mesopotamians, Nubians, Ethiopians, Turks, Egyptians, Arabs, Saracens and Greeks (for almost all the East has been affected)—that the last judgement had come.

... As it happened, among those who escaped from Caffa by boat were a few sailors who had been infected with the poisonous disease. Some boats were bound for Genoa, others went to Venice and to other Christian areas. When the sailors reached these places and mixed with the people there, it was as if they had brought evil spirits with them: every city, every settlement, every place was poisoned by the contagious pestilence, and their inhabitants, both men and women, died suddenly. And when one person had contracted the illness, he poisoned his whole family even as he fell and died, so that those preparing to bury his body were seized by death in the same way. Thus death entered through the windows, and as cities and towns were depopulated their inhabitants mourned their dead neighbours.<sup>6</sup>

While the corpse-launching may not be accurate,<sup>7</sup> such reports might underestimate rather than overdramatize the impact. Consider, after all, our own pandemic, with an approximate mortal-

ity rate of 3-5%,<sup>8</sup> its fatalities surviving for weeks if not months after their first exposure; the Black Death killed 80-100% of those who contracted it, an estimated third to a half of western Europe's entire population, claiming its victims within days if not hours. And as much as still remains unknown about COVID-19, we understand the basics of our pandemic's transmission. Medieval people did not.

Gabriele de' Mussi lists multiple ethnicities and geographical areas devastated by plague before it came to "Christian areas," by which he means western Europe: "the Chinese, Indians, Persians, Medes, Kurds, Armenians, Cilicians, Georgians, Mesopotamians, Nubians, Ethiopians, Turks, Egyptians, Arabs, Saracens and Greeks (for almost all the East has been affected)." Yet studies generally ignore the impact beyond Europe, and the "Black Death" most specifically applies to the European outbreak between 1347 and 1352.<sup>9</sup> While Europe had endured plague before and would again, repeatedly, the scope and scale of these five years place it in a unique category. Virtually all of Europe was impacted, with the exception of Iceland (as plague literally missed the boat when trade was halted), with standard estimates deeming that a third to a half of the entire population perished, with some communities at 90-100%, although again records are far from exact. In 1346, Europe was overcrowded with about 150 million competing for limited land—by 1353, the population was about 75 million, and wouldn't recover to pre-plague levels until the seventeenth century. 80 to 100% of those who contracted plague died from it, depending on the form. Bubonic, the most common, attacks the lymphatic system, causing pus-filled swellings or "buboes" (hence the name) in the armpit, neck, groin, with an estimated 80-85% mortality rate—far higher than today's COVID-19's estimated 3-5% mortality rate, but far lower than its fellow

plague travelers, both of which killed nearly everyone who contracted them. Pneumonic was the most contagious, as it caused severe coughing and could pass from person to person in ways similar to COVID, inhaled through aerosols. The third kind, septicemic, could develop out of the others and seems to have caused the most severe suffering, but on the positive side, it killed fast, claiming effectively 100% of its victims within hours. People who appeared healthy at breakfast could be dead by dinner, and no one knew why.

Every sector of society appears to have been equally hit—plague, like God (Acts 10:34), was no respecter of persons, although again it needs to be stressed that records prioritize the privileged. Medieval people made sense of the cataclysm through their main interpretive lens, divine providence, seeing it as the judgment of God and a punishment for ever-present sin. They also accepted the miasma theory that dominated epidemiology efforts in the West until the end of the nineteenth century, when it was displaced by germ theory. Miasma theory held that disease spread through foul air, prompting the plague doctor costumes of early modernity (not the Middle Ages, and so not a "Black Death" doctor as people often assume). Such doctors would stuff their beaks with fresh-smelling herbs or flowers to keep out the stench that often accompanies disease and death, which would have offered protection similar to that offered by today's masks. To escape this "bad air" and rampant death, people with means fled cities for the countryside, as Giovanni Boccaccio describes in his *Decameron*, often spreading the contagion. While fourteenth-century folks didn't understand bacteria, they did recognize the condition was contagious. They thought people brought bad air or divine punishments with them, so country folk sought to keep outsiders out, as shown in this 1625 pamphlet relating to one of sev-

6. Gabriele de' Mussi, *Historia de Morbo*, c. 1348; translated in Rosemary Horrox, ed., *The Black Death* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 14–26.

7. See Mark Wheelis, Biological Warfare at the 1346 Siege of Caffa," *Emerging Infectious Diseases* 8 (2002): 971-75, (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12194776/>) and Hans Ditrich, "The transmission of the Black Death to western Europe: A critical review of the existing evidence," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 32 (2017): 25-39.

8. As discussed below, mortality rates vary based on differing factors, but 3-5% has been a standard estimate worldwide.

9. Scientific breakthroughs have expanded our understanding of the Black Death as a global pandemic; see, for example, Monica H. Green, ed., "Pandemic Disease in the Medieval World: Rethinking the Black Death," *The Medieval Globe* 1 (2014): entire double issue.



eral early modern outbreaks of plague.<sup>10</sup> This same dynamic surfaced today as well, when wealthy New Yorkers seeking refuge in their second homes outside of the city were [met with hostility](#).



*Prejudice (warning: disturbing content)*

The worst prejudice, of course, wasn't against city folk by country folk. Medieval Christians' hatred of Jews lurked barely beneath the surface throughout much of Western Europe, repeatedly erupting into bloody violence without provocation. Plague-induced terror caused staggering levels of violence, in a history already written in blood and fire, especially in the parts of the Holy Roman Empire now known as Germany. This makes it ring exceptionally hollow when contemporary Christians claim that the Nazis weren't "real" Christians and Christianity had nothing to do with the Holocaust. One of the basic lessons of Christianity is that if you don't take responsibility for sin, you can't repent for it, and consequently can't be redeemed from it. True, some Nazis were not themselves Christian, but the vast majority were, and their hatred was fed by Christian scriptures and built upon centuries of Christian persecution of Jews, including specifically in connection with the Black Death. Lest other Europeans feel superior on that score, however, note that England

expelled all Jews in 1290, and France did the same repeatedly, most recently before the plague in 1322 (as it had in 1182, then again 1306, and then again in 1394, this time permanently—at least during the Middle Ages), always after extreme persecution. The German response wasn't so severe due to some inherent German quality, but because their fear increased as the plague took longer to reach them. Most of Germany didn't have an outbreak until 1350/51, but they knew it came ever closer.

Rumors that the plague was caused by Jews poisoning wells spread wildly, even though Jews died at similar rates as Christians, and desperate Christian Germans turned on their neighbors and other Jews who had sought refuge near larger towns, burning them alive.

Heinrich Truchess von Diessenhoven, a former chaplain of Pope John XXII, offers a particularly disturbing account. He lists seemingly limitless massacres across Germany in 1348-49, including one in Horw on December 20, 1348, when the flames burned out before all confined in a fiery pit had died: "when the wood and straw had been consumed, some Jews, both young and old, still remained half alive. The stronger of them snatched up cudgels and stones and dashed out the brains of those trying to creep out of the fire, and thus compelled those who wanted to escape the fire to descend to hell." Heinrich then remarks that this fulfills Matthew 27:25, in which Jerusalem's Jews are made to say that Christ's blood should be upon them and their children. He continues, "Once started the burning of the Jews went on increasing,"

including in Strasbourg, "where it took six days to burn them because of the numbers involved." He claims that within the year "all the Jews between Cologne and Austria were burnt—and in Austria they await the same fate, for they are accursed of God." Only babies were spared death, then subjected to baptism and raised as Christians amidst their parents' killers. Heinrich says the annihilation was so extensive he almost "could believe the end of the Hebrews had come," but since not all biblical prophecies had yet been fulfilled, "it is necessary that some be reserved" until God's appointed hour should arrive.<sup>11</sup> While the scale of devastation is unquantifiable, an estimated 340 towns in Germany had pogroms, with 80 Jewish settlements wiped out entirely.<sup>12</sup>

Christian persecution of Jews has continued down to this day, with what often gets called "anti-Semitic" attacks on the rise especially over the past four years in the United States, and some now blaming today's pandemic on a Jewish conspiracy—as Christian racists have blamed catastrophes on Jews essentially since their start. But the main scapegoats for the virus are Asians and especially the Chinese, with even [the then-president of the United States calling](#) the disease "Kung flu." Hate crimes against Asians had been declining for at least the past two decades, with one hate crime against Asians in the US per 200,000 people—compared with over ten for Black people, over sixteen for Muslims, and nearly 35 for Jews reported in 2017 (although hate crimes are notoriously undercounted). [COVID-19 has already impacted those numbers](#), with multiple attacks across our nation related to fears about Coronavirus and older prejudices about Asians plotting against Westerners, who are generally seen as generically "white."

When Americans speak of a pan-European "white" identity, however, they often reveal their ignorance not just about medieval European history, but also more recent American history as well as

10. Title artwork from a seventeenth-century pamphlet on the effects of the plague on London, "A Rod for Run-aways," by Thomas Dekker, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-derbyshire-51904810>.

11. Heinrich Truchess von Diessenhoven, canon of Constance, in Horrox, *The Black Death*, 208-10.

12. Theresa Finley and Mark Koyama, "Plague, Politics, and Pogroms: The Black Death, Rule of Law, and the persecution of Jews in the Holy Roman Empire," Munich Personal RePEc [Archive](#) (2016).

today's Europe. Those who identify with England have dominated in the US and jealously guarded admittance to their so-called "Anglo-Saxon" identity—even though modern inhabitants of England, let alone white Americans, have a tenuous connection with the Germanic tribes that invaded England starting in the fifth century and established their own kingdoms in the sixth century, which became unified as "England" in 927 and was overwhelmed by "the Norman Conquest" the following century. Essentially every ethnicity in medieval Britain stands at odds with common contemporary assumptions. The original Britons who gave the island its name are now better known as Welsh, a word that ironically means "foreigner," bestowed by the Germanic Angles, Saxons, and Jutes upon the indigenous inhabitants of the land they invaded in the fifth and subsequent centuries.<sup>13</sup> Scots originally referred to Irish people, including those of Dál Riata, a kingdom encompassing parts of northern Ireland as well as western Scotland starting in the sixth century, combining with Picts in a new kingdom in the ninth or tenth. The "Anglo-Saxons" were a Germanic blend intermingled with Britain's other inhabitants, the name "Angles" (Latin *Angli*) giving rise in English to "English," whereas in their own languages the Irish, Scottish, and Welsh referred to them and their increasingly ethnically mixed descendants as variants of Saxon. Then there were the Norse, commonly called Vikings today, who established strongholds on outlying islands as well as in certain cities in Britain and Ireland in the ninth and subsequent centuries.

A related branch of Norse raiders converted to Christianity in the tenth century as part of the terms for their settlement of northern France, which became known as Normandy; and integrated so thoroughly into French Christian culture that when William, Duke of Normandy, invaded England in 1066 to claim its throne, he did so as the pope's chosen champion. Similar dynamics repeated a century lat-

er, when William's great-grandson Henry II and his vassals invaded Ireland ca. 1169, initiating more of a colonization than a conquest that took more than the rest of the Middle Ages to complete. This often gets called the "English" invasion of Ireland, but those who invaded Ireland were an ethnic mix whose dominant language was French, and England itself continued to have "Englishry laws" legalizing discrimination against those identified as and speaking English into the mid-fourteenth century—ending just a few years before the plague. The Normans at least initially considered "the English" in terms similar to how English colonists in what would become the United States regarded indigenous people here, with prejudice, disdain, and contempt,<sup>14</sup> and the pope and other leading ecclesiastics backed them in this bigotry, just as they would do the following century, when England's Norman nobility set imperialist eyes upon Ireland.

Ethnicity is often perceived to be a product purely of genetics and ancestry, but it is a "situational and strategic" construct,<sup>15</sup> a group's self-perception of its own identity informed by its culture, language, ancestry, and geographical location, among other factors, and defined in opposition to those seen as dangerously different, a threat to be eliminated, subdued, or avoided. While physical characteristics like skin color, hair texture, and eye shape would eventually come to dominate in determining ethnicity, Europeans regularly subjected each other to such racializing treatment even in the absence of such distinctions, and further added religion to the mix, even when all involved were Catholic Christians, as seen in Ireland's colonization as well as England's conquest. William and his Normans invaded England with papal support, even though the Normans had converted to Christianity only in the previous century, after centuries of raiding Christian communities throughout Britain, Ireland, and the Continental coast as the hated heathen "Vikings." The English,

on the other hand, had been Christian since at least the seventh century, partly thanks to the missionary work of the Irish, who had been Christian since the fifth century and served as missionaries in Britain as well as on the Continent throughout the early Middle Ages. Yet in the twelfth century the papacy identified far more with the Norman rulers of England than the people of Ireland and endorsed Ireland's invasion, saying the Irish had become false Christians who needed to be restored to the faith by Henry II, a man whose Christian failings are too many to name—suffice it to say he's the man responsible for the murder of Thomas Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury, in his own cathedral, and the pope actually proclaimed Ireland's invasion part of Henry's penance for Becket's martyrdom. As this papally-endorsed invasion indicates, the definition of Christian could depend on power and authority rather than actual belief or behavior, and such is similarly true with ethnic identity, which frequently shifted, especially at broader levels.

Throughout most of the Middle Ages, people didn't think of themselves in terms of "nationalities," but in terms of their kin-groups. "England" didn't even become a lasting unified kingdom until the century before William conquered it. When I referenced the first Europeans to contract plague and bring it back to Europe, I spoke of *Genoese*—not Italians, as Italy didn't exist as a country, but as a collection of largely independent city-states, and it wasn't until the fourteenth century that the Florentine dialect of Dante and Boccaccio—who was a key witness to the plague, especially in his *Decameron*—became formalized, eventually becoming the Italian language. As modern events like Brexit and repeated efforts to establish Scottish independence as well as continuing ethnic tensions related to Northern Ireland indicate, the people of the so-called "United Kingdom" are far from united and don't think of themselves simply as one people.

13. Indigenous does not mean they were the first inhabitants of the land known as Britain, however; Britain's first human inhabitants died out long before the Britons, let alone the Angles and Saxons, arrived on Britain's shores.

14. Hugh M. Thomas, *The English and the Normans: Ethnic Hostility, Assimilation, and Identity, 1066-C. 1220* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

15. Robert Bartlett, "Medieval and Modern Concepts of Race and Ethnicity," *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31 (2001): 51.

Extending the example to Europe generally, twentieth-century European history, including its bloody world wars, makes the point unmistakable—“Europeans” aren’t a unified people, let alone a “race” that generally gets called “Caucasian.” Moreover, the term Caucasian is mostly meaningless when applied to anyone except those who originated around the Caucasus region; it became the term for certain western Europeans during eighteenth- and nineteenth-century racist attempts at anthropology. Up until relatively recently, some western Europeans were deliberately excluded from this so-called “race,” especially the Irish and Highland Scots, along with southern Europeans like Greeks and Italians, Eastern Europeans of any kind, including those with the most claim to “Caucasian,” and of course the perennial European “other,” the Jews. “White” emerged as an invented ethnic identity especially among the European mix that called the United States home, but one that only goes skin deep.<sup>16</sup>

Being only skin deep doesn’t stop that identity from being weaponized against others, especially people of color, however. As Ta-Nehisi Coates notes, “race is the child of racism, not the father.”<sup>17</sup> People think race is genetic, but it’s a social construct created to justify pre-existing ethnic prejudice, intensified in connection with the slave trade. Racism is a reality, but race is an invention to perpetuate the prejudice and discrimination that prop up economic, military, and legal systems that allow dominant groups to exploit others based on perceived ethnic differences. This happened in medieval Europe, and, as we’re all painfully aware, it happens today. The most common name for the fourteenth-century plague is “Black Death,” a name that should reverberate especially among Americans in 2020, as our country reckons with its racist legacy and its perpetuation, which disproportionately impacts Black Americans, including with respect to victims of COVID-19.

As medievalist Mary Rambaran-Olm

has noted in her article “Black Death Matters,” which takes inspiration for its name from the “Black Lives Matter” (BLM) movement, profound parallels exist between the fourteenth-century Black Death and 2020 America. Dr. Rambaran-Olm critiques the common view (more common among modernists than medievalists) that the plague ended feudalism and other oppressive aspects of the Middle Ages to enable society to progress into modernity, which often gets painted in a far more positive way—consider, for example, how many people still call the Middle Ages the “Dark Ages”—while the ways in which the plague increased persecution often gets ignored:

people writing about COVID-19 have pointed to the Plague to argue that COVID-19 may marshal in a new economic model. Basing this idea on a false sense of history is problematic enough but there is also something more sinister at play: these false narratives of plague-born social change ignore that one of the biggest social changes that the Bubonic Plague *did* cause was a rise in racial violence

... This current pandemic has ravaged the Black and Latinx communities, where numbers of deaths in both groups far outnumber any other racial group in the US and beyond... The virus does not make distinctions between race and class, but we do and that ends up costing lives. This pandemic has exposed the underbelly of racism, particularly, but not exclusively, in the West. What scholars in my predominantly white field have largely failed to see as humanists devoted to understanding the value and agency of humans is that this pandemic has exposed a racial crisis that the world has generally refused to acknowledge... We have taken the “pan” out of “pandemic” in our discussions, just like as medievalists, we had taken the “pan” out of pan-

demic-narratives about the Plague that ravaged beyond Europe in the 14th century. This is how we have white-washed history repeatedly, and this is how we have neglected to draw closer human parallels between the 14th-century Plague and Covid-19. This lack of discussion in our scholarly community reveals how much white America (and beyond) is not ready to discuss how they regard BIPOC as nothing more than dispensable commodities... We have refused in our courses, research, and public-facing work to examine who the targets of this racial violence are. We are neglecting to confront whom the targets of these crises are now, whether it be COVID-19 or the Bubonic Plague, and we have not acknowledged the correlation between modern capitalism and white supremacy.

Dr. Rambaran-Olm then names some of the Black deaths that have fueled a massive outpouring of support for the BLM movement, even while people understand the dangers of the pandemic. Racism is so toxic and pervasive that it too is a pandemic, and she closes with referencing some of the things its victims have been doing seconds before they became a headline, including sleeping as Breonna Taylor was, before invoking the last words of George Floyd, Eric Garner, Elijah McClain, Derrick Scott, and too many others: I. Can’t. Breathe. She closes with the point that, “[w]hile the Plague of the 14th century may not have been a Black Death in a literal sense, we must face the horrendous truth that [COVID-19 most certainly is one](#).”<sup>18</sup>

Statistics more than support her analysis. As of July 21, 2020:

- 1 in 1,350 Black Americans has died (or 73.7 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 1,650 Indigenous Americans has died (or 60.5 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 2,100 Pacific Islander Ameri-

16. See Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2010).

17. Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2015), 7.

18. Mary Rambaran-Olm, “Black Death’ Matters: A Modern Take on a Medieval Pandemic,” June 5, 2020 <https://medium.com/@mrambaranolm/black-death-matters-a-modern-take-on-a-medieval-pandemic-8b1cf4062d9e>.



cans has died (or 48.0 deaths per 100,000)

- 1 in 2,700 Latino Americans has died (or 37.2 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 3,100 White Americans has died (or 32.4 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 3,250 Asian Americans has died (or 30.7 deaths per 100,000)

By November 10, the numbers were even worse:

- 1 in 875 Black Americans has died (or 114.3 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 925 Indigenous Americans has died (or 108.3 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 1,275 Latino Americans has died (or 78.5 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 1,325 Pacific Islander Americans has died (or 75.5 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 1,625 White Americans has died (or 61.7 deaths per 100,000)
- 1 in 2,100 Asian Americans has died (or 47.6 deaths per 100,000)

Black Americans continue to experience the highest actual COVID-19 mortality rates nationwide—about two or more times as high as the rate for Whites and Asians, who have the lowest actual rates. Indigenous Americans' death rate is just slightly lower than Blacks.

If they had died of COVID-19 at the same actual rate as White Americans, about 21,200 Black, 10,000 Latino, 1,000 Indigenous and 70 Pacific Islander Americans would still be alive.

Adjusting the data for age differences in race groups widens the gap in the overall mortality rates between all other groups and Whites, who have the lowest rate. It also reveals that Indigenous people have suf-

fered the greatest losses, accounting for age differences, followed closely by Blacks and Latinos. Compared to Whites, the latest U.S. age-adjusted COVID-19 mortality rate for:

- Indigenous people is 3.2 times as high
- Blacks is 3.0 times as high
- Latinos is 3.0 times as high
- Pacific Islanders is 2.3 times as high, and
- Asians is 1.1 times as high.<sup>19</sup>

### Possibility

Even when the future looks bleakest, we can be at our best, as the fourteenth century illustrates. As about 50% of the population fell to a gruesome disease, clearly it was one of the worst centuries Europeans ever endured. But it was also a time of remarkable achievement. It was the time of Dante and Boccaccio, Chaucer and Wycliff, as well as two of Christianity's most inspiring theologians, Catherine of Siena and Julian of Norwich. Both women were mystics—people who have direct experiences of the divine that transform them and inspire them to share with others some of the wisdom they have gained from that experience. Catherine is believed to have been born in the year the plague first struck Italy. She was a Dominican tertiary, which means she was similar to a nun, but wasn't enclosed and could interact more freely with the outside world. People from all classes sought out her wisdom and guidance, and it was partly due to her that in 1377 the papacy returned to Rome from Avignon in France, where it had been since 1309 (and thus was when the plague first hit). Catherine's mystical experiences taught her a basic Christian truth that Christ himself is said to give in the Gospel of John (13:34)—to love one another as Christ loves us. But although many Christians know this teaching, few live its truth

as Catherine did, ceaselessly serving the sick, the condemned, the oppressed, with freely-given love, regardless of how those she served might treat her or act towards others. Grace, after all, isn't about merit, but about love.

The word "charity" literally means love. When in First John (4:8 and 4:16) it says God is love, the Latin word is *caritas*, and God through Catherine as well as First John and the Gospel of John, as elsewhere, calls us to embody that love through caring for each other and creation. In her *Dialogue* with the divine, Catherine writes, "although [God] created us without our help, he will not save us without our help."<sup>20</sup> She also says to God, "You, deep well of charity, it seems you are so madly in love with your creatures that you could not live without us! Yet you are our God, and have no need of us."<sup>21</sup> God tells her, "This is why I have put you among your neighbors: so that you can do for them what you cannot do for me—that is, love them without any concern for thanks and without looking for any profit for yourself. And whatever you do for them I will consider done for me."<sup>22</sup> So great is her love for God as well as humanity, Catherine declares, "If it were possible that, without losing love of you, I could be set upon the mouth of hell to close it, and so prevent any further souls from entering it, that is what I would like most of all."<sup>23</sup> In Catherine's understanding, God calls us to act as Christ for each other to the best of our ability, which of course pales incomparably beside Christ himself. Yet we are capable of greatness, because of our ability to love, which is divine power, especially when we heed Christ's example of how to live out that love.

Julian was an anchoress, or a woman (the male was anchorite) who after persuading her bishop that she had a genuine lifetime commitment and sufficient resources not to become a financial

19. This section quoted from APM Research Lab, "The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S.," <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race>. By December 10, Indigenous Americans had the highest fatality rate, with 1 in 750 killed by COVID, or 133.0 deaths per 100,000, and Black Americans at 1 in 800, or 123.7 deaths per 100,000.

20. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, trans. Suzanne Noffke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 59.

21. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 63.

22. Catherine of Siena, *The Dialogue*, 121.

23. Raymond of Capua, *Life of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Conleath Kearns (Washington, D.C.: Michael Glazier, 1980), 14.

burden on the diocese, underwent a funerary rite in which she was declared “dead unto the world and alive unto God.” She was then walled up in a small room or cell, called an anchorhold, adjacent to the church, and was never to leave that cell until her actual death; one window looked into the church, allowing her to witness and participate in the Mass, and another faced outside, where people like her younger contemporary Margery Kempe could come to her for inspiration and guidance. She thus existed in liminal space between heaven and earth, each day a sacrifice to her love and service of God, as well as a penance for her own and others’ sins. Unlike Catherine, who played a prominent public role even as she dedicated herself to religion, Julian was literally a recluse, about whom most of our information derives from her *Revelations of Divine Love*. On May 8, 1373, when she was thirty years old (which would have made her about five when the plague first hit England), she received a series of sixteen visions as she lay on what was assumed to be her deathbed. This occurred in response to her desperate prayers to better understand Christ’s suffering, which, according to Christian theology, he endured for his love of us, enabling our salvation. She became so grievously ill she received last rites; as the priest held up the crucifix and told her to take comfort from her savior, she saw Christ come to life as he died for us on the cross. Her revelations juxtapose gruesome details of his torment with their glorious meaning of the inexhaustible depths of his love for us, of how precious we are and how great the cost paid for us.

Julian envisions the divine as an all-loving figure who allows us to fall so that we will learn from our mistakes and become better people, offering the metaphor of God as Mother:

The mother’s service is nearest, readiest and surest: nearest because it is most natural, readiest because it is most loving, and surest because it is truest. No one ever might or could perform this office fully, except only [God]. ... To the property of mother-

hood belongs nature, love, wisdom and knowledge, and this is God. ... The kind, loving mother who knows and sees the need of her child guards it very tenderly, as the nature and condition of motherhood will have. And always as the child grows in age and in nature, she acts differently, but she does not change her love. And when it is even older, she allows it to be chastised to destroy its faults, so as to make the child receive virtues and graces. This work, with everything which is lovely and good, our Lord performs in those by whom it is done.<sup>24</sup>

She lived in a turbulent, often devastating period: the Black Death likely killed roughly half of Norwich’s population, the Hundred Years War started in 1337, the Great Schism in which at least two broadly supported “popes” claimed the papacy began in 1378 and lasted for four decades, in addition to events like the Peasant Revolt of 1381, the rise of the Lollard heresy and their resulting executions, et cetera. Amid this political, socio-economic, and spiritual unrest, Julian offers a message of hope. She proclaims that God treasures each and every one of us and longs for our salvation, our re-union, even more than we do. Her optimism didn’t blind her to the dire problems facing her contemporaries: she delves into the human condition of her time and interprets even our worst pain as an occasion for joy, although it doesn’t seem that way to us. She assures her fellow Christians that Christ suffers as we suffer and thus we are never alone in our pain. In those dark and uncertain times, she wanted all to know God’s message: God is love, powerful beyond measure; he paid the most precious and painful price for our salvation, so all will be well in the end, although we will suffer along the way. As she says in her final revelation, God “did not say: You will not be troubled, you will not be belaboured, you will not be disquieted; he said: You will not be overcome.”<sup>25</sup> She didn’t mean this in a facile sense. She reminds her audience that we have to actively work towards our

own and the world’s salvation, but with the confidence that since God is with us, as she firmly believes God to be, we will ultimately triumph over the horrors that fourteenth-century Europe—or our twenty-first-century world—might throw our way.

Julian and Catherine’s message parallels the wisdom of the late and much lamented Congressman John Lewis. In his autobiography, *Walking with the Wind*, Lewis describes the nonviolence training he received, which rested on Redemptive Suffering:

there is something in the very essence of anguish that is liberating, cleansing, redemptive. I always understood the idea of the ultimate redeemer, Christ on the cross. But now I was beginning to see that this is something that is carried out in every one of us, that the purity of unearned suffering is a holy and *affective* thing. It affects not only ourselves, but it touches and changes those around us as well. It opens us and those around us to a force beyond ourselves, a force that is right and moral, the force of righteous truth that is at the basis of human conscience... We are talking about *love* here... a broader, deeper, more all-encompassing love. It is a love that accepts and embraces the hateful and the hurtful... It is the ability to see through those layers of ugliness, to see further into a person than perhaps that person can see into himself, that is essential to the practice of nonviolence... [This provides the foundation for building the Beloved Community, the kingdom of God on earth, which] is as inexorable, as irresistible, as the flow of the river toward the sea. Wherever it is interrupted or delayed by forces that would resist it—by evil or hatred, by greed, by the lust for power, by the need for revenge—believers in the Beloved Community insist that it is the moral responsibility of men and women with soul force, people of goodwill, to respond and to struggle

24. Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), 297-99.

25. Julian of Norwich, *Showings*, 315.

nonviolently against the forces that stand between a society and the harmony it naturally seeks.<sup>26</sup>

As Rep. Lewis recognized, history isn't just progressive growth, as those who claim that plague eradicated all oppressive aspects of medieval culture to pave the way for modernity, the Enlightenment, and Protestantism would have us believe, but he too shared the conviction that, eventually, we shall overcome.

The standard claim that the Plague ended feudalism dangerously oversimplifies history, as Dr. Rambaran-Olm argues, yet it was a contributing factor. In certain places, the scope of death and upheaval enabled serfs, peasant field laborers who were tied to manorial estates, to leave their lords' lands and go work for other lords who would pay higher wages, increasing financial and social mobility as well as urbanization. Relatedly, the current pandemic helped more people realize how invaluable "essential" workers like cashiers and store clerks were, prompting an increase in

some of their wages. History is especially hard to analyze when you're living it, however, and it's hard to say where this will lead—especially when, as [Niall McCarthy noted in Forbes in June](#), "Since the start of the pandemic, collective U.S. billionaire wealth has surged by more than \$584 billion, while \$6.5 trillion in household wealth has disappeared... the U.S. billionaire class saw its wealth climb 20% between March 18 and June 17 with 29 new billionaires added to the total... the total net worth of the 643 U.S. billionaires climbed from \$2.9 trillion to \$3.5 trillion. During the same period, 45.5 million Americans filed for unemployment." [By February 19, 2021](#), American billionaires were collectively worth 4.3 trillion, a 44% increase since March 18, 2020, whereas American workers saw a 10.3% decline in their earnings. Possibility isn't inherently good or bad—it depends on what humans make of it.

It bears repeating that people didn't wake up on November 1, 1517, take a look around and say, "oooohhh, we're in early modernity now." These ages are imposed

centuries later by those far removed, who look back at trends and place a marker. But we're clearly in a time of transition now. Humanity will decide what kind of age it will be—some factors are beyond our control, but many are not. Will this age reject racism and do the work of rooting it out from our institutions, systems, and our own minds? Will it create a more economically just society, so people get paid a living wage and aren't required to literally put their lives on the line for other people's profit, convenience, and comfort? Will it provide healthcare workers with the resources they need to fight this pandemic and heeds scientific advice to lessen the likelihood of the spread of this disease? I'll leave you to read the news and draw your own conclusions, but I'll end with the oft-quoted wisdom of Jane Goodall and Maya Angelou, reminding us that every day we make a difference and inspiring us to combat our own ignorance that causes us to be part of the problem more than the solution, so that we can learn better and "do better."



We have more power than we often realize. The question is, how will we use it?<sup>27</sup>



26. John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A memoir of the movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 76-78 .

27. Repeated on [Goodall's website](#) and [Angelou's official Twitter](#). Final image from a [June 8, 2020 tweet by Jarlath Ragan](#).

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