

God and Pandemics: THE RELIGIOUS IMPACT OF “PESTILENCES”

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Drawing of plague doctor with human skull

Many Christians are wondering whether the current global plague must be regarded as one of the pestilences that Christ predicted would signal his soon return to this world (Luke 21:11). Theories, opinions, and conspiracies abound; however, I want to look at the question in a broader perspective: what has been the religious impact of pandemics or epidemics, and how does that compare with our reaction to COVID-19?

Past and Present

Deadly pandemics in the Bible are invariably characterized as the result of divine intervention. The sixth plague in Egypt, with its “festering boils” that affected humans and livestock (Exod. 9:9, NIV, NRSV), may certainly qualify as an epidemic. The sudden demise of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers (Isaiah 37:36) during their assault on Jerusalem, in the reign of Judah’s King Hezekiah (729-686 B.C.), was described by the Bible as God’s vengeance and explained by ancient Greek historian

Herodotus as an epidemic caused by infected mice.

The Plague of Athens (430-426 B.C.), which claimed the lives of more than a quarter of the city’s population, may have been an outbreak of typhoid,¹ and smallpox may have claimed as many as 5 million in the Antonine Plague of A.D. 165-180. A century later the Cyprian plague brought havoc to the Mediterranean region, and the Justinian Plague—possibly an early manifestation of bubonic plague—began in the

mid-sixth century and was followed by decades of new outbreaks, during which the population in some areas may have been reduced by as much as 40 percent.

The Black Death. The most dramatic plague was “Black Death,” a disease referred to as bubonic plague. It originated in China in 1334 and spread to Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. The Black Death annihilated entire communities. Although the total number of victims remains unknown, some experts put the death toll at approximately 75 million. As many as half of all Europeans died.

Smallpox. One of the great successes of humankind’s fight against deadly diseases was the eradication of smallpox (variola) in the early 1980s. In the 20th century alone, smallpox killed nearly 300 million people—three times more than the combined number of deaths from all of the wars in that period.² Smallpox had a tremendous geopolitical impact. The great Islamic expansion across North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula from the sixth to eighth centuries spread smallpox across Africa and Europe. Colonization exported the disease to the Americas and other continents, in the process eliminating many indigenous populations.

In the 18th century, variolation—that is, inoculating individuals with material from a smallpox-infected person to immunize them—became a

method to stem the disease. This was the precursor to the smallpox vaccine developed in Victorian times. Objection to vaccination is not new: even in the 19th century, inoculation was suspected of being unchristian. Britain already had campaigns by anti-vaccinationists, and on the European continent, opposition against inoculation lasted even longer.³

The Spanish Flu. Seven waves of cholera rolled across the world in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Although a cholera vaccine was created in 1885, the pandemics continued, and even today the bacterial disease remains a threat when sanitary conditions are seriously compromised.

The influenza of 1918, though, is often regarded as the first truly *global* pandemic, with fatalities as high as 50 million or even 100 million—far more than the death toll from World War 1. It became known as the Spanish flu, not because the disease originated in Spain, but because that country had remained neutral in the World War and provided uncensored reporting of the death toll.⁴

Since 1918. For a long time, diseases such as measles or poliomyelitis (polio) exacted a high death toll. The extremely contagious Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), which first surfaced in 2002, caused international concern because of its high mortality rate but was kept under control. Appearance of “bird flu” set off another global scare.

The H1N1 (Swine flu) pandemic of 2009 infected 10 percent of the world’s population, with an estimated 20,000 fatalities, though some speculate a much higher number. The Ebola outbreak of 2014-2016, though confined mostly to Central Africa and West Africa, caused worldwide concern due to its extreme contagiousness and high case fatality, and recent reports indicate that this horrible disease may again raise its ugly head.

Perhaps the most notorious pandemic in the Western world was HIV and AIDS. Damir Huremović, a prominent New York psychiatrist, wrote, “HIV/AIDS is a slowly progressing global pandemic, cascading through decades of time, different continents, and different populations.”⁵ Although HIV infected tens of millions of people, so far no vaccine exists to prevent it, and the worldwide death toll is over 40 million. The number of victims would have been higher had not effective medication enabled people to live with the virus as a chronic but controlled condition.

God and Pandemics

What is the religious impact of these pandemics? Comments by University of Cambridge historian Andrew Cunningham are worth quoting:

“For Christians the visitation of disease has always been an ambiguous matter, since their God is a benign god, and nothing happens without His will

and knowledge. Obviously, God sends disease, and obviously it must be as punishment for sin. But it was not always clear, even to men of religion, quite which sins were being punished by a particular visitation of a pestilence, nor why the good died under God's justice as well as the wicked."⁶ In actual fact, "there is no single predictable religious response" as environments also greatly differ.⁷

Let's concentrate on the religious impact of the Black Death, the Spanish flu, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and the current COVID-19 crisis, with special attention to Seventh-day Adventist believers.

God and the Black Death. Barbara W. Tuchman, a two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning historian, provides a detailed description of the impact of Black Death in "the calamitous 14th century" that includes the religious aspects.⁸ She explains that a vast majority of people were convinced that human sin had evoked divine wrath and that people needed to do everything possible to appease God. The blame was to a large extent laid upon Jews, with traditional accusations of their being Christ-killers, of desecrating the host, and poisoning wells. The result was expulsion, persecution, and seizure of Jewish property.

The church, which in many ways formed the backbone of medieval society, took a severe battering. Clergy died at the same rate as the rest of the population, their number sharply diminished while their reputation was severely tarnished by ethical abuses and lack of moral standards.⁹ As a result of the plague, "a terrible pessimism permeated society" Many adopted "a live-for-today" attitude, while others "went off the deep end with quackery and mysticism."¹⁰ Says Tuchman, "The sense of a vanishing future created a kind of dementia of despair."¹¹

Penitent processions were one of the most radical attempts to appease an angry God. Flagellants, for example, beat themselves until blood flowed, believing that their physical suffering was redemptive.

It was to be expected that many Christians would regard these past plagues as signs of the certainty of Christ's coming and that Adventists who lived through the Spanish flu, who saw how HIV and AIDS ravaged particular segments of society, would emphasize this.

Pope Clement's formulation of the theory of indulgences linked forgiveness of sins with the exchange of money: people could buy a share in "the treasury of merit" accumulated by the blood of Christ and the good deeds of the Virgin and the saints, and thus acquire a pardon for personal sins. Tuchman concludes: "What the Church gained in revenue by this arrangement was matched in the end by loss in respect. ... The Church emerged from the plague richer if not more unpopular."¹²

God and the Spanish Flu. The Spanish flu of 1918 caused unimaginable mayhem in Europe and around the world. But

since it was of relatively short duration, the crisis soon faded from public memory and later was often referred to as the "forgotten pandemic."

Western scientists knew by this time how influenza was spread, so they recommended the temporary closing of public buildings. While many Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish leaders were willing to comply, some believed the doors of their churches and synagogues should remain open.¹³

In response to the viruses that have caused near omnipresent death since 1918, "some turn to traditional religions and deities, as before, but most are turning to our secular deity, the state" for a solution to the problems caused by the pandemic, only to find that "our faith in modern states cannot make the virus go away."¹⁴ Not surprisingly, one of the ramifications of the Spanish flu was an increase in the popularity of occult practices such as communicating with the dead.

The diverse religious response to the Spanish flu in South Africa was reflected in other regions of the world. In the space of just six weeks, the flu killed approximately 300,000 South Africans, or roughly 6 percent of the population. Hindus, Jews, and Muslims all acknowledged that the pandemic had a divine cause, but they remained mostly quiet, at least publicly, about why the people should deserve this divine action. Traditional African religions saw the plague as the revenge of indignant ancestors—or caused by nefarious witches or wizards.

Historian Howard Phillips writes that Christian clergy pointed to "divine visitation" as punishment for sins.¹⁵ As always, he says, "generic sins like immorality, drunkenness, and lax church attendance featured prominently in the list of those that were said to have called

forth God's wrath."¹⁶ And, as could be expected, both a global World War I and the devastating plague were put into an eschatological framework and seen by many as signs heralding the soon return of Christ.

A book published in 1938, written by James Edson White (1849-1928) and later updated by Alonzo L. Baker, referred to the Spanish flu as "the most decimating pestilence of all history."¹⁷ Yet this pattern of thought did not appear to characterize Adventist thinking when the pandemic was actually taking place. Seventh-day Adventist church members were surely not immune to the Spanish flu, but we have no way of knowing how many succumbed to it.¹⁸ Most of our information about it comes from Adventist commentary within the United States. West Virginia Conference President T. B. Westbrook wrote in November 1918: "If there was ever a time in the history of the world when we needed to offer incense (pray) to God for help it is now. All our churches are closed, and some lines of the work are at a standstill. The plague, or Spanish Influenza epidemic, is raging everywhere and there are many dead bodies in every place."¹⁹

Interestingly, we have no evidence of Adventist protests against limiting religious freedom once authorities demanded in 1918 that churches and schools be closed, though one article in the *Review and Herald* noted the scarcity of medical personnel.²⁰ Church leaders at various levels urged the members to isolate when needed and "exercise intelligent faith" in dealing with the enormous threat, mindful of the principles of the church's health message. Many Adventist schools, meanwhile, saw a significant increase in enrollment in medical courses, and Adventist periodicals carried extensive advertising for the Red Cross.²¹

A survey of Adventist reactions to the 1918 influenza as seen in the *Columbia Union Visitor* gives little indication that church leaders and members saw the pandemic primarily as a sign of the nearness of Christ's second coming. Numerous articles reported, rather, how the church did all it could to continue its various ministries.²²

God and HIV/AIDS. Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) was first identified and named in 1981. Its precise origin is still unknown. The HIV/AIDS disease differs in a very significant aspect from other pandemics, in that the initial expansion (in particular in the United States) was predominantly among gay men.

Its connection with homosexuality and also with substance abuse, together with an initial high death rate, led many conservative Christians to believe that God was using AIDS to punish the (in their eyes) heinous sin of homosexuality. Some, such as Jerry Falwell (1933-2007), were adamant that the virus was a biological judgment on those who engaged in sexual promiscuity and drug abuse. Mainline Christian churches generally rejected such stigmatization, and several started initiatives to minister to victims of AIDS.

Many Christians still see a moral dilemma regarding how to deal with persons with AIDS. On the one hand, they "blame the victim by defining AIDS as punishment for sin" while, on the other hand, they recognize that sick people need care.²³ These views continue to underline the incorrect idea that HIV/AIDS is invariably linked to a gay lifestyle.

Because of the frequent association of HIV/AIDS with homosexuality, Adventists have seemed reluctant to speak about it. In 1987 the denomination established an AIDS Committee. A few

conferences were held at different levels of the church, and some AIDS-related initiatives were undertaken, notably in Africa. Activities by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) deserve special mention.

Gradually official Adventist journals began to publish articles about the AIDS epidemic, as a rule being careful to avoid giving the impression that HIV/AIDS was also a problem in the Adventist Church. They remained circumspect in speaking about the issue of homosexuality, due to the church's strong rejection of it. Adventist sociologist Ronald L. Lawson, emeritus professor of Queens College (City University of New York), concluded a detailed survey of Adventist attitudes toward HIV/AIDS with this sobering statement: "The response of the Seventh-day Adventist church to the AIDS crisis has been extraordinarily slight."²⁴

An official statement about HIV/AIDS issued in 1990 by the quinquennial world congress in Indianapolis referred to the moral questions surrounding the pandemic but avoided the term "homosexuality." The statement acknowledged that AIDS had made its entrance into the Adventist Church and stressed the importance of accepting persons with AIDS and ministering to them.²⁵

When Lawson conducted his research in Africa, he found that many denominational leaders there denied the existence of AIDS in the Adventist church even though, in reality, HIV/AIDS was a major crisis among believers, especially in the countries around Lake Victoria, where there is a high density of Adventists.

God and COVID-19. It is too early to analyze the religious impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in any depth. Certainly, we may see significant lasting changes in the way people "do" church (or synagogue or mosque) as a result of

the physical closure of large numbers of places of worship around the world and the extensive use of online platforms for communal worship.

The titles of two small books by Christian authors illustrate the different theological interpretations of the pandemic. In *Corona Crisis: Plagues, Pandemics, and the Coming Apocalypse*, Professor Mark Hitchcock of the conservative Dallas Theological Seminary places COVID-19 in an eschatological context. The global health crisis, he maintains, is a prelude to Earth's final events.²⁶

In *God and the Pandemic*, prominent New Testament theologian Tom Wright looks at the coronavirus outbreak from quite a different perspective.²⁷ We must accept that we do not fully understand events, he says, and we must acknowledge that humans play a role in what happens, and Christians in particular have special responsibilities in confronting the consequences of such events.

We find this same dual track in the Adventist media. The eschatological emphasis, which is very pronounced in the media of independent ministries on the right wing of the church, can also be seen in some official church statements. An *Adventist Review* news article about COVID-19 vaccines combined both the eschatological and pragmatic aspects: "Seventh-day Adventists look to the coming of Christ as the great culmination of history and the end of all disease, suffering, and death. At the same time, we have been entrusted with the Adventist health message" that teaches "healthful living through practical and wholistic [sic] lifestyle behaviors."²⁸

Generally, official denominational media have spent the most time on pragmatic aspects of the pandemic, such as worship services and keeping the

church running during this crisis. They stress that many of the church's ministries have continued to function and that new creative initiatives have been launched.

Adventist Review, to its credit, has decried false, alarmist ideas that are circulating among Adventists and pointed out that any linking of the mark of the beast with a COVID-19 vaccine has no basis in Adventism's traditional eschatological understanding.

Conspiracy Theories

I have already said that during the 14th-century bubonic plague, Jews were scapegoated. Spanish flu conspiracy theories often focused on the Germans: fake news reports claimed that German submarines purposely spread the disease around the world.

Not surprisingly, millions have embraced various conspiracy theories in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic. Existing conspiracy movements, including anti-5G and

anti-vaccine groups, have melted into new umbrella-like conspiracies, such as the ID2020 theory. According to fringe Christian conspiracy sites, the vaccines are a cover for implanting some form of microchip, radio frequency implantation (RFID) chip, or other digital tracking device. The plan is, allegedly, part of a global New World Order. These microchips, some argue, may well represent the apocalyptic mark of the beast.

It was to be expected that such theories would appeal to segments of the Adventist Church, since media on its right wing have long been open to conspiracy theories. They did not, however, speak with one voice with regard to any linkage between the COVID-19 vaccine and the "mark of the beast." One YouTube video circulated by Walter Veith "put the vaccine in the context of manipulation and control by the Jesuits."²⁹ David Gates, an independent Adventist evangelist who itinerates around the world, promotes the idea that the COVID-19 vaccines, together with the 5G-signal, are a satanic tool to destroy humanity and make human beings into automatons.³⁰

Adventist Review, to its credit, decried false, alarmist ideas that are circulating among Adventists and pointed out that any linking of the mark of the beast with a COVID-19 vaccine has no basis in Adventism's traditional eschatological understanding. The article downplays the eschatological significance of the pandemic, warns against acceptance of these and other extremely speculative ideas, and encourages church members to place full trust in the vaccines that have been developed.³¹

In an article for *Amazing Facts* ministries, Gary Gibbs, president of the Pennsylvania Conference, insisted that

“the mark of the beast concerns enforced worship,” and “this is not an element of the current pandemic.”³²

Pandemics as Signs of the End

Whenever pandemics struck, Christians asked whether they were seeing a sign of Christ’s second coming, and this is a question many are asking today. In Luke’s version of the Olivet discourse, Christ mentions among the signs of the end the occurrence of “earthquakes, famines and pestilences in many places” (Luke 21:11). (In some versions of Matthew 24:7, these “pestilences” are also mentioned, but scholarly opinion almost unanimously supports the view that the original Matthean text omits this word.) The signs of the end would signal the impending doom over Jerusalem, fulfilled when the Romans destroyed that city in A.D. 70, and would also remind mankind of the certainty of the second coming of Christ at the end of time.

The traditional Seventh-day Adventist view has been that the time of the end began around the time of the French Revolution, when “the great tribulation” caused by the medieval papacy had come to an end. In line with this view, signs of the times were expected to occur from that point onward. Epidemics and pandemics that occurred *since* then, such as the Spanish flu and the current COVID-19 crisis, thus qualify as the pestilences Christ predicted.

Hans K. LaRondelle (1929-2011), a prominent Adventist eschatologist, emphasized that the so-called “signs of the end” cannot be placed in any chronological order. They are “signs of the age, and characterize the entire period between Jesus’ two advents.”³³ Adventist theologian Jon Paulien likewise warns against placing too much emphasis on the time element of

the signs.³⁴ According to this view, all epidemics and pandemics of the last two millennia may be seen as genuine signs of the times. They all are signals pointing mankind to the climax of history, the second coming of Jesus Christ.

It was to be expected that many Christians would regard these past plagues as signs of the certainty of Christ’s coming and that Seventh-day Adventist Christians who lived through the Spanish flu, who saw how HIV and AIDS ravaged particular segments of society, would emphasize this. It would go against our spiritual DNA if Adventists did not regard the COVID-19 pandemic as a sign of the second coming; indeed, it is surprising that the eschatological dimension does not dominate the response of most Adventist Christians to the current pandemic.

But perhaps Seventh-day Adventists have gradually learned that although the signs of the times surely are important, it is unwise to point to one particular event—momentous though it may be—as proof that Christ’s coming is perhaps a matter of months, or at most a few years, from fulfillment. Perhaps we have learned, at long last, that Christ comes on his own schedule. **AT**

¹ Damir Huremović, “Brief History of Pandemics (Pandemics Throughout History),” *Psychiatry of Pandemics: A Mental Health Response to Infection Outbreak* (2019), p. 11.

² Michael B. A. Oldstone, *Viruses, Plagues & History* (1998, 2010 edition), p. 53.

³ William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples* (1978, 1998 ed.), pp. 255-256.

⁴ Oldstone, p. 309.

⁵ Huremović, p. 22.

⁶ Andrew Cunningham, “Epidemics, Pandemics, and the Doomsday Scenario,” *Historically Speaking*, Vol. 9, No. 7 (September/October 2008), pp. 29-31.

⁷ Duane J. Osheim, “Religion and Epidemic Disease,” *Historically Speaking*, Vol. 9, No. 7 (September/October 2008), p. 36.

⁸ Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* (1978), pp. 92-125.

⁹ Dan Carlin, *The End Is Always Near: Apocalyptic Moments, from the Bronze Age Collapse to Nuclear Near Misses* (2019), p. 132.

¹⁰ Carlin, p. 134.

¹¹ Tuchman, p. 99.

¹² *ibid.*, pp. 121-122.

¹³ “Signs of the Times,” *Christian Science Sentinel* (Nov. 30, 1918), p. 258.

¹⁴ UdayChandra, “Thinking Theologically with Pandemics,” *Al Jazeera* (July 28, 2020).

¹⁵ Howard Phillips, “Why Did It Happen? Religious Explanations of the ‘Spanish’ Flu Epidemic in South Africa,” *Historically Speaking*, Vol. 9, No. 7 (September/October 2008), p. 34.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ James Edson White and Alonzo L. Baker, *The Coming King* (1938).

¹⁸ Michael W. Campbell, “Adventists and the 1918 Influenza Pandemic,” *Adventist World* (April 3, 2020).

¹⁹ T. B. Westbrook, “Present-day Conditions a Call to Prayer,” *Columbia Union Visitor* (Nov. 7, 1918), p. 1.

²⁰ W. A. Ruble, “After Influenza, What?” *Review and Herald* (Oct. 31, 1918), p. 16.

²¹ Campbell, *op. cit.*

²² Celeste Ryan Blyden, “How the *Visitor* Reported the 1918-1920 Pandemic,” *Columbia Union Visitor* (May 21, 2020).

²³ Mark R. Kowaleski, “Religious Constructions of the AIDS Crisis,” *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (1990), p. 91.

²⁴ Ronald L. Lawson, “Is This Our Concern? HIV/AIDS and International Seventh-day Adventism,” Paper read at the meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, Pittsburgh (August 1992), posted online June 11, 2018.

²⁵ “AIDS – A Seventh-day Adventist Response,” Statement published by the AIDS Committee of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists (1990).

²⁶ Mark Hitchcock, *Corona Crisis: Plagues, Pandemics, and the Coming Apocalypse* (2020).

²⁷ N. T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath* (2020).

²⁸ “COVID-19 Vaccines: Addressing Concerns, Offering Counsel,” *Adventist Review Online* (Dec. 18, 2020).

²⁹ “Walter Veith Anti-Vax Video Removed by YouTube,” *Adventist Today Online* (Jan. 18, 2021).

³⁰ “SDA Evangelist: Vaccine & 5G Will Make You an Automaton,” *Adventist Today Online* (Dec. 10, 2020).

³¹ “COVID-19 Vaccines: Addressing Concerns, Offering Counsel,” *Adventist Review Online* (Dec. 18, 2020).

³² Gary Gibbs, “Coronavirus and the Last Days,” *AmazingFacts.org* (April 21, 2020), online at www.amazingfacts.org/news-and-features/news/item/id/24670/t/coronavirus-and-the-last-days

³³ Hans K. LaRondelle, *Light for the Last Days* (1999), p. 11.

³⁴ See Jon Paulien, *What the Bible Says About the End-Time* (1994), pp. 85-87.