

Epidemics and the Rise of Christianity

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Christians have always learned from the past, and frequently drawn on the example and witness of the first Christians, who lived during the period of Christian growth and expansion in the first three centuries of the faith as it established itself in the context of the Roman world.

During this period the beliefs, practises and traditions we continue to follow today were progressively shaped and settled. The first Christians left us a large body of literature that continues to inspire and influence, as well as setting out how the early church conducted its mission and responded to the many challenges posed by its status as a marginalised, and often persecuted, minority in its social world.

This includes the manner in which the early Christians responded to crises, such as the outbreak of disease and the chaos caused by epidemics, something Christians, like all people, have had occasion to respond to, from time to time and from place to place, throughout the course of history, and to the present day.

The Rise of Christianity

The present crisis caused by the global coronavirus pandemic caused me to revisit what was for me a formative and seminal work on the growth and development of Christianity during the course of its first three centuries. This is Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*, first published in 1996. Stark, a sociologist who has written extensively on the history and philosophy of religion, has publicly described himself as an agnostic in terms of his own belief.

The central thesis of *The Rise of Christianity* is that Christianity take root in, and then steadily grew, during the course of its first three centuries on account of the intense and inclusive form of community it fostered in the context of an often harsh and unforgiving social world, together with its ability to make its core message known by utilising existing social networks.

In the context of a social world in which life was often difficult and short, and in which human fortune and misfortune were understood to be at the mercy of either the gods or fate, or both, Christianity proclaimed a message of hope that transcended the present world, promising something better in the next, and exemplifying this in a tangible way by the way believers lived and formed community.

In the course of developing his thesis about the rise of Christianity, Rodney Stark devotes a key chapter¹ to the manner in which the early Christian community and its leaders responded to the crises brought about by two Empire wide outbreaks of disease in the second and third centuries AD. Stark maintains that these two crises in particular, and the Christian response to them, are an often overlooked reason for the growth and spread of Christianity in the Roman world, to the extent that “had classical society not been disrupted and demoralised by these catastrophes, Christianity might never have become so dominant a faith.”²

Crisis and Faith

As Rodney Stark observes, “crises produced by natural or social disasters have been translated into crises of faith. Typically this occurs because the disaster places demands upon the prevailing religion that it appears unable to meet.”³ Stark goes on to observe how the prevailing religions of the Graeco-Roman world were ill equipped to answer the critical question human beings usually ask in the face of disaster – why? The pagan gods were often capricious, remote and disengaged, and their priests ignorant. All that could be offered was that sacrifice might in some way attract the attention of the god, or might deflect the anger of the gods as currently being experienced. Even philosophy had few answers in the face of a large scale disaster such as an epidemic, other than to reference fate or fortune – in other words, it all just came down to luck as to whether one survived or not, and as to how short or how long the period of disruption and disaster might be.

¹ Published in an earlier form as ‘Epidemics, Networks and the Rise of Christianity,’ *Semeia* 56 (1992), pp. 159-175.

² Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 74.

³ *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 77.

Faith and Action

Christianity, in contrast, possessed and espoused a worldview that made life meaningful and which offered hope, even in circumstances of great suffering, and even in the face of death. But Christianity did not just offer explanations and words, it offered real and tangible action. Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria wrote in his Easter letter in 260 AD, at the height of an epidemic that was devastating the Roman world:

At all events most of the brethren through their love and brotherly affection for us spared not themselves nor abandoned one another, but without regard to their own peril visited those who fell sick, diligently looking after and ministering to them and cheerfully shared their fate with them, being infected with the disease from them... At all events, the very pick of our brethren lost their lives in this way, both priests and deacons and some highly praised ones from among the laity, so that this manner of dying does not seem far removed from martyrdom, being the outcome of much piety and stalwart faith... But the Gentiles behaved quite differently: those who were beginning to fall sick they thrust away, and their dearest they fled from, or cast them half dead into the roads: unburied bodies they treated as vile refuse; for they tried to avoid the spreading and communication of the fatal disease, difficult as it was to escape for all their scheming.⁴

No one would today, and in the midst of the present crisis brought about by the coronavirus pandemic, exhort anyone to willingly place themselves in danger of exposure to the disease, although we are aware that many in the medical profession in particular are voluntarily placing themselves in such situations, with the best protections and practices modern medicine can provide, in order to care for others.

The passage above from Bishop Dionysius must be read and understood in its context, as arising out of a society that did not understand how to effectively treat disease and prevent its spread, and with a mortality rate and life expectancy that was radically different to the world we inhabit, and which meant that just about everyone had known and experienced the death of someone close to them.

⁴ In Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, vii. 22

It must be read, also, in light of the early Christian veneration of martyrdom, and of the martyrs of the faith. The Bishop of Antioch, Ignatius (who died in the first half of the second century AD according to most historians), provides a ready example. He wrote to the Roman Christians pleading with them *not* to intercede with the civil authorities on his behalf, but to allow him to proceed unhindered to a martyr's death.⁵ The key point here is not the way in which the early Christians cared for their neighbours, *but that they did*. In contrast, as Bishop Dionysius pejoratively notes, the non-Christians simply ran away, leaving friend and stranger to their fate.

Do unto others...

Taking as its maxim the command of Jesus to “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Matthew 7.12), what early Christianity did that was new, and often highly attractive in its social world, was to link a social ethic with a religion. It was not that the Greeks and Romans knew nothing of charity and did not practice it, for they did. It was more that the Greek and Roman gods did not require charity of them.

Whereas the Greek and Roman gods were indifferent and aloof, demanding sacrifice in exchange for favour or appeasement; the Christian teaching was that God demonstrates his love for humans through sacrifice (Romans 5.8), and asks humans to demonstrate their love for God through sacrificial acts one for another. Furthermore, and perhaps most radically in its social context, the Christians performed self-sacrificial acts and loving service, not just for their own familial or ethnic groups, but for everyone, anywhere (1 Corinthians 1.2). As Rodney Stark notes, “these were revolutionary ideas.”⁶

This crystallizes in the famous quotation of Tertullian, reflecting on how the pagans viewed Christians – “but it is mainly the deeds of a love so noble that lead many to put a brand upon us. See, they say, how they love one another.”⁷ This did not escape the attention even of the Roman authorities. The Emperor Julian the Apostate (361–363 AD), sought to restore the pagan cults, by not only building new temples and sanctuaries, but directing that their

⁵ Ignatius, *To the Romans* 2.

⁶ *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 86.

⁷ *Apology* 39.

priests imitate the practices which had made Christianity so successful by themselves practising hospitality towards strangers, and undertaking works of charity for others.⁸

Doctrine and Belief

Following Rodney Stark's thesis, the growth, and eventual triumph of Christianity, is, in some measure, attributable to the tangible acts of love and mercy for which Christians became renowned in the Roman world, together with the ability of the early Christians to make their message about Jesus known to their friends, neighbours and others in their social networks, by maintaining and preserving the witness of their presence. But Stark does not stop there, but, tellingly, links Christian practice indelibly to Christian belief, or doctrine.

I believe that it was the religion's particular doctrines that permitted Christianity to be among the most sweeping and successful revitalization movements in history. And it was the way these doctrines took an actual flesh, the way their directed organizational actions and individual behaviour, that led to the rise of Christianity.⁹

For Christians, adversity, suffering and even death were not to be feared, but a means to nurture faith in adversity and, ultimately, as a gateway to salvation. As Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage in North Africa, who lived through the terrible plague of the mid third century AD, wrote, " this is, in short, the difference between us and others who know not God, that in misfortune they complain and murmur, while adversity does not call us away from the truth of virtue and faith, but strengthens us by its suffering."¹⁰

Clearly, of particular significance and importance in the midst of suffering and hardship, and in times of fear and anxiety brought about by a global pandemic, the Christian belief in the empowering and sustaining presence of God, together with the eschatological assurance that God will put things right, conveys a sense of hope sourced in doctrine, one that resonates throughout Scripture.

Our ecclesiology (theology of the church) helps here, also. For although our physical buildings may be closed, the church itself is not, of course, closed. For we, as people of faith,

⁸ Oliver Nicholson, 'The "Pagan Churches" of Maximinus Daia and Julian the Apostate,' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45 (1994), pp. 1-10.

⁹ *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 211.

¹⁰ *Treatise* 7.13.

are the church, and continue to be the church, whether gathered in a physical building, or not.

Responses

The response of religious leaders in Liberia during an outbreak of Ebola in 2014, is instructive.

Both Christian and Muslim faith leaders drew lessons from their own religious texts (the Bible and the Quran) to support the recommended infection control and prevention measures for Ebola. These included seeking medical care when sick, avoiding contact with bodily fluid, and routine hand washing after contact with the sick or with dead bodies. They emphasized the need for safe and dignified burials, as well as acceptance and appreciation of Ebola workers. They validated the need for psychosocial support for those impacted by the disease, rather than stigmatizing them.¹¹

This modern response complements the response of the first generations of Christians in ancient Rome, who during the course of epidemics, sought to compassionately bring material comfort and aid to their neighbours, whilst praying fervently for the political leaders of the day, even in circumstances of oppression and persecution from those same leaders.

The first and most important thing Christian people, and Christian communities, can and should do, in the current pandemic, is to heed the expert advice, and to act in accordance with the measures being required of us by our leaders. By so acting, we will be saving lives and ensuring those with the greatest needs have access to our health system, and, thereby, to the care they need.

There may be practical ways, that are safe and which observe the directives regarding social distancing and non-essential gatherings, whereby we can support and assist our neighbours and communities. This may be ensuring the continuity of the provision of assistance with necessities, such as food, to those in need. It may be that some are able to support those

¹¹ Perry Jansen, "The Role of Faith-Based Organizations and Faith Leaders in the 2014–2016 Ebola Epidemic in Liberia," *Christian Journal for Global Health* 6 (2019).

providing assistance in other ways, such as through financial giving. The possibilities are multiple.

We must, insofar as is possible, maintain the witness of our presence in the community. The first Christians could never have imagined nor conceived of the many instruments of communication and technology that are available to us, in our age.

Finally. We can all, and must, pray. Pray for our communities, our friends, families and neighbours, for one another, for health care, emergency service and medical workers. And for those who bear the burden of giving and receiving expert advice, as well as those charged with acting upon it.

The salient point throughout Rodney Stark's *Rise of Christianity* is that the manner in which the Christians of ancient Rome responded to the epidemics that afflicted them, is a significant factor in the growth and expansion of the faith in its first three centuries. Primarily, it was the integrity of the Christian responses that impressed those who were not of Christian faith, and which attracted them to the faith. The Christians acted as they believed.

May it be that the same can, and will, be said, of the Christians of this generation, as we live through the coronavirus pandemic.