

Plague Literature in a Century of Pandemic, 1919-2019

Syllabus

Christ College Reading Groups

2020-2021

Discussion 1: Plague and Plague Literature: Ancient and Medieval/Early Modern

Exodus 7-12

Thucydides, from *History of the Peloponnesian War*

Martin Luther, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague”

These three readings remind us that outbreaks of catastrophic disease have afflicted humankind throughout recorded history. The rise of densely populated cities and the development of trade beyond local networks served as preconditions for epidemics and (larger) pandemics, in which pathogens spread rapidly through vulnerable populations; the two earlier texts emerge from ancient societies characterized by those features. Plague in the narrower sense (infection by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, which causes buboes to erupt on the body) arrived in Europe in 1347, and by 1400 this “Black Death” had diminished Europe’s total population by at least half. Thereafter it lingered in Europe for centuries, waning but then erupting, as it was doing in Saxony when Luther wrote this letter; it would erupt again in the England portrayed in *Year of Wonders*. Before the nineteenth century, victims and care-givers had few reliable facts about the origin or spread of this or other infectious diseases, and few effective remedies.

The texts gathered here contain varied accounts of what causes plagues. Notice the explanations in each text, and how they differ from one another. Overall, each text shows greater interest in morality than in what we today think of as science. Notice how each text assesses the responses of those affected—victims, bystanders, caregivers—and interprets their responses within frameworks of morality and divine intent.

These texts belong to very different genres and were written for quite different purposes. We’ll consider them individually, though we encourage you to let them speak to one another. Be sure to leave plenty of time to discuss the third text, a letter from a pastor about how Christians ought to behave amid the sad and dangerous conditions created by outbreaks of plague. We have found this letter especially resonant during the current pandemic.

Exodus 7-12

The story told in these chapters has provided an imaginative backdrop against which Christians and Jews have experienced and interpreted catastrophic natural events, including massive outbreaks of disease. Parts of this story are mentioned by the preachers in both of the plague

novels we'll be reading in coming sessions. This is the story we grew up calling "The Ten Plagues of Egypt."

We were surprised, then, to discover that the word "plague" is seldom used in the text. Instead, the horrifying events described here are often called "signs and wonders." To what does this phrase point, within the flow of the narrative? *Why* does Yahweh (God, the Lord) inflict suffering on the Egyptians? What pictures of God, God's participation in scenes of suffering, and God's intentions for the world emerge in this narrative?

A contest of sorts takes place between Yahweh, the God of Moses, and Pharaoh, with his Egyptian gods and magicians. According to VU theologian Fred Niedner, this narrative shows a transition from Yahweh as one god among many (this god belongs to the Hebrews, while other gods belong to other peoples) to a view of Yahweh as the one and only true God. How does the narrative gradually disclose the extent of Yahweh's power? Does this power work only for the Israelites, or does it have sway for creation as a whole? Consider how and why Pharaoh yields to Yahweh's power, or does not; how his magicians react to the signs and wonders; how Moses acts and speaks at various points; and how animals and the natural world are caught up in the struggle.

The relationship between plagues and the natural world will appear in several upcoming readings. How is that relationship presented here? The biblical scholar Terence Fretheim sees strong ecological themes in Exodus 7-12. Exodus, like many other ancient texts, posits a close connection between ethical order and cosmic order; a breach in the just ordering of society is also a breach in the order of creation. Pharaoh's oppression of Israel, then, is viewed in Exodus as fundamentally disruptive of creation. How might the series of plagues (water to blood, frogs, insects, diseases of persons and animals, and so on) be interpreted with reference to creation? Robert Alter sees the imagery of creation—and threat to creation—throughout this text; for example, the benign swarming of life in Genesis 1 becomes the vile swarming of frogs and gnats, and the utter darkness of the ninth plague undoes the original light of creation. Is this mere imagery, or are plagues (Egypt's or ours) really ecological events? Cosmic events?

Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War

<https://www.ancient.eu/article/1535/thucydides-on-the-plague-of-athens-text--commentar/>

Thucydides' account of a plague that erupted in Athens near the beginning of the Second Peloponnesian War provides a vivid picture of a city in the grip of a lethal infectious disease. Thucydides reported as realistically as possible on what he observed, believing that future generations could learn important lessons from the past. The article we shall consider provides information by historian Joshua J. Mark about the context within which the Athenian historian wrote and commentary on his purposes in doing so. This article also includes the portion of Thucydides' history that describes the plague itself.

On March 23, 2020, *The Atlantic* published an article by Katherine Kelaidis, a classics professor at Loyola/Chicago, which asked "What the Great Plague of Athens Can Teach Us Now." <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/great-plague-athens-has-ecerie->

[parallels-today/608545/](#) Kelaidis begins by noting that pandemics hit both societies at a very difficult time, “when a nation is already in crisis, when trust in its leaders and itself is already low . . . when international relations are strained and internal strife widespread.” With the social and moral fiber of a society already being tested, widespread fear of disease can make everything exponentially worse. We don’t yet know the whole story of Covid-19, Kelaidis acknowledges, but that is what happened in Athens. Because the people, under pressure, “abandoned the values that had been at the heart of their ability to govern themselves,” the plague “wrote the first chapter in the end of Athenian democracy.”

Does Thucydides’ history of the plague in Athens offer any instruction for those of us living through the current pandemic? What parallels do you see? What warnings? Or do you reject drawing such connections across so many centuries? As you ponder these questions, look for details such as these: where the plague is said to have come from; the impact of war and intercity strife; housing and health conditions within the city; dangers faced by caregivers; funerals and other religious activities; and the impact of the plague on civic and political life.

Martin Luther, “Whether One May Flee from a Deadly Plague”

<https://blogs.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Plague-blogLW.pdf>

[For the sake of discussion, please number the pages of this pdf.]

From Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, Vol. 43: Devotional Writings II, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999, c1968), 43:119-138.

Bubonic plague, which was an endemic disease in early modern Europe, flared up in Wittenberg in 1527. Although precise scientific understanding of the disease did not exist—notice the now-disproven explanations Luther endorsed—it was clearly contagious. When possible, people left infected areas and sought to avoid contact with the ill; they social distanced. As Luther wrote this letter, the University of Wittenberg had closed, while he remained in town. He does not speak directly about his own specific decision to remain, but the letter suggests at many points what factors he would have found most important for himself as well as for others deciding whether or not to flee infection.

In the early paragraphs, and then elaborating throughout the letter, Luther rejects the simplest answers: NO, you may not flee; and YES, you may flee, regardless. The decision would require Christians to consider a number of factors, and they would need to come to their own conclusions. Identify as many of these factors as you can, and discuss which ones you think were most important to Luther.

Although Luther’s understanding of the biological causes of disease is now outdated, he showed great respect for the science and expertise available at the time. What does he make of people who refuse to do this, defying practical precautions because they think they should leave all outcomes to God? Why does he urge people to use medicines, fumigate, and shun unnecessary contact with the sick? On page 6, he considers a number of common courses of action—even suggesting that some folks were having parties to promote exposure. On that page, and throughout the letter, what wisdom might his way of thinking about these matters offer today?

For example, what would he say to those who refuse to wear masks? What would he say about worship attendance? About funerals and burial practices? About the role of government in addressing the situation? Is some of his thinking unwise, or even wrong, in your view?

This is the letter of a pastor to a pastoral colleague, written in awareness that other pastors and laypeople for whom its topic was an urgent concern would also read it. At points it is tender in its rhetoric, at other points more fierce. What sort of persuasion and teaching does Luther employ? A theology, including a view of who human beings are and what God intends for them, is at work amid his very practical advice. As we noted in the introduction to this series and will note again in later sessions, it is often the case that the arrival of plague pulls back a veil, allowing us to see the truth about the people and society that already existed. How are the difficult choices and emotions that plague arouses in Christians already present in their everyday lives with God and their neighbors?

Discussion 2: Plague on the Verge of Scientific Modernity

Geraldine Brooks. *Year of Wonders*. New York: Penguin Books, 2002.

Video interview with Geraldine Brooks:

<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2015/10/16/october-16-2015-author-geraldine-brooks/27485/#:~:text=Brooks%20is%20a%20convert%20to,tied%20to%20the%20natural%20world.&text=Her%20best%20selling%202008%20novel,Holocaust%2C%20and%20the%20Bosnian%20war.>

Geraldine Brooks grew up in Australia as part of a devout Irish Catholic family and was educated in Catholic schools from kindergarten through high school. She began her writing career as a war correspondent. After marrying Tony Horwitz, another war correspondent, she converted to Judaism. As she notes in the interview (see the link above), hers has been a complex spiritual journey marked throughout by a religious sensibility especially attuned to nature.

Year of Wonders was Brooks's first work of fiction (she had published two previous non-fiction books). Its central character and narrator, Anna Frith, is a shepherdess and housemaid who serves as the unwitting meta-host to the plague that eventually kills over two-thirds of her Derbyshire village, which arrives when a tailor boarding in her home unknowingly receives a shipment of infected cloth from London. The story of the village is very much her story, which is in large part a kind of spiritual journey. How do you think Anna's journey compares to that of Brooks, as she describes it in the interview?

Anna's journey takes place in the context of tremendous suffering and death. Along the way, Anna ministers to many of those afflicted with the plague at great risk to herself. What would Luther have made of her behavior? What motivates her apparent selflessness? What leads to her eventual "naturalistic" understanding of the nature and causes of the plague? (pp. 214-15)

Where did she find the resources to adopt a view of the plague so different from that of her surrounding culture?

Some of Anna's transformations arise from the context of plague itself. As she describes the experience of the village, what features of thought and behavior seem eerily familiar to us today? Were the villagers in this pre-scientific age more or less sure about the nature, the severity, and the future course of the disease than we are today about the pandemic? Were Anna's fellow villagers less anxious or more anxious than we are today? Consider the Gowdies and scapegoating. Do we have our own scapegoats, or have we outgrown witch hunts? What explains the need for scapegoating then and now? And what of the quest for herbal cures and other remedies that we today would call "quack" remedies? Have we abandoned similar quests in the present time? Are there present-day equivalents of the flagellants? Almost always in plague novels, someone functions as a profiteer; here, that role is played by Anna's father in an especially grisly way. Do Anna and her father represent the extremes of good and evil in this book?

Perhaps the major source of Anna's transformation is her friendship with Elinor Mompellion. Without that friendship, she would certainly not have been able eventually to tell her story. How and why does the relationship between these two women grow from one of teacher/ pupil to one of full-fledged mutuality and equality? And what of women more generally? To what extent does the ethic of care that pervades the book, the way human beings serve and support and heal one another, derive from the fact that the village seems in some ways a women's world? Describe that ethic of care.

There is of course one very powerful man who is the third point of a triangle whose other two points are Anna and Elinor. Rector Michael Mompellion is the bearer and expositor of the village's theology as well as pastor to many of the sick and dying. The theology of his initial sermon leads to the remarkable (and historically accurate) decision by the villagers to self-quarantine in order to protect others outside of the village from the plague. How does the God in Mompellion's sermon compare to the God in his private theology, which leads him to insist, in the name of God, upon a heartless and hateful atonement for both him and Elinor? And how do you account for the contrast between Michael's pastoral theology, which informs the way he cares for his parishioners, and his more systematic, though private, theology, which informs the way he treats his wife?

Was the voluntary self-quarantine too costly? In time of plague, how do we make such judgments? For example, should Valparaiso University close down and offer only on-line classes for the sake of the larger town of Valparaiso, even though the decision could financially jeopardize the University's future? This question may look different at the time that it is discussed from the way it looks at the time of this writing, i.e. the University may have reversed its present intentions to invite students back to campus, or it may turn out that having brought students back to campus did little harm. What would Luther think of the pastor-led decision these villagers made? What would he have thought of whatever decision Valparaiso University, a Lutheran university after all, finally makes?

At the end of the novel, Anna does several things that are very courageous, even heroic. Are they also saintly? Is there any sense in which Anna's last actions constitute something of an atonement on behalf of her deceased friend? If so, how so?

When Anna finally and stealthily sets out with the child she has adopted, she boards a ship bound for Venice. Yet she unaccountably disembarks *en route* at the north African port of Oran. Why does Brooks have Anna make such a strange decision? The beginning of an answer might be found in the very first sentence of the novel assigned for the next discussion, Camus's *The Plague*.

Discussion 3: Plague in the Age of Science

Albert Camus, *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Random House, 1948).

Albert Camus was and remains, in the judgment of the late, great European historian Tony Judt, "a hero for our times." (Judt wrote this in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.) Camus was certainly a hero in France and the trans-Atlantic West during the 1950's and especially the turbulent 1960's, when many young people found him and his famous character, Dr. Bernard Rieux, exemplary and inspiring. Camus was a rare thing: a genuinely independent intellectual. He is often regarded as an existentialist philosopher, but he himself resisted that characterization. He devoted many years to the French resistance against the Nazis, but he never became captive to any ideology.

The Plague is the book for which Camus is widely and perennially known. Published in France in 1947, it was translated into nine different languages within a year, and it has never gone out of print. Ask yourself as you read it what might account for its enduring pertinence and popularity. Camus was only 33 years old when the novel was published, only 28 when he began work on it in 1942.

The novel seems more contemporary to us than *Year of Wonders*, largely because it is set in an age much more similar to our own than seventeenth-century England. Even so, we wonder whether the reactions of the citizens of Oran to the gradual eruption and increasing spread of the plague are more like or more unlike those of the Derbyshire villagers. What difference does it make in the thought and behavior of the citizens of the two communities that the quarantine of the Derbyshire village was self-imposed in response to a sermon, whereas the quarantine of Oran was forced upon the town by the municipal government? In terms of thought, feeling, and behavior, what differences emerge between the citizens represented in *Year of Wonders*, who lived in a dominantly religious age, and the citizens of Oran, who lived in a dominantly commercial and scientific one? If the differences are major, what accounts for them? If they are insignificant, does this suggest that human beings under great stress are pretty much the same everywhere at any time?

The forced quarantine of Oran leads to many stories of separation and isolation that were neither anticipated nor desired. Compare Rieux's reactions to his separation from his wife to Rambert's

reactions to his separation from his lover. What kinds of factors help to account for these differences? We too are in the midst of physical separations from one another, from far-flung family members, and from friends and fellow parishioners. How are we managing these separations? What leads to the change in Rambert as he throws in his lot with the community of Oran instead of pining away and taking advantage of an opportunity to escape? Do we find that Rambert becomes more or less morally admirable to us? Does Rieux pass judgment upon him? Why or why not? Is Rambert's early fixation upon his beloved a sign of selfishness or of healthy attachment?

Oran, which is still under French control in the 1940's, is much more cosmopolitan, multicultural, and multi-religious than the small Derbyshire village of *Year of Wonders*. Nevertheless, due to French influence, the Catholic Church is very much a presence in Oran, and Rieux, the narrator, gives much more attention to Christianity as represented by the Jesuit Priest Fr. Paneloux than he does to Islam. As with the Protestant rector Michael Mompellion, Fr. Paneloux delivers two sermons, the first one designed to explain the plague in theological terms. Does his explanation accord with some of the theological explanations of the pandemic offered today? What do you make of such explanations? Note that Paneloux invokes the plagues of Egypt in his sermon. How does *he* interpret them by comparison to our own earlier conversations?

Like Mompellion, Paneloux is quite a complicated character. In the case of Mompellion, we noticed a discrepancy between his pastoral practice and his professed theological convictions. Does a similar discrepancy obtain in the case of Paneloux? How does his theology develop between his first sermon and his second one? What explains the change as well as the writing project he has decided to undertake shortly before his death? What would Luther have thought of that writing project?

Camus is a much more philosophical writer than Brooks, though she too cares very much about ideas, values, and beliefs. The vehicle for dramatizing different ideas for Camus is the relationship among various characters who embody sometimes conflicting views. One of the most memorable exchanges in the novel takes place shortly after Rieux and Paneloux have stood together at the bedside of a child who dies a prolonged and painful death. The two men have quite different understandings of the death and very different ways of coming to terms with it. What exactly is at issue between them in their exchange? (217-219) How do they resolve these differences? Or do they simply agree to live with them? What do you make of Tarrou's explanation for Paneloux's views as expressed in his second sermon and as shared with Rieux during their exchange? (229)

Perhaps the most interesting relationship in the entire novel is the one between Rieux and his friend Tarrou. Tarrou offers Rieux a long narrative about how he came to adopt the ethic that informs his life. What do you make of that ethic? Is it one that inspires Tarrou to do great good, or is it one that construes goodness simply as the avoidance of evil?

Tarrou also makes it quite clear to Rieux how he regards plague. His understanding of it invites us to consider a metaphorical reading of the novel. For Tarrou, plague represents any form of contagious moral decline. This metaphorical reading of what is going on in Oran is even broader

than the allegorical reading often applied to the novel. Do you think Tarrou's reading provides the best guide to how we ourselves should read Rieux's narrative, which is based in large part on Tarrou's journals?

Even though Rieux is the narrator of the entire novel, we learn little about his upbringing and personal background by comparison to what we learn of Tarrou. We must study Rieux's character by attending simply to what he says and what he does. So what are his motives and his reasons for doing what he does? What is his ethic of care, and how does it differ if at all from Tarrou's? One of the concepts that loom large in Rieux's ethic is the idea of "decency." What does that term mean for Rieux?

Rieux seems moved by, among other things, a sense of vocation. He seems devoted to the work he has been called to do. Since he is an avowed atheist, he would seem to have a call without a caller, so to speak. Is this possible? If so, he is akin to Tarrou who aspires to be a saint without being a believer, a project that Rieux finds perplexing. (254-55) In 2014, John Berry wrote an essay in the Jesuit magazine *America* that characterized Camus as a "secular saint." Could this description apply to either Rieux or Tarrou or both? Is the idea of secular sainthood one that emerges naturally from the apocalypse of plague or is it finally an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms?

Discussion 4: Zoonotic Plague

Ferris Jabr. "How Humanity Unleashed a Flood of Diseases." *The New York Times Magazine* (June 17, 2020).

Contagion. Film directed by Stephen Sonderburgh and written by Scott Z. Burns (2011)

After the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic, the NIH developed a list of eight criteria that define what a pandemic is: widespread geographic extension, disease movement, high attack rates and explosiveness, minimal population immunity, novelty, infectiousness, contagiousness, and severity. These characteristics apply to the present pandemic—and also to the pandemic depicted in *Contagion*, a 2011 film whose fictional narrative is remarkably resonant with what has unfolded across the globe in 2020.

As background to the film—and as a fascinating journey into science, public policy, and global preparedness—we begin with "How Humanity Unleashed a Flood of Diseases." This article distills current scientific explanations of how a virus such as SARS-CoV-2 can erupt on the scene, speedily infecting the global human population. At the *biological* center of this piece are "zoonotic pathogens"—microbes that jump from one species of animal to another. Also of great importance are the *social and economic* arrangements that promote the spread of these pathogens.

Many scientists claim that they were not surprised by the outbreak of a global pandemic; they had thought for years that the question was not *if* that would happen but *when*. How have the pandemic and its course surprised you? Have events overturned any of your prior beliefs about

biology, globalization, medicine, government, or other topics? What do you know about the world, yourself, or your community that you did not know before? Might this hard-won knowledge alter how you live or what policies you support in the future?

The question of human interdependence—our unavoidable reliance on and vulnerability to one another—has arisen in prior readings. What does the biological and social evidence gathered in this article teach us about this web of interdependence? More important: What does the article teach us about the interdependence of humankind, other species, and the natural world as a whole?

Contagion was inspired by two outbreaks of zoonotic disease that are mentioned in the article, H1N1 and SARS-CoV-1. The writer and the director, Scott Z. Burns and Stephen Soderbergh, have said that their goal was to tell a story that “really felt like what could happen.” They and the actors researched the science and response agencies carefully, and they’ve gotten good reviews for attaining a certain degree of accuracy. At the same time, conventions of the Hollywood thriller are present, and the film was commercially successful. Do you think that this story felt like it really could happen? How so, or how not? Did you find it too sensational? Learn what Dr. Anthony Fauci thought of it when it was released, and how the director sees it now, looking back from COVID, here: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/31/movies/steven-soderbergh-amy-seimetz-pandemic.html?action> (Hint: The film was accurate and holds up very well.)

The narrative strategy of the film is to depict a crisis of huge proportions by developing intimate stories about specific characters caught up in that crisis. Choose a character or two, and consider how their individual stories connect with the pandemic’s global reach. Assess their motives, their influence on others, and other characteristics that attract or repel you. For example: Beth, the index patient; Dr. Cheever, a CDC executive who tries to balance governmental, scientific, and personal concerns; Alan Krumwiede, whom one critic called the “index patient” for the pandemic of fear and panic; and Dr. Ally Hextall, the researcher who injects herself with experimental vaccine. Do these or other characters remind you of characters we have met in earlier readings?

The film shows not only individuals but also communities that embrace different ways of life, and thus different responses to the pandemic. Think, for example, of the big corporation for which Beth works; the community of scientists in Geneva, San Francisco, and Atlanta; the grocery shoppers in Minnesota. And what about that Chinese village, whose close local bonds win the heart of the WHO investigator they have kidnapped? What does each of these communities know in its culture and evince through its actions about how it sees the world in which we live?

Discussion 5: Sanctity in the Century of Plague

Orhan, Pamuk, “What the Great Pandemic Novels Teach Us”

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/23/opinion/sunday/coronavirus-orhan-pamuk.html>

Philip Hallie, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994),
Chapters II, XI, and XII

Weapons of the Spirit (1987)

Classroom version (28 minutes); regular version (90 minutes)

Note: Both versions are intermittently available through various streaming services, or you can purchase the DVD. Either version will serve. Just Google the title to discover several options for viewing.

In his widely acclaimed book *Lest Innocent Blood be Shed*, the philosopher Philip Hallie called his story of the small village of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon in the mountains of southern France “a companion to Camus’ *The Plague*.” (249) We agree. We think that, when paired with a reconsideration of *The Plague*, an examination of selections from Hallie’s book, supplemented by a powerful documentary that presents the story of Le Chambon from the perspective of one of the Jewish refugees who was born in the village, rounds out our common work in this year’s Christ College reading groups. Taken together, these texts address from new perspectives both our concerns with the distinctive 1919-2019 “century of plague” and our examination of some of the connections between that century’s apocalyptic plague literature and Christian thought and practice.

The little village of Le Chambon was, during the Second World War, the safest place in Europe for Jewish refugees. During the period from 1940 to 1945, a Calvinist/Huguenot Christian community of around 3,000 saved somewhere between 3,000 and 5,000 Jews by sheltering them, feeding them, concealing them, and sometimes arranging safe passage for them from Le Chambon to safer havens. Hallie, whose primary philosophical interest was in questions about the nature of good and evil, was completely captivated by Le Chambon. His book is subtitled, “The Story of the Village of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened Here.”

In 1942, when the whole elaborate system of sheltering refugees was firmly in place, a young writer from Algeria arrived in the neighborhood of Le Chambon to begin work on a novel. He lived about a mile outside of the village. At the end of almost a year of work on the novel, he abandoned the project and joined the French Resistance until the end of the war in 1945, when he could resume writing. The writer was Albert Camus, and his novel was *The Plague*.

These biographical facts about Camus invite us to reconsider an allegorical reading of *The Plague*. Le Chambon, located within Vichy France, the puppet state established by the Nazis after their conquest of France in the Spring of 1940, was often swarming with Gestapo agents and other Nazi functionaries. Yet for the most part, the rescue and sheltering operations continued without interruption. This was not the case throughout the rest of Vichy France or throughout the rest of Europe, which partially explains Camus’s decision to join the French Resistance. Might his novel *The Plague* then represent the way in which Camus had come to experience Fascism, as a gradual, seemingly inexorable but wildly lethal infection that increased mistrust, disrupted established political and social patterns, and ruthlessly punished scapegoats?

Notice that with the exception of Cottard, all of the major characters in *The Plague* are writers. Rambert is a journalist. Tarrou keeps a journal, which turns out to be a major source for Rieux.

Grand is an obsessive but failed novelist who keeps revising the same opening sentence over and over; in the assessment of the narrator, he is the most morally upright (in conventional terms) of all the characters. And of course Dr. Rieux, a character throughout the novel, discloses himself at the end to be its author/narrator. All of these men represent different ways of balancing their lives of contemplation (writing) with lives of combating the plague (action). Do you think this represents Camus's own ambivalence about writing vs. direct action in time of plague (fascism)? Which of the characters achieves the best balance between thought and action in the midst of plague?

We are at present facing multiple threats to the health of our society and our loved ones: the pandemic, violence against Black people, economic ruin, creeping authoritarianism, and growing distrust of leadership in general. Should we simply keep doing whatever we have been called to do well? Or should we diminish or set aside altogether our ordinary work for the sake of direct action to heal one or another of the divisions in our country and the injuries they cause our fellow citizens? What would Camus, Tarrou, Andre Trocme, and Rieux think?

There is no evidence whatsoever that Camus and Andre Trocme, the pastor of the Protestant Temple in Le Chambon, ever met, much less had extended discussions with one another. Even so, Hallie notes a series of remarkable similarities between the two men (249ff), after offering earlier in his book an extended biographical profile of Trocme. (Chapter II) Try an exercise in imaginative historical reconstruction. How likely do you think it was that the two men met and grew to know one another? How likely do you think it was that Camus knew full well what was going on in Le Chambon under the guidance of Andre Trocme? If Camus and Trocme had met, what would they have discussed? How likely do you think it was that Camus modelled Rieux on Trocme?

We have by this time thought about the possibility that apocalyptic plague literature unveils what it means to be human in part through exposure of extremes of good and evil. And we have met many exemplary characters among our authors and among the fictional characters that they created. Remember these five. Author Geraldine Brooks, a Roman Catholic, converted to Judaism and has written a series of novels steeped in religious issues but informed by a "secular imagination" even as she has faithfully observed Jewish practices like prayer "without knowing whether anyone is listening to them." Andre Trocme felt called to be a Protestant pastor even as he soon came to abandon certain basic Christian teachings about heaven and hell or an afterlife. When his faith continued to wane after his son's tragic death, he nevertheless continued until his death many years later in his calling as a minister. The one prayer that was said every day during his austere religious formation was one that he prayed daily for the rest of his life: "Lord, teach us to do our duty."

If the altogether secular, atheist Bernard Rieux had prayed, Trocme's prayer would have been his. Completely devoted to his calling as a healer in an absurd and seemingly hopeless situation, Rieux's love for a variety of people whose own character was formed primarily through suffering was deeply human and humane. Rieux's fictional forbear Anna Frith was inexplicably drawn to Oran, having discovered her vocation even as her Christian faith frayed into tatters. And Rieux's best friend Tarrou aspired his whole life long to become a saint by steadfastly

avoiding any action that might lead to another's suffering or death. Yet he did not believe in God.

To expand the range of the question we asked at the end of Discussion 3, of all of these people, actual and fictional, which are saints and which are not? If you had to canonize only one of them, which would you canonize? Finally, in understanding the ethic of care that Frith, Rieux, Trocme, Tarrou, and Paneloux all exhibited in the midst of apocalypse, how if at all are we helped by strict ideas and ideals of sanctity?

Finally, what will you remember longest about this sequence of readings and discussions? What did you find the most provocative? What did you find the most helpful in your present efforts to live well in a time of pandemic? What single text (including visual texts) would you be most likely to recommend to friends?

For Further Reading

John M. Barry, *The Great Influenza* (2004; a sweeping history of the 1918 pandemic)

Eula Biss, *On Immunity: An Inoculation* (2016; essays on vaccination)

Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722; realistic fiction set in London in 1665-66)

Ali S. Khan, *The Next Pandemic* (2016; an epidemiologist on the front lines)

Christian W. McMillen, *Pandemics: A Very Short Introduction* (2016, Oxford)

Katherine Anne Porter, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* (1948; novella about the 1918 epidemic)

David Quammen, *Spillover: Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic* (2013)

Frank M. Snowden, *Epidemics and Society: From the Black Death to the Present* (2020)

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