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HOW CHRISTIANS OF THE FIRST CENTURIES EXPERIENCED EPIDEMICS

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Abstract. The article examines the ethical responses of the Christian communities of the first centuries to the challenges of the Antonine Plague and the Plague of Cyprian. During these times, the institutionalization and development of the Christian church took place, and thus the strategies of its social service and behavior in the conditions of acute social crises and trials were developed. Already during the first epidemics, the Christian communities showed a radically different attitude to the sick and sufferers than was accepted in the society of that time. This attitude was based on Christian love and charity, self-sacrifice and service to others. The Christian communities offered unique examples of attitudes to the value of human life, its meaning, as well as to death and the culture of dying. Such behavior has become an impressive testimony to the viability and truthfulness of the Christian religion. This distinguished Christianity among other religions of the time, attracted people's attention and became one of the factors in the significant growth of its adherents. Our hypothesis is that it was at that time that important patterns of the Church's response to the challenges of rapidly spreading infectious diseases were developed. Understanding these patterns clarifies not only the interaction of religion and medicine today, but also the essence of Christianity.

Keywords: Christian communities, Christian church, challenges plagues and epidemics, charity.

Introduction

The experience of the modern world having encountered the COVID-19 pandemic testifies to the state of physical, psychological, social and spiritual health of humankind. Remembering the past history of pandemics, the globalized world has accepted the new infectious challenge, taking into account old mistakes and applying new ways of responding. However, the results of such attempts indicate the need for further ways to improve the current coherent model of human ethical response to such threats. At present, it is not always optimal. Throughout history, humankind has experienced many devastating epidemics, some lasting

for centuries. They often occurred alternately; when one ended another came. Sometimes they overlapped. Epidemics devastated large areas, caused riots and unrest, destroyed empires and dynasties, and influenced the course and end of wars, in which the victors were often not armies with the best commanders, but those who carried terrible bacilli.¹ They changed the fate of not only individual countries but of entire civilizations.

Epidemics caused crises, destruction, extinction/annihilation, the ends of some eras and the beginnings of others.² At the same time, illnesses contributed to serious spiritual and intellectual changes, affecting public morality. Special relevance and importance in this painful process of evolution belonged to the plagues described by Anthony and Cyprian, which in history coincided with the period of formation and institutionalization of Christianity.

It was during those epidemics that the Christian vision of sickness and suffering was formed and tested. In the New Testament there is evidence of the healing of people, the restoration of health from medical maladies. Jesus Christ gave his twelve disciples authority over unclean spirits so that they could cast them out and healed many sicknesses and infirmity (Mat. 10:1). This power then extended to other followers of his disciples.

Among early Christians there were physicians, including the evangelist Luke (Col. 4:14). The Gospel According to Luke described the signs of the end of the world, including war, turmoil, earthquakes, famine, plague, great signs from heaven, and persecution of Christians (Luke 21:9-19). This knowledge of the signs of the end times, and the confirmation of the movement of the horsemen of the apocalypse on earth, created the conditions for a special sense of the fluidity of this earthly existence and a guide to patience, which saved souls (Luke 21:19). On the one hand, this periodically brought about the revolt of both preachers and false prophets regarding the approach of the Second Coming, and on the other hand, reminded believers of the need for constant repentance (μετάνοια/metanoia).³

Christians understood that the Lord would not prolong life on earth if all who were born lived unrighteously, losing the possibility of salvation, because people could not be born for hell. Therefore, the attitude toward epidemics among Christian believers was not panic. If

¹ Дж. Даймонд. *Зброя, мікроби і харч: витоки нерівностей між народами*. [J Diamond. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*]. (Київ: Ніка-Центр, 2012), p. 190

² Lester K. Little. *Plague and the End of Antiquity. The Pandemic of 541-750*. (Cambridge University Press, 2007). http://www.academia.dk/MedHist/Sygdomme/Pest/PDF/Plague_and_the_End_of_Antiquity.pdf. Accessed 01.30.2021.

³ Metanoia is understood as a wide range of phenomena associated with the spiritual transformation of a person. It includes repentance, a change in attitude towards one's own self; change of life goals, developing a new look at the world accompanied by service to God as the highest goal.

these were the last days, and Christians had expected this since the first centuries, then the Lord knew to whom to give a crown. All that remained was to accept him with dignity and gratitude and to die of disease, famine, war or persecution. The persecution of Christians was stopped by Emperor Constantine the Great since Christianity had been legalized by the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D., when several waves of plagues (the Antonine Plague and the Plague of Cyprian) passed. All this influenced not only the development of apologetics, the formation of the canon of sacred texts, theology and the structure of the Church, but also the attitude toward martyrdom and death.

The Antonine Plague (the Plague of Galen) and the Emergence of a Christian Alternative to the Disease

The type and exact place of origin of the disease is unknown, but in 165 it was already in Mesopotamia. In 166, during the Parthian War, along with Roman soldiers returning home, it moved to the eastern provinces, Rome, and then with troops, which went to the Macromanian War, spread throughout the empire. Between 166 and 169, about a quarter of the Eastern Legion's personnel and a fifth of the Danube Army died from the Antonine plague.⁴ Then, within 15 years, a great number of people in the Roman Empire (according to various sources, between 7 to 15 million) died from it. The response to such mortality was the creation of laws that laid down strict rules for the movement and burial of corpses and severe penalties for violating them.

The death of the last of the "five good emperors" from this disease ended the golden age of the Roman Empire. The second century was led by such emperors as Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, Antoninus Pius, and Marcus Aurelius. They had high ethical values, wisdom, and gave attention to the people, to the needy, through which those emperors earned their people's love and respect. It was at this time, however, that the conflict between the Roman Empire and Christianity became most tragic, compared to previous sporadic persecutions under Nero and Domitian.

During the time of the above-mentioned emperors, the "veil of Judaism" fell from the Christians, under which, according to Tertullian, the Church rose to its feet. During the time of Trajan, a legal basis was created, according to which all subsequent persecutions would be carried out, including those which were carried out during the reign of Marcus Aurelius.

⁴ С. О. Харитонов. "Пандемії від Стародавнього Риму до Ковід-19: незасвоєні уроки. Римське право і сучасність." *Епідемії в Європі і право: від Риму до COVID-19: матер. Міжнародної науково-практичної конференції*. (Одеса, 12 червня 2020). pp. 9-13.

From the correspondence of Pliny the Younger, who was the emperor's viceroy in Bithynia, there were not only stories of Christian executions, but also of an edict that defined the illegal status of Christians for a long time; the death penalty was the punishment for all belonging to the Church without exception.⁵

Although the need to bring charges against each Christian often stopped the Romans, who themselves could be executed if they were wrong, but executions of Christians did not stop during the entire second century. During the reign of Marcus Aurelius, who was a philosopher, St. Justin the Philosopher in Rome and other Christians in various cities were executed. At that time, there was a general opinion that, because of the Christians' disregard for the Roman gods, all kinds of misfortunes and cataclysms occurred. Here a paradox arises: on the one hand, the plague could be explained by the wrath of the gods upon the Romans due to Christians, and on the other hand, merciful service to the sick, God's help, resilience in the face of death were evidence of life's victory over death.

Christians also influenced Roman views on sickness and healing. At that time, only the cult of Asclepius resembled the Christian attitude and treatment of the sick, and competed with Christianity. Current researchers even note some similarities in the history of Asclepius and Jesus Christ in terms of healing, in particular, in the rejection of magic, and recourse to divine help, healing the poor, and others.⁶ On the other hand, if we compare the original narratives, there is a difference between God the Son, who for the salvation of men was embodied in the humble and immaculate birth of the Virgin Mary, and the son of the god Apollo, who was taken from the womb of the dead woman Coronida. She was unfaithful to Apollo and for this reason was punished to death. Asclepius was raised by the centaur Chiron, and he learned to raise the dead from a serpent and personified the serpent himself. According to the legend, one of the epidemics in Rome in 293 BC was accidentally stopped by one of Asclepius's serpents. A "medical" temple was built at the place where this occurred. Differences in worldview existed in the basics of treatment of asclepiads and Christians; the need to sacrifice to Asclepius made it impossible for Christians to turn to his doctors. However, the point of their imaginary intersection could be mercy shown to those who suffered and the desire to help them physically, from which scientific medicine would develop over time.

⁵ А. Л. Дворкин. *Очерки по истории Вселенской Православной Церкви*. (Москва: Риза; Нижний Новгород: Христианская библиотека, 2008). https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Istoriya_Tserkvi/ocherki-po-istorii-vselenskoj-pravoslavnoj-tserkvi/11. Accessed 01.30.2021.

⁶ Frank M. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present*. (The Open Yale Courses Series). <https://cutt.ly/ajXs9jf>. <https://oyc.yale.edu/history/hist-234>. Accessed 01.30.2021.

The end of the 2nd century is regarded as the termination of the “early Christian” period, and by this time three forms of church service had already been formed: diakonate, priesthood, and episcopacy.⁷ It was the deacons and deaconesses who were engaged in social service. Among other responsibilities, deacons, for example, administered communion to sick and imprisoned Christians and were financially and administratively accountable to the Church.

A deaconess, in a view attributed to the Apostle Paul, could be a widow “not less than sixty years old, who was married to one man, witnessed in good works, if she raised children, if she received travelers, if she washed the feet of saints, if she helped the needy, if she performed every good deed” (1 Tim:5, 9-10). Later, in the first centuries of Christianity, deaconesses were not only widowed women, but also the wives of priests, if their husbands received episcopal ordination and they ceased to live in marriage. According to the rules of the Ecumenical Councils, widows and unmarried women of forty years of high morals were allowed to serve in the Church.⁸

Under Justinian, the age limit was further expanded, and the 140th rule of the Council of Carthage allowed for service from the age of 25, but until ordination. After receiving the ordination, the deaconess could no longer renounce the ministry and marry, under threat of anathema. The deaconess’s responsibilities included helping women preparing for baptism, the sick, the poor, and the prisoners. They served the needy on *agapes*, after the sacrament of the Eucharist, etc. Today the Orthodox Church honors the holy deaconesses Thebes and Graptus (1st century), Tatiana and Dionysius (2nd century), Platonides (3rd century). In the 4th and 5th centuries, thanks to a special piety in the history of the Church, remembered were the deaconesses of St. Publia, St. Nonna, St. Macrina, Lampadia the Virgin, St. Theosophy, Arista, Salvinia, Pentadia, Amproukla, Sabinian, St. Olympias, Palladia, Martyria, Elisanthia, St. Candida, St. Abbess Theodora, Sts. Mavra and Dominica, St. Romana, and St. Euphemia the Deacon.

⁷А. Л. Дворкин. “Очерки по истории Вселенской Православной Церкви.” https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Istorija_Tserkvi/ocherki-po-istorii-vselenskoj-pravoslavnoj-tserkvi/. Accessed 01.30.2021.

⁸“Книга правил Святых Апостолів, Вселенських соборів.” *Домашня церква. Сайт для християнської родини.* https://dc.lviv.ua/nauka_cerkvy/dokumenty/3800-kniga-pravil-svyatih-apostolv-vselenskih-pomskih-soborv-svyatih-otcv.html. Accessed 01.30.2021.

The Plague of Cyprian and the Victory of the Christian Paradigm of Charity

Another great epidemic in the Roman Empire went down in history as the Plague of Cyprian, which raged between 249 and 262. Taking the lives of up to 5,000 inhabitants of Rome every day, it became one of the factors of the crisis of the 3rd century, along with political and economic instability, barbarian invasions, civil wars, peasant revolts, and others. According to William Ruddiman,⁹ the epidemic lasted about 16 years and spread from Egypt to Scotland. In some regions, there were more dead than survivors after it, and there was no one to cultivate large areas of arable land, because the survivors fled to the cities, which made them even more vulnerable.

Modern research cannot pinpoint the causative agent and type of the disease, and it was named after Bishop Cyprian of Carthage, who described it in his work “De Mortalitate”¹⁰ and called for standing right in the midst of the devastation of the human race. The saint saw the plague as a sign of the end of time, so Christians should rejoice and appreciate this gift, in which the power of faith can be manifested. The epidemic came to Carthage in 252, which again caused a new persecution of Christians, who had supposedly caused the “wrath of the gods.” People, running away from the deadly disease, fled from the city, leaving the sick without help and the dead without burial. The bishop addressed the Christians with an explanation of the attitude to death, calling by his own example to courageously help the sick and the families of the dead, regardless of their religion. It was this behavior of Christians that softened the attitude of the non-Christian population towards them.¹¹

Changes also took place in social ideology due to the Plague of Cyprian. The effectiveness of the Stoic paradigm, which contained some ideas close to Christianity about the need for spiritual self-improvement, equality of all people, and the universality of higher transcendental laws, had already departed. Neoplatonism became the leading religious and philosophical school, which synthetically absorbed not only the teachings of Plato, the logic of Aristotle, the ethical norms of Stoicism, but also religious and mystical practices. It was Neoplatonism that opposed the teachings of the Church. In this manner, Porphyry wrote 15 volumes of refutation of Christianity. However, the attitude of Christians to the emperors of that time was different. By that time, the Church had become a fairly large organization, full

⁹ В. Радимен *Плуг, мор і нафта: Як людство здобуло контроль над кліматом* (Київ: Ніка-Центр, 2013). p. 167.

¹⁰ J. H. D. Scourfield. “The ‘De Mortalitate’ of Cyprian: Consolation and Context.” *Vigiliae Christianae*. Vol. 50, No. 1 (1996). pp. 12-41.

¹¹ “Киприан.” *Православная Энциклопедия*. <https://www.pravenc.ru/text/1684710.html> . Accessed 02.03.2021.

of bounties. Thus, until 251, the Roman Church alone maintained a bishop, 46 presbyters, 7 deacons, 7 subdeacons, other clergy, 1,500 widows, and the poor, generously helping other churches.¹² Such an established living system, the instructions of the Church Fathers, the love with which Christians were recognized, the service to the Church and to each other became the support that allowed them to meet the epidemic with dignity.

However, outside the Christian Church, the epidemic caused horror, despair, and decline of faith in many gods. It was difficult for the general public to convincingly explain the meaning of what was happening, to soothe or alleviate the suffering. Against this background, Christianity stood out, which, despite previously being a foreign religion, incomprehensible to the Romans, then became convincing, relevant, and vital, because it allowed people to find support in the world created by a loving God without whose will not even a hair would fall from a person's head. Christianity did not leave the human alone, but offered effective examples of Christian love. Hence, St. Cyprian, along with other priests at that time, baptized two or three hundred people a day.¹³ The difference in the reaction of Christians and people of other faiths to the threat of plague was striking.

Christians, like representatives of other religions, could not save people from death, but they were merciful and offered a different culture of dying. The "Church History" of Eusebius of Caesarea¹⁴ contains the pre-Easter letter of Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria, in which he addressed the brotherhood. An eyewitness to those events, St. Dionysius wrote that at that time there was a funeral mourning for the people who died every day. The plague did not distinguish between Christians and non-Christians, but "the fullness of its influence fell on non-Christians." Describing the reactions of non-Christians to the plague in Alexandria, he noted that at the first signs of the disease they pushed away the sufferers and even their relatives, drove them out of the house, leaving them to die in the street. At the same time, Christians served the sick until they themselves contracted the disease and died. Caring for them and their needs in the name of Christ, they died happily, taking on the sickness of their neighbors and gladly accepting their pain.

Many of our brothers, out of great mercy and brotherly love, did not spare themselves, supported each other, visited the sick without fear, served them without fail, cared for them for Christ's sake, and died together joyfully. Gaining someone

¹² А. Л. Дворкин. *Очерки по истории Вселенской Православной Церкви*. (Москва: Риза; Нижний Новгород: Христианская библиотека, 2008). https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Istoriya_Tserkvi/ocherki-po-istorii-vselenskoj-pravoslavnoj-tserkvi/11. Accessed 01.30.2021.

¹³ F. F. Cartwright, M. Biddiss. *Disease and History: From Ancient Times to Covid-19*. (New York: Crowell, 1972). p. 23.

¹⁴ Bishop Eusebius. *The History of the Church: From Christ to Constantine*. (London, 1990). <https://erenow.net/common/the-history-of-the-church/8.php>. p. 8. Accessed 02.02.2021.

else's anguish, they became infected from their neighbors and willingly took on their sufferings. Many, caring for the sick and strengthening others, died themselves, accepting death in their place. Such death was considered equal to martyrdom.¹⁵

Centuries later, in some cities in the east of the Roman Empire, as an echo of those events, a new cultural practice emerged—the care of those who suffered in hospitals.¹⁶

The direct and indirect consequences of these epidemics were population decline, reduction of the army, increased loyalty to barbarian peoples and slaves, and a keen demand for labor. There was a shortage of production; the economy was collapsing. Many families and clans disappeared. There was a change in worldview. The growing conversion of Christians over time turned what had been until then incomprehensible to the Greeks and the Romans into the official religion of the Empire. Thus, in 165, Christians made up 0.08% of the population of the Empire; in 251, it became 1.9%. By 300 AD, Christians accounted for 10.9% of the population, and in 350 they were already 56.5%.¹⁷

The changes that happened in the public consciousness regarding the value of human life involved a new attitude toward patients which was assumed according to the principle described by N. Taleb in the work “Skin in the Game.” When a minority that does not agree to yield to its own principles and values reaches 3 to 4% and is evenly distributed in society, after a while it gains power. This is the power of attitudes that most may not even realize, but will imitate.¹⁸ During the Antonine Plague and the Plague of Cyprian, Christians were an evenly distributed minority, not inferior in imitation of the commandments and acts of charity. In this way, Christianity changed the idea of a community of people, their destiny to serve each other, the attitude of the majority to the sick and infirm. According to Abba Dorotheus, “the more one connects with his neighbor, the more he is connected to God,” comparing the circle, at the center of which is God, to the world, and the rays coming from the center to the lives of people. Therefore, the movement to the center is a desire to get

¹⁵Евсевий Кесарийский (Памфил). “Церковная история.” [Church history]. *Азбука веры*. https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Evsevij_Kesarijskij/tserkovnaja-istorija/7. Accessed 02.02.2021.

¹⁶J.N. Hays. *The Burdens of Disease: Epidemics and Human Response in Western History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press 2010), pp. 14-16.

¹⁷“Як рання церква впоралася з двома спустошливими епідеміями.” [How the early church dealt with two devastating epidemics]. *Всеукраїнський союз церков євангельських християн-баптистів*. <https://www.baptyst.com/yak-rannya-tserkva-vporalasya-z-dvoma-sputoshlyvymy-epidemiyamy/>. Accessed 02.02.2021.

¹⁸N. N. Taleb. *Skin in the Game: Hidden Asymmetries in Daily Life*. (New York: Random House, 2018), p. 69. <https://philosophiatopics.files.wordpress.com/2018/10/skin-in-the-game-nassim-nicholas-taleb.pdf>. Accessed 02.02.2021

closer to God and at the same time a movement to each other, while the movement outwards separates one both from God and from the neighbour.¹⁹

At that time, one could be a Christian only according to one's own convictions, as well as being able to freely interrupt his/her *koinonian* communication. Already in the time of Marcus Aurelius there were testimonies of people who converted to Christianity, but then apostatized from the Church. It was thanks to their testimony during interrogations that the myths of cannibalism and debauchery of Christians began to dissipate. During the persecution in the 3rd century, by order of Decius, every citizen of the Roman Empire had to make a sacrifice to the statue of the emperor in the presence of the commission, which was documented. Many Christians accepted the death of the martyrs, many became confessors (endured torture, but did not renounce Christ and did not perish), but many did not pass the test and fell away from the Church. After that, a great question arose about the possibility of a second repentance and the return to the fold of the Church of those who asked for it. This issue was covered by St. Cyprian of Carthage in the book "On the Unity of the Catholic Church." The situation changed when Christianity became the main religion, especially when it was no longer possible to leave the Church without social condemnation or ostracism. Then some people became nominal Christians, who, falling away from the Church with every sin, did not have the opportunity in their hearts to return to the faith through true repentance (μετάνοια/metanoia).

Conclusions

The analysis of the experience of Christians of the first centuries with epidemics of deadly diseases shows the formation in the fold of Christianity of a completely new attitude toward the value of human life, death, suffering, and assistance to those who suffer from pain. Involvement in Christ who, by his death, overthrew death, offered the expectation of eternal life and its joyful acceptance if you give your soul for your friends, creates a new paradigm of mercy and standing before death. During the period of institutionalization of Christianity, the Antonine Plague and the Plague of Cyprian swept the Mediterranean world, which in turn affected the theology and structure of the Church. Acting on behalf of one's neighbor became the best argument in the outside world for the viability of a new religion. Christians at that time already had a sense of vocation to serve the needy and the sick, which

¹⁹ Преподобный Дорофей, авва Палестинский. *Душеполезные поучения и послания*. [Psychic teachings and messages]. (Минск: Издательство Белорусского Экзархат– Белорусской Православной Церкви, 2006), p. 71.

was sometimes compared to a medical mission in the series of epidemics encountered by the world at the time. The growth and unification of disparate Christian communities into the established body of the Church was especially accelerated by the Plague of Cyprian, the teachings of the prelate and other saints.

The modern world, in its encounter with the COVID-19 pandemic, can take from the experience of the early Christians the best examples of service to one's neighbor and joy in him/her, when Christ is behind everyone who suffers. These patterns of behavior have already become archetypal, so they can be actualized in the examples of professional service of Christian health workers, the activities of religious communities aimed at pastoral care, and material support of the sick and bereaved.

As for the possibility of overcoming the intra-communal confrontation among Christians in relation to the limitations of church life and innovations in the liturgy, the following principle of the Apostle Paul in the Epistle to the Romans can be applied: "The one who eats everything must not treat with contempt the one who does not, and the one who does not eat everything must not judge the one who does, for God has accepted them." (Romans 14:3). Christian communities should set an example in matters of charity and understanding of the Other.

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