

The Black Death and the Transformation of Medieval Christian Faith

Andi Chen*

Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing 400047, China

**Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.*

Copyright: © 2026 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: The Black Death that swept across Europe in the 14th century caused massive loss of European lives and profoundly shook the medieval Christian faith system. The reality of death disintegrated the traditional sacred order and triggered a faith crisis from three dimensions: theodicy logic, secular authority of the Church, and public mental-psychological state. The catastrophe forced people's spiritual cognition to turn toward the individual and brought about an overall transformation of Christian faith. This transformation weakened the discourse power of the Church, bred early humanism, provided ideological conditions for the Renaissance and the Reformation, and became a crucial opportunity for Europe's transition from theocentric to human-centered civilization.

Keywords: The Black Death; Christian faith; Faith transformation; Humanism; Medieval Europe

Online publication: October 21, 2026

1. Introduction

Poor public-health conditions accelerated epidemic transmission and also bred racial prejudice and social conflicts. The public originally believed firmly in Christian theological narratives, yet the plague mercilessly devoured human lives and destroyed numerous families.

This disaster shook the concept of divine justice preached by the Church and accelerated ideological changes in Europe. Fractures appeared within the theocentric spiritual system, creating conditions for the rise of Renaissance humanism. The corrupt rule of the Church suffered heavy blows, and medieval Europe initiated the alternation of old and new faith modes under the shock of the plague. Drawing on existing historical materials and academic research, this paper analyzes how the Christian faith order collapsed and how new ideas took shape under the impact of the Black Death, and interprets the far-reaching influence of this faith transformation on early-modern European history.

2. The collapse of the sacred order: The deconstruction of faith

In 14th-century Europe, Christianity exerted influence above secular states. As the mediator between God and human beings, the Church monopolized access to salvation of the soul. The theological logic of “original sin-salvation” constituted the foundation of people’s spiritual life. The devastating impact of the Black Death shook the centuries-old sacred order in three dimensions: theological theories, church organizations, and mass psychology.

2.1. The crisis of theodicy: When prayers failed

Divine justice constituted the core of medieval Christian theodicy. The mainstream viewpoint at that time held that worldly sufferings were punishments for human sins. Humans could obtain God’s forgiveness and protection through repentance and abiding by church teachings. This set of interpretations served both as the foundation for believers’ faith and an important source of the Church’s legitimacy. However, the indiscriminate slaughter brought by the Black Death rendered this theological logic self-contradictory.

Believers’ pious acts failed to hold back death, and the foundation of faith began to waver. After the plague broke out, large numbers of believers made pilgrimages and offered sacrifices at saints’ churches, organizing collective prayer processions to pray for the cessation of divine punishment. Ordinary people regarded pilgrimage and sacrificial offerings as the most direct and effective way to eliminate calamities. People spent all their household wealth, hoping to win God’s mercy. Nevertheless, many cities that held large-scale religious ceremonies, such as Bologna in Italy, instead became severely-stricken plague-hit areas.

Mass deaths of innocent people further amplified theological perplexities. Pious clergymen, infants, virtuous hermits, and wrongdoers alike could not escape the plague. Contemporaries raised questions: “If God is just, why should the innocent perish together with sinners?” “What sins have we committed to suffer such terrible punishments?”^[1] The old theological framework could no longer explain real-world catastrophes, and people’s traditional perceptions of God gradually loosened. David Herlihy pointed out that the greatest harm of the Black Death lay not in population decline, but in the destruction of public trust in the sacred order^[2]. The theodicy crisis marked the beginning of the disintegration of traditional faith.

2.2. The bankruptcy of church authority: Death and greed of the shepherds

The authority of the Church was built upon mediated salvation. Only when clergymen presided over sacraments could human souls hope to be saved and ascend to heaven. In the perception of ordinary medieval people, souls could hardly achieve salvation without sacraments presided over by clergymen. Hence the Church occupied an irreplaceable position in the spiritual world. The Black Death exposed the incompetence and corruption of the Church, and its social authority accumulated over hundreds of years declined rapidly.

Clergymen needed to care for the sick and conduct funerals, coming into frequent contact with infected persons. Their mortality rate was far higher than that of ordinary people. Around 70% of clergymen in Florence died of the plague in 1348, and the mortality rate among Parisian clergymen reached 80%^[3]. Mass deaths of clergy made it impossible for many parishes to hold sacraments. Numerous believers died in terror without receiving spiritual consolation from church rituals. The Church, as “the sole channel of salvation,” malfunctioned in the face of the catastrophe.

Escape and corruption among some clergymen intensified public discontent. As recorded in Boccaccio’s *The Decameron*, many clergymen feared death and abandoned believers to flee to manors for self-preservation^[4]. Some other clergymen profited from the plague by raising funeral charges, seizing

property of the deceased, and even turning salvation into a tradable commodity. Betrayal by the pastoral stratum caused continuous collapse of public trust in the Church.

With the failure of theological explanations and the Church's inability to deliver salvation, believers' spiritual anxiety was transformed into various extreme acts. People did not abandon faith in God, yet they could find no reliable path to salvation and could only seek psychological relief in extreme rituals and superstitions. Confronted with overwhelming death, human reason was easily overwhelmed by panic, and society was prone to fall into irrational collective actions.

The Flagellant Movement served as a representative folk religious movement. It emerged in northern Italy in 1348 and spread rapidly across Europe. Believers paraded in white hooded robes, publicly scourging themselves with iron-barbed whips to atone for the sins of all mankind and pray for the end of the plague. Zhao Lixing argued that the Flagellants adhered to traditional doctrines of salvation through penance, yet denied the Church's monopoly over forms of penance. They advocated obtaining God's forgiveness directly through self-flagellation without clergymen acting as mediators^[5]. This movement directly challenged church authority. In 1349, Pope Clement VI issued a papal bull condemning it as heresy and suppressed it, and the movement gradually subsided.

Meanwhile, a wave of Jewish persecution swept across society. Rumors claimed that Jews poisoned wells to spread the plague. Large numbers of Jews were massacred and their property looted in places such as Mainz (Germany) and Strasbourg (France). Persecution of Jews represented violent venting of public fear amid the collapse of the faith order, and directly reflected social turbulence and human-nature distortion accompanying the disintegration of old faith. In an age where the root causes of catastrophes could not be understood, scapegoating became a distorted means for the public to ease mental suffering.

3. Sowing seeds in the shadow of death: Reconstruction of ideas

The Black Death destroyed the old faith order, yet it did not completely crush the spiritual world of Europeans. New ideological conceptions grew out of the ruins of catastrophe. Renewed perceptions of death, inward-turning religious piety, and budding secular-mindedness jointly brought about the transformation of Christian faith. This ideological change did not mean total rejection of Christianity, but rather shifts in interpretive modes and practical patterns within the Christian framework.

3.1. Deepened perception of death: From “collective judgment” to “individual reflection”

Early-medieval perceptions of death centered on the collective Last Judgment. People attached greater importance to the salvation of humanity as a whole, while the position of individual lives was downplayed. Artworks mostly depicted scenes of all souls awaiting God's judgment. In daily life, people seldom reflected on individual death, which was regarded as a collective event to occur only in the distant eschaton.

The Black Death turned death from eschatological prophecy into everyday reality. People witnessed relatives and friends dying one after another; funeral processions could be seen everywhere in cities. Graves could no longer hold the deceased, and large-scale collective cemeteries kept emerging. This drove people's perceptions of death to shift from the collective to the individual. They began to ponder how individuals should face death and preserve their own souls.

The *Danse Macabre* (Dance of Death) theme gained wide popularity and embodied this ideological shift.

In such works, Death dances alongside figures of all ranks: popes, nobles, and beggars alike. It illustrates that all are equal before death, and secular power and wealth are meaningless ^[6]. This theme dismantled medieval hierarchical sacred notions, brought the value of individual lives into sight, and gave birth to individual consciousness. No matter how high one's status or how great one's wealth, no one could escape death. Such imagery constantly challenged entrenched medieval hierarchical ideas.

After the Black Death, Italian artistic styles shifted from elegant International Gothic to somber and tragic. *The Black Death Frescoes* by Taddeo Gaddi no longer glorified saintly miracles. Instead, they truthfully depicted human suffering and death amid the plague and conveyed empathy for the fragility of human life. Artistic narratives began to shift from divine tales toward human lived experience ^[7]. Artists no longer served merely religious dogma and started to incorporate ordinary people's sufferings into artistic expression.

3.2. The turn of piety: Individualization and interiorization

Declining church authority prompted believers to reinterpret faith: faith was no longer mere compliance with church rituals and regulations, but sincere inner communication between the individual and God. Changes in testaments before and after the plague offer direct evidence of this trend. Faced with the ever-present possibility of death brought by the Black Death, people scrutinized the destination of their souls more earnestly, and testaments became very important texts for contemporaries to express religious appeals.

Samuel K. Cohn's quantitative study on Florentine testaments from 1300 to 1400 shows: before the plague, about 60% of testaments included donations to monasteries in pursuit of collective salvation through communal monastic practice. After the plague, this proportion dropped to 31%. More people financed masses for their individual souls or donated to secular charitable institutions such as hospitals and orphanages ^[8].

People no longer over-relied on collective monastic practice for salvation. They paid greater attention to the salvation of individual souls and meanwhile valued worldly sufferings, and charity became an important form of religious practice. The testament of Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici of the Medici family, which included both donations for plague-stricken patients and payments for masses for family souls, serves as a typical example of individualized faith ^[9]. This testament reflects that believers' religious practice was no longer entirely dependent upon collective monastic life. Individuals could realize religious appeals through diverse means.

Medieval mysticism further pushed piety toward interiorization. Meister Eckhart proposed that God dwells within the human soul, and humans could communicate directly with the divine through inner contemplation without church mediation ^[10]. This idea broke the Church's monopoly over faith. The pursuit of direct individual communion with God also laid ideological groundwork for Martin Luther's "justification by faith alone." Mystical ideas spread quietly among ordinary believers, making more people realize that the core of faith lay in inner devotion rather than elaborate external rituals.

3.3. Discovery of this-worldly life: From *The Decameron* to glimmers of humanism

Uncertainty over other-worldly salvation drove people to re-evaluate earthly life. The Black Death made people realize that earthly life was transient and precious. Facing ever-imminent death, people were unwilling to pin all their hopes on the illusory afterlife. Intellectual emphasis gradually shifted from other-worldly salvation to earthly well-being. Secular-mindedness emerged, and glimmers of humanism appeared.

Set against the background of the 1348 plague in Florence, Boccaccio's *The Decameron* tells of ten

young people fleeing the city and telling stories in a villa to relieve their afflictions. Instead of passively awaiting death or placing full trust in church salvation, they relied on human wisdom to confront catastrophe. The stories within the book sing praises of love, wisdom, and earthly life, criticize the hypocrisy and corruption of the Church, and affirm human secular desires ^[11]. Ernst Cassirer commented that *The Decameron* represents a form of human self-salvation, proving that humans can discover the meaning of life through reason and creativity ^[12]. Within these tales, human secular emotions, wisdom, and joys of life receive full affirmation — something rarely seen in early-medieval literary works.

Petrarch, known as “the father of humanism,” lost relatives and friends amid the plague, yet he did not sink into despair. Instead, he devoted himself to studying classical texts. He argued that people need not pin all hopes on the afterlife; virtue and truth ought to be pursued in this world to realize human worth ^[13]. He collected and collated classical writings and advocated earthly human well-being, advancing humanist thought. Petrarch did not oppose Christian faith; he merely hoped that human potential and value could be fully explored within the framework of faith.

Works by Boccaccio and Petrarch jointly reflect changes of the age: the theocentric spiritual pillar was shaken, and human value gained recognition. Though early humanism remained immature, it pointed out the direction for Europe’s spiritual transformation. Humans were no longer merely servants of God, and earthly well-being also carried great significance. Admittedly, humanism of this period had not reached the heights seen in later eras and remained deeply rooted within medieval Christian cultural soil.

4. Conclusion: Essence and historical echoes of the transformation of medieval Christian faith

The Black Death delivered a violent blow to the medieval church-centered faith system. The collapse of theodicy undermined the legitimacy of the sacred order; the Church exposed its incompetence and corruption amid the catastrophe, and the mediated-salvation model lost persuasiveness. The rise of folk religious movements laid bare the inherent fragility of the old faith system. This transformation was not accomplished overnight. The Black Death acted as a powerful catalyst, amplifying various spiritual contradictions already latent within late-medieval society.

The Black Death shattered the Church’s monopoly over the spiritual world. Faced with the plague, the Church could neither halt epidemic spread nor soothe public suffering through religious rituals. Large numbers of clergymen either perished in the epidemic or evaded their duties, damaging both the Church’s personnel resources and its moral reputation. Folk religious movements such as the Flagellant Movement demonstrate the public’s urgent need for new spiritual sustenance ^[14]. Huizinga held that the essence of the late-medieval faith crisis lay in the disconnect between traditional religious institutions and the spiritual demands of the populace, and the Black Death accelerated the eruption of these contradictions ^[15].

The most prominent features of this faith transformation are the rise of individual faith and religious secularization. Uncertainty brought by death lessened believers’ attachment to the Church, and demands for direct individual communion with God grew stronger ^[16]. Boccaccio recorded the tide of religious secularization through literary depictions of secular values ^[17]. People no longer pinned all the meaning of life on the afterlife, and earthly moral practice received greater emphasis. Jacques Le Goff pointed out that this did not mean negation of Christian doctrines. Rather, faith returned from external authorities to real-life contexts to fit the living conditions of ordinary believers ^[18]. Believers retained Christian faith, yet their

degree of dependence upon church institutions declined markedly.

The faith transformation spawned by the Black Death planted ideological seeds for the Reformation. Many religious dissent movements of the 14th–15th centuries trace their intellectual origins back to public distrust toward the Church formed during the Black Death^[19]. Martin Luther’s “justification by faith alone” constitutes a theoretical sublimation of individual religious experience among the populace. Different interpretations of infectious diseases from religion and medicine amid the plague promoted initial intellectual integration between religious thought and natural science^[20]. Plague-driven shocks to local social governance also indirectly advanced the process of religious secularization^[21].

In cruel fashion, the Black Death reshaped the contours of medieval faith. Church authority was weakened, individual-oriented faith rose, and faith became individualized and secularized. This profoundly altered the early-modern European spiritual landscape and paved the way for the Reformation^[22]. Arnold J. Toynbee’s civilizational theory reveals that religion, as a spiritual instrument for humanity to cope with existential crises, can retain vitality only by continuously responding to challenges of the times. The legacy left by the Black Death tells us: confronted with profound suffering, human longing for survival and spiritual courage will always drive people to seek new spiritual outlets amid desperate circumstances.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Herlihy D, 1997, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*. Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 38.
- [2] Herlihy D, 1997, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West*. Harvard University Press, Massachusetts, 72.
- [3] Cohn SK, 2002, *The Black Death Transformed: Disease and Culture in Early Renaissance Europe*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 81.
- [4] Boccaccio G, 2005, *The Decameron*. Translated by G. H. McWilliam. Penguin Classics, London, 6.
- [5] Zhao LX, 2005, *The Black Death and the Transformation of Medieval European Society*. *Historical Research*, 2005(6): 138.
- [6] Huizinga J, 1996, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 258.
- [7] Meiss M, 1951, *Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death*. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 98.
- [8] Cohn SK, 2002, *The Black Death Transformed: Disease and Culture in Early Renaissance Europe*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 92.
- [9] Martines L, 1979, *Power and Imagination: City-States in Renaissance Italy*. Vintage Books, New York, 87.
- [10] Eckhart M, 1994, *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*. Translated by Oliver Davies. Penguin Classics, London, 127.
- [11] Boccaccio G, 1995, *The Decameron*. Translated by G. H. McWilliam. Penguin Classics, London, 89.
- [12] Cassirer E, 1944, *An Essay on Man*. Yale University Press, Connecticut, 102.
- [13] Petrarch F, 1975, *Letters on Familiar Matters*. Translated by Aldo S. Bernardo. Columbia University Press, New York, 45.

- [14] Huizinga J, 2017, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*. Translated by He Daokuan. The Commercial Press, Beijing.
- [15] Cohn SK Jr., 2006, *Lust for Liberty: The Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200-1425*. Harvard University Press, Massachusetts.
- [16] Cassirer E, 2003, *Individual and the Universe in the Renaissance*. Translated by Huang Zhending. SDX Joint Publishing Company, Beijing.
- [17] Boccaccio, 2019, *The Decameron*. Translated by Wang Yongnian. Shanghai Translation Publishing House, Shanghai.
- [18] Le Goff J, 2011, *Medieval Civilization 400-1500*. Translated by Xu Jialing. The Commercial Press, Beijing.
- [19] Constabel G, 1995, *Religion and Society in Medieval Europe*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- [20] McNeill WH, *Plagues and Peoples*. Translated by Yu Xinzhong. CITIC Press, Beijing.
- [21] Bowsky WM, 1964, The Impact of the Black Death upon Sienese Government and Society. *Speculum*, 39(1): 1–34.
- [22] Toynbee AJ, 2015, *A Study of History*. Translated by Liu Beicheng, Guo Xiaoling. Shanghai People’s Publishing House, Shanghai.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.