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Response Paper 4

The High Middle Ages marked a period of great population and economic growth in Europe, as well as in the Middle and Far East. This was the result of the development of expansive trade routes and cities which allowed people and goods to flow through. However, these sources of economic expansion would serve as the spring board for the plague. With the world mired with plague many turned to religion in search of answers. In Christian and Muslim communities people believed that the plague or pestilence, as it was referred to, was created by God, as punishment for their sins and only forgiveness would provide them salvation.

Christians and Muslim were convinced that the plague was orchestrated by God. They believed that God desired for mankind to answer for sins committed. The *Fifteenth-Century Treatise on the Pestilence* states “It should be known to all Christians that pestilence, and every other manifestation of God’s vengeance, arise because of sin.”¹ It further states “Pestilence arises from a multitude of sins, but most especially from swearing worthless, deceitful and meaningless oaths.”² The treatise asserted that mankind’s corrupt actions are responsible for God’s decision to create the plague. It further declared that God’s desire to seek revenge is spawned from man’s impiousness. This denigration must be meet with retribution by God. Ibn Khaldun an Arab

¹ *Rosemary Horox, trans. and ed. The Black Death (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994) pg 193-194*

² IBID

philosopher, historian, and statesmen declares in *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History* “The principal reason for the latter is corruption of the air (climate) through (too) large a civilization (population). It results from the putrefaction and the many evil moistures with which (the air) has contact (in a dense civilization).”³ Khaldun contends that large populations have a potentiality for sinful acts. Thus, God will unleash his wrath upon those who sin and fail to seek forgiveness.

Christians and Muslims subscribed to the belief that salvation from the plague rested in God’s forgiveness. This could be achieved by being a true believer in the Lord. The Christian painting *St. Sebastian Interceding for the Plague-Stricken* by Lieferinx depicts St. Sebastian praying for help and forgiveness on behalf of those afflicted by the plague. St. Sebastian was a Roman soldier who was executed for following Christianity. His presence in the painting illustrates the tenet that only a true believer can share in God’s grace. The painting reveals the ideology that only a true follower of God has the potential of receiving salvation. Also seen in the painting are the sinners writhing in pain and dying, further epitomizing the canon of Christians, failure to seek forgiveness would inhibit salvation. In the Muslim work the *Citations from the Hadith* it states “ It is a punishment that God inflicts on whom he wills, but He has granted a modicum of clemency with respect to Believers.”⁴ For those who believe in God salvation would be bestowed upon them. But, for the non-believers salvation will not come and they will suffer with the plague.

³ *Michael Dols*, *The Black Death in the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1977, p 270

⁴ *William H. McNeil*, *Plagues and Peoples* (New York: Anchor, 1977), p 198

The High Medieval Period experienced an increase in population and economic expansion in Europe, the Middle and Far East. This was caused by the formation of extensive trade routes and cities which presented the capacity for people and merchandise to circulate. Consequently, the sources of economic growth became the impetus of the plague. Faced with plague the world looked to God for help. Christians and Muslims were convinced that God generated the plague as a way to punish sinners. Their doctrinal creed dictated that only true believers would receive forgiveness and thus be saved.