**Lawlessness, debauchery, scapegoating, murder ... the Black Death didn’t bring out the best in people**

EP

By **Erna Paris** Excerpt from From Tolerance to Tyranny

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Definitions added by Ms. G

*Today’s coronavirus has echoes not just of more recent pandemics but of the medieval plague, a disease of unknown origin that unleashed terrible fear and hatred. In the following excerpt from her 2015 book, “From Tolerance to Tyranny: A Cautionary Tale from Fifteenth-Century Spain”, Erna Paris narrates the European experience of the plague, known as the Black Death, in the fourteenth century.*

**Behold a Pale Horse**

There was famine, flooding and the painful erosion of deeply held conviction (beliefs), but the fourteenth century had not finished delivering up misfortune. In mid-century all of Europe was devastated by unprecedented calamity. Bubonic plague.

“In a.d. 1348, the people of France and of almost the whole world were struck by a blow other than war,” wrote Jean de Venette, the prior (like a priest) of a Carmelite monastery in Paris.

Looking back at that terrible year the goodly prior suspected he had been permitted to see a celestial (heavenly) portent (sign) of the plague:

“In the month of August 1348, after Vespers, when the sun was beginning to set, a big and very bright star appeared above Paris, toward the west … Whether it was composed of airy exhalations and was finally resolved into vapour, I leave to the decisions of astronomers. It is, however, possible that it was a presage of the amazing pestilence to come.”

Since 1346, strange rumours had been circulating through Europe telling of a terrible disease that was spreading through Asia and killing entire populations. But Asia was far away and the idea of **contagion** (spread of disease through germs) was unknown. Disease somewhere else only meant that God was punishing other people for their sins.

In 1348, one of the trading ships that plied the seas between the Far East and Italy delivered a terrifying cargo into the harbour of Genoa. The blackened bodies of dead sailors lay across their oars while a few dying companions managed to row the ship into shore. They were dizzy, shaking with fever and suffering terrible pain. A few seemed to be delirious; others coughed incessantly and spat blood on the deck. Those with the cough were dead in a day. Almost all the rest were dead within five.

The plague reached the port of Barcelona in the spring of 1348, and within six months it had devastated the whole of the country. Lawlessness and debauchery redoubled (expanded), looters raided shops, and the poor boldly squatted on (occupied) the abandoned lands of dead nobility.

The disease spread under exceptionally favourable conditions. Spain had almost doubled its population over the relatively peaceful years of the thirteenth century, industry and international commerce had surged ahead, and thousands of peasants had moved to the walled cities where garbage rotted in the streets and the black rat, the deadly carrier, soon replaced the common rat of the back alleyways.

By the end of 1348, the plague had spread along the Mediterranean. By 1350 it had reached northern England, Scandinavia and the Baltic countries, stretching to Iceland and Greenland.

“All this year and the next, the **mortality** (death rate) of men and women, and the young even more than the old … was so great that it was impossible to bury the dead. People lay ill little more than two or three days and died suddenly, as it were in full health. He that was well one day was dead the next and carried to his grave,” wrote Jean de Villette.

For most people there was only one explanation: God had sent the plague as an expression of his anger at human sin. There was no use wondering which sin. Every individual had his or her own personal storehouse of guilt. The Church railed against human frailty — adultery, **avarice** (greed), **blasphemy** (going against the word of the Catholic Church), greed, pride — but without success. Guilt hollowed out deep crevices in the souls of believers and doubters alike.

Doctors and scholars seized on a more logical explanation: In His anger, God had ordered a pernicious conjunction of the stars and planets, they explained. The proof was that on March 20, 1345, certain astrologers had observed a dangerous juxtaposition of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars under the sign of Pisces: an early **portent** (sign) of calamity.

The fourteenth century believed the air was corrupted by astral influences, or by winds that carried **pestilence** (disease), or by various miasmic stinks; and as there was no cure, physicians concentrated their efforts on prevention.

In Spain, aromatic plants such as cypress, roses and thyme were placed in the main plazas of cities to perfume the corrupted air while frightened people sprinkled their houses with vinegar. Doctors prescribed amulets to be worn near the heart. Those made with sapphires and emeralds were said to be the most effective.

The physicians recommended chicken, partridge and eggs, and warned against beef, duck, lamb, goat, rabbit and pork. (Pork and duck were the most dangerous because they created humours which threw the body out of balance.) Bread had to be eaten within three days; apples or pears were to accompany the first meal of the day; and only dry white wine was safe. All fish was bad, except lobster.

“Nothing helped, neither physicians, nor medicament,” despaired the chronicler Marchione di Coppo Stefani. “Either this disease is new and hitherto unknown, or the doctors have never studied it. There seems to be no remedy.”

In the face of terror, human beings did the usual thing: they beseeched God for mercy and looked for **scapegoats** (someone to blame). But turning to God was now a risky proposition, for who could fathom the depth of divine (godly) rage if this awful disease was its most visible sign. Processions of the faithful transported relics of holy martyrs to local churches, where they prayed to the dead saint to intercede (act) on their behalf. Cathedrals were hastily repaired or newly constructed.

People contributed to charities and did good works, hoping to gain points with the Almighty. The rich donated so much land and wealth to the Church that the prelates (Church officials) grew magnificently rich and the entire economic structure of countries fell into disarray.

Not surprisingly, a new back-to-basics religious movement spread across Europe in tandem with the plague. Barefoot and dressed in dark, hooded robes with a large red cross embroidered on front and back, men and women calling themselves Brothers of the Cross travelled from town to town, punishing themselves twice a day with a three-pronged whip tipped with iron.

The men whipped themselves in public, the women in seclusion. Through self-inflicted pain the Flagellants, as they were known, hoped to recover the purity of their original baptism — a state without sin — and therefore protect themselves from the illness. Others rebelled against the established Church order by turning to witchcraft, magic and satanism.

The Flagellants needed an outlet for their rage, and as soon as they arrived in a new town they headed straight for the Jewish quarter, with an excited mob of townsfolk storming behind. Their charge against the Jews was a simple one: Jews were poisoning the wells in order to rid the world of their enemies, the Christians.

Once this motive was established, the Flagellants mustered indisputable proof that the Jews had the capacity to carry out this conspiracy. They were doctors, apothecaries (early pharmacists) and grocers, were they not? Therefore they had access to the spectrum of poisons.

In 1348 in the southern French city of Toulouse, 40 Jews were tortured and eventually “confessed” to poisoning the wells. They were massacred by a mob and many were thrown into the wells — which did poison the water.

In July and September of 1348 Pope Clement VI published two bulls (letters) declaring that the poison-well accusation was preposterous (unbelievable). Anyone with eyes could see that the Jews were losing as many people to the plague as Christians, he pointed out. The pope explained that Christians who blamed the Jews were being “seduced by that liar, the Devil,” but a combination of public hysteria and disdain (dislike) for the Church diminished the impact of his words.

Philip VI of France, for example, accused the Jews of receiving poisons from their “grand master” in Toledo; the poisons were said to have been extracted from venomous scorpions, spiders and toads, which were powdered then carried to France in “stitched leather satchels.” Jews were massacred across Europe. On Feb. 13, 1349, in the city of Strasbourg, 900 people were hurled into bonfires.

It is of interest that not one of the individuals relaying these fevered accusations even pretended to verify (prove) the existence of a toxic substance capable of poisoning water with plague. Rumour and belief in place of scientific fact sufficed in the fourteenth century, as it frequently does today. The impulse was a familiar one: those who are not one of us must necessarily be our enemy.

By 1351 the plague had largely passed, although there were to be frequent recurrences throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Between 25 and 30 per cent per cent of the population of Europe died — about 25 million people in all. In one small French parish the records indicate more deaths for the period of Aug. 1 to Nov. 19, 1348, than for the previous 20 years.

The Black Death was followed by widespread psychological aftershock as stunned and brutalized survivors struggled to resume their lives. The survivors had witnessed the agonizing deaths of loved ones. They had watched doctors and clergy (priests) abandon the dying — and they were overwhelmed by the magnitude of sin they believed they must have committed. Finally, they could no longer care about the heaps of uncollected bodies in the streets. Finally, they thought only of their own personal survival.

The shock of massive death invaded all of Europe and was mirrored through the dark lens of art. Death personified (made human-like) — a grinning skeleton brandishing scythe and hourglass — interrupts the joyous celebrations of young and old. He bides his time in gleeful expectation or actively carries away his victims under the helpless, horrified watch of their companions who are, of course, next in line to go. No army can defeat him.

He is the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse from the “Très Riches Heures” of the Duc de Berry, painted by Jean Colombe in 1470: “And Behold a pale horse, and he that sat upon him his name was Death.”

A reckless dissoluteness now marked Europe. In Spain, houses were looted in broad daylight, murders were committed in the streets, gambling tables operated in public squares, and the richest families recklessly threw away their fortunes, borrowing heavily at uncontrolled interest rates to maintain the spending frenzy.

Courtiers paraded about in rich gowns of red, blue and green velvet or silk, their sleeves and bodices draped in lavish folds. Men with an eye for opportunity quickly married wealthy newly widowed women. A careless disregard for the future pervaded society; only the present mattered. Jean de Venette offered the following lament:

“Woe is me! the world was not changed for the better but for the worse. For men were more avaricious and grasping than before. They were more covetous and disturbed each other more frequently with suits, brawls, disputes and pleas. Greater evils than before abounded everywhere in the world. And this fact was very remarkable. Although there was an abundance of all goods, yet everything was twice as dear. Charity began to cool, and iniquity with ignorance and sin to abound, and few could be found in the good towns and castles who knew how or were willing to instruct children in the rudiments of grammar … ”

*Erna Paris is the author of seven acclaimed works of literary non-fiction and the winner of twelve national and international*[*writing awards*](http://www.ernaparis.com/awards-and-honours/)*for her books, feature writing, and radio documentaries. Her most recent book is*[*From Tolerance to Tyranny: A Cautionary Tale from Fifteenth-Century Spain*](http://www.ernaparis.com/works/from-tolerance-to-tyranny/)*.*