

DIVERGENT STORIES? NARRATING ANCIENT AND CURRENT REACTIONS TO PANDEMICS

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ABSTRACT: Although this recent COVID virus is new, it is well known that this pandemic, in its medical characteristics, in its impact on the population and even in its social and economic repercussions, is nothing new. There is a long tradition of previous pandemics that have affected Western culture and have left literary footprints over the centuries. Pandemics generally share common features: the description of the symptoms, the response of the authorities, even the lockdown of the population, are recurring, and help us to see the current situation with some perspective.

However, despite the similarities in the way illness has been metaphorized over the centuries, the divergences are particularly striking: while in ancient and medieval literary accounts illness is seen, in a metaphorical reading, as a moral, social and natural disorder as a whole, and the reaction of the majority of society is always a moral upheaval that leads to the loss of religious and ethical values, in current accounts, the media narrative emphasises shared feelings, popular gestures, and hopeful mimetism that have occurred all over the world. As a result, our civic values and religious belief systems, far from weakening, have been even strengthened.

In order to clearly delineate an area for analysis, I will mainly focus on the social reactions to the pandemics described by Thucydides (5th century BC) and by Procopius of Caesarea (6th century AD) and contrast them with social reactions during the current pandemic, especially through media narratives such as news reports and political slogans. I will try to establish the devices in constructing of a story about the pandemic in each cultural context, and to illustrate how the ancient metaphors can be used to better understand the collective story of the current pandemic.

KEYWORDS: Literature about pandemics; Thucydides; Procopius of Caesarea; John of Ephesus; construction of a common story; metaphorizing illness

1. NARRATING ANCIENT PLAGUES

Without any doubt, the most vivid description of the effects of an epidemic, which became the model for all subsequent accounts, is the one recounted by Thucydides in the second book of his *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The plague of Athens occurred between 430 and 426 BC, in the middle of the Peloponnesian War, plausibly due to the unsanitary conditions of the city, as a result of the accumulation of people who had taken refuge from the countryside, seeking the protection of the walls. The dead numbered in the thousands, including Pericles himself, who at that time led the city. Without his leadership, and depleted morally and in number of troops by the epidemic, Athens declined until losing the war (Martínez, 2017). The narrative of Thucydides, as it has been often noted, has various reasons that make it particularly estimable. Firstly, the author is a direct witness of the events and even declares that he had himself suffered the epidemic. But above all, in his conception of history as a merely natural process, explicable without the intervention of the gods, he describes the plague and its ravages in human terms, without appealing to divine anger as the cause, as was customary not only in the *Iliad*, but also in Herodotus.

According to Thucydides (II 48, 1), the plague originated in Ethiopia, and its initial symptoms included headaches, conjunctivitis, a rash which covered the body, and fever. The victims then coughed up blood, had pustules and ulcers on the body, suffered from insomnia and extreme thirst, and from extremely painful stomach cramping, followed by vomiting and «ineffectual retching», and they usually died «on the seventh or eighth day to the internal inflammation». If they survive this initial attack of the disease, they died by severe diarrhoea, and many escaped with the loss of the fingers and the toes, some too with that of their eyes; others again were seized with an entire loss of memory (II 49). Fortunately, the infection provided immunity: few caught the disease twice, or, at least, the second attack was never fatal (II 51). The disease has traditionally been considered an outbreak of the bubonic plague, but scholars had advanced many alternative explanations, including typhus, smallpox, measles, and toxic shock syndrome (Papagrigrakis, Yapijakis & Synodinos, 2008). Based upon descriptive similarities, Ebola or a related viral haemorrhagic fever has also been considered (Olson, Hames, Benenson & Genovese, 1996, pp. 155-156), but we must admit that the exact nature of the Athenian plague is very difficult to know.

Thucydides masterfully explores the effects that the plague had on the spirits of the Athenians, presenting the desolation, moral subversion and the absolute loss of horizon that shook the population (II 53):

Men now coolly ventured on what they had formerly done in a corner, and not just as they pleased, seeing the rapid transitions produced by persons in prosperity suddenly dying and those who before had nothing succeeding to their property. So they resolved to spend quickly and enjoy themselves, regarding their lives and riches as alike things of a day. Perseverance in what men called honor was popular with none, it was so uncertain whether they would be spared to attain the object; but it was settled that present enjoyment, and all that contributed to it, was both honorable and useful. Fear of gods or law of man there was none to restrain them. As for the first, they judged it to be just the same whether they worshipped them or not, as they saw all alike perishing; and for the last, no one expected to live to be brought to trial for his offences, but each felt that a far severer sentence had been already passed upon them all and hung ever over their heads, and before this fell it was only reasonable to enjoy life a little. (Trans. Richard Crawley)

One of the most terrible consequences was the upheaval of the customary funerary rites, to extremes that clearly border on impiety, from the perspective of ancient beliefs (II 52, 2-4):

The bodies of dying men lay one upon another, and half-dead creatures reeled about the streets and gathered round all the fountains in their longing for water. The sacred places also in which they had quartered themselves were full of corpses of persons that had died there, just as they were; for as the disaster passed all bounds, men, not knowing what was to become of them, became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane. All the burial rites before in use were entirely upset, and they buried the bodies as best they could. Many from want of the proper appliances, through so many of their friends having died already, had recourse to the most shameless sepultures: sometimes getting the start of those who had raised a pile, they threw their own dead body upon the stranger's pyre and ignited it; sometimes they tossed the corpse which they were carrying on the top of another that was burning, and so went off. (Trans. Richard Crawley)

Even worse, because of the fear of contracting the disease, after having verified that doctors and those who cared for the sick were quickly infected, those who fell ill were condemned to die alone, since no one dared to risk taking care of them (II 51, 5). And, nonetheless, the situation shakes the very foundations of religiosity and belief in the gods (II 47, 4):

Supplications in the temples, divinations, and so forth were found equally futile, till the overwhelming nature of the disaster at last put a stop to them altogether. (Trans. Richard Crawley)

The plague is seen, in a metaphorical reading, as a moral, social and natural disorder as a whole. Later, already in the first century BC, Lucretius took advantage of the crude description by Thucydides to argue in favour of the Epicurean doctrine regarding the rationality of the world, explainable by physical laws, without the need to resort to the gods. In this eloquent way he concludes the entire book with the description of the plague (*De rerum natura* VI, 1272-1286):

All holy temples, too, of deities
Had Death becrammed with the carcasses;
And stood each fane of the Celestial Ones
Laden with stark cadavers everywhere-
Places which warders of the shrines had crowded
With many a guest. For now no longer men
Did mightily esteem the old Divine,
The worship of the gods: the woe at hand
Did over-master. Nor in the city then
Remained those rites of sepulture, with which
That pious folk had evermore been wont
To buried be. For it was wildered all
In wild alarms, and each and every one
With sullen sorrow would bury his own dead,
As present shift allowed. And sudden stress
And poverty to many an awful act
Impelled; and with a monstrous screaming they
Would, on the frames of alien funeral pyres,
Place their own kin, and thrust the torch beneath

Oft brawling with much bloodshed round about
Rather than quit dead bodies loved in life. (Trans. William Ellery Leonard)

Another important plague occurred during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 AD), known as the Antonine plague, which is described by the famous physician Galen in his treatise *Therapeutikon*, known in Latin as *Methodus Medendi* (*Method of Treatment*). He described the symptoms as fever, diarrhoea, and pharyngitis, followed by a skin eruption, sometimes dry and sometimes pustular, that appeared on the ninth day of the illness, which scholars have generally diagnosed as smallpox, and which caused a great crisis in the Empire (Bruun, 2007). Galen, very attentive to the symptoms of the plague, tells us nothing, however, that could help to know the social reaction to the mass mortality, so it contributes little to what interests us here, which is the account of the moral impact of a pandemic.

In all these cases, we are dealing with the reactions of a majority and officially pagan society. Things change with the so-called plague of Cyprian, where we witness the first testimony of the reactions of a Christian community. From 250 to 262 AD, during the outbreak, it was said that 5000 people died every day in Rome. This time, our source is saint Cyprian of Carthage, who gives the plague its name. In his treatise *On Mortality*, he briefly recounts the symptoms (*De mortalitate* 14), which coincide with a viral disease that causes a haemorrhagic fever, such as Ebola, instead of smallpox, according to a recent study by Kyle Harper (2015). Anyway, Cyprian gives a clear and forceful message of Christian approach: the plague must serve for humanity to realise that this life is a mere transit towards the definitive one, and death should not be mourned but even desired, because it frees us from the hardships of this mortal life and allows us to access the delights of eternal life in heaven (*De mortalitate* 16):

That pestilence and plague which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the righteousness of each one, and examines the minds of the human race, to see whether they who are in health tend the sick; whether relations affectionately love their kindred; whether masters pity their languishing servants; whether physicians do not forsake the beseeching patients; whether the fierce suppress their violence; whether the rapacious can quench the ever insatiable ardour of their raging avarice even by the fear of death; whether the haughty bend their neck; whether the wicked soften their boldness; whether, when their dear ones perish, the rich, even then bestow anything, and give, when they are to die without heirs. Even although this mortality conferred nothing else, it has done this benefit to Christians and to God's servants, that we begin gladly to desire martyrdom as we learn not to fear death. These are trainings for us, not deaths: they give the mind the glory of fortitude; by contempt of death, they prepare for the crown. (Trans. Christian Classics Ethereal Library)

It seems clear that the list of points for examination of conscience that Cyprian proposes in his preaching are exactly those that the faithful had to amend: they tended not the sick, the rapacious quenched not their avarice, nor did the physicians care for their patients... The popular reaction was exactly the opposite — and hence Cyprian's exhortation, of course. Indeed, Cyprian's biographer and deacon Pontius of Carthage describes in detail the general behaviour that prompted the sermon (*Vita Cypriani* 9):

Afterwards there broke out a dreadful plague, and excessive destruction of a hateful disease invaded every house in succession of the trembling populace, carrying off day by day with abrupt attack numberless people, every one from his own house. All were shuddering, fleeing, shunning the contagion, impiously exposing their own friends, as if with the exclusion of the person who was sure to die of the plague, one could exclude death itself also. There lay about the meanwhile, over the whole city, no longer bodies,

but the carcasses of many, and, by the contemplation of a lot which in their turn would be theirs, demanded the pity of the passers-by for themselves. No one regarded anything besides his cruel gains. No one trembled at the remembrance of a similar event. No one did to another what he himself wished to experience. (Trans. Ernest Wallis)

The main lines, then, of the social reaction in Antiquity were almost the same than the behaviour of people in Athens at Thucydides' time: the loss of civic and religious values during pandemic outbreaks.

2. MEDIEVAL LITERARY REACTIONS TO PANDEMIC

However, what is usually considered the first pandemic in history is the so-called Justinian plague, which also originated in Ethiopia, around 541 AD, and spread throughout the Mediterranean basin through trade routes (Little, 2006; Meier, 2016; Harper, 2017). In this case we have four main sources for the account of the pandemic: John of Ephesus, Evagrius Scholasticus, Agathias, and especially Procopius of Caesarea, who, in his work entitled *History of the Wars*, published in 550, gives the most systematic account of the symptoms and — what we are particularly interested in here — the social consequences of the disease. According to Procopius, the disease reached Constantinople, the capital, in the spring of 542 and lasted up to four months, during which time it killed up to 10,000 people every day (II, 23, 1); it then spread throughout the Empire, causing periodic deaths until the eighth century.¹ In this case, the symptoms clearly describe the first documented outbreak of bubonic plague in Europe (II, 22, 15-19).² As in the previous accounts, the result on a social level is very similar — an upheaval of morality, especially in funeral practices and in caring for the sick, because of the fear of contagion (II 23, 3-5; 12):

Now in the beginning each man attended to the burial of the dead of his own house, and these they threw even into the tombs of others, either escaping detection or using violence; but afterwards confusion and disorder everywhere became complete. For slaves remained destitute of masters, and men who in former times were very prosperous were deprived of the service of their domestics who were either sick or dead, and many houses became completely destitute of human inhabitants. For this reason, it came about that some of the notable men of the city because of the universal destitution remained unburied for many days. [...] At that time all the customary rites of burial were overlooked. For the dead were not carried out escorted by a procession in the customary manner, nor were the usual chants sung over them, but it was sufficient if one carried on his shoulders the body of one of the dead to the parts of the city which bordered on the sea and flung him down; and there the corpses would be thrown upon skiffs in a heap, to be conveyed wherever it might chance. (Trans. H. B. Dewing)

¹ Allen (1979, p. 14) cites among others the works of Agapius, Bede, Theophanes, Theophylact, and the *Vita of John the Almsgiver* by Leontius of Neapolis, which record the various outbreaks of the plagues.

² The symptoms are also described by Evagrius IV, 29, and John of Ephesus, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, frgs. 11, E-H. In 2013, researchers confirmed the earlier speculations that the plague of Justinian was due to the same bacterium, *Yersinia pestis*, responsible for the Black Death: see Harbeck et al. (2013) and Wagner et al. (2014).

As in our current pandemic, all the activities ceased (II 23, 18-19). And, likewise, a notable and generalised loss of traditional values and religiosity. In this case, the most eloquent account is that of John of Ephesus (*Historia Ecclesiastica*, frgs. 11, E-G):

It was learned that men became enraged, like dogs, became mad, attacked one another, went into the mountains and committed suicide. [...] Scarcely anyone was found to carry the dead away and throw them out like dogs. It happened that a stretcher being carried by four carriers, they fell and perished. One fell as he spoke, the other ran away; another died while eating; every man lost hope of living, and was afraid to go out, saying: «I shall perish in the middle of the house». When they were obliged to go out, the one who went out, either to accompany or to bury (the dead), wrote a tablet with these words that he hung on his arm: «I am such a one, son of such a one, and of such a neighbourhood; if I die, for God's sake, and to show his mercy and goodness, let them know at my house, and let my people come to bury me». This great city reached exhaustion and was ruined; men feared to go into the streets because of the stink of corpses and of bodies being eaten by the dogs.

Since in this way the riches of many people were left unguarded, gold, silver and other things — the pearls of the world —, gates standing open and treasures abandoned, houses full of all (kinds of) objects and everything one could desire in the world, so if it happened that somebody wished to take and gather something in order to take possession (of it), thinking that he would escape, on the very same day the sentence would come upon him. [...] The entire city then came to a standstill as if it had perished, so that its food supply stopped. There was nobody to stand and do his job, with the result that food vanished from the markets and great tribulation ensued, especially for the people prostrate with exhaustion from illnesses. Only a few were strong (enough) to bring to any bazaar anything worth one obol, but if they wished they took a dinar for it. Thus everything ceased and stopped. (Trans. Roger Pearse)

Fake news was even spread, as is usual in these cases, giving rise to bizarre scenes like this one (John of Ephesus, *Chronicle*, frgs. 11, H):

A rumour from somebody spread among those who had survived, that if they threw pitchers from the windows of their upper storeys on to the streets and they burst below, death would flee from the city. When foolish women, [out of their] minds, succumbed to this folly in one neighbourhood and threw pitchers out, the rumour spread from this quarter to another, and over the whole city, and everybody succumbed to this foolishness, so that for three days people could not show themselves on the streets since those who had escaped death (in the plague) were assiduously (occupied), alone or in groups, in their houses with chasing away death by breaking pitchers. (Trans. Roger Pearse)

In addition, to combat the effects of the pandemic, the government preferred to reduce the salaries of teachers and physicians, in order to increase the budget for public entertainment (Procopius, *Secret History* XXVI), an attitude that shows how society, threatened by constant, arbitrary and silent death preferred above all to escape and to pursue pleasures.

Procopius' account of the effects of the pandemic is clearly inspired by Thucydides, as it could not be otherwise for a writer so influenced by his training in classical authors: for this reason he has been accused by some scholars of being artificial and unrealistic.³ However, it must be said that the symptoms described are quite different, which fits as different diseases attacked Athens and Constantinople, and it

should be noted that any educated writer active in this period would have received identical rhetorical training, so this does not seem in any way to invalidate the description (Cameron, 1985, pp. 168-169; Kaldellis, 2004, pp. 210-213). Another controversial issue is the scope of the death toll that appears in his account, which is recently undergoing a thorough revision. Merle Eisenberg and Lee Mordechai (2019) argue that the mortality of the Justinian plague was far lower than previously believed, and that «it developed into a moralistic parable of the past that threatens destruction in the future [...], a useful conceptual agent to explain the end of the Roman Empire as a premodern parallel to today's climate change» (Eisenberg & Mordechai, 2020, p. 1637).

Be that as it may, it is significant that, regardless of the clear rhetorical component of the sources, all these ancient and medieval social reactions to the various pandemic episodes, display patterns which remain almost identical. On a practical level, the increase in deaths causes neglect of the sick, as well as subversion of traditional funerary customs, in a way that is markedly scandalous; on a spiritual level, traditional piety and religious belief are questioned, mainly because of the failure of prayer to prevent sickness and death. Moreover, thirdly, collective moral values are weakened, leading to practices marked by harsh individualism and by the desire to enjoy the pleasures of life while there is time.

It is a situation that immediately brings to mind the introduction of Boccaccio's *Decameron*, in the context, this time, of the Black Death that ravaged Europe in 1348. No matter how content the tone, it is evident that retiring far from the city (a kind of lockdown) to enjoy life with a group of young lovers is conceived as an escape only tolerable in a moment of relaxation of the prevailing morality. It is declared without a doubt by the Pampinea's speech, in which the surrounding moral dissolution takes on the usual tone of the texts we have analysed so far:

They are of those, as my senses too often have borne witness, who make no distinction between things honourable and their opposites, so they but answer the cravings of appetite, and, alone or in company, do daily and nightly what things soever give promise of most gratification. Nor are these secular persons alone; but such as live recluse in monasteries break their rule, and give themselves up to carnal pleasures, persuading themselves that they are permissible to them, and only forbidden to others, and, thereby thinking to escape, are become unchaste and dissolute. (Trans. James Macmullen Rigg)

As scholars have remarked, the Black Death crisis caused irreversible changes in European society, socially and economically: extreme inflation, impoverishment of rural classes, and a decline in religious belief (Courie, 1972; Nutton, 2008). Boccaccio makes a good synthesis of the resulting moral subversion, in the same introduction to the *Decameron*:

In this extremity of our city's suffering and tribulation the venerable authority of laws, human and divine, was abased and all but totally dissolved, for lack of those who should have administered and enforced them, most of whom, like the rest of the citizens, were either dead or sick, or so hard bested for servants that they were unable to execute any office; whereby every man was free to do what was right in his own eyes. (Trans. James Macmullen Rigg)

As Glending Olson (1986, pp. 164-183) pointed out, there is a link between pleasure and the plague: pleasure is a reaction to death at every doorstep — but the escape even serves a medical purpose as well, because it wards off the bad humours which make one susceptible to the plague. Once again, the main axes of the accounts of the majority social reaction to the plague follow the same

³ See specially Barker (1966, p. 76) and Evans (1996, pp. 160-161).

paradigms: abandonment of minimum moral obligations to the deceased, subversion of traditional values, loss of religious faith, extreme individualism, and every man for himself. It is the motto of a famous late medieval popular song known in multiple versions: «Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die».

3. A STORY FOR THE CURRENT PANDEMIC

It is maybe still too early to define what the story of this current pandemic will be, but, in clear contrast to the ancient and medieval pandemics that we have briefly analysed, it will hardly be possible to speak of a moral upheaval, nor of a loss of religious or civic values. Neither individualism has prevailed, nor have we witnessed a collective despair or an increase in the desire to enjoy the pleasures of life as if there were no tomorrow. At most, we can say that there has been a certain change in funerary customs, but these have been imposed by measures of social isolation, in no way by a process of generalised demoralisation, as we have observed in ancient and medieval pandemics.

If we want to sketch an account of the current pandemic, we must rather summarise it as follows: civic values clearly strengthened; doctors and healthcare workers served to exhaustion in care of the sick; teachers and professors continued online education; various members of the citizenry made masks or brightened life for free during the long lockdowns — like playing guitar or singing to the neighbourhood from a balcony; posters and «Get Well» cards as a «gestures of concern» (Ingraham, 2021); applauses given across the cities to healthcare and other essential workers as they got off work each night; supermarkets and other essential stores served essential workers in preference and sent the goods home free of charge to the elderly or people at high risk; messages of encouragement on sidewalks saying «Stay safe! We got this!», as well as painted stones, teddy bears with messages of support and solidarity; public displays of endurance; governmental calls for resilience; and the so-called «bread-porn», that is «pictures of homemade bread shared on social media platforms, which bears a strange resemblance, both aesthetically and substantively, to sexually explicit imagery» (Mohabeer, 2021). All this fits in what John Nguyet Erni and Ted Striphas (2021, p. 216) label as «the range of possible cultural-semantic responses to COVID», and with the concept of «the representation of shared beliefs»: messages and gestures that attempt to invoke a shared sensibility, to draw «persons together in fellowship and community» (Carey, 2009, p. 15). These are manifestations of the «structures of feeling», a term coined by Raymond Williams (1977, p. 132), chosen to emphasise a distinction from more formal concepts such as «world view» or «ideology». Precisely, according to Williams (1975, p. 47), «felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time» is very difficult to reconstruct; our best hope is to find the residue of a structure of feeling left behind in art and other artifacts of cultural production.

In this universe of shared feelings, a genre emerged of motivational advice literature with suggestions on how to optimise the time of isolation at home, «grounded on the assumption that the pause necessitated by coronavirus in the spring of 2020 would surely be brief, singular, and precious» (Adelman, 2021, p. 467). Experts in emotional wellness gave advice for resilience that stood in stark contrast to Ancient and Medieval songs that exhorted to «Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you may die». Furthermore, in direct contrast with the loss of religious belief that we have clearly seen in Ancient and Medieval sources, some surveys tend to confirm that faith has been strengthened during the current pandemic. I have chosen some surveys from the very peak of the pandemic outbreak:

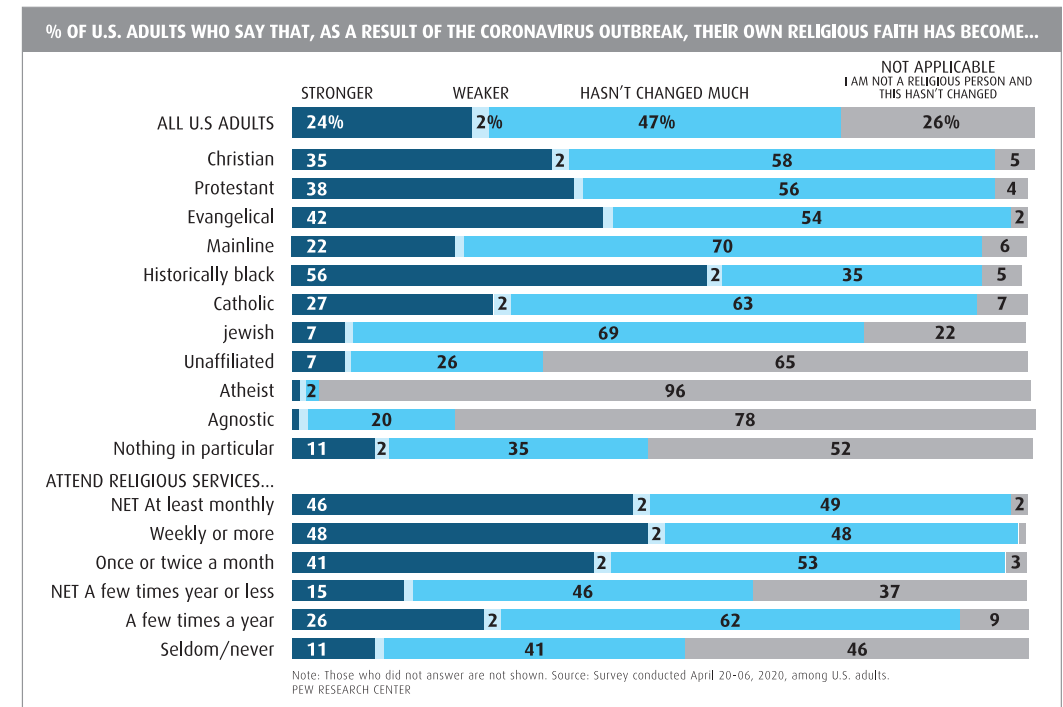


Figure 1: Americans far more likely to say coronavirus crisis has strengthened their faith rather than weakened it

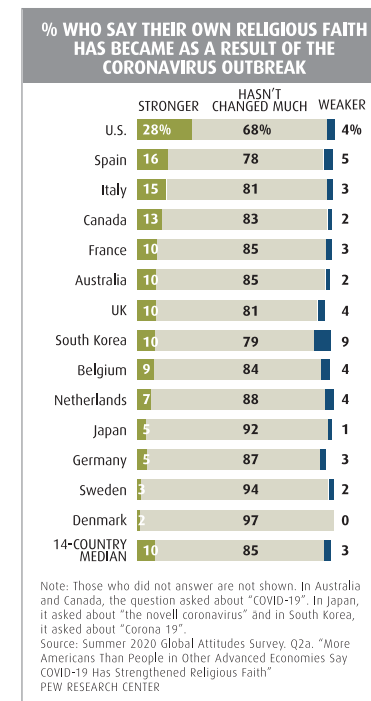


Figure 2: Majority say coronavirus has not changed their religious faith much

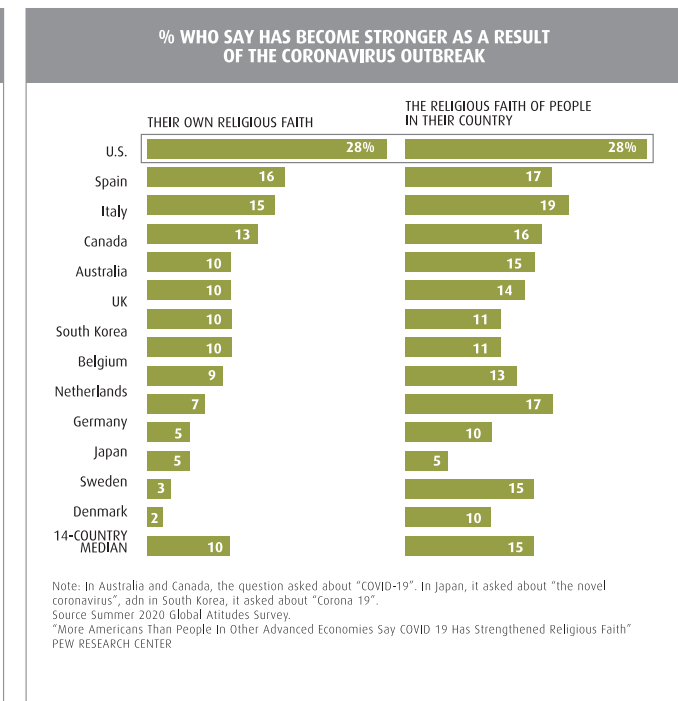


Figure 3: Americans must likely to say pandemic has made their religious faith stronger

And the same is valid for civic and moral values, which have been generally strengthened in this pandemic period, as surveys seem to show. The closest we get to contemporary subversion of customs and norms are the various samples of attacks against lockdowns that have taken place in most countries. However, these manifestations do not admit comparison with the loss of values and the subversion that ancient sources relate: rather, I think that they should be understood as signs of dissatisfaction with the management of the pandemic exercised by the authorities and governments, more or less associated with the social discontent generated by other very diverse circumstances, such as climate change, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the violence in different parts of the world, as have been suggested by various analysts (Smicker, 2021; Bratich, 2021). If there is a novel narrative element in the current pandemic, it is undoubtedly the negationism of various sectors and the refusal to obey the basic sanitary measures, particularly with regard to mask wearing (Bennett, 2021). I believe, however, that these are reactions that have a rather political aspect (especially when it is exercised by leaders, such as Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro). It shows, in any case, that social panic in this pandemic has been less than in the previous ones, despite the fact that the increase and arbitrariness of the deaths was not, especially at the beginning, very different. And, nonetheless, we must admit that in Western societies, the majority response to restrictions, for those who have the means, has been acceptance, with trends like plotting «revenge travel» for later in 2021, or smaller, more modest and immediate pleasures, like inflatable pools, Oreos, *365 Days*, and puppies, for instance. No sign then of the moral upheaval nor civic subversion, which we read about in Ancient and Medieval stories.

4. SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS: DIVERGENT STORIES

From these brief notes on the accounts, at different times, of the social repercussions of a pandemic, we can draw many conclusions, but I would like to briefly summarise only some of the most important ones. In first place, we might recognise the capital importance of cultivating a (shared) story when managing individual and collective emotions associated with a pandemic situation. As is the case with all human affairs, reality is perceived less in the events themselves than in the story that gives meaning to those events. In the case of a disease, as Sander L. Gilman (2010, p. 1866) points out, there are «many qualities and emotions to create an illness, not in the sense of inventing it, but in the sense of shaping our experience of it». Of course, in the current pandemic there has been a sense of social disorientation, but «the pandemic arrived at a particular moment in Western societies where the dominant myths, narratives, sensibilities, and affects that bound the neoliberal project together had largely collapsed at the level of popular legitimacy» (Means & Slater, 2021, p. 516). Therefore, the reactions oscillate between a story at the service of neoliberal capitalism, as a referent of a quasi-religious sense, and a break with the traditional parameters of reaction to pandemic situations.

An example of the first type of reaction is from the Republican Governor of Texas, Dan Patrick, who claimed that elderly and high-risk populations in the United States should be happy to suffer infection and death for the sake of the economy and for the sake of the «younger» and «fitter» populations. Patrick suggested that senior citizens and high-risk populations should gladly «take a chance on [their] survival in exchange for keeping the America that America loves for its children and grand-children», since after all «there are more important things than living» (Knodel, 2020; Madani,

2020) It is an exhortation that closely recalls the preaching of Saint Cyprian that we have quoted above, with the difference that here the transcendence is represented by the nation and the economy, the new gods of our era. Resilience is the most used word, and, as Sarah Bracke (2016) pointed out, resilience assures that the demands of capital will be met, no matter what suffering threatens to interfere: resilience leads to endurance of the situation, and an eventual (uncritical) return to the social system preceding the crisis.

The novelty, I think, is the other type of reaction: popular gestures and hopeful mimetism that have occurred all over the world. As a last example, I will present a contrast that is very significant between ancient and current accounts of the reaction to a pandemic situation. In his biography of the famous 2nd century AD guru, Apollonius of Tyana, Philostratus (writing in the 3rd Century AD) relates how Apollonius freed the city of Ephesus from an epidemic (IV, 10):

He therefore called together the Ephesians, and said: «Take courage, for I will today put a stop to the course of the disease». And with these words he led the population entire to the theatre, where the image of the Averting god has been set up. And there he saw an old mendicant artfully blinking his eyes like a blind man, and he carried a wallet and a crust of bread in it; and he was clad in rags and was very squalid of countenance. Apollonius therefore ranged the Ephesians around him and said: «Pick up as many stones as you can and hurl them at this enemy of the gods». Now the Ephesians wondered what he meant and were shocked at the idea of murdering a stranger so manifestly miserable; for he was begging and praying them to take mercy upon him. Nevertheless, Apollonius insisted and egged on the Ephesians to launch themselves on him and not let him to go. And as soon as some of them began to take shots and hit him with their stones, the beggar who had seemed to blink and be blind, gave them all a sudden glance and showed that his eyes were full of fire. The Ephesians recognised that he was a demon, and they stoned him so thoroughly that their stones were heaped into a great cairn around him. (Trans. F. C. Conybeare)

The remedy is very simple and well known in Religious Studies: that of the scapegoat, the *pharmakós* of the ancient Greek tradition, who bears the sins of the community and whose death or exile purifies them of their own evil, in this case a plague. Philostratus' description, however, is particularly interesting: the Ephesians, at first, refuse to stone a poor innocent beggar, but after Apollonius' encouraging speech, someone throws the first stone, and social mimetism supersedes any other scruple. Mimetism, we know, is the dynamism of the masses; but there are positive mimetisms, alongside the negative ones. For instance, in the current pandemic the mimetism has consisted, at the very beginning, of panic buying and stock piling of essential goods, but, in the worst contexts, the mimetism has consisted of applauding the essential workers, sending messages of hope and strengthening the ties of the community, instead of seeking and hurling stones at a scapegoat. Certainly, Trump threw his metaphorical stones at the scapegoat of China, by calling COVID «the China virus». However, Trump lost the election, partly because of pandemic mismanagement, so people seem more to be holding their governments responsible, that is, rejecting the politics of scapegoating. This should be a sign of hope in the midst of the disaster. The quality of our society's response will depend, of course, on the social changes (or not) that come afterwards. For now, it seems that ancient and current accounts of pandemic are divergent stories.

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