Black Death’s Impact on Religion

The cause of the plague was unknown and was believed to come from the will or anger of God. People responded with hopeful cures and prayers, supported by The Catholic Church. These did nothing to stop the spread of the disease or save those who had been infected. Some Christians believed that the plague was started by the Jews and targeted Jewish communities. No matter how many Jews or others, were killed, however, the plague continued. In Europe, the perceived failure of God to answer their prayers caused The Church’s power to decline and led to the eventual split of the Christian Church during the Protestant Reformation (1517-1648 CE).

**Document 1 – Excerpt from the Archbishop of Canterbury**

*The Archbishop of Canterbury is a church leader who is frustrated with priests not serving the poor and sick, and only serving the rich. He wants the greedy priests to be punished by the law.*

“If humans are taken over by uncontrollable greed, love and compassion for others will disappear. This greed needs to be controlled by justice and punishment. The priests who survived the plague (a sign from God, he wanted them to live and serve him) show no compassion for the dying. These priests, instead of caring for the sick and dying souls, spend their time celebrating anniversary masses and other private services that earn them more money. This makes them wealthier as they are not content with being paid ordinary salaries. They are demanding to be paid unreasonable salaries for little work.

Wanting to limit the greediness of priests, we ask you to only choose priests who will care for the souls in that church. And if anyone challenges this and wants to move to a different church, we will order you to report their name to us. For we wish to bring justice for the complaints that they have been accused of.

**Document 2 – Writings of Friar Jean De Venette**

*Jean De Venette was a friar who worked in small French towns, serving the Church.*

“Men became greedier after the plague, since they could possess many more goods than before. They were also more jealous, and they liked to stir up conflict among themselves through arguments and fights. The kings and lords did not bring peace throughout this terrible disease inflicted by God. The enemies of the king of France and of the Church were stronger and worse than before: they started wars on sea and land, and evil spread. From that time, kindness disappeared, and wickedness spread, along with ignorance and sin.

**Document 3 – “Religious Responses to the Black Death” Article**

*Some Christians believed that the way to protect and heal themselves from the plague was to become closer to God and the Church. Anything that was not associated with Christianity was marked as “evil”.*

“Since the plague was thought to have been sent by God as a punishment, the only way to end it was admitting personal sin and guilt, asking for forgiveness, and dedicating themselves to God. Religious processions (parades) would wind their way through cities to a church, usually dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Participants would fast, pray, and purchase charms to keep them safe. Even after Christians understood that the plague was contagious from person-to-person, these processions continued because they thought it was more important to praise God.

As the plague continued and religious responses failed, a group known as the Flagellant Movement emerged in Austria and Germany. They were a group of devout Christians who walked from town to town whipping themselves for their sins and encouraging the persecution of Jews and other minority groups. They were banned by Pope Clement VI for being unreasonable, disruptive, and upsetting.

Cures were often based on religious understanding, such as killing and chopping up a snake (associated with Satan) and rubbing the snake on someone’s body. They believed that the “evil” of the disease would be drawn to the “evil” of the dead serpent and it would take the plague out of the person. Drinking a potion made of “unicorn horn” was also considered a cure as the unicorn was associated with Christ and holiness.”