The 14th-Century Black Death and the Church of England’s Response

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Abstract. The Black Death spread to Britain in 1348 and rapidly spread to various regions, bringing an indelible impact on the British population, economic and social order. The subject of this paper is the English church’s response to the Black Death and the impact on the church after the plague. In the concept of “scourge”, the church regarded the plague as God's punishment for the people. In response, it mainly confessed and prayed, and established new cemeteries to bury the increasing dead, and strengthened the supplement of vacant church positions. Although these measures have not achieved much effect, they have partly helped to quell social panic. After the Black Death, the public and intellectuals gradually produced disappointment and skeptical attitude towards the church, and various anti-church heresy rose, people began to pay attention to their own happiness, people-centered and opposed the divinity, which not only promoted the liberation of the mind, but also enhanced the optimistic and enterprising spirit.

Keywords: Black Death, England, church, confession, religious authority.

1. Introduction

In the history of Europe, the church played a pivotal role in education and medical care, and had a significant influence on the development of European history. The outbreak of the Black Death in the 14th century caused serious damage to the social and economic order. Despite the church’s response, the results were not optimistic. Moreover, the Black Death shook the authority of the church and had a profound influence on the subsequent development of religion.

Chinese academic research has drawn numerous results on the Black Death. For example, Li Huacheng’s “On the British Church during the Black Death” mainly discusses the church’s cognition and response to the Black Death, and objectively evaluates the behavior of the church [1]. Liu Li’s “Response to the Black Death” lists in detail the church’s treatment of the Black Death [2]. However, the question of how the Black Death changed the social status of religion and its influence on later generations remains unanswered. This paper explores the relationship between the Black Death and religion and analyzes the ideological development of the people. Moreover, compared to the responses of modern religious organizations to diseases, this study reveals the evolution and continuity of religious epidemic strategies.

2. The Spread and Impact of the Black Death in the United Kingdom

In the 14th century, the Black Death spread rapidly across the continent at an alarming rate, sweeping across Britain in just a few years. The plague began in 1347. Britain was one of the most important countries in Europe, it soon emerged in 1348. The Black Death first came to Dorset in southern England and then entered the port of Melscomb. Due to the unusual weather in England in 1348, increased rain provided conditions for accelerating the spread of the plague. The Black Death spread through Devon, Somerset and Salisbury and Exeter. By the end of 1348 the plague had penetrated into the western counties of England, arriving in Bath and Bristol in 1349 [3]. In the Midlands, places such as Gloucester, Oxford and London were not spared. In northern England, the plague reached the four counties of Chester, Derby, Nottingham and Lincoln. Ireland was infected by sea in 1349, while the disease was introduced to Wales and Scotland in 1950 [4].
The spread of the Black Death caused an unprecedented disaster in Britain in the 14th century. It not only caused heavy population losses but also profoundly changed the social structure, economic activity, and cultural landscape of the time. Wherever the plague went, the population died, and England fell by 1/3-1/2 [3]. About 43% of people die in Oxford, and the county has 25% to 37%. Monks in Buckinghamshire had a staggering 60% monk rate and half of the inhabitants died. About 4,000 out of the 9,000 people died in Winchester, Hampshire, to the extent that the cemetery was “overcrowded” [5].

The decline in population has caused economic paralysis and a trade halt. With a lack of labor, higher wages and prices, one-third of the lands were uncultivated, and food supplies were problematic. The British Serfdom, which had lasted for centuries, was hit, and commercial trade along the coast sank [3]. In addition, the Black Death also caused chaotic social order, the public moral bankruptcy. The phenomenon that relatives and friends abandoned each other became common. Morality was corrupt and hedonism prevailed. The clergy pursued high-paying positions, causing corruption and crime [6]. In the despair of the disease, people began to spontaneously look for the source of the plague. Some people turned their eyes to the Jews, believing that the Jews had cast poison in the wells. This triggered a large-scale slaughter of the Jewish population, religious fever and conflicts intensified. As a consequence, the legal order disappeared.

In general, driven by the war and trade exchanges, the Black Death spread rapidly. The whole UK was deeply affected by the Black Death. The political, economic and social order were strongly impacted. Due to the limitations of the times, people did not really figure out the causes of the disease, so they could not do anything about it. During the plague of the Black Death, not only the ordinary people suffered misfortune, but also clergy members experienced a sharp decline in numbers. Due to the confession ceremony performed for the dead, a large number of priests and clerics became infected, resulting in serious ordination vacancies. Thus, the Church was inevitably involved in the Black Death.

3. The Church’s Response to the Black Death and Its Results

Due to the lack of medical sources in the medieval period, European people had two main standards for explaining the cause of the Black Death. One was the theological standard established by the Church, and the other was the medical standard under the supervision of the Church. The Church took a series of measures to deal with the disease. Under the theological standard, God was “omnipotent”, and they interpreted the plague as God’s punishment to the people, which was known as “curse theory” [1]. Therefore, the only effective way to reverse the plague was to ask God for help. Based on the Church’s perception of the Black Death, authorized by the Pope, the diocese adopted preventive measures with the theme of repentance. Churches in Europe actively strove to guide the people to pray and repent, using this spiritual comfort as a means to stabilize social order and deal with the fear of disease and death.

However, the original intention of these measures was good, but these collective confession activities led to a large number of people gathered together, not only did not reduce the spread of Black Death, but accelerated the spread of Black Death in the gathered crowd. More people were infected with Black Death. As the death toll increasing, the original churchyard was not enough to bury the dead. The Church had to decide to build new ones [2]. They broke the rules and no longer insisted on setting the cemetery in churches, but opened new cemeteries far from the city center. This left many people hastily buried, but to some extent treated the bodies to prevent the spread of the plague and alleviate public panic. Most of the faculty died in the care of the sick and the dying mass. In order to fill the vacancy and maintain the basic operation of the church, the church had to quickly recruit and promote new staffs. In this process, the selection and training of the faculty standards were inevitably reduced, leading to the decline of the overall quality and moral standards of the church [1]. This situation posed a challenge to the long-standing reputation and authority of the Church, while also revealing the weaknesses of religious institutions in the face of a major social crisis.
In general, the Church’s understanding of the black plague cognition and its coping strategies were heavily influenced by the religious and social background of the time. Their actions showed efforts to stabilize society and provide spiritual support, but also exposed the shortcomings in crisis management and personnel training. The experiences of this period had profound effects on the British Church and whole society, prompting people to re-examine ideas and practices related to illness, death, and religious beliefs.

4. The Influence of the Black Death on the Authority of the English Church

During the Black Death, the Church’s efforts failed to prevent the spread of the disease. The disease not only shook the authority of the church, but also had a profound impact on the development of religious history. For centuries, the Church had dominated the ideological world, serving as a bridge between the European people and God. However, during the Black Death, the Church could not cure the disease, and the clergy died in a large number. People gradually lost faith in the Church, hoping to bypass it and directly contact with the God. They prayed through pilgrimage, penance, and even self-whipping to seek for God’s forgiveness and ward off disease [7]. Moreover, Latin was the official language of the Church, it held the authority to interpret the Bible. This led to many clergy to exploit their positions by charging fees for administering sacraments, resulting in widespread discontent among the populace toward the Church’s greed for wealth and power, as well as its extravagant and corrupt lifestyle. Consequently, more and more people began to use local language translation [8], making religious doctrine more accessible to the masses. Furthermore, religious doctrines were applied to secular education, breaking the education monopoly of the Church and diversifying people’s religious beliefs.

In the process of opposing the Church, humanism and the religious reform quietly emerged, not only within the religious authority but also in the European ideological circle. To some extent, the Black Death weakened the sacred authority of the Church in people’s minds, and the political status of the Church declined. This relaxed the ideological control, creating a relaxed and favorable environment for the development of the Renaissance [9]. Humanist ideas opposed asceticism of the Church, promoted secular pleasure, opposed authority, and advocated reason and science.

Intellectuals also satirized the church in literary works. The most famous work was Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, which depicts characters from different ranks of society, especially criticized the ugliness and decay of feudal society. Humanism also impacted the hierarchical system. The Black Death led to a sharp decrease in population and the large decline of noble population. In order to promote population growth as soon as possible, the people lowered the requirements of their ancestries to a certain extent, and people of different classes began to intermarry, which promoted the development of the thought of equality. The Black Death exposed the incompetence and corruption of the Church, with priests and monks and nuns losing their morality and scandals abound. Anti-church heresies began to gradually gain popularity, leading to the emergency of some heresies, such as the Lollards and the Albigenses, or new mysticism. They contempt for the authority of the Pope, against the redemption, and won the support of the lower class and citizens, laying the foundation for the later Martin Luther Reformation [10].

5. Conclusion

During the long Middle Ages, the Church controlled European politics, economy and education, occupying most of the social resources. Thousands of people believed in religion, accepted the Church in the field of ideology, and actively fulfilled their obligations for it. When the Black Death came, the social order of England was destroyed, and death covered the whole country. The church was as exposed to the disaster as the ordinary people. They took every possible measure to protect against disease, such as collective confession and cemetery opening, and served patients regardless
of their own safety. But they were more of a spiritual consolation and unable to treat the disease. Although appease the people to a certain extent, they failed to stop the spread of the plague.

In general, the Black Death brought a fatal blow to the church and shook its authority. However, it also provided an opportunity for the liberation of the mind, shifting the people’s attention from “god” to “man”, and also helped to break the class concept and enhance social mobility. In the 21st century, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, the religious world can learn from its past history, was inspired and further strengthen its understanding of the disease in order to better get out of the dilemma.

References
[1] Li Huacheng, On the English Church during the Black Death, Anhui historiography, 01, 2008, pp. 6-10.