



Secondary Sources



The Crisis of the Late Middle Ages

Francis Oakley

Most historians agree that during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, medieval civilization suffered a crisis. What are less clear are the exact nature of that crisis and its causes. In the

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following selection Francis Oakley focuses on problems within the Church, wars, and economic difficulties as being the core of the crisis of the Late Middle Ages.

CONSIDER: Whether the problems within the Church should be considered causes or symptoms of the general crisis; the social consequences of wars and economic depression.

One of the most persistent features of ecclesiastical life from the early fourteenth century onward had been the ex-

tension once more of royal or princely control over the local churches. In ways subtle and not so subtle the work of the Gregorian reformers was being undone, and rulers were moved increasingly to assert their sovereign jurisdiction over all groups and institutions—clergy and churches included—within the territorial boundaries of their states. By the early fifteenth century the kings of France and England, in particular, had become adept at the art of marshaling national antipapal feeling in order to bring pressure on the papacy to concede them a handsome share of the taxes levied on their national churches and of the benefices or ecclesiastical positions belonging thereto. Given the difficulties that the Avignonese popes and the popes of the schism had had to face, they had had little choice but to yield to such diplomatic blackmail, even though by so doing they had committed the church piecemeal to a revolution that would ultimately leave to their successors nothing more than a theoretically supreme authority, the substance of power having passed in fact into the hands of kings, princes, and rulers of city-states like Venice. . . .

Historians have frequently chosen to take this transformation of the church and the accompanying decline of papal fortunes as symptomatic of a more profound crisis in the very soul of medieval civilization itself. It is easy enough to understand why they should have been tempted to do so. The outbreak in 1296 of the war between France and England, which had led so rapidly to the disastrous confrontation with Boniface VIII, had marked the end of a comparatively peaceful era and the beginning of the prolonged struggle between the two major European powers, which, punctuated with intermittent truces and periods of peace, was to drag on well into the fifteenth century. While it lasted it caused a great deal of devastation in France and sponsored in that country a recrudescence of the aristocratic feuds and rival private armies characteristic of the anarchic early phase of feudalism. A similar growth of what has been called “bastard feudalism” occurred in England during the dynastic conflicts between the Yorkist and Lancastrian claimants to the throne which broke out in 1450 after the end of the war with France and which have gone down in history as the “Wars of the Roses.” The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries marked, then, at best a pause in the development of the English and French states and at worst a positive setback. Certainly, they witnessed the breakdown of public order and the growth of violence to a degree that would have been unimaginable in the late thirteenth century.

To the social dislocations caused by invasion and civil war must also be added the tribulations consequent to the ending in the early fourteenth century of the great economic boom that had gathered force in the tenth century, accelerated in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and reached its peak in the thirteenth. Even before the ad-

vent of the Black Death (1348–50), population expansion had ceased, serious and widespread famines had reappeared, and the European economy had begun to slide into a financial crisis and a depression that was to last until the latter part of the fifteenth century and even, in some sectors, into the sixteenth.

The Great Mortality

John Kelly

In the middle of the fourteenth century, the Black Death swept through Eurasia. In Europe, the pestilence killed between 33 and 60 percent of the population. In the following selection, John Kelly analyzes the extent of this catastrophe and contemporary reactions to it.

CONSIDER How widespread the Black Death was; how people understood its causes; potential consequences of this catastrophe.

Apocalyptic in scale, the Black Death affected every part of Eurasia, from the bustling ports along the China Sea to the sleepy fishing villages of coastal Portugal, and it produced suffering and death on a scale that, even after two world wars and twenty-seven million AIDS deaths worldwide, remains astonishing. In Europe, where the most complete figures are available, in many places the plague claimed a third of the population; in others, half the population; and in a few regions, 60 percent. The affliction was not limited to humans. For a brief moment in the middle of the fourteenth century, the words of Genesis 7—“All flesh die” that moved upon the earth”—seemed about to be realized. There are accounts of dogs, cats, birds, camels, even of lions being afflicted by the “boil,” the telltale bubo of bubonic plague. By the time the pestilence ended, vast stretches of the inhabited world had fallen silent, except for the sound of the wind rustling through empty, overgrown fields. . . .

To many Europeans, the pestilence seemed to be the punishment of a wrathful Creator. In September 1349, as the disease raced toward an anxious London, the English king Edward III declared that “a just God now visits the sons of men and lashes to the world.” To many others, the only credible explanation for death on so vast a scale was human malfeasance. Evildoers were using poisons to spread the plague, warned Alfonso of Cordova. To many of Alfonso’s contemporaries, that could only mean one thing: The Great Mortality occasioned the most violent outburst of anti-Semitism in the Middle Ages, a period already marked by violent anti-Semitic outbursts. . . .

SOURCE: John Kelly, *The Great Mortality* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), pp. xii–xiii, xv, 12.