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What can we Learn about Religion and COVID-19 from the Epidemic of 1616? An interview with Matthew Rowley

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7 APRILE 2020

As the COVID-19 pandemic spreads around the globe many religious leaders and laypeople have sought to discern some divine purpose behind it. But historian Matthew Rowley cautions that those “who think they have the ability or duty to discern God’s purposes for a plague face a daunting task—and perhaps more historical awareness might temper their confidence.”

In this interview with *Religion & Diplomacy* editor Judd Birdsall, Rowley explains how the Protestant settlers of New England providentially interpreted a plague that decimated Native American populations just prior to the arrival of the Pilgrims in 1620. And he offers his thoughts on how the novel coronavirus might reshape religious life and theological interpretation in the present day.

Dr Matthew Rowley is a historian who works on the relationship between Christianity and killing in the early modern Puritan Atlantic world. He has recently been spending self-isolation with family, researching, woodworking, walking in nature, and reading *Hitchhiker’s Guide to The Galaxy*—which has ‘Don’t Panic’

appropriately blazoned on the cover. He holds a PhD in early modern religious and political history from the University of Leicester. He previously served as Non-Stipendiary Fellow at the Woolf Institute and a Research Associate at the Cambridge Institute on Religion & International Studies.

Religion & Diplomacy: Tell us a bit about the epidemic of 1616-1619.

Rowley: As Europe slid into the self-inflicted Thirty Years' War, the Indigenous populations of New England faced an even more dire situation. The lethal killer that stalked their lands from 1616–1618 was invisible. Plague brought by Europeans decimated Native populations. Upwards of ninety percent died as a result of the epidemic.

The 1620 Charter of New England, given by King James I, mentioned this epidemic. The plague became proof of property rights of the English and formed part of the backstory of Plymouth colony. The highly-mythologised Thanksgiving narrative often focuses on the plight of the Pilgrims. The cost European expansion to the Indigenous—through disease, war, slavery, and displacement—is almost always left out of the narrative. However, the plague-decimated Wampanoag tribe needed allies, and they found allies in the Pilgrims. Disease made the Wampanoag and English depend on each other. No plague, no Thanksgiving.

R&D: How did the English settlers interpret what happened to the Native Americans?

Rowley: Although many colonists described New England in Edenic terms, the plague rendered it 'a new found Golgotha'—as Thomas Morton called it in *New English Canaan* (1632). Most Pilgrims and Puritans viewed plague as a confirmation of divine favor toward the English and as a judgement on the Algonquian tribes. It augured the demise of native communities.

John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, argued in 1629 that God providentially removed most of the native peoples before Massachusetts Bay was planted. And he wrote in 1634 that God continued to 'drive out the natives'. God was 'deminishinge them as we increase'. Similar comments litter the landscape of early colonial reflections.

R&D: Were the settlers aware that Europeans had brought the disease to the New World, or did they attribute to plague's origin entirely to God?

Rowley: The early colonists mainly viewed themselves as passively being pulled by God into a void left by plague. Over time they transitioned to viewing themselves more actively involved repelling Natives. Particularly after King Philip's War (1675–1678), they increasingly saw themselves as pushing Native Americans out, with divine approval. This shift would have profound implications for the long and deadly history of American expansion.

R&D: Other than the obvious decimation of their population, how did pandemic restructure Native American life—particularly their religious life?

Rowley: Some Natives connected the plague with the English and their God. According to Edward Winslow's *Good Newes from New-England* (1624), some Natives thought 'wee [the English] had the plague buried in our store-house, which at our pleasure wee could send forth to what place or people wee would, and destroy them therewith'. The English denied possession of the plague, 'But the God of the English had it in store, and could send it at his pleasure to the destruction of his and our enemies'. Plague was not theirs to wield. God alone sent it against 'his *and our* enemies' (italics added).

Plague, followed by war, pushed the English and Algonquian communities together. After the Pequot War (1636–1638), the English took a more active role in 'civilising' and evangelising outsiders. They founded an Indian College at Harvard in 1656. The inclusion of Natives into Christianity seemed to contradict God's earlier providential eviction of them through plague. Some argued Indians descended from Israel. Their conversion would usher in God's kingdom on earth.

Decades of disease influenced Native American spirituality. The trauma—plague being only one factor—made some Algonquians receptive to evangelistic efforts. Some individuals and groups shifted loyalty (at least in part) to the English and their God. Their split allegiance undermined traditional authority structures within Native tribes and exacerbated conflict with the English.

R&D: The English settlers were no doubt informed by the Bible in their attempts to interpret the reason for the plague, but the Bible posits many different reasons for plagues and pestilence.

Rowley: That's right. The Bible brims with descriptions of physical maladies, but it does not speak univocally about what God communicated through them. Plagues are seen in the Bible as just part of a broken world (Romans 8:22), a test of righteousness (Job 2), a punishment for sacrilege (1 Samuel 5–6), a response to royal sin (1 Chronicles 21). Or, God's purposes are simply mysterious (John 9:2–3).

Partisans in the 17th century had an interest in pinpointing the cause of disease. Plague—as an event and an idea—could be weaponized. Royal interpretation of the plague might differ from that of a persecuted minority. If there was a spiritual *cause*, then someone was *guilty*. One needed to find the culprits, convince them to repent or, sometimes, punish them. Declaring 'God willed the plague' simply opened—rather than closed—debate.

R&D: Help us understand the Puritan response to the plague within the context of early modern Europe. Were the Pilgrims and Puritans outliers in their interpretation of pandemic as divine judgment?

Rowley: Perhaps the most basic thing to understand about plagues in early modern Europe is this: most people thought of them as a divine communication.

As with so many things, Puritans beliefs overlapped in significant ways with others. It was often the intensity with which they held their convictions that set them apart.

Even with a paltry life expectancy of 35 years, people were likely to experience a major Europe-wide outbreak during their lifetime. Additionally, they could expect several localised outbreaks. People searched for physical causes, but these explanations complemented—rather than replaced—beliefs about divine agency.

Plague provided evidence of the end of days, as in Albrecht Dürer's famous 'Four Horsemen, from The Apocalypse' (1498). Wherever death, famine, war, or plague reared their ugly heads, some would interpret these events eschatologically—as has already happened with COVID-19.

Plague-as-weapon was also a common theme. Whereas war was considered divine judgement through human instruments, famine and especially plague were considered weapons that God directly wielded. For this reason, Henry Hibbert echoed Homer and called plague a 'Bellum divinum' (*Syntagma theologicum* 1662). These beliefs were widely shared by early modern Europeans.

R&D: If God was punishing the Native Americans with a plague, did that mean the English saw themselves as additional agents of punishment? That is, did the plague further justify mistreatment of the Indians?

Rowley: Here the story gets a bit complex because providence did not override ethics. Just because someone thought God willed that a drunkard be murdered in a pub, they would not have thought it ethically right to be the murderer.

We might expect the English to gloat over the plight of native populations, and many did. However, some thought God plagued Natives *and* that it was their duty to try to save Algonquian lives and souls. In one 1633 account, compassionate acts for diseased Algonquians coexisted with thankfulness that God was clearing the land—however mutually exclusive those two emotions seem.

R&D: Were there any voices within the Pilgrim or Puritan communities that disagreed with the dominant interpretation of the epidemic as a providential judgment on the Native Americans that cleared the way for English Christian settlement?

Rowley: Like his contemporaries, Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, would have thought plague a judgement of God. However, he challenged the leap from plague to property rights. Plague was a communication from God, but one could not say God communicated English superiority. Williams was committed to the equality of humanity before God.

R&D: What can the epidemic of early 17th century New England teach us about attempts to divine a providential reason between disasters such as pandemics?

Rowley: Christians in the present who think they have the ability or duty to discern God's purposes for a plague face a daunting task—and perhaps more historical awareness might temper their confidence. The Puritans thought plague was like a barometer that recorded the spiritual state a group. Plague rose in tandem with sin, at least in theory. Christians insisted that God's judgements were not arbitrary. Confusion about the meaning of those divine judgments fed religious anxiety. Thus many Christians awkwardly shoved inconvenient evidence away from their theological paradigms.

Christians earnestly sought to understand God's communications, but authoritative divination always seemed elusive. Each interpretation invited critique. Over time, the narrative that God supported the English and judged Natives cracked under the strain of events. Disease among the English, continual war, economic trials, loss of autonomy, religious fragmentation—all challenged simple explanations of what God was doing in New England.

R&D: From your study of the 17th century, what thoughts do you have on how the COVID-19 pandemic might reshape religious life and theological interpretation of world events?

Rowley: First, plague is destructive and disruptive. It pulls people together and drives them apart. Its effects are hard to predict. Epidemic strained politics, pressured religion, and left social scars that are still visible today. We have seen how it decimated Native populations, established new avenues of cooperation between peoples, ripped communities apart, divided allegiances, pitted tribes against each other, increased spiritual anxiety, and drew some natives into the fold of Christianity.

Second, plague leaves most people entrenched in previous convictions. If one already loved or loathed Donald Trump or Boris Johnson, the pandemic will confirm prejudice. Partisan reactions to plagues reveal more about the biases of interpreters.

Third, we have seen how Scripture undergirded a multivalent response to sickness, disease, and plague. This textual diversity deeply impacted early modern history and will likely impact religious interpretations of COVID-19.

Perhaps a final lesson comes from the layout of the Mashantucket Pequot Museum in Connecticut. It takes the visitor through displays about the epidemic and immerses them in the Pequot War, but this is not where the tour begins. The visitor is first welcomed into the present life of the Pequot community. Contrary to terminal narratives of decline and extinction, Algonquian tribes like the Pequot resisted, adapted, and survived the growth of non-Native power. Many tribes preserved customs, secured recognition, demanded autonomy, and asserted rhetorical sovereignty over how their history is remembered.

As deeply unsettling as COVID-19 is right now, its impact will pale in comparison with how plague and conquest fundamentally altered Native communities in the Americas. Nevertheless, these communities highlight the human resolve to endure and thrive.

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