

CHAPTER ONE

Life in the Middle Ages

The German sociologist Max Weber once wrote: “The most elementary forms of behavior motivated by religious . . . factors are oriented to this world.”¹ He identifies one of religion’s most important functions as offering the hope of protection and relief from suffering and distress. The historian Michael Goodich identifies one of the key implications of Weber’s insight when he writes: “The supernatural tends to intercede when human mechanisms, such as the state, prove unreliable or flawed, and the brutalization of human relations demands outside intervention to achieve equity.”² These views imply that the appetite for divine protection and miracles among large segments of the populace is whetted when conditions of daily living are especially harsh and when society’s institutions fail to protect people from the resulting dangers.³ Such insights offer a useful framework for discussing the role of religion and saints among Western European Christians during the medieval and early modern periods.⁴

Modern Westerners sometimes describe medieval life as “nasty, brutish and short,” a phrase borrowed from the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes to describe life as it would be in a state of nature, without law, order, or government.⁵ This pithy phrase is accurate in many respects, but it obscures an important point. When we look back

on medieval times from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, we tend to focus on the things that we have that were lacking then: amenities, technologies, conveniences, public services, and civic institutions that most of us take completely for granted and consider essential to our existence. From this perspective, it is inevitable that medieval life will appear bleak, harsh and dreary. But in the absence of any notion held by medieval people about what twenty-first century life might be like, things may not have seemed so bad to them. (Historians writing in the year 3010 might be similarly perplexed at how we could possibly have enjoyed life in the early twenty-first century, which might strike them as quaint and deprived.)

The Hobbesian depiction of medieval life also discounts features of communal and religious life that served as buffers against adversity, like the comfort and reassurance afforded by religion, the certain belief that divine beings could provide protection, the powerful experience of community (a major benefit of communal existence), and the sense of mutual support and obligation toward other people. These are things that gave meaning to medieval life and helped cushion people against the burden of uncertainty and the precariousness of day-to-day existence. If life was at times frightening and dangerous, it also offered sources of comfort and solace.

The first section of this chapter explains the conditions during the medieval period that made life so difficult.⁶ The second describes how community and religion together offered buffers against these harsh conditions. These aspects of medieval life help us understand the roles saints played as protectors and healers of the sick.

CHALLENGES OF MEDIEVAL LIFE

Rural Living

Economic historians estimate that until about the late fifteenth century, more than 90 percent of the population lived by the planting, tending, and harvesting of crops. Subsistence farming entailed constant devotion

to producing the food necessary for survival, and to meeting farmers' obligations to landowners.⁷

The amount of land available to peasant families for cultivation varied markedly. In the early fourteenth century, as the population grew, agricultural lands were repeatedly subdivided (a process known as *morcelling*), but after the Black Death the process was reversed, and lands were once again consolidated into larger allotments.⁸ The most fortunate, known as *yardlanders* or *virgaters*, farmed ten to forty acres of land, with average allotments being about twenty acres. A typical household consisted of five people: husband, wife, and three children ages 5–12.⁹ *Yardlanders* grew grains, legumes, and perhaps a few vegetables. On average, a third of the land was planted with wheat, half with barley, and the remainder with oats, peas, and other crops.¹⁰ The family's basic food needs for a year, mainly bread and pottage (a starchy stew made of vegetables, mainly peas and beans, and sometimes bits of meat or fish) could be met with 53 bushels of wheat, barley, and oats, plus another 24 bushels of barley for brewing ale.¹¹ A good wheat harvest might yield 8 to 12.5 bushels of wheat per acre (the comparable figure today is 47 bushels). However, 2.3 bushels of that yield had to be set aside for planting next year's crop. Thus, the effective wheat yield per acre in a good year was in the range of 5.7 to 10.2 bushels. The average *yardlander* planted a little over six acres of what, with a total yield of 38 to 68 bushels.¹²

Bread was the main food staple, constituting an estimated 82 percent of daily caloric intake. It is estimated that a single bushel of wheat, mixed with other grains, provides enough flour for 73 one-pound loaves of bread.¹³ Thirty-eight bushels of wheat per harvest would produce enough wheat to make about 2,774 one-pound loaves of bread; a higher yield might produce enough for nearly five thousand loaves.¹⁴

A family of five needed approximately 11,000 calories per day. The adult male in the family, doing the hard work of farming, needed an estimated 2,900 calories. His wife would need at least 2,150 calories, and each of the children would need at least 2,000 calories per day. A

one-pound loaf of bread contained about 1,000 calories, so a typical family needed a minimum of nine loaves of bread per day (i.e., 82 percent of 11,000, or 9,020). In a good year, the land would provide enough grain for this quantity of bread and perhaps even leave a small surplus to sell. But a poor harvest would leave the family going hungry if other sources of food could not be found.¹⁵

This was life for the typical yardlander. But nearly half of all holdings in the Midlands and south of England through the High Middle Ages were considerably smaller, consisting of perhaps five to ten acres of land.¹⁶ Farmers on these lands, known as half-yardlanders, could not hope to produce sufficient food to live on. Even in good years, a ten-acre allotment, one-third of which was planted in wheat, would yield enough grain for only eight loaves of bread per day, leaving the household 12 percent short of its estimated daily calorie requirement. Thus many poor people were chronically undernourished.¹⁷

Daily existence, then, was highly uncertain, often unnervingly so. The production and consumption of food overwhelmed all other matters. The economic historian Carlo Cipolla explains: “The poorer the country, the greater the proportion of available income its inhabitants have to spend on food. . . . [T]he lower the income, the higher will be the percentage spent on ‘poor’ items such as bread and other starchy foods.”¹⁸ He estimates that between 60 and 80 percent of total income was spent on food.

The figures for crop yields that I have cited apply to harvests during good years. But even slight seasonal variations—a single storm, an unexpected dry spell, a late frost after spring planting, or an early frost at harvest—could plunge an entire community into an economic tailspin. Such events were unsettlingly common. Discussing the *Chronica Majora*, by Matthew Paris, which covers the years 1236–59, the historian Malcolm Barber comments: “No year passes . . . without some comment on rain and floods, on drought, on wind and storms, on frost, hail and snow, on the state of the air and atmospheric disturbances, on the tides, on earthquakes . . . [and] . . . on disease among humans and

animals.”¹⁹ Another source, describing the years 1086–1348, speaks of the “precariousness of life, deriving . . . from man’s dependence on the weather and his vulnerabilities to disease.”²⁰

Though few people seem to have actually starved to death, malnutrition was endemic. Chronic malnutrition, of course, heightened susceptibility to disease. Thus fevers, flu, and even the common cold were widespread and often life-threatening. Even worse, to stay alive during periods of extreme food shortage, especially in winter, peasants might be forced to consume foods that put their health further at risk.²¹ Grains stored in damp indoor areas were prone to proliferation of the ergot fungus, which is poisonous when eaten. It attacks the muscular and circulatory systems, causing painful spasms and impaired blood flow to the extremities, which can lead to paralysis. It can also affect the brain, producing hallucinations and erratic behavior, and can eventually be fatal.²²

Compounding this misery was the fact that, at least until the fifteenth century, the agricultural economy in which most people lived was local.²³ There were no reliable systems for shipping surplus goods from one region to another that was experiencing shortage.²⁴ Nor were there reliable ways to preserve foodstuffs, except by drying and salting them.²⁵ In times of need people might be forced to consume the fodder they had set aside for animals—meaning that the livestock would starve or have to be slaughtered for food.

Daily life during the long winters was especially harsh. Cold weather forced people indoors to spend the long hours of darkness huddled around whatever sources of heat they could find. The typical peasant’s hovel consisted of one or two rooms, one with an open hearth for heat, and an inner chamber for sleeping and storage. There were few windows to let in light, and those were small and unglazed. The rooms were unventilated, unsanitary, cold, and damp. More fortunate people lived in longhouses, so called because they accommodated animals and family members under one roof but at opposite ends of the building. In the homes of the less fortunate, swine, cattle, and other farm animals were brought indoors to protect them from the elements. In most

cases, houses had floors of mud, loosely covered with straw or rushes, or cobblestones. Houses were subject to flooding and chronically damp and moldy. The open hearth was an inefficient source of heat and poorly vented. The thin walls of the houses made them highly permeable to wind and weather. Rats were a constant menace, feeding on grain stored inside the house. Bathing and laundering under these conditions were virtually impossible, and the typical winter diet—salted meat and fish, bread made from coarse, poor-quality grains, and watery ale—virtually guaranteed illnesses caused by dietary deficiencies, infectious agents, and indigestible or toxic foods.²⁶

Urban Living

Given the challenges of eking out a living by farming, some were forced or tempted to move to an urban area, but they could expect to find little relief or improvement in living standards there. Instead, town dwellers faced many of the challenges characteristic of life in the country, along with others. During the medieval period, only about a tenth of the population lived in urban settlements (with a population of two thousand or more).²⁷ The typical medieval urban environment was a toxic mix of filth, noise, rats, flies, and the terrible stench emanating from streets filled with raw sewage and garbage.²⁸ In the beginning stages of urban development in the tenth century, town dwellers typically lived on plots of land about a quarter or half an acre in size, with room to build houses and outbuildings and to plant gardens. But because most medieval towns were enclosed within city walls, as urban populations grew, the towns soon become overcrowded.²⁹ As peasants migrated to towns, lots were subdivided, so that by the twelfth century, people were often living in suffocating proximity to one another. Living quarters were placed adjacent to privies, or next to butchers' shops where animal entrails were simply dumped out onto the street, next to mounds of manure. Water supplies were polluted by sewage from privies running into open drains, contributing to the spread of dysentery.³⁰ As those who

have studied urban life during the Middle Ages are fond of pointing out, the only real sanitation laws involved ordinances requiring homeowners to shout, "Look out below!" three times before emptying chamber pots out of their windows and onto the streets.³¹

These urban environments were breeding grounds for diseases of every kind. Archeological analyses of the contents of cesspits in urban areas show high concentrations of intestinal parasites, and though epidemic diseases could strike anywhere, in towns they could spread more rapidly and with far more devastating effects than in rural areas.³²

Urban dwellers' diets were much like those of rural subsistence farmers. Bread and watery ale were the dietary staples, perhaps supplemented with milk, eggs, and fish. However, fish was scarce in inland areas, and during the winter months the low quality of feed available for livestock led to a progressive decline in concentrations of vitamin A available from milk and eggs.³³ In urban areas, regardless of season, certain foods, milk especially, were difficult to obtain and impossible to store for long periods. The winter diet of the average medieval citizen was essentially devoid of fruits and vegetables, except perhaps for small crops of carrots and cabbages that helped alleviate vitamin deficiencies; even then, the acreage available for such crops was small, and yields were poor. Not surprisingly, illnesses associated with vitamin deficiencies were endemic.

Life Expectancy

Under these nutritional and sanitary conditions in rural and urban areas, death was omnipresent.³⁴ It is difficult to state with precision the life expectancy of someone who had survived childhood, but a reasonable guess is that those who managed to remain alive until the age of twenty-five might survive into their early fifties.³⁵ One source states that although "evidence for infant mortality in the medieval countryside is wholly lacking. . . . [i]t is almost inconceivable that rates of infant mortality in the late Middle Ages were low, and . . . life expectancy at birth was less than thirty-five years, possibly less than thirty years."³⁶ One

reliable source estimates that in the early fourteenth century, life expectancy at birth may have been as low as twenty-five.³⁷

Many children died in early childhood. Some authorities estimate that more than one-third of all infants born during the Middle Ages died before reaching the age of five.³⁸ By comparison, infant mortality (death in the first twelve months of life) for 2005 in the United States was 29.4 per 100,000 live births.³⁹ Infants died from an array of conditions we would know today as influenza, respiratory diseases, whooping cough, measles, smallpox, accidents, tuberculosis, rashes, dehydration, urinary tract disorders, infections of the stomach and bowel, kidney stones, tumors and swellings of various kinds, hernias, ulcers, carbuncles, sores that would not heal, bone diseases, epilepsy, and even toothaches.⁴⁰

When these high infant mortality rates are combined with deaths among the rest of the population, the result is a very short average life expectancy. According to Carole Rawcliffe, in Florence in the late 1420s life expectancy among laypeople was 29.5 years for women and 28.5 years for men.⁴¹

Death rates varied among different segments of the population. Those living in urban settlements were at greater risk of premature death. Excavations of urban cemeteries provide vivid evidence of the short and uncomfortable lives of urban dwellers. One such study found that 36 percent of men and 56 percent of women living in urban areas died before age thirty-five, and that only 9 percent of people lived to age sixty or later.⁴² Examinations of skeletal remains find extensive evidence of malnutrition.⁴³ Archeological excavations of one medieval cemetery, St. Nicholas Shambles in London, produced 234 skeletons dating from the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Of the individuals whose bodies were exhumed, 94 percent had died before reaching the age of forty-five.⁴⁴ Other studies point to a variety of other kinds of illnesses, including typhoid fever, smallpox, cholera, malaria, tuberculosis, and dysentery.⁴⁵ Skeletal remains show signs of crippling rheumatism and poor dental health.

Those who sought escape in the quietude of a monastery in fact faced even higher odds of dying prematurely. According to one source,

a young adult (age 16–20) who joined the monastic order at Westminster Abbey could expect to survive for only about ten years.⁴⁶ Between 1395 and 1505, the monastery at Canterbury experienced a major crisis in mortality on average every four years.⁴⁷ John Hatcher's study of the monks of Durham Priory in the years 1395–1529 shows similarly high mortality rates.⁴⁸ During outbreaks of the plague, mortality rates in monasteries were astronomically high. Among those who entered the Dominican monastery at Montpellier in France in 1347, only 5 percent of the monks in residence survived the plague of 1347–51; and in the Franciscan convents of Carcassonne and Marseille, every member of the community died.⁴⁹

These high mortality rates continued well into the early modern period. The population of London at the beginning of the sixteenth century was in the range of fifty thousand. The annual mortality for this period has been estimated at five thousand per year, or about 10 percent of the entire population.⁵⁰ One study of birth and death records from London for the 1662 by the seventeenth-century English demographer John Gaunt finds that for every 100 live births, 60 children died before the age of sixteen, 36 of them during the first six years of life.⁵¹ Not until the middle of the eighteenth century did life expectancy began to increase.

Common Illnesses

Among people of the medieval period, a sense of complete physical well-being was probably rare; most people probably suffered from multiple chronic diseases or disorders. Some kinds of illness can now be traced to vitamin deficiency. For example, one effect of vitamin A deficiency is a condition once termed “dry eyes,” known today as xerophthalmia. In its early stages it causes night blindness, an inability to see in dim light. This disorder is the result of a failure of the tear glands to function properly. Night blindness put people at great risk of accidents.⁵² Vitamin A deficiency can also cause conjunctivitis, an inflammation of the membranes that line the eyelids; painful bladder stones and urinary tract

infections, both regularly reported among premodern populations; and diminished resistance to infections, often causing skin lesions.⁵³

Shortages of meat, green vegetables, and fresh fruits, especially during the winter months, resulted in a serious vitamin C deficiency, which manifests itself as scurvy, causing chronic tiredness, muscle weakness, joint and muscle pain, rashes, and bleeding gums. Niacin deficiencies caused pellagra. Known today as the “disease of the four Ds,” it causes diarrhea, dermatitis, dementia, and, if untreated, death. Those fortunate enough to escape pellagra were prone to develop other symptoms associated with niacin deficiency, such as ulcers of the mouth, nausea, vomiting, seizures, and disorders of balance. Vitamin D deficiency led to rickets in children. Parasites, such as lice and bed bugs, spread various diseases, some fatal.

Even a partial list of the diseases mentioned by historians of medieval medicine underscores how widespread disease-related morbidity would have been. In addition to plague, the list includes intestinal and pulmonary infections, typhus, and measles; sicknesses arising from malnutrition; mental and nervous disorders; leprosy, skin infections, smallpox, dropsy (edema), abscesses, and tumors of the liver; syphilis, tuberculosis, quinsy (tonsillitis), “pin and web” (an eye disease), fever, loss of hair, headaches, earaches, toothaches, nosebleeds, fainting spells, nausea, diarrhea, stomachaches, hemorrhoids, arthritis, and worms; and diseases of the spleen, chest, lungs, and urinary tract.⁵⁴

These and other conditions were common among the population at large. Other diseases were associated with particular trades. The peasant who left the farmstead to mine coal risked developing black lung disease. Those who mined mercury faced a high risk of mercury poisoning. Becoming a metalsmith meant inhaling highly toxic vapors; becoming a potter meant exposure to lead poisoning. If the new line of work involved exposure to sulfur, workers would suffer the coughs and eye conditions associated with inhaling its fumes. Tanners were prone to develop dropsy from inhaling toxic fumes, and those who worked with glass were at risk of developing diseases of the chest.⁵⁵

Famine and Plague

To the illnesses associated with chronic malnutrition, poor sanitation, and dangerous working conditions, nature added famine and deadly epidemics. The early 1300s saw the arrival of a cooling period in the earth's climate, which led to centuries of unsettled weather and much lower average temperatures throughout Europe.⁵⁶ One of the early consequences was the great famine of 1315–22, an event documented in riveting detail by William Jordan in his book *The Great Famine*. Jordan describes a seven-year period of extremely high rainfall: during one stretch it rained nonstop for 150 consecutive days throughout Western Europe.⁵⁷ The incessant rains made planting next to impossible, and the few crops that farmers managed to put into the ground could not be harvested because of flooding. Valuable topsoil washed away, as did salt basins, thereby depriving people of one of the few dependable methods for preserving food for the long winters. Food supplies were rapidly exhausted, leaving people to survive on tree bark, bird dung, family pets, and mildewed wheat and corn. These were interspersed with seven consecutive years of exceptionally cold winter weather, during which the North Sea twice froze over.

It is estimated that a half a million people (one in eight citizens) died in England during the Great Famine and that an estimated 10 to 15 percent of the urban population of Flanders and Germany perished. A large but unknowable proportion of the population of rural Europe succumbed as well.⁵⁸ In addition, the immune systems of those surviving on starvation diets were severely compromised, leaving them all but defenseless against disease.

Famine brought with it epidemics—typhoid fever, malaria, typhus, dysentery, and other gastrointestinal infections, smallpox, mumps, influenza, and, most deadly of all, plague. According to Carlo Cipolla, from 1346, when the first major plague epidemic occurred, until the end of the seventeenth century, scarcely a year went by without a large city or region of Europe reporting an epidemic of some kind.⁵⁹ Epidemics

were not new, but earlier outbreaks of disease had had less devastating effects because of the lower population densities. The population growth that occurred before the cooling period, which allowed for the wider cultivation of land, paved the way for epidemics of devastating proportions. In some places, such as in England, the plague killed 35 to 40 of every 100 residents.⁶⁰

Though no one understood at the time how the disease was transmitted, plague is caused by a bacterium, *Yersenia pestis*, carried by fleas whose preferred host is the rat.⁶¹ Rats developed a natural tolerance to this bacillus that humans did not share. Plague takes three forms: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic. Bubonic plague attacks the lymph glands, causing painful swellings (termed *buboes*) all over the body, but mainly in the armpits and crotch. Death rates from the bubonic version of plague in the Middle Ages were high: 70 to 80 percent of those who became infected died in four to seven days.⁶²

The pneumonic and septicemic strains of plague were deadlier still. Pneumonic plague is highly contagious. The lungs quickly fill with fluid, and victims can transmit the disease to other people by sneezing or spitting. In septicemic plague, the pathogen produces toxins that enter the bloodstream and produce a deep discoloration of the skin. This is one reason plague became known as the “Black Death.”⁶³

Plague caused not only great physical suffering and death but also economic and social disruption. Cipolla provides one especially graphic account of the chaos a plague epidemic could cause in his compelling monograph about the small Tuscan village of Monte Lupo.⁶⁴

The plague first came to Monte Lupo in September 1630. When the health authorities in Florence were notified, they created a special cemetery outside the village walls. In addition, a pesthouse was built for the sick outside the village gate. Inside the village, quarantine was imposed on the households of victims. Those who were quarantined had to be fed, and this required the imposition of a special tax. Monte Lupo was already a very poor village, and its residents resisted the new tax. Civil unrest developed, exacerbated by the fact that thieves began to pillage



Figure 1. Victims of the Black Death. From the Toggenburg Bible, Switzerland, ca. 1411. Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

the abandoned households of some of the plague victims who had been sent to the pesthouse.

The epidemic continued to spread, so that by the beginning of 1631 the health magistracy in Florence proposed a general quarantine, attempting to confine the entire population of the village to their homes for a period of forty days.⁶⁵ Because such a measure threatened to cause the collapse of the local economy, tensions between the general populace and health officials escalated further.

At this point a serious conflict erupted between the health authorities, who favored quarantine, and a local priest, who believed that the only way to save the village was by appealing to God.⁶⁶ The priest announced his intention to parade the local parish church's most valuable relic—a crucifix—in a procession through the village. He invited the village congregation to join him, along with residents of nearby

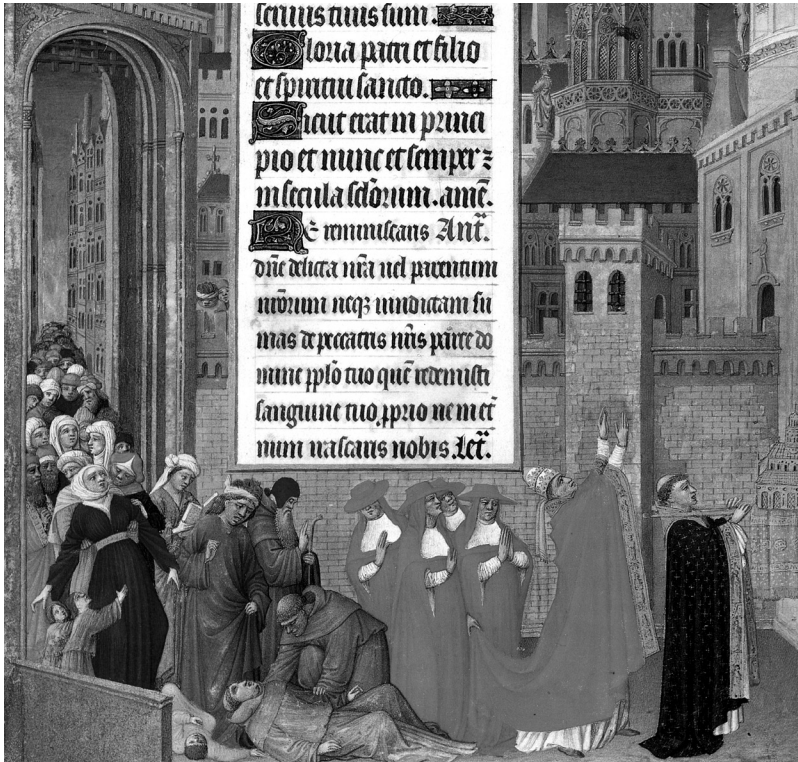


Figure 2. Pope Gregory I (590–604) leading a procession to pray for the end of the plague in Rome. From *Les très riches heures du duc de Berry*, fifteenth century. Musée Condé, Chantilly. Courtesy of Art and Architecture Library, Stanford University.

communities that were also affected by the plague.⁶⁷ To enable these outsiders to join the procession, the priest's local supporters, under cover of darkness, dismantled the barrier that health officials had erected at the village gate. Outsiders poured into the village, and the villagers spread into the adjacent countryside. On the day of the procession, the church quickly filled with worshippers, and a vast procession made its way through the village, ending in the town square for a communal feast.

These events put health authorities completely at odds with the church and allowed the plague to spread throughout the village and the adjoining countryside. They also, of course, greatly worsened the already precarious economic and social state of Monte Lupo, so that in the end the plague not only caused widespread death but also effectively destroyed the social fabric of the community.

The Black Death tore at communal bonds in other ways, too. In *The Black Death*, based on sound historical scholarship, John Hatcher imaginatively reconstructs life in the medieval English village of Walsham in Suffolk. Hatcher describes the growing rifts between neighbors, the shunning of one another lest they themselves become infected, the warning away and barring of strangers from other villages, the unwillingness of those who were well to look after those who became ill, the inability or unwillingness of priests to perform customary burial rites, and the need to dispose of the dead by tossing them into open fields, ditches, and streams and rivers because of a shortage of consecrated burial space.⁶⁸

This devastation of the existing social order did not end when the plague abated. The high death toll created an acute labor shortage, resulting in widespread neglect of established farmland, rising wages among the laboring classes, and a redistribution of wealth because the death of heirs transferred ownership of land to those who previously had none. Nor were the effects limited to economic arrangements. The plague insidiously eroded beliefs among survivors in religious doctrines and those who preached them. Ordinary people had been told that the plague was God's revenge for their sins and that to stop the Black Death they needed to confess them fully. Hatcher explains: "Walsham's inhabitants, like people everywhere and in all ages, argued, lied, cheated, stole, and fornicated; they reneged on debts, charged exorbitant rates of interest, misrepresented the quality and quantity of goods they sold and falsely denigrated those they bought, repeatedly cut their lords' and their neighbors' hedges for firewood, encroached on the property of others and carelessly or maliciously allowed their cows, sheep, pigs and geese to stray." This meant that there was much to confess, and the evidence Hatcher cites suggests

that people owned up to their failings out of fear of continuing divine vengeance. Yet no matter how hard they prayed and how often they confessed, the deaths continued, leaving many of the faithful survivors wondering why God should react so angrily to minor misdeeds.⁶⁹ In the end, they lost confidence in the explanation their priests had given them for the plague. Moreover, because of the high death rates among the priesthood, the people lost faith in their priests as spiritual brokers favored by God.

Accidents, Fire, and Violence

If poor diet, dreadful sanitation, famine, and epidemics contributed to appallingly high rates of premature death, so too did accidents. In the United States today, the overall death rate from accidents is estimated to be 40.6 per 100,000 population.⁷⁰ Although no comparable figures exist for the communities of medieval Europe, these were very dangerous places, and accidents were common. Children were expected to contribute to the household economy by fishing and drawing water, and some of them drowned while performing these tasks.⁷¹ Tiny infants and toddlers were often left unattended for long periods during the day while their parents worked, and, as Carol Rawcliffe explains, “the juxtaposition in dark, cramped surroundings of open hearths, straw bedding, rush-covered floors and naked flames posed a constant threat to curious infants.” Even at play, “children were in danger because of ponds, agricultural or industrial implements, stacks of timber, unattended boats and loaded wagons, all of which appear with depressing frequency in coroners’ reports as causes of death among the young. Besides the obvious risk to health presented by the close proximity of domestic animals, which either shared their owner’s quarters or wandered in off the streets, the very real possibility that one would maim or kill a child increased the odds against survival even more.”⁷²

Those who lived in rural settlements faced other hazards. In his book *At Day’s Close*, Roger Ekirch describes the environment in which most people lived: “Much of the pre-industrial landscape remained

treacherous. . . . Steep hillsides, turbulent streams, and thick underbrush cut across pastures, fields and villages. Even when lands had been cleared in Europe by agriculture, tree stumps and trenches scarred the rock-strewn terrain. Thick slabs of peat, cut for fuel, left deep ditches. In parts of England, Wales and Scotland with active or abandoned collieries, quarries and coal-pits pocked the ground.”⁷³ The combination of the endemic night blindness due to dietary deficiencies and the absence of artificial light meant that nighttime heightened the dangers posed by these hazards. Those unfortunate or foolish enough to venture out after dark were in constant danger of falling into an open ditch, pond, or river; man-made hazards included wells, moats, canals, and, worst of all, cess-pools. There were discarded tree stumps to avoid, plow furrows and ruts to trip into. And because of the darkness, it was easy to lose one’s way.

Barbara Hanawalt, who has creatively analyzed the records of formal inquests of unexpected deaths for this period, shows the pervasiveness of accidental deaths, especially drownings. For patrons of local alehouses, inebriation made the journey home that much more dangerous.⁷⁴

Urban environments were just as hazardous. The great majority of urban settlements were disorderly rabbit warrens of narrow streets and alleys, crammed with small houses. Until the second half of the seventeenth century, when street lamps were introduced into the great cities of Europe, the only sources of light in the streets were candles and oil lamps shining through the windows of houses. Bands of thieves often roamed at night; any urbanite who ventured out after dark put his life at risk. In fact, Ekirch reports that the murder rate during the early modern era was five to ten times higher than today. According to one source, homicides were twice as frequent as deaths from accidents, and only one of every one hundred murderers was ever brought to justice.⁷⁵

Some municipal institutions existed, but they closed before dark so that workers could go home before nightfall. For protection at night, all the residents could do was retreat inside their homes and secure them with locks, bolts, shutters, and gates. For added protection, they were advised to get a guard dog and to arm themselves.⁷⁶

The extraordinary lengths to which some municipalities went to protect themselves from thieves, brigands, and others at night is illustrated by Ekirch's discussion of the French town of Saint-Malo, a garrison town on the northern coast of France that housed large quantities of naval stores. In the early 1600s, to discourage thievery, local authorities released packs of unfed mastiffs into the streets after dark to prowl for food. The animals roamed the streets all night and would set on any living thing on the streets after sundown.⁷⁷

Fire posed an equal hazard. In rural areas, most homes had open hearths set in the middle of rooms built of tinder-dry wood, their floors covered with flammable straw, and their roofs made of thatch. Clothes left to dry hanging next to fireplaces were in danger of catching fire, as were chimneys clogged with soot. Candles and oil lamps could easily set fire to objects they touched.⁷⁸ Most agricultural settlements consisted of houses and barns arranged in close proximity. A fire ignited in any of these structures could easily spread to other buildings. The only means of fighting fire was with leather water buckets and hooks to pull timbers and straw from burning structures.

In urban areas, fire posed special dangers. The tinderbox structures that were homes to the urban poor were crammed together into congested rows, so that a fire breaking out in any one of them could spread quickly to consume entire blocks of houses and even the entire settlement. According to Ekirch, in England from 1500 to 1800, at least 421 fires in provincial towns consumed ten or more houses apiece, with as many as 46 fires during the period destroying one hundred or more houses. Some larger urban areas were all but consumed by great fires, including Toulouse in 1463, Bourges in 1487, and Troyes in 1534.⁷⁹

Fear of God's Wrath

Added to this already toxic mix of elements was another, ironically supplied by the prevailing religious orthodoxy of the day. Religion offered comfort to the faithful, but it also injected a powerful sense of fear into

everyday life.⁸⁰ The common conception of God was one of a vengeful, all-powerful, all-knowing being, an image that fostered a pervasive sense of fear and foreboding.⁸¹ He controlled life from moment to moment: everything that happened, from the most banal events to the epic, were signs of his agency. The belief that an external force controlled daily life contributed to a kind of collective paranoia.⁸² Rainstorms, thunder, lightning, wind gusts, solar or lunar eclipses, cold snaps, heat waves, dry spells, and earthquakes alike were considered signs and signals of God's displeasure. As a result, the "hobgoblins of fear" inhabited every realm of life. The sea became a satanic realm, and forests were populated with beasts of prey, ogres, witches, demons, and very real thieves and cutthroats. This aura of terror was pervasive. Ekirch writes: "At night, bizarre sights and queer sounds came and vanished, leaving widespread anxiety in their train." After dark, too, the world was filled with omens portending dangers of every sort: comets, meteors, shooting stars, lunar eclipses, the howls of wild animals.⁸³

As if all the suffering caused by natural events were not enough, medieval people displayed a seemingly insatiable appetite for barbaric acts of violence.⁸⁴ They waged wars against one another, attacked neighboring villages and neighbors in their own communities, slaughtered heretics, burned witches, and visited acts of physical and sexual abuse on one another.⁸⁵ This problem of violence extended not just to neighbors arguing with neighbors, people from adjacent villages in dispute, or roving bands of brigands looting rural settlements. Rawcliffe, describing the practice of surgery during the Middle Ages, points out that "levels of domestic violence were so great that local surgeons became quite experienced at treating head wounds, internal injuries, broken bones and stab wounds."⁸⁶

Historians generally agree that violence was endemic. Goodich writes: "The employment of violence as a means of dealing with conflict, however petty, had become a widely learned cultural trait."⁸⁷ Miller and Hatcher state that "men were swift to defend their rights by force and, when quarrels arose, to resort to the knife or other weapons" and

that “excessive violence was characteristic of the epoch.”⁸⁸ This violence extended to every aspect of medieval life, from personal disputes to group vendettas, from organized, illegitimate violence such as sea piracy to organized open warfare.⁸⁹

What explains this readiness to resort to violence? Poverty was surely one factor. Poverty promotes crime, and high rates of crime in turn give rise to fear among potential victims. In the absence of a strong police force or other public bodies to provide protection or control retribution, medieval people were left to protect themselves, and one way to do this was to assault perceived sources of threat.⁹⁰ The ready availability of weapons, access to alcohol, the likelihood of escaping punishment, and the general ethos of violence all contributed to the toxic mix.

The medieval world was based on a culture of honor, expressed in the form of incessant demands for deference and respect.⁹¹ Those who study such cultures tell us that they are also characterized by an ethos of individual power, masculinity, and self-protection.⁹² To establish and preserve one’s sense of honor, and to ensure self-protection, members learn to react violently to even subtle cues of insult and attack.⁹³ Research by the social psychologists Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen has shown how this tendency is displayed in face-to-face relationships between members of communities, suggesting that cultures of honor are most likely to develop where no effective policing powers are available to protect individuals and their property.⁹⁴

Finally, religion tended to foster violence. Throughout Europe, violence was routinely used to uncover and then punish heretics, and justified as necessary in the execution of God’s work.⁹⁵

Writing about the lifetime of the fourth-century saint Martin of Tours, the medievalist Raymond van Dam provides a characterization of those times that applies equally well to life during the later medieval and early modern periods. He describes a life that was “unrelentingly brutal and precarious . . . with squalor, misery, and grinding poverty . . . violence, cruelty, intemperate weather, locusts, a late frost, hailstorms, drought, poor nutrition, illnesses and disabilities.”⁹⁶

THE WEAKNESS OF CIVIC INSTITUTIONS

Today, in times of crisis, we turn almost automatically to public institutions, agencies, and services for help. But in medieval times there was no fire department to summon to a chimney fire, no police department to catch thieves, no ambulance to transport the sick. Also missing were sanitation services, a meaningful criminal-justice system, and a standing army to protect against invasion. Systems for controlling floods were not always effective; there was no provision for communal long-term storage of food as a guard against starvation, no water-purification system or reservoirs in which to store water, no protection against extreme weather. The most powerful secular figure was the king, yet in most cases even he could do little to help, and in any event he could intervene only where he was physically present; hence his protection was restricted to those who had direct access to him.⁹⁷ Even if the telephone had existed, a 911 number would have been useless. There was little or no help to be summoned.

Medieval Medicine

The institution of medicine was hopelessly ill-equipped to deal with the terrible tolls on health exacted by medieval living conditions. Practitioners of medicine consisted of a ragtag collection of barbers, herbalists, folk healers, astrologers, dentists, witches, and quacks. Any understanding of how and why people became ill or recovered was provided by the classical Greek notion of the four humors succinctly explained by Carol Rawcliffe: “Just as the universe was made up of the four basic elements of fire, water, earth and air, so too the body depended for its existence on four corresponding human humors created through the digestive process out of food: cholera or yellow bile; phlegm or mucus; black bile and blood.” Good health required maintaining a careful balance between these and ensuring that none grew either too powerful or too weak.⁹⁸ Treatment consisted “in examining the patient, particularly the urine,

and in diagnosing an imbalance of the four humours. . . . The imbalance could then be corrected by means of purges, bloodletting, special diets, and so forth.”⁹⁹

Such corrections entailed unpleasant, painful, and occasionally even fatal procedures. Patients were bled; heated glass vessels were placed on areas of skin that had been scarred with a knife; leeches were applied to open wounds to draw off poisons; patients were cauterized using caustic medicines or heated implements; and foul-smelling herbs, fumigants, and vile-tasting concoctions were administered by mouth or to the skin. Those diagnosed with demonic possession were flogged, beaten, starved, or, in effect, waterboarded. As if the pain caused by such treatments were not bad enough, the physician or surgeon sometimes took added steps. Many surgeons believed that the premature cleansing, drying, or closing of a wound would force corrupt matter inward and poison the patient.¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, after a procedure involving cauterization or scarring, the physician might bandage the wound with cotton that had been soaked in salt water to ensure that it did not heal too quickly.

Because bodily processes were linked with cosmic developments, the physician also consulted a patient’s horoscope to understand the disposition of the heavens at the moment of his birth and at the time he became ill and to track the conjunction of the planets at each stage of treatment. This deeply held belief in the role of heavenly bodies in human illness occasionally gave rise to bizarre explanations for epidemics. For example, in 1348 Philip VI turned to the faculty of the University of Paris for an explanation of why the Black Death was sweeping his kingdom. The medical team reported that the outbreak of plague was beyond the ability of humans to control: it was caused by the conjunction of three planets in the sign of Aquarius, which, along with other conjunctions and eclipses, had produced a pernicious corruption of the air. They dated the cause of the epidemic to one o’clock on the afternoon of March 20, 1345, when the deadly alignment of heavenly bodies occurred.¹⁰¹

The same logic might lead physicians to propose that an illness could only be treated on certain days of the year. Those who were diagnosed

with dropsy needed to undergo a regimen of bloodletting, but only on September 17. Migraine headaches needed to be treated on April 3, eye problems on April 11, and so on. If a patient sued a doctor for malpractice, the role of celestial bodies in causing illness could be used in deciding the case. One source describes a malpractice suit that was brought against three physicians in 1424 by a patient who had sought treatment for a wounded thumb. The case was thrown out on the grounds that the injury had occurred on the last day of January, a time when, as the medical specialists' report argued, "the moon was consumed with a bloody sign, to wit Aquarius, under a very malevolent constellation, and that, even worse, some nine days later, by which time the moon had passed into Gemini (the sign governing the hand . . .). In other words, the plaintiff could consider himself fortunate to have survived at all against such tremendous odds."¹⁰²

Most medical care, however useless, was reserved for the rich.¹⁰³ As Faye Getz notes, "The pressing problems of famine, epidemic disease, and social dislocation among the poor made resort to medical practitioners nearly impossible."¹⁰⁴

RELIGION AND COMMUNITY AS BUFFERS AGAINST ADVERSITY

The picture we have painted of life for the average European in the medieval period is bleak indeed, but it is incomplete. Fortunately, people seldom had to confront these grim conditions entirely alone. In normal times, two social institutions served as buffers against adversity, made life manageable and tolerable, and imbued it with a vital sense of meaning: religion and community. The two were intimately entwined, yet each made a distinctive contribution to the quality of daily life. From our vantage point in the twenty-first century, what they offered might not seem very effective, but to those who lived in medieval and early modern Europe, they must certainly have provided much-needed comfort and reassurance.

Living in agricultural communities of the sort I have described was a quintessentially communal existence. To survive, everyone had to accept a certain degree of regulation and offer mutual support. Christopher Dyer explains why: at the heart of communal life during this period “lay the management of the common land, especially when all of the arable in a midland field system was subject to common grazing. The pressure on land meant that rules had to be observed or neighbors would suffer.” Regulations governed the planting and harvesting of crops, grazing rights, prohibited poaching, and encouraged people to look after one another. Everyone recognized their common interest in cooperating to keep agriculture running smoothly.¹⁰⁵ This is not to say that people never acted independently or that they lacked entrepreneurial skills, but only that the culture placed a high value on cohesive communality.

The need for everyone to work together to survive contributed to a powerful sense of community and a corresponding feeling of security and mutual support in adversity.¹⁰⁶ In performing the daily tasks of a small agricultural community, individuals were reminded at nearly every turn of the importance and value of the collective enterprise.

The term *community* in this context should not be taken to imply a single, overarching entity. Instead, it connotes clusters of memberships in different kinds of groups: households, neighborhoods, villages, parishes, guilds, and workshops, as well as counties, regions, and nation-states. These multiple associates made personal identity somewhat fluid, yet rooted in the security of embeddedness in a social world.¹⁰⁷

Religious belief and practice powerfully reinforced this sense of community. Early modern Christian communities centered on the parish and its teachings: belief in God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost, as well as the obligation of parishioners to confess their sins, take communion, and attend mass. These articles of faith gave people a powerful sense of identification with the church at large, reminding us that, “even in the most remote of English farmsteads, there were tenets of belief which its inhabitants shared not only with neighboring villages but with villages as far afield as the Baltic and the Mediterranean.”¹⁰⁸ Another historian writes:

“Religious life for Medieval Christians was predominantly a communal experience. They practiced their faith in the context of a parish, the basic unit of public worship: Where one lived determined what parish one belonged to, and within its boundaries, a medieval Christian learned his or her creed, received moral instruction and correction, received his sacraments and paid taxes, collected tithes to support the church. Communal life was both supportive and coercive, and much of the laity’s parish involvement comprised balancing these two forces.”¹⁰⁹

In the local parish church, the faithful were instructed in the tenets of the Catholic faith and inducted into its practices. Phillip Schofield explains:

Throughout an individual’s life, the union with the Church was maintained through the sacraments which, organized around vital moments in that life, reaffirmed a relationship with Church and God. Through the sacrament of baptism, a sacrament typically administered within hours of birth, the newborn were admitted into membership of the church while, at the point of death, the sacrament of extreme unction prepared the penitent for death and membership of a new congregation in the life everlasting. In between these two ‘moments,’ other sacraments strengthened the relationship between the church and the individual—the marriage rite . . . confession, the Eucharist, confirmation.¹¹⁰

Membership in a parish church entailed more than attending mass, communion, and confession. It also involved the obligation to support and maintain the church buildings and property and support its priest.¹¹¹ Church-sponsored confraternities were often organized in the name of a favorite saint. In times of need they fed the hungry, clothed the poor, provided dowries for needy young women, looked after the sick, and buried the dead. They also staged processions and met for private devotion. Thus membership in the parish church tightly integrated people into religious communities.¹¹²

William Christian has studied in impressive detail the role that religious belief and practice play in rural Spanish communities today. His

study documents how religious doctrines infuse and structure family and community relationships, mirroring people's relationships with God, the Virgin, saints, and the Catholic Church, and how relationships with the divine in turn are patterned on family ties.¹¹³

The important role that religion played, and still plays, in helping buffer people against adversity was succinctly captured by the sociologist Émile Durkheim, who wrote in 1912: "The true function of religion is not to make us think. Its true function is to make us act and to help us live. The believer who has communed with his god is not simply a man who sees new truths that the unbeliever knows not; he is a man who is stronger within himself, he feels more strength to endure the trials of existence or to overcome them. He is as though lifted above the human miseries, because he is lifted above his human condition."¹¹⁴

Of all the features of medieval religion, the faith in saints was one of the most potent. Ordinary people thought of them as friends, protectors, advocates, and personal intercessors with God. It is not difficult to understand why. Given the inability of social institutions to protect or assist individuals, in particular the poor and powerless, the only line of defense against adversity was the agency of God and his saints.

The great challenge facing individuals and communities was devising ways of gaining access to these powers. The next chapter examines the actions people took to invite divine intervention into their lives and the beliefs that gave rise to these actions.