

EPIDEMICS, NETWORKS, AND THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY

Rodney Stark University of Washington

ABSTRACT

The early Christian movement achieved unprecedented growth during the second and third centuries A.D. Numerous historical and sociological explanations have been advanced to account for this phenomenon and its role in the eventual "triumph" of Christianity under Constantine. Long overlooked in this endeavor has been the role of several spectacular disasters that hit the empire in this same period. Most notable are two periods of widespread and devastating epidemic that hit especially hard in the eastern provinces in the 160s and again in the 250s. This article suggests that the fabric of Roman society was substantially disrupted and demoralized by these catastrophes, and that this opened the door for Christian ascendancy, both theologically and numerically. To demonstrate this contention the character of the epidemics will be described. Then, three main theses will be advanced and explored. First, the Christians offered a more satisfactory explanation of the catastrophic events. Second, Christian values of love and charity were translated into practices of social service in the times of crisis, thereby creating a network of medical care. Third, with even minimal medical attention, the survival rate among the Christians (and any of their pagan neighbors whom they treated) was substantially higher than that in the general population. Over time, the proportion of Christians in the total population was thereby dramatically increased. When coupled with the network effect of those pagans now disengaged from traditional ties and attracted by Christian benevolence to new attachments, the result was to alter irreversibly the balance of the Roman empire.

Introduction

In 165 A.D., during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, a devastating epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. Some medical historians suspect that it was the first appearance of smallpox in the West (Zinsser, 1960). But, whatever the actual disease, it was lethal. During the 15 year duration of the epidemic, from a quarter to a third of the population of the empire died from it, including Marcus Aurelius himself, in 180 in Vienna (Boak, 1947; Russell, 1958; Gilliam; McNeill). Then, in 251 a new and equally devastating epidemic again swept the empire, hitting the rural areas as hard as the cities (Boak, 1955a, 1955b; Russell, 1958; McNeill). This time it may have been measles. Both smallpox and measles can produce massive mortality rates when they strike a previously unexposed population (Neel, et al.).

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Although, as we shall see, these demographic disasters were reported by contemporary writers, the role they likely played in the decline of Rome was ignored by historians until modern times (Zinsser; Boak, 1947). Now, however, historians recognize that acute depopulation was responsible for policies once attributed to moral degeneration. For example, massive resettlement of "barbarians" as landholders within the empire and their induction into the legions did not reflect Roman decadence, but were rational policies by a

state with an abundance of vacant estates and lacking manpower (Boak, 1955b). In his now classic and pioneering work on the impact of epidemics on history, Hans Zinsser (99) pointed out that:

... again and again, the forward march of Roman power and world organization was interrupted by the only force against which political genius and military valor were utterly helpless—epidemic disease ... and when it came, as though carried by storm clouds, all other things gave way, and men crouched in terror, abandoning all their quarrels, undertakings and ambitions, until the tempest had blown over.

But, while historians of Rome have been busy making good the oversights of earlier generations, the same cannot be said of historians of the early Christian era. The words "epidemic/" "plague/⁷ or "disease" do not even appear in the index of the most respected recent works on the rise of Christianity (Frend; MacMullen, 1984). This is no small omission. Indeed, Cyprian, Dionysius, Eusebius, and other church fathers thought the epidemics made major contributions to the Christian cause. I think so, too. In this essay I suggest that had classical society not been disrupted and demoralized by these catastrophes, Christianity might never have become so dominant a faith. To this end, I shall develop three theses.

The first of these can be found in the writings of Cyprian, bishop of Carthage. The epidemics swamped the explanatory and comforting capacities of paganism and of Hellenic philosophies. In contrast, Christianity offered a much more satisfactory account of why these terrible times had fallen upon humanity and it projected a hopeful, even enthusiastic, portrait of the future.

The second is to be found in an Easter letter by Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria. Christian values of love and charity had, from the beginning, been translated into norms of social service and community solidarity. When disasters struck, the Christians were better able to cope and this resulted in *substantially higher rates of survival*. This meant that in the aftermath of each epidemic, Christians made up a larger percentage of the population even without new converts. Moreover, their noticeably better survival rate would have seemed a "miracle" to Christians and pagans alike and this ought to have influenced conversion.

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Let me acknowledge that, as I consulted sources on the historical impact of epidemics, I discovered these two points discussed briefly in William H. McNeill's superb *Plagues and Peoples*, 1976. I cannot recall having read them before. I must have done so, but at a time when I was more interested in the fall of Rome than in the rise of Christianity. In any event, both points have a substantial social scientific pedigree as elements in the analysis of "revitalization movements"—the rise of new religions as a response to social crises (Wallace, 1956,1966; Carroll; Thornton; Champagne; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985,1987).

My third proposition is an application of control theories of conformity (Hirschi, 1969; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985,1987). When an epidemic destroys a substantial proportion of a population, it leaves large numbers of people without the interpersonal attachments which had, in the past, bound them to the conventional moral order. As mortality mounted during each of these epidemics, large numbers of people, especially pagans, would have *lost the*

bonds that once might have restrained them from becoming Christians. Meanwhile, the superior rates of survival of Christian social networks would have provided pagans with a much greater probability of replacing their lost attachments with new ones to Christians. In this way, very substantial numbers of pagans would have been shifted from mainly pagan to mainly Christian social networks. In any era, such a shifting of social networks will result in religious conversions (Lofland and Stark, 1965; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985,1987).

In what follows I will expand each of these arguments and offer evidence that it applies. But first, I must sketch the extent of these two epidemics and their demographic impact.

The Epidemics

The great epidemic of the second century, which is sometimes referred to as the "Plague of Galen," first struck the army of Verus, while campaigning in the East in 165 A.D., and from there spread across the Empire. The mortality was so high in many cities that Marcus Aurelius spoke of caravans of carts and wagons hauling the dead from cities. Hans Zinsser (1900) noted that

... so many people died that cities and villages in Italy and in the provinces were abandoned and fell into ruin. Distress and disorganization was so severe that a campaign against the Marcommani was postponed. When, in 169, the war was finally resumed, Haeser records that many of the Germanic warriors—men and women—were found dead on the field without wounds, having died from the epidemic.

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We cannot know the actual mortality rate with any certainty, although there is no doubt that it was high. Seeck's estimate, made in 1910, that over half the population of the Empire perished, now seems too high (in Littman and Littman). Conversely, Gilliam's conclusion that only 1 percent died is incompatible even with his own assertion that "a great and destructive epidemic took place under Marcus Aurelius."

The Littmans propose a rate of seven to ten percent, but do so by selecting smallpox epidemics in Minneapolis during 1924-25 and in West Prussia in 1874 as the relevant comparisons, and ignoring the far higher fatalities for smallpox epidemics in less modern societies with populations lacking substantial prior exposure. I am most persuaded by McNeill's estimate that from a quarter to a third of the population perished during this epidemic. Such high mortality is consistent with modern knowledge of epidemiology. It also is consistent with analyses of subsequent manpower shortages (Boak, 1955b).

Almost a century later a second terrible epidemic struck the Roman world. At its height, 5,000 people a day were reported to have died in the city of Rome alone (McNeill). And for this epidemic we have excellent contemporary reports, especially from Christian sources. Thus Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, wrote in 251 that "many of us are dying" from "this plague and pestilence." Several years later Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria, wrote in an Easter message that "out of the blue came this disease, a thing... more frightful than any disaster whatever."

These disasters were not limited to the cities. McNeill suggests that the death toll may have

been even higher in rural areas. Boak (1955a) has calculated that the small town of Karanis, in Egypt, may have lost more than a third of its population during the first epidemic. Calculations based on Dionysius' account, suggest two-thirds of the population of Alexandria may have perished (Boak, 1947). Such death rates have been documented in many other times and places when a serious infectious disease has struck a population not recently exposed to it. For example, in 1707 smallpox killed more than 30 percent of the population of Iceland (D. R. Hopkins). In any event, my concern here is not epidemiological. It is, rather, with the human experience of such crisis and calamity.

Crisis and Faith

Frequently in human history, 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*. This inability can occur at two levels. First, the religion may fail to provide a satisfactory explanation of *why* the disaster

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occurred. Second, the religion may seem to be *unavailing* against the disaster, which becomes truly critical when all non-religious means also prove inadequate—when the supernatural remains the *only plausible source* of help. In response to these "failures" of their traditional faiths, societies frequently have evolved or adopted new faiths. The classic instance is the series of messianic movements that periodically swept through the Indians of North America in response to their failures to withstand encroachments by European settlers (Mooney, 1896). The prevalence of new religious movements in societies undergoing rapid modernization also illustrates the point. Bryan Wilson has surveyed many such episodes from around the world.

In a now famous essay, Anthony F. C. Wallace argued that *all* religions arise in response to crises. That seems a needlessly extreme view, but there is abundant evidence that faith seldom is "blind," in the sense that religions frequently *are discarded* and new ones accepted in troubled times. Elsewhere I have attempted to specify the process by which this occurs and explain why the new faith often will retain many elements of the old (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985, 1987). Here my concern is simply to contrast the ability of Christianity to explain the epidemics with that of its competitors in the Graeco-Roman world.

I also will examine the many ways in which Christianity not only seemed to be, but actually was *efficacious*. This too is typical. Indeed, this is why the term "revitalization movement" is applied to new religions that arise during times of crisis—the name indicates the positive contributions such movements often make by "revitalizing" the capacity of a culture to deal with its problems. How do religions "revitalize?" Primarily by effectively mobilizing people to attempt collective actions. Thus the new religious movements among the North American Indians during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries initially revitalized these societies by greatly reducing drunkenness and despair and then provided an effective framework for joining fragmented bands into an organized political unit capable of concerted action. That these proved unable to withstand white encroachments in the *long run*, must not obscure the

obvious early benefits and how these "proved" the validity of the new faith. In this way new ideas or theologies often generate new social arrangements that are better-suited to the new circumstances.

As a sociologist, I was trained to be suspicious of "theological" or "ideological" explanations—those that attribute behavior to ideas. However, as I shall demonstrate in this essay, ideas often are critical factors in determining not only individual behavior but, indeed, the path of history. Put another way, for people in the Graeco-Roman world, to be a Christian or a pagan was not simply a matter of "denominational preference."

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Rather, the *contents* of Christian and pagan beliefs were *different* in ways that greatly determined not only their explanatory capacities, but also their relative capacities to mobilize human resources.

To assess these differences between pagans and Christians, let us imagine ourselves in their places, faced with one of these terrible epidemics.*

Here we are in a city stinking of death. All around us, our family and friends are dropping. We can never be sure if or when we will fall sick too. In the midst of such appalling circumstances, humans are driven to ask *Why?* Why is this happening? Why them and not me? Will we all die? Why does the world exist, anyway? What's going to happen next? What can we do?

If we are pagans we probably already know that our priests profess ignorance. They don't know why the gods have sent such misery—or if, in fact, the gods are involved or even care (Harnack, 1908). Worse yet, many of our priests have fled the city, as have the highest civil authorities and the wealthiest families, which adds to the disorder and suffering.

Suppose that instead of being pagans we are philosophers. Even if we reject the gods and profess one or another school of Greek philosophy we still have no answers. Natural law is no help in saying *why* suffering abounds, at least not if we seek to find *meaning* in the reasons. To say that survival is a matter of luck makes the life of the individual seem trivial. Cicero expressed the incapacity of classical as well as modern humanism to provide meaning (or perhaps we should say meaningfulness), when he explained that

... it depends on fortune or (as we should say) "conditions" whether we are to experience prosperity or adversity. Certain events are, indeed, due to natural causes beyond human control (in Cochrane, 1957:100).

Moreover, for a science that knows nothing of bacteria the phrase "natural causes" in connection with these great epidemics is simply how philosophers say "who knows?" I am not here disputing that survival *was in fact* substantially random or that the epidemics had natural causes. But I do claim that people will prefer explanations that assert that such events reflect underlying historical intentions, that the larger contours of life are coherent and explicable. Not only were the philosophers of the time unable to provide such meanings, but from the point of view of classical science and philosophy these events were indeed beyond human control, for no useful medical courses of action could be suggested. Indeed, the philosophers of the period could think of nothing more insightful than to anthropomorphize

society and blame senility. As Cochrane (1957:155) put it, "while a deadly plague was ravaging the empire . . . the sophists prattled vaguely about the exhaustion of virtue in a world growing old."

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But if we are Christians, our faith does claim to have answers. McNeill summed them up this way:

Another advantage Christians enjoyed over pagans was that the teachings of their faith made life meaningful even amid sudden and surprising death... even a shattered remnant of survivors who had somehow made it through war or pestilence or both could find warm, immediate and healing consolation in the vision of a heavenly existence for those missing relatives and friends. . . . Christianity was, therefore, a system of thought and feeling thoroughly adapted to a time of troubles in which hardship, disease, and violent death commonly prevailed (108).

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, seems almost to have welcomed the great epidemic of his time. Writing in 251 he claimed that only non-Christians had anything to fear from the plague. Moreover, he noted that although:

. . . the just are dying with the unjust, it is not for you to think that the destruction is a common one for both the evil and the good. The just are called to refreshment, the unjust are carried off to torture; protection is more quickly given to the faithful; punishment to the faithless. . . . How suitable, how necessary it is that this plague and pestilence, which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the justice of each and every one and examines the minds of the human race; whether the well care for the sick, whether relatives dutifully love their kinsmen as they should, whether masters show compassion for their ailing slaves, whether physicians do not desert the afflicted ... Although this mortality has contributed nothing else, it has especially accomplished this for Christians and servants of God, that we have begun gladly to seek martyrdom while we are learning not to fear death. These are trying exercises for us, not deaths; they give to the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death they prepare for the crown . . . our brethren who have been freed from the world by the summons of the Lord should not be mourned, since we know that they are not lost but sent before; that in departing they lead the way; that as travellers, as voyagers are wont to be, they should be longed for, not lamented ... and that no occasion should be given to pagans to censure us deservedly and justly, on the ground that we grieve for those who we say are living with God. . . . (Cyprian, *On the Mortality*, 15-20).

His fellow bishop Dionysius addressed his Alexandrian members in similar tones. "Other people would not think this a time for festival," he wrote, but "far from being a time of distress, it is a time of unimaginable joy" (*Festal Letters*, quoted by Eusebius, *Church History* 7,22). Acknowledging the huge death rate, Dionysius noted that though this terrified the pagans, Christians greeted the epidemic as merely "schooling and testing." Thus, at a time when all other faiths were called to question, Christianity offered explanation and comfort. Even more important, Christian doctrine provided a *prescription for action*. That is, the Christian way appeared to work

Survival Rates and the Golden Rule

At the height of the second great epidemic, around 260, in the Easter letter already quoted above, Dionysius wrote a lengthy tribute to the heroic nursing efforts of local Christians, many of whom lost their lives while caring for others.

Most of our brother-Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their

stead. The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form, the result of great piety and strong faith, seems in every way the equal of martyrdom.

Dionysius noted the heavy mortality of the epidemic by saying how much happier had they merely, like the Egyptians in the time of Moses, lost the firstborn from each house. For "there is not a house in which there is not one dead—how I wish it had been only one." But, while the epidemic had not passed over the Christians, he suggests pagans fared much worse: "its full impact fell on the heathen."

Dionysius also offered an explanation of this mortality differential. Having noted at length how the Christian community nursed the sick and dying and even spared nothing in preparing the dead for proper burial, he wrote:

The heathen behaved in the very opposite way. At the first onset of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled from their dearest, throwing them into the roads before they were dead and treated unburied corpses as dirt, hoping thereby to avert the spread and contagion of the fatal disease; but do what they might, they found it difficult to escape.

But, should we believe him? To assess Dionysius' claims, it must be demonstrated that the Christians actually did minister to the sick while the pagans mostly did not. It also must be shown that these different patterns of response would result in substantial differences in morality.

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