

Interesting question from a recent member of the blog:

QUESTION:

In the August 5/12 New Yorker, a review of a new book, “The mosquito: A Human History of our Deadliest Predator.” In this review, this sentence: “In the third century, malaria epidemics helped drive people to a small, much persecuted faith that emphasized healing and care of the sick, propelling Christianity into a world-altering religion.” I realize that medical history is not your thing. If nonetheless you’d care to comment, any warrant for this assertion?

RESPONSE:

I don’t know that I’ve ever written about mosquitoes before, either on the blog or anywhere else, but I have dealt with issues connected with ancient health care, and in particular with the theory that superior health care was one of the factors that led Christianity to expand to become a dominant (*the* dominant religion) of the Roman world. It is an intriguing idea indeed, and was a popular theory for a very brief moment, about when this book reviewed in the New Yorker came out. But I’m afraid I don’t think it passes muster I explained why in my book The Triumph of Christianity. See if you agree. Here’s what I said.

One benefit of joining the church recently touted as particularly important for Christian growth was the availability of better health care. This was one of the many controversial proposals set forth by sociologist Rodney Stark in his popular discussion, The Rise of Christianity, and was the thesis behind a more extensive treatment by Hector Avalos, Health Care and the Rise of Christianity.^[1]

Despite Avalos’s in-depth discussion of how early Christians organized, managed, and implemented health care, he (somewhat oddly, given the title of his book) never mounts an argument to show how the Christian health care system attracted converts or led to church growth. Stark, on the other hand, applies his sociological training to the question and makes some intriguing suggestions. He points out that epidemics swept through the Roman world on more than one occasion during the period that Christianity was gaining members. The terrible plague that ravaged the empire during the reign of Marcus Aurelius killed, Stark avers, between a quarter and a third of the entire population of the empire. The emperor himself was one of the fatalities.

Stark notes that Christian sources celebrate the eagerness of Christians to minister to the sick in times of illness. This was unlike ...

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This was unlike the pagans, Stark claims, who, as a rule, simply let the sick fend for themselves. He goes on to point to studies which indicate that even without access to modern medicine, simple nursing - trying to care for someone who is ill - can have a drastic effect on survival rates. Stark concludes that Christians emerged from epidemics far more intact as a population group than pagans, so their relative numbers grew through nothing more than the decision to nurse the sick.

This is an intriguing perspective, but it has not proved widely persuasive, for several reasons. For one thing, Stark unrealistically and uncritically assumes that when Christian sources praise Christians and malign pagans for their health care practices, they are giving factual information. For him, a Christian author is simply stating historical reality when he praises fellow Christians for acts of love far superior to anything found elsewhere, and maligns outsiders for neglecting even their dying family members. Historians of early Christianity are never this sanguine when it comes to our sources. One always needs to consider their obvious biases.[\[ii\]](#)

Beyond that, there is a fairly obvious reason for doubting that Christian nursing practices in times of epidemic led to growth in the church. If our sources are indeed to be trusted that Christians tended to the sick more often than did pagans, that would surely also mean that Christians were more often infected.

As it turns out, early Christian texts bemoan precisely this fact: Christians frequently died because they acquired the diseases they were trying to heal. This is a point that Stark, naturally enough, glosses over. But it is clearly stated in the eyewitness accounts, nowhere more grippingly than in a letter written by a mid-third-century bishop of Alexandria Egypt, Dionysius, as quoted by the church historian Eusebius. In this letter Dionysius refers to an epidemic that "came out of the blue" and notes how the Christians dealt with it in their community:

Heedless of the danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing in themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains. Many, in nursing and curing others, transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead... The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner, a number of presbyters, deacons, and laymen.

Dionysius claims that the care of the sick continued post-mortem, leading to yet more deaths within the community:

With willing hands they raised the bodies of the saints to their bosoms; they closed their eyes and mouths, carried them on their shoulders, and laid them out; they clung to them, embraced them, washed them, and wrapped them in grave clothes. Very soon the same services were done for them, since those left behind were constantly following those gone before.[\[iii\]](#)

We have no indication from outsiders that they were drawn to the church because of the improved possibilities of health care, and it seems unlikely that a Christian inclination to stay in intimate contact with the contaminated led to a growth in Christian numbers. We should therefore look elsewhere to discover what attracted converts to the church. The best place to begin are the actual accounts of conversions from the early church. These are relatively abundant and scattered throughout the decades and centuries with which we are concerned. Moreover, these narratives are unambiguous about what attracted outsiders to

the faith. The Christians did amazing miracles.[\[iv\]](#)

[I later devote an entire chapter of the book to this issue of converts joining the Christian community because of miracles]

[\[i\]](#) Rodney Stark, The Rise of Christianity, chapter 4; Hector Avalos, , Health Care and the Rise of Christianity (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999).

[\[ii\]](#) Stark's uncritical use of sources is probably the most criticized aspect of his work among scholars in the field of early Christian studies. For a particularly trenchant critique, see Elizabeth A. Castelli, "Gender, Theory, and the Rise of Christianity: A Response to Rodney Stark," Journal of Early Christian Studies 6 (1998) 227-57.

[\[iii\]](#) Eusebius, Church History, 7.22.

[\[iv\]](#) No scholar has argued this case more forcefully than Ramsay MacMullen, Christianizing the Roman Empire (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984).



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