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After the Apocalypse: A Comparative Study of the Black Death, London Fire, and Lisbon Earthquake

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After the Apocalypse: a Comparative Study of the Black
Death, London Fire, and Lisbon Earthquake

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Abstract

This thesis conducts a comparative study of historical responses to natural disasters by examining the Black Death of the fourteenth century, the 1666 Great Fire of London, and the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. In doing so, I employ an interdisciplinary framework by adapting the theory of path dependence to my analysis of prominent historical disasters. With this theoretical structure, I suggest that natural disasters cause moments of uncertainty that often produce critical junctures at key moments of development in the societies they affect. In the first and third chapters, I explore how the Black Death and the Lisbon earthquake served as interruptions of existing path dependencies allowing for departures, of varying magnitude, from patterns of the past. Chapter One argues that the Black Death highlighted institutional shortcomings within the Catholic Church as a public health institution, opening the doors for new expressions of religious criticism. Chapter Three similarly contends that the Lisbon Earthquake devastated the city and the Portuguese economy, allowing students of the Enlightenment to reform both through modernization-minded rationalism, and reshaping intellectual dialogues of disaster across Europe. Contrasting slightly, Chapter Two asserts that the paranoia and confusion that followed the London Fire helped to cultivate burgeoning path dependencies by removing obstacles to and exacerbating imperial and anti-Catholic tensions. In concert, these case studies seek to offer historians an interdisciplinary framework through which to create and contribute to broader scholarly dialogues surrounding natural disasters in human history.

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Introduction: Natural Disasters in the Study of History

Among the less-acknowledged casualties of the social-media age has been the word disaster. In the modern digital landscape, anything can be labeled a disaster only to be forgotten within days. While this phenomenon may not make news headlines, it trivializes a word that describes crucial moments in human history. From biblical floods to this fall's devastating hurricanes, true disasters litter the collective memory of countless societies. Few things seem to captivate public attention in the way disasters do. Yet when disaster strikes, the insights of historians rarely seem in high demand. Rather, when considering past catastrophes, natural scientists, sociologists, geographers, anthropologists and even economists offer the lion's share of scholarly investigation and analysis. The historical study of natural disaster exists in such a scattered and inconsistent state that historian John Burnham once termed it "the neglected field."¹ While historians have certainly produced increasing amounts of work surrounding natural disasters since Burnham published this opinion in 1988, the field remains under-saturated by the voices of those most-trained in analyzing the past. This thesis offers one lens through which to view that tendency by considering the unique opportunity disasters provide historians to better understand certain changes within a given society.

As sociologist Russell Dynes explains, "disasters are usually identified as having occurred at a particular time and place, but they also occur at a particular time in

¹ John C. Burnham, "A Neglected Field: The History of Natural Disasters," *Perspectives on History: the Newsmagazine of the American Historical Association*, April, 1988.

human history and within a specific social and cultural context.”² Thus, when disaster strikes a society, it creates a snapshot in time wherein the defining characteristics of a society in that moment come to the forefront to respond to the challenges posed by that disaster. In a comprehensive article on the practice of historical disaster research, Mexican historian Virginia García-Acosta argues that “disaster research in a historical perspective has shown that hazards may act as triggers, in the sense of leading to important social and cultural changes.”³ She goes on to argue that

sudden-impact events (earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, floods, tsunamis) and slow-impact ones (droughts, epidemics, plagues) are treated in ways that not only address a specific event or analyze what some authors characterize as “critical lapses of time” but also take notice of the context and time period in which the event occurred.⁴

While catastrophes may not offer a window into the study of all aspects of life, as Acosta eloquently suggests, disasters present specific moments enabling historians to gain a glimpse into the defining themes of a longer historical period. This thesis applies that theory to better understand the nature of natural disasters in human history and its usefulness to the field of history.

A fundamental belief that natural disasters constitute exceptional moments in time pervades cultural memory and understanding in societies around the world. This

² Russell R. Dynes, “The Dialogue between Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake: The Emergence of a Social Science View,” *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 18, no. 1 (March 2000), 97.

³ Virginia García-Acosta, “Historical Disaster Research,” in *Catastrophe and Culture* edited by Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2002), 55.

⁴ *Ibid.*

view of natural disasters seems consistent from small, isolated communities to the highest court in the United States. In 1934, for instance, Chief Justice Hughes acknowledged that “it cannot be maintained that the constitutional prohibition should be so construed as to prevent limited and temporary interpositions with respect to the enforcement of contracts if made necessary by a great public calamity such as fire, flood, and earthquake.”⁵ Here Justice Hughes explicitly acknowledges the fact that the devastation and chaos that define the aftermath of a natural disaster defy prediction and precedent, creating a unique atmosphere that requires flexibility and improvisation. The view of disasters as unpredictable moments of shock is part of what makes them so interesting and historically significant, which contributes to the relevance of conducting a study such as this. At the same time, Alasdair Roberts points to the reality of a “human habit of giving undue weight to immediate experience,”⁶ and it is important to avoid succumbing to this temptation or allowing it to exert excessive influence on narratives of disaster examined through a historical lens.

It is also worth noting that for the purposes of this study, disaster should not be conflated with total collapse. Collapse, as defined by Jared Diamond, implies a “drastic decrease in human population size and/or political/economic/social complexity, over a considerable area, for an extended time.”⁷ Thus, a catastrophe like the devastation of

⁵ David M. O’Brien, *Constitutional Law and Politics: Struggle for Power and Governmental Accountability*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 1043.

⁶ Alasdair Roberts, *Four Crises of American Democracy: Representation, Mastery, Discipline, Anticipation*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 115.

⁷ Jared Diamond, *Collapse How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 3.

Pompeii by Mount Vesuvius stands outside the boundaries of this thesis. Such an instance could easily serve as the locus for much historical study, but a total collapse does not lend itself to the study of societal *response* to a disaster, wherein a significant trend in societal development emerges. Regarding that response, Acosta argues that “societies develop multiple adaptive strategies and that they fall into five major types: social, cultural, political, ideological, and economic. As all the adaptive strategies developed to cope with disasters are culturally constructed over time, they must be understood and studied historically.”⁸ Across this range of responses, my research reveals a common theme of the recovery period. As societally-stabilizing elements such as infrastructure, public health, functioning government, or a powerful church suffer from the chaos of a disaster, a dynamic social environment develops. In this environment, the stricken society experiences a dramatic loss of certain inhibiting factors that, much like a brush fire in a dry forest, allows for a rapid period of development that can be more easily understood by analyzing an interdisciplinary theory: path dependence.

Path Dependence as a Historical Framework:

The field of economics frequently employs the concept of path dependence, the theory that “the set of decisions one faces for any given circumstance is limited by the decisions one has made in the past, even though past circumstances may no longer be relevant.”⁹ While originally an economic theory, fields such as political science

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Dave Praegar, “Our Love of Sewers: a Lesson in Path Dependence” *Daily Kos*, 6/15/2007.

frequently adopt it for use in a wide range of studies. For the purpose of this thesis, path dependence means that past events and practices build on each other to establish trajectories of societal or individual behavior from which humans find it extremely difficult to diverge. When diversions do occur, this theory refers to those moments as critical junctures. Giovanni Capoccia provides useful terminology for understanding critical junctures as “moments in which uncertainty... allows for political agency and choice to play a decisive causal role in setting an institution on a certain path.”¹⁰ Capoccia draws this definition specifically from an institutional view of path dependence, though scholars apply it to scales ranging from the individual to “the development of groups and organizations and the evolution of entire societies.”¹¹ For the purposes of this thesis, I will apply the concept of critical junctures to groups and societies as well as institutions in an attempt to shed light on how disasters throughout history have disrupted path dependent norms and practices within the societies they affect.

To do this, I examine three distinct case studies wherein an unpredictable disaster struck an established society with noteworthy results: the Black Death outbreak in Western Europe in 1347, the Great Fire of London in 1666, and the Lisbon Earthquake in 1755. These three disasters taken together cover a variety of time periods and offer both “sudden-impact” (the London Fire and the Lisbon Earthquake) and “slow-impact”

¹⁰ Giovanni Capoccia, “Critical Junctures and Institutional Change,” Paper prepared for inclusion in *Advances in Comparative Historical Analysis in Social Sciences* Eds. J. Mahoney and K. Thelen. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015: 2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

(the Black Death) disasters in accordance with Acosta's definitions. Admittedly, any collection of case studies in a work of this size will suffer from a variety of limitations and disadvantages, but temporally these selections allow for a relatively expansive study of disasters in human history.

Case Studies:

Chapter One of this thesis examines the cultural aftermath of the 1347 Black Death outbreak in Western Europe. For centuries prior to the outbreak, the Catholic Church held substantial authority over medical practices and beliefs across Europe, and this role conferred incredible legitimacy on the Church as a public health institution. Through an analysis of the literary record from the decades following the decline of the epidemic in 1353, I suggest that the Church's failure to contain and respond to the disease signified a cataclysmic failure in its public health role that led to unprecedented criticism of the institution from the public. I do acknowledge a crucial limitation of this shift in dependence on the Church to encompass only criticisms of the Church's practices and officials, but not to diminish the deference to the Church regarding matters of death and the afterlife, which remained largely untouched, if not strengthened by the disease. Despite that limitation, the increase in prominence and distribution of criticism towards the Catholic Church demonstrates the Black Death's role as a critical juncture, causing a limited yet noteworthy disruption in centuries of deference to the Church and its officials as public health authorities.

Chapter Two examines a slightly different aspect of the intersection between natural disaster and path dependence by engaging with the chaotic atmosphere of

London following the Great Fire of 1666. The mid-seventeenth century witnessed a drastic escalation in imperial tensions that can be traced to the international friction sparked by the Age of Exploration. With the beginning of the long decline of the Spanish and Portuguese empires on the global stage, the British enjoyed increasing prominence. This coincided with escalating conflict with their perennial rival, the French Empire, but also a surge in animosity towards the Dutch. By 1666, civil and political institutions had maintained a degree of domestic civility despite growing tension on the international stage, but during and after the London Fire of 2-5 September, these restraints suddenly lifted. In this less-restricted atmosphere, residential Londoners were able to engage violently in the imperial conflict by targeting their own foreign-born neighbors. More enduring than these xenophobic expressions of imperial rivalry, the Fire produced a significant escalation of persecution of Catholics. In a period of deepening religious tensions tied to the legitimacy of the British Crown, Parliament seized on the resentment and suspicion, prompted by the Fire to stage a Catholic witch hunt, the legacy of which remained etched into the psyche of London for generations. Unlike the case of the Plague disrupting a longstanding path dependence, the London Fire demonstrates an instance wherein a disaster helped to clear an obstacle to a developing one, as imperial animosity intensified as Parliament responded to violent and paranoid public sentiments.

Chapter Three's analysis of the Lisbon earthquake marks a return to the critical juncture effect explored in the Black Death chapter. The earthquake, which struck Lisbon on 1 November, 1755, razed a city of tangled streets, grandiose churches, and

unstable architecture in a nation weighed down by economic dependence on Britain. To reform-minded Enlightenment observers, the city's growth seemed hindered by the ghosts of its own past. Its disorganized cityscape and emphasis on the primacy of religious sites bore none of the hallmarks of rationally-conceived urban areas cropping up elsewhere across Europe. Empowered by the devastation of the earthquake, the Marquis de Pombal led these reformers in implementing a revolutionary scheme to revive Lisbon as a model of modern urban planning. Similarly, these progressives seized an opportunity to reduce the importance of religious structures in favor of government and commercial buildings, and strove to reduce the country's economic reliance on Britain. These reforms drew inspiration from the movement of rationality and empiricism sweeping the continent, which simultaneously inspired prominent intellectuals to respond to the earthquake by challenging their fundamental conceptions of natural disasters.

Throughout these case studies, I explore whether the various disasters challenged or reinforced path dependencies unique to each of the stricken societies, in the hopes of contributing to a discussion of how historians can utilize the records of disasters as historical tools. My findings indicate slightly differing results across the various case studies, but each reinforces the aforementioned "clearing" or "brush fire" effect in one of two ways. In the cases of the Black Death and the Lisbon Earthquake, the respective disasters challenged longstanding, deeply-cemented institutions and cultural practices by undermining the place of religion and the Catholic Church in both societies to such an extent that they disrupted ongoing path dependencies, thus serving

as critical junctures. In the case of the London Fire, however, the clearing process that followed the disaster interacted with the developing trend towards escalating imperial competition by clearing obstacles to localized violence and unrest along lines of nationality, thus enhancing a path dependence rather than challenging it. In all three cases, what remains apparent is the pattern in which unpredicted disasters intensify pre-existing ideas and patterns within the stricken societies by removing obstacles to their expression and allowing individuals within those societies to exert heightened levels of agency over their surroundings.

Chapter One: Critical Agency and the Church after the Black Death

In 1347, the Black Death erupted into one of history's deadliest epidemics. The disease's devastation across Europe is deeply etched in the continent's collective memory, as is the helplessness exhibited by medieval medicine when it confronted the scourge. Following the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, the Catholic Church had grown to serve as a conceptual authority across Western Europe, and with that role came the status of Europe's most geographically consistent public health institution. By the 1300s, centuries in that role had granted the Church dominion over the minds of Europeans and their understandings of both life and death. Societal reliance on the Church to resolve health concerns grew to constitute a form of path dependence that could not be fundamentally weakened except through a significant disruption, a critical juncture, in the everyday lived experience of pious Europeans. The devastation wrought by the outbreak of Black Death in 1347 constituted such a disruption.

Prior to the pandemic, religion associated so directly with public health that clergy members commonly accompanied doctors to visit the sick in order to deliver last rites. Thus, when faced with so much tragedy and loss, Europe looked to its religious institutions for the protection they claimed to offer, but found no relief. The aftermath of the disease created an atmosphere that granted agency to those outside the Church to reimagine the role of religion in their conception of the world. By highlighting the limitations of the Church's power, the plague weakened its standing in the minds of many, allowing members of the public to question its institutions and officials to

unprecedented degrees. However, as a crucial boundary of this phenomenon, the transformation was not total and the realm of death and the afterlife remained firmly within the domain of the Church, where some would argue it remains even today.

Before analyzing the impact of the Black Death on religious thought within Europe, this paper will begin with a review of the existing literature on the subject. Scholars such as John Aberth and David Herlihy have contributed to historical understanding of the role of the plague epidemic as a watershed moment in European history, clearing away many restrictive practices and facilitating ensuing periods of social change, namely the Renaissance and the Reformation. However, in producing such wide-ranging works on the subject, many historians have attempted to draw causal lines between the plague and the succeeding centuries of European history that resemble the inevitability doctrines put forth in Whig and Sonderweg historiographies. This paper will then provide a general background of the expansive power of the Catholic Church in Europe prior to the plague outbreak in 1347 and the failure of the Church and its institutions to respond effectively to the catastrophe, which weakened the institution's social standing and left it vulnerable to changing perceptions. Unfortunately, the number of primary sources that could indicate this shift are limited, but the surviving literary record offers a unique perspective. Specifically, this paper focuses on Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, supported by evidence from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the anonymously-authored *Pearl* poem. Taken together, these sources suggest that in the aftermath of the Black Death, while critical agents transformed the

public perception of the Church's institutions and officials, the Church maintained its monopoly over death and conceptions of the afterlife.

Four points require clarification before continuing farther. Three of these points are concerned primarily with methodology or terminology. First, the area of Europe effected by plague after 1347 contains far too much land and too diverse groups of people to discuss here in their entirety, so this work will draw its sources primarily from those available on the aftermath of plague in England and Italy. As Western Europe's most remote nation and the heart of Catholicism's seat of power during the Middle Ages respectively, these areas offer illustrative representation of regional developments during this period. Second, in analyzing the intersection of plague, literature, and the Church in the European Middle Ages, I do not contend that my findings presume the existence of European "Dark Ages" bookended by the arrival of plague and the beginning of the Renaissance. In 1942, Theodore Mommsen argued that "in the scholarly world this usage of the term 'Dark Ages' was either to be abandoned completely or at least to be restricted increasingly in its application."¹² Most contemporary medievalist scholarship supports this statement, yet in the decades since Mommsen, the term has not fully fallen out of usage. In fact, some reaffirm its validity. I do not attempt to wade into the debate, nor do I intend for it to inform my analysis. What I loosely interpret as an indicator of significant modernization does not presuppose that such progress necessitates a dark age from which society needed to

¹²Theodore Mommsen, "Petrarch's Conception of the 'Dark Ages,' *Speculum* 17 (1942) 226.

advance. Rather, I suggest that widespread faith in clerical institutions and officials hindered the development of humanistic individualism, and much of societal development away from this phenomenon can be traced to the effects of Black Death on European society. Third, while the phrase “Black Death” has been appropriated by mainstream discussions of a range of *Yersinia pestis* outbreaks throughout human history, within standard academic discourse the Black Death refers specifically to the fourteenth-century outbreak that is generally agreed to have occurred between 1347 and 1353.

The fourth and most important premise to bear in mind in this chapter is that we cannot lose sight of how deeply entrenched the Church had been in the lives of Europeans before the plague arrived. Catholicism was not some political system or even a simple collection of individual leaders to be tossed aside when its inadequacies began to show. The European population of the fourteenth century could scarcely conceive of a future in which the Catholic Church lost its hold on European spiritual life, much less bring that future into existence. In the fourteenth century, European states still lacked the level of centralization for which nation states would later strive, and the “Age of Empire” similarly had yet to emerge on the continent. The Church stood alone as a guiding institution with influence capable of transcending regional boundaries. I will elaborate on the specific functions and attributes of the fourteenth-century Catholic Church later in this paper. Nonetheless, I can go no further without emphasizing its astounding entrenchment across Europe that required an event as dramatic as the Black

Death to inspire even limited change; clerical ownership of death emerged largely unscathed.

No discussion of the Black Death as an interruptive force in European history would be complete without recognition of the tremendous and varied body of scholarship that has been conducted on this topic. For nearly seven centuries, the fourteenth century's Black Death epidemic has captivated students of history, medicine, art, and countless other fields, producing a seemingly endless body of work on the spread, manifestation, and aftermath of the disease. In recent decades, a trend has emerged as a significant number of historians have sought to redefine the Black Death as a European watershed, marking a momentous turning point in the continent's history that set it on the path towards modernity. Proponents of this theory treat the plague as a disruptive force in European history that undeniably altered its trajectory and examine the dramatic impact of this process on the role of the Church. However, most works advancing this theme take an extremely wide view of the shifts towards a more modern society that emerged in the aftermath of the plague, often attempting to establish a causal link between the epidemic and subsequent historical developments such as the Renaissance.

This paper offers several fine, but significant, divergences from these works. It acknowledges that the disruptive role of the Black Death in Europe's traditional relationship with the Church acts as a moment of rapid reevaluation of longstanding institutions. However, this does not necessarily imply the dawn of an inevitable march to modernity. Furthermore, by grounding its analysis in the literary record of the post-

plague era, this paper seeks to avoid the irresolvable statistical debates that afflict so many analyses of this subject. In a similar vein, and perhaps most importantly, this paper suggests that the existing causal forms of analysis tend to lose sight of the critical agency of those who persevered through this catastrophe with the fortitude and awareness to begin questioning centuries of established tradition surrounding the function of the Church.¹³

Literature Review:

John Aberth:

John Aberth stands out among the proponents of the aforementioned trend of modernization analysis. In *From the Brink of Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages*, his comprehensive history of the array of disasters to strike fourteenth century Europe, Aberth invokes the symbolism of the four horsemen to tell a “story of men and women who faced a daunting and fearful series of crises but faced them squarely, carrying on with their lives and proving remarkable resilient in the process.”¹⁴ With this admirable task in mind, Aberth presents a detailed history of humanity and endurance in the face of disaster. Particularly in relaying the failings of church officials and spiritual leaders and the public response thereof, Aberth’s narrative proves complex, compelling and highly informative to this study. However, his

¹³ For the purposes of this paper, critical agency refers to the ability of individuals within plague-era Europe to openly express critical thoughts and beliefs, specifically towards the Catholic Church.

¹⁴ John Aberth, *From the Brink of Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 5.

wide lens of analysis lends itself to controversy in several crucial areas that must be addressed when using his work as a source.

For example, Aberth wades deep into a debate about the casualty figures caused by the Black Death. Sweeping rapidly through the European population with near certainty of death for anyone infected, estimates suggest the Black Death reduced the continent's population by thirty to sixty percent.¹⁵ Setting aside the most likely exaggerated accounts from many fourteenth and fifteenth century observers who offer astronomical, yet unsupported figures, most experts place the total closer to the thirty percent estimate. However, as many historians before him have also erred, Aberth disputes this figure and contends that the true mortality rate was much higher. Ironically, Aberth introduces this claim by referencing a case of exaggerated casualties. He refers to Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, among the most important pieces of plague-era literature, and points out the impossibility of the Florentine death rates that Boccaccio records as an example of the tendency of survivors to inflate estimates. In response to this inflationist pattern, Aberth asks "would a 33-percent death rate inspire the degree of hyperbole to be found in the medieval chronicles?"¹⁶ While some contemporary research indicates that the reality may have been an average death rate of approximately fifty percent, close consideration of Aberth's question should produce a resounding yes in response.

¹⁵ Suzanne Austin Alchon, *A Pest in the Land: New World Epidemics in a Global Perspective* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 21.

¹⁶ John Aberth, *From the Brink of Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 90.

Acknowledging Aberth's argument that most medieval records invariably focused on adult men and left those more vulnerable to plague often unrecorded, for the purposes of his study and this one, the difference in the death rates is essentially negligible. Aberth claims that "the numerical percentages are actually quite important, because they determine how much of an impact the Black Death may have had upon late medieval society."¹⁷ This may be the case, but it seems that by taking such a broad ranging approach to his study of the fourteenth century, Aberth has lost sight of the lived experience of those who endured it. His dismissal of the idea that "only a third of Europe's population was carried off during the first outbreak of plague between 1347 and 1353" constitutes a "low average mortality" significantly underestimates the impact that a thirty-three percent death rate would have had on the population of Europe.¹⁸ Readers need only imagine one in every three members of their community being plucked from the face of the earth to imagine the depth of the social and psychological impact attributable to plague even with such a "low" mortality rate. This is to say nothing of the veritable ghost towns created even in regions with a rate of thirty-three percent.

When evaluating the experience of the society that withstood the Black Death, some historians have simplified the experience of individuals in favor of streamline theories of continuity between the Black Death as a watershed and the developments that modernized Europe after the fourteenth century. Aberth strays onto this path with

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid

a series of claims made to demonstrate that the Black Death “overall had a positive impact on late medieval society.”¹⁹ I would classify Aberth’s “silver linings” stance as an oversimplification and instead suggest that survivors of plague endured the devastation and responded to the resulting opportunities in ways that furnished a long-term positive effect. This small distinction seeks to restore the agency of plague survivors to the conversations within which they are so integral, and to offer a complication to the theories put forward by Aberth and his peers that fabricate an inevitable course of history that can be attributed directly to the Black Death. Kevin Hughes of Villanova University summarizes this point with his observation that “Aberth’s concluding suggestions that late medieval miseries led to a sort of stoic resolve to ‘wrest hope from despair’ (263), and thus prepared the way for the Renaissance...strikes one less as a new ‘scholarly consensus’ (262) than as a retooled Whig theory.”²⁰ Ann Carmichael levies a similar criticism of Aberth’s more recent publication, *Plagues in World History*, contesting that his “immediate dismissal of pre-Neolithic ‘legacy diseases’ betrays his old-style Western European orientation to the topic.”²¹

David Herlihy:

Despite these criticisms, it is worth acknowledging the tremendous scholarship offered by Aberth in much of his work and noting that he is not alone in his

¹⁹ Ibid, 206.

²⁰ Kevin Hughes, review of *From the Brink of Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages* by John Aberth, *Church History* 72 (2003), 649.

²¹ Ann G. Carmichael, review of *Plagues in World History* by John Aberth. *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 43, (2012).

interpretation of plague as an inevitable driver of European history. Most famously, David Herlihy, whose work Aberth himself expressed a desire to complicate, contended in a short book published after his death in 1991 that the Black Death broke Europe free from a “Malthusian deadlock” and “allowed Europeans to rebuild their demographic and economic systems in ways more admmissive of further development,” as well as preparing the “road to [cultural] renewal.”²² While Herlihy’s summary certainly includes the seeds of several widely accepted observations surrounding the legacy of the Black Death, to a much greater degree than Aberth he presents a causal narrative that fails to account for the generations of countless variables that separate the outbreak of plague from the modern societies for which he attempts to give the virus credit. Analyzing the response to and recovery from the Black Death in order to draw a direct and inevitable causal link between the disease and the development of modern European society requires historians to take a broad, telescopic view. Undoubtedly, the efforts of these historians, including Aberth and Herlihy, have done much to reveal the modernizing effect of the response to the Black Death, but the work is far from complete. While this approach has certainly produced insights into the history of the plague and its effects on society and religion, the lived experience of individuals tends to be the first thing lost in this methodology, and this paper argues that it is precisely those individuals whose response to this historical moment altered the role of the Church in Europe.

The Church Before the Plague:

²² David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997,) 81.

As previously mentioned, generations of scholars struggled with the concept of the medieval period as some kind of “Dark Ages.” While the term has largely gone out of fashion as a descriptor for the Middle Ages, it has deeply ingrained in the mainstream collective memory the belief that the centuries after the fall of Rome, which marked the end of classical antiquity, witnessed a degeneration within European society. Subsequently, this implies that the dawn of the Renaissance heralding the return of classical culture through humanism. Ernst Cassirer and Francis Johnson et al. remind us that drawing clear temporal lines separating the Middle Ages from the Renaissance is far from a simple task, as “factual historical facts cut across and extend over each other in the most complicated manner.”²³ Proceeding, then, with caution, by the fourteenth century it still appears as though individual states could not wholly fill the power vacuum where Rome once held sway. Instead, the Catholic Church stands out as the most consistent, culturally-unifying authority across the European continent, particularly with regards to health.

The Church exerted influence over all aspects of the lives of its followers during this period, blurring the lines between spiritual and secular. Rivka Feldhay explains that individuals willingly assented to “divine authority” to such an extent that Thomas Aquinas saw fit to declare that “The universal Church cannot err’... ‘since she is governed by the Holy Ghost, who is the Spirit of truth.’”²⁴ This unwavering societal

²³ Ernst Cassirer and Francis R. Johnson et al., “Some Remarks on the Question of the Originality of the Renaissance,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 4 (1973), 55.

²⁴ Rivka Feldhay, “Authority, Political Theology, and the Politics of Knowledge in the Transition from Medieval to Early Modern Catholicism,” *Social Research* 73 (2006), 1071.

valuation of faith granted the Church near-singular authority over fundamental aspects of European society such as education, medicine, and most importantly death; by the time the Black Death had swept through Europe in 1353, only one of these would remain unchanged. To understand the position of the Church prior to the Reformation, one must consider the ways in which laypeople gained access to the word of God. Until Martin Luther declared his opposition to the Catholic Church in favor of individuals' relationships with God, the Bible existed almost solely in Latin, a language that few outside the Church could understand. Thus, it fell to Catholic officials to interpret the text and communicate it to the public, granting Church leaders incredible leeway to shape divine mandates however they saw fit. Given the risk of their faith and souls non-clerical Europeans hesitated to challenge the Church's monopoly of functions now performed by most modern states.

The Church as a Public Health Institution:

During the medieval era, public health primarily existed at the level of cities, where community organization and legal statutes sought to protect local populations and labor forces. The statutes tended to focus on sanitation and early attempts at quarantining practices, and while the Church rarely drafted those laws themselves it played an instrumental role in their implementation and legitimacy. In a collaboration between six scholars examining medieval public health statutes, Anja Petaros and her colleagues argue that "religion has often acted as a mediator between public opinion and public health" and "society has certainly used the strong relationship between the population and the institution of the church to implement certain provisions in its legal

system and to increase respect for these laws.”²⁵ This seemingly passive role of the Church in public health proved deeply consequential to the everyday lived experiences of individuals in medieval communities. Adherence to local sanitation ordinances requiring participation in the maintenance of public spaces, for instance, was no more appealing in the fourteenth century than it would be today. However, support for those laws by the Church added a spiritual imperative for members of the public that inspired compliance with those public health efforts.

This relationship between the Church and localized public health policies proved beneficial to the Church as well as cities and townships. Petaros and her coauthors describe a mutual benefit between the Church and government authorities, as the health laws for which the Church rallied public support and respect directly protected its own properties and often targeted spiritual groups that distracted from Christian devotion such as “practitioners of magic arts, herbalists, [and] witches.”²⁶ They explicitly argue that in promoting witch trials the Church framed the persecution of its rivals as “a struggle to rescue the health of the entire European population and to protect it from extermination.”²⁷ This demonstrates the degree to which the Church established its role as a public health institution by linking health practices to its own legitimacy and authority in ways that benefitted the Church socially, spiritually, and even politically, while simultaneously facilitating support for medieval public health laws. That

²⁵ Anja Petaros et al., “Public Health Problems in the Medieval Statutes of Croatian Adriatic Coastal Towns: From Public Morality to Public Health,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 52 (2013), 535.

²⁶ Ibid, 536-7.

²⁷ Ibid, 536.

relationship seeped into the foundations of medicine in medieval Europe, affecting civilians and medical professionals alike, who looked to Catholic institutions for guidance on medicine and all other areas of public health. The practice of deference to the Church in matters of health reached a climax in 1347 when the Black Death pandemic reached Europe, threatening communities and their inhabitants across Europe to a historic degree.

The Church during the Plague:

Public Expectations:

The Church's position as the guarantor of physical and spiritual health inspired a widespread public belief that Europeans placed their faith in an institution whose spiritual leaders could keep them safe from harm.²⁸ For its part, the Church did little to interrupt this mythos, and in many ways encouraged it, even when confronted with medical challenges it found itself ill-equipped to solve. This became the great predicament of the Church in the 1340s, but it was by no means a stranger to plague by the fourteenth century, and this was not the first time it had failed to fulfill the public's expectations surrounding it. For example, in 603 imaginative literary descriptions and the amalgamated liturgical accounts culminated in the *Legenda aurea* in which a brave [Pope] Gregory marched through the city in order to convince the archangel Michael to

²⁸ For an interesting comparison from pre-colonial Africa regarding the role of health and healing, both physical and spiritual, as factors conferring sovereignty and political authority see: Neil Kodesh, "Political Leaders as Public Healers" in *Beyond the Royal Gaze: Clanship and Public Healing in Buganda* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press: 2010), 98-130.

sheath his sword and to end the plague, even as Romans fell dead in the streets.”²⁹

Pope Gregory, simultaneously regarded “as the last Roman of Rome... and the first medieval pope”³⁰ exemplified the symbolic protection and practical helplessness that defined the Church’s interaction with the plague in 1347. This Justinian Plague struck Europe in the sixth century, during the prosperous reign of East Roman emperor Justinian I, who oversaw what classics scholar Kyle Harper has termed the “grandest building spree in Christian history.”³¹ Much like the Europeans confronted with the Black Death eight centuries later, Justinian subscribed to a “punitive theology” that believed divine anger with widespread sin resulted in cataclysms such as plague, a stance derived from his declaration that “we are accustomed to consider God in everything that we do.”³² If, as most Christian Europeans believed, it was a failure of spiritual life that brought divine wrath in the form of the plague, it was only natural to look to the Church, the gatekeeper of all spiritual life, for salvation.

Clerical Response:

²⁹ Plague here refers to the Justinian Plague, a sixth century outbreak described by Anthony Kaldellis as the “worst disaster in all of Byzantine history,” which was only in 2013 revealed to have been caused by *Yersinia pestis*, the same bacteria that caused the three strains of plague encompassing the Black Death in the fourteenth Century; Jacob A. Latham, “Inventing Gregory ‘the Great’: Memory Authority, and the Afterlives of the Letania Septiformis,” *Church History* 84 (2015), 3.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 1.

³¹ Kyle Harper, “6 ways climate change and disease helped topple the Roman Empire,” *Vox* (November 4, 2017).

³² Anthony Kaldellis, “The Literature of Plague and the Anxieties of Piety in Sixth-Century Byzantium” in *Piety and Plague From Byzantium to the Baroque*, ed. Franco Mormando and Thomas Worcester, (Kirkville: Truman State University Press, 2007), 5.

The Church, however, had no remedies to treat patients or stop the spread of the Black Death. Centuries before the confirmation of and subsequent treatment options deriving from germ theory, no inhabitant of fourteenth century Europe, churchmen or otherwise, would have any way of understanding what the plague truly was, how it killed so quickly, and why it spread so fast. This is not to say that medical efforts constituted mere guesses, though this could very well be the case in some instances. Medieval historian Samuel Cohn goes as far as arguing that by 1348, when faced with the full might of the Black Death, “prayer, repentance and recognition of church authority were the best doctors could possibly prescribe.”³³ The doctors and clergy members who did attempt to apply “treatments” to the infected largely believed in the efficacy of their medical knowledge, but their best remedies came from mistaken premises. For example, in his widely-reproduced poem “a diet and doctrine for pestilence” John Lydgate, a renowned English monk and poet during the late-fourteenth to mid-fifteenth centuries, offered guidance such as:

Whoever wishes to be healthy, protect himself against sickness,
And resist being struck down by plague,
Should try to be happy and avoid sadness entirely;
Flee from bad air, indeed avoid the presence
of infected places that can cause harm.
Drink good wine and eat healthy foods;
Smell Sweet things and for his own protection
Walk in clean air and avoid black mists.³⁴

³³ Samuel K Cohn, “Popular Insurrection and the Black Death: A Comparative View,” *Past & Present* 2 (2007), 202.

³⁴ John Lydgate, “A diet and doctrine for pestilence.” In *The Black Death*, ed. Joseph P. Byrne (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004) 162.

A twenty-first century audience may find Lydgate's instructions easy to disregard as pure fiction, but when Lydgate and his contemporaries delivered messages like these they carried with them the authority of Europe's most powerful institution, an institution unprepared to adapt when its traditional remedies failed.

Despite their ineffectiveness, no shortage of such remedies existed. As Ernest Gilman notes "plague produces a cornucopian medical literature full of cures and preservations as useless as they are exotic."³⁵ The previous passage of Lydgate's demonstrates the common belief in miasma theory that bad air may have been a cause of disease. Some of his suggestions proved even less medically effective, going so far as to advise that one "have nothing to do with older, sensual women and practice abstinence from gluttony," all in the pursuit of three overarching remedies: "a glad heart, troubled by few cares;/ a moderate diet, which is wholesome for all creatures;/ and most importantly, not worrying about things."³⁶ Unfortunately, between the Black Death, recurring famines, the waging of the Hundred Years' War, and a period of global cooling in the Little Ice Age, not worrying about things rarely presented itself as an option to fourteenth century Europeans.³⁷ When reflecting on the London plague outbreaks of the seventeenth century, Gilman observes a "traumatic crack" in the realm

³⁵ Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 64.

³⁶ John Lydgate, "A diet and doctrine for pestilence." In *The Black Death*, ed. Joseph P. Byrne (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004) 163-4.

³⁷ James Goldsmith, a professor of history at the University of Oklahoma, describes these crises, particularly the Hundred Years War, Black Death, and grain shortages as the driving factors in the historiographical trend towards a crises-focused approach to the fourteenth century.

of plague theodicy, as survivors began to question “how could the death of a quarter of London’s population in a few summer months be the work of a just and merciful God?”³⁸ This question offers an opportunity to emphasize the change over time in European reactions to the plague. In the fourteenth century, this direct questioning of central Church doctrines paled in comparison to questioning of society’s role in causing its own misfortune. Thus, at this time Gilman’s question would likely have been rephrased as, “what could we have done to provoke such devastation from our just and merciful God?”



Figure 1.1: “The Dance of Death” Produced in 1493 by printmaker Michael Wolgemut, displaying the motif of the *Danse Macabre* that gained widespread popularity during the Black Death epidemic due to the omnipresence of death. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Wolgemut#/media/File:Danse_macabre_by_Michael_Wolgemut.png

³⁸ Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 64-5.

The possible answers that emerged to this question are endless. The proposed solutions, relate directly to the perceptions of the Church's ability to function effectively as a public health institution. Some sought to punish the "undesirables" who they felt brought divine wrath upon their society. Within Europe, "the relationship between Jews and Christians had been marked by anger, hate, and suspicion," making Jewish populations highly susceptible to periodic assaults through violent pogroms.³⁹ Other portions of the population sought to punish themselves. The Church had long promoted penance as a necessary component of combatting epidemics, but as is so often the case in times of extreme fear, groups emerged that took the sentiment too far. A highly theatrical, self-castigating collection of groups known as the Flagellants rapidly gained attention. Wandering bands of Flagellants would travel from town to town and publicly flog themselves in front of large crowds. Claiming that pain and the destruction of the flesh offered an extreme form of penance in response to God's extreme choice of punishment, the Flagellants mixed violent spectacle with prayer in an attempt to save all of Christendom from the plague, and rapidly drew desperate and enthusiastic supporters from throughout European society.⁴⁰

To an extent, the Catholic Church embraced these efforts at first, much as they had in the thirteenth century when a similar movement emerged in response to famine and crop failures. This support vanished as quickly as it was given. As Herlihy notes,

³⁹ Peter M. Marendy, "Anti-Semitism, Christianity, and the Catholic Church: Origins, Consequences, and Responses" *Journal of Church and State* 47 (2005), 289.

⁴⁰ John Aberth, *From the Brink of Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 140-42.

“these men seemed to be supplanting the clergy in the role of intermediaries between the heaven and earth. This the Church could not allow,” and although it was too late to quell the movement entirely Pope Clement VI officially condemned the movement in October of 1349.⁴¹ Similarly, in 1348 the Church took an official stance against persecutory violence towards Jews and local efforts to blame them for the arrival of the Black Death. While certain figures in the Church may not have held the level of contempt for these responses that their official stances may indicate, it becomes clear that the Church sought, above all else, to maintain order across the continent. This meant subduing such radical groups as the anti-Semitic mobs carrying out pogroms and the Flagellants, and in turn disavowing their proposed solutions to the plague through ethnic and racial persecution and repentant self-violence respectively. However, while the Church could easily oppose remedies arising from the public, it has already been established that clergy members themselves possessed few to offer. This ultimate shortcoming laid the foundation for a monumental shift in European thinking away from centuries of clerical deference, particularly regarding health, to a world in which those meant to guide the population’s relationship with God were often incapable of doing so, beleaguered by the same vices and shortcomings as anyone else. This development following the Black Death coincided with a wave of popular insurrections across Europe. In Italy alone, over sixty cities—including the Papal States— revolted against the Church

⁴¹ David Herlihy. *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997) 68.

by 1375, at least temporarily overthrowing its authority inside their borders.⁴² This development emerges as a central theme in the most iconic piece of plague literature produced in the fourteenth century: Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

The *Decameron*:

Written immediately following the epidemic of the 1340s, Boccaccio's *Decameron* provides uniquely proximate and revealing insight into his society's changing attitudes towards the church in the aftermath of the Black Death. Following ten narrators over ten days, this iconic work unfolds as its characters attempt to escape Boccaccio's native Florence, a city severely affected by plague. Each narrator receives one day to tell ten stories about a particular theme, ranging from comedies to love stories to adventures for a total of 100 short stories in the collection. These stories describe, in sensational ways, an extraordinary range of the lived experiences of plague-era Europeans, but David Wallace observes that "the rules of rhetoric dictate that the most important parts of a work come first and last. [And] the first part of the *Decameron* describes, Petrarch notes, 'that siege of pestilence which forms so dark and melancholy a period in our century.'"⁴³ This reveals both how deeply Boccaccio's contemporaries perceived the effects of the plague in their world and how strongly Boccaccio himself viewed it as central to the impetus for this work. Despite the variation from day to day, several significant themes emerge repeatedly throughout the different

⁴² Samuel Cohn, "Popular Insurrection and the Black Death: A Comparative View," *Past & Present* 2 (2007), 200.

⁴³ Wallace, David, "Whan She Translated Was: A Chaucerian Critique of the Petrarchan Academy," In *Literary Practice and Social Change in Britain, 1380-1530*, edited by Lee Patterson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 176.

tales that draw attention to a shift in the perceptions of spirituality in Boccaccio's society: the capacity of individuals to find success and fortune through struggle and loss, avoidance of disaster through individual wit and skill, and most importantly, criticism and mockery of the Church's institutions and officials.

The title and plot of the very first tale of *The Decameron's* very first day, "Ciappelletto dupeth a holy friar with a false confession and dieth; and having been in his lifetime the worst of men, he is, after his death, reputed a saint and called Saint Ciappelletto," begins the one-hundred-story text with a poignant critique of Church practices.⁴⁴ Told by Panfilo, this satirical tale begins Boccaccio's narrative with a scathing attack on canonization and those who both call for and experience it. As the title indicates, the dishonest and crooked Ciappelletto becomes extremely ill and on his death bed deceives a local friar with a falsified tale of his life inflating his deeds and piety. Greatly moved by Ciappelletto's story, the friar relays it in a sermon to the town of Burgundy, whose inhabitants praise the criminal as a man of God and depict him forever as a saint.⁴⁵ A similar story unfolds in the first tale of the second day, as Neifile mentions an unremarkable yet holy German man named Arrigo. "In the hour of [Arrigo's] death, the bells of the great church of Treviso began to ring, without being pulled of any. The people of the city, accounting this a miracle, proclaimed Arrigo a saint."⁴⁶ These two satirical tales, at first glance unremarkable jokes at the expense of

⁴⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* Translated by John Payne (New York: Walter J. Black Inc., 1929), 16.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 24.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 50.

an easily hyperbolized practice, signify a remarkable shift in post-plague thought and culture. For a cherished Italian writer to forego the veneration of saints in favor of mockery and humor speaks to the weakened position of the Church's institutionalized practices within the societal consciousness of Boccaccio's Florence.

This weakness did not develop without cause or reason. In early cases of the Black Death, members of the clergy, true to tradition, faced the disease faithfully in accordance with their traditional duty to the public. As already discussed, their efforts could do little to save patients, and the astronomical rates of infection among churchmen visiting the sick quickly offset any spiritual comfort these men could offer. Faced with the overwhelming ineffectiveness of their efforts, many Church officials began to allow cowardice to outweigh faith in their own traditional roles and turned their backs on their congregants. Within Boccaccio's Florence, priests began refusing to hear confessions.⁴⁷ Across Europe this trend continued to grow until priests could no longer be relied upon to maintain traditional funeral practices and instead hastily buried the dead in mass graves to limit the spread of the contagion.⁴⁸

Much like the economic aftermath of the Black Death, in which the reduced population enjoyed an increase in individual wealth and opportunity for work, the high mortality rates among clergymen allowed for upward mobility within the Church, as officials capitalized on sudden openings of more profitable positions. This pattern

⁴⁷ John Aberth, *From the Brink of Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 120.

⁴⁸ David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 61.

contributed to a growing phenomenon of absenteeism within the Church. Priests abandoning their districts and congregations for safer and more prosperous areas grew so commonplace and harmful that leaders such as a series of archbishops of Canterbury introduced clerical legislation to “limit the wages priests received or curb their ‘leapfrogging’ to richer lives elsewhere.”⁴⁹ Even Pope Clement was not immune to bouts of absenteeism. On the advice of his physicians, he began appearing in public with decreasing frequency, drawing criticism that “the absence of the pope... meant the absence of God’s blessing ‘as a means of deliverance’ from the plague, especially at the head of prayers and processions that could placate ‘God’s anger and indignation.’”⁵⁰ The decrease of traditional funeral rites and the increase of absenteeism compounded the failure of doctors and clerics to offer any cure to the plague. These phenomena inspired a sense that not only was the Church helpless to save the European public, but that clerics may have abandoned their flocks entirely.

Boccaccio’s writing gives further voice to that sentiment, and to the mockery and criticism that followed. One striking aspect of the *Decameron* is that many of its stories involve positive endings, and the factors that produced these pleasant resolutions would have appeared strange to Boccaccio’s contemporaries. Across one-hundred different stories, written by a man watching nearly seventy percent of his city succumb to the Black Death, the jubilant and triumphant tones that conclude so many tales are not attributed to God. Instead, resilience, cleverness, wit, ingenuity, love and other

⁴⁹ John Aberth, *From the Brink of Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 121

⁵⁰ Ibid.

human attributes bring success to Boccaccio's characters. In many ways, the *Decameron* reads as a triumph of individualism and human capacity, hallmarks of the Renaissance that would later begin in Boccaccio's home city. In the *Decameron* members of the Church came off as incompetent at best, and often avaricious and lustful; this is so particularly in the charged fifth tale of the *Decameron's* seventh day. Narrated by Fiammetta, the story relates a timeless tale in which a husband, jealous of his wife's suspected affair, takes up the mantle of a priest to lure her into false confession, only to learn that her mystery lover is a priest himself. When the cuckolded husband laid in wait one night to catch the pair in the act, the priest snuck in through the roof to make love to the man's wife while the indignant spouse stood guard at the front door.⁵¹ Similarly, in the second story of the eighth day, of a lustful and illiterate priest takes yet another married woman as his lover.⁵² Boccaccio did not confine his humor regarding clerical philandering only to men of faith. In the second story of the penultimate day, Elissa speaks of an abbess who wakes up in the pitch black of night to humiliate and punish a younger nun under her charge in bed with her lover. However, the abbess mistakenly wraps her head with the pants of a priest with whom she herself had been in bed, thus exposing both women, while the rest of the nuns "who were loverless pushed their fortunes in secret, as best they knew."⁵³ Limited to attacks on the individuals who

⁵¹ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. John Payne, (New York: Walter J. Black Inc., 1929), 341.

⁵² *Ibid*, 368.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 435.

occupied Church offices, these tales nevertheless painted a damaging picture of the Church's servants rarely found prior to the Black Death.

Through hindsight colored by the horrors and resentments of plague, the Church's increasing prosperity and corruption did not escape notice. James Goldsmith recalls that "the social elite... the bishops, canons, monks and nobles... drew their revenues from a variety of sources: from the tithe, seigneurial dues and the proceeds of justice; increasingly, from royal, ducal or comital office; from nonseigneurial rentes of various sorts; and from domain farms."⁵⁴ Through these practices the Church had accrued vast quantities of wealth prior to 1347, which in turn financed lavish and decadent lifestyles for many Church officials. This process often avoided comment from laymen until the Church's response to the plague left it vulnerable, a phenomenon depicted in the second tale of day one of the *Decameron* when a Jew named Abraham decides to evaluate his friend's counsel that he convert to Christianity by traveling to Rome to "enquire into the manners and fashions of the Pope and Cardinals and other prelates... [and] found all, from the highest to lowest, most shamefully given to the sin of lust... [and] perceived them to be universally gluttons, wine-bibbers, drunkards and slaves to their bellies."⁵⁵ In another moment of criticism through comedy, Boccaccio reveals that Abraham chooses to become a Christian anyway, exclaiming to his companion that since the Church continues to grow and prosper despite such rampant

⁵⁴ James L. Goldsmith, "The Crisis of the Late Middle Ages: The Case of France," *French History* 9 (1995), 431.

⁵⁵ Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, trans. John Payne, (New York: Walter J. Black Inc., 1929), 27.

vice and excess in its leaders, God must truly favor Christians above all others. This humorous tale, presented so early in the *Decameron*, offers both a concise appraisal of the Church's hypocritical hedonism and a comical evaluation of its followers who willingly overlooked such excesses for centuries.

Herlihy and Aberth read the *Decameron* more as a tale of individuals fleeing and abandoning cities and basic morality out of fear. For example, "in periods of plague, towns typically closed their gates to travelers... and tried to expel beggars, prostitutes, and other undesirables from their midst."⁵⁶ Aberth extends this discussion to an abandonment of loved ones and relatives. I do not dispute this phenomenon, but I question whether this should be the most important thing to take away from the source. The abandonment of cities and relatives was not a permanent development or response to the Black Death. If we wish to understand the legacy of the plague on European societies, *The Decameron's* passages about the characters' mockery, criticism, and opposition to the Church are much more relevant and informative. Rather than solely condemning those who abandon their homes and responsibilities, these passages offer a unique understanding through what is criticized, and what is omitted. While Boccaccio shows no hesitation to satirize the Catholic Church's officials and vices, his characters retain a respect for Christianity's authority over the afterlife and the souls of the dead, as evidenced by the absence of these subjects from his humorous critiques. This is further supported by the powerful desire of survivors to return to traditional

⁵⁶ David Herlihy, *The Black Death and the Transformation of the West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 66-7

funeral and memorial practices as quickly as possible when an area became safe again, something that Herlihy observes himself.

The Canterbury Tales:

Writing in a similar vein as Boccaccio, and heavily influenced by his work, Geoffrey Chaucer, perhaps the most widely renowned English poet of the Middle Ages wrote the *Canterbury Tales*, his most famous work, in 1387. Heavily borrowing its structure from *The Decameron*, *The Canterbury Tales* consists of a series of tales told by a group of travelers on their way from London, Chaucer's hometown, to Canterbury. Chaucer survived the plague himself in 1349 but lost the majority of his mother's family to the disease.⁵⁷ While only the Pardoner's Tale refers to the plague directly, "in the wake of the Black Death, Chaucer's company of survivors wends its way from the *taverna* to the *tabernaculum* (and symbolically, from the earthly to the heavenly city) to venerate the saint."⁵⁸ This premise introduces a crucial element to understanding Chaucer as a source on both the fervor and limitations of post-plague religious criticism. Within the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer continues the work of Boccaccio in sharply denouncing the practices of the Catholic Church, but he remained a faithful Christian throughout his life.

⁵⁷ Ernest B. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 32.

⁵⁸ Chaucer wrote the *Canterbury Tales* as a frame narrative similar to Boccaccio, but instead of each narrator telling a different story everyday on the theme set forth for that day, Chaucer's tales cover a massive range of subjects, and each one is titled after the occupation of the pilgrim telling that story; *Ibid*, 49, 237.

Throughout his collection of stories, Chaucer highlights the rampant corruption and excess within the institutions of the Catholic Church and the individuals who make such abuses possible. For example, in the fourteenth section of the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer mocks one of his narrators known as the Pardoner. Pardoners served the Church as peddlers of indulgences, commercialized reductions of “the amount of punishment one has to undergo for sins.”⁵⁹ By the time of the Reformation, this practice had come under intense scrutiny, particularly from Martin Luther, but in this section of his book, Chaucer reveals that such opposition emerged over a century earlier in the aftermath of plague. During the Pardoner’s Prologue and Tale, Chaucer portrays this narrator as painfully unreliable and shameful. The Pardoner openly confesses to unapologetically tricking people into giving him their money by preaching the evils of greed,⁶⁰ and he proves capable of doing this because he is backed by the religious authority of his position, granting legitimacy to his deceptions. In the Pardoner’s Tale, he goes on to speak of three young men who meet their death collectively out of greed, the very sin that the Pardoner exploits for his personal gain.⁶¹ Despite the ridicule thrown at the Pardoner by the Host of Chaucer’s pilgrims, and the countless other examples of corrupt Church figures scattered throughout the *Tales*, Chaucer concludes the book by remaining true to his own identity as a devout Christian. In a final section titled only the “Retraction,” Chaucer declares that:

⁵⁹ Edward Peters, *A Modern Guide to Indulgences: Rediscovering This Often-Misinterpreted Teaching* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2008), 13.

⁶⁰ Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, trans. F. N. Robinson in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), 148-9.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 150-5.

“preye I to hem alle that herkne this
Litel tretys or rede, that if ther be any thyng
In it that liketh hem, that therof they thanken
Oure Lord jhesu crist, of whom procedeth al
Wit and al goodnesse. And if there be any
Thyg that displease hem, I preye hem also that
They arrette⁶² it to the defaute of myn unkonnyge⁶³,
and nat to my wyl, that wolde ful fayn
Have seyde better if I hadde had konnyng⁶⁴ „⁶⁵

By attributing all that is good in the *Tales* to Jesus, and assuming the blame for anything interpreted otherwise, Chaucer clears his conscience of any religious guilt, reaffirms his faith in God, and establishes a firm line between his critiques of the Church’s institutions and messengers and his genuine beliefs from which he derives this criticism.

This distinction laid out by Chaucer marks a significant limitation to the transformative effect of the Black Death and its aftermath on European religious thought. As Boccaccio and Chaucer’s writings suggest, the abject failure of the Church to protect the European people from the medical and spiritual harms of the Black Death created an atmosphere rife for clerical criticism. Writers, artists, and anonymous laypeople alike expressed unprecedented degrees of skepticism and loss of faith in the capability and virtue of church figures. However, 156 years stand between 1353, when the worst period of the Black Death ended, and 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of the All Saints’ Church in Wittenberg; several

⁶² blame

⁶³ wit

⁶⁴ cunning

⁶⁵ Ibid, 265.

generations separate the outbreak of the Plague from the onset of the Reformation. Those intervening generations would each interact with and adapt the religious legacy of the plague, and the Reformation was not the inevitable result. The Black Death fundamentally altered the ways in which Europeans began to view those within the Church, but it did not immediately light the fires of religious revolution, and it does a deep disservice to our collective understanding of the past when children are taught that “the anger and resentment at the church’s inability to stop the plague... set the stage for the Reformation, where many abuses and superstitions were largely swept out of the church.”⁶⁶ This interpretation of the plague’s legacy fails to account for an enormous aspect of the Church’s domain that remained largely untouched by the Black Death: the afterlife.

As the threat of plague gradually subsided, Europeans cast a noticeably more critical eye towards those among them meant to interpret and communicate the will of God, but they also accepted a return to spiritual normalcy especially regarding death—an area for which commoners had no alternative understandings. This becomes visible by the fifteenth century in “funeral ritual imagery... [suggesting] a manifestation of the

⁶⁶ Jim Ollhoff, *A History of Germs: The Black Death* (Edina: ABDO Publishing Company, 2010), 29. While this book is intended to serve as a survey of Black Death for elementary schoolers, offering sweeping connections such as this one embeds such logical lapses into popular conceptions of the past. Certainly, it is reasonable to limit the details taught to children, but it seems irresponsible to equate the Black Death and the Reformation in such a linear, causal manner.

intense psychological need within European society to restore the religious and social traditions of funeral and burial that were disrupted by the Black Death.”⁶⁷

The *Pearl Poem*:

The anonymously authored *Pearl Poem* offers another source of literature that serves as a foil to Boccaccio and a continuation of Chaucer’s concluding deference to the true Christian faith.⁶⁸ Recent scholarship provides compelling arguments that the poem can be dated to the 1390s, several decades into the recovery period from the Black Death outbreak.⁶⁹ The poem centers on a grieving father, deeply depressed by the death of a woman assumed to be his daughter, presumably of plague. When confronted by the ghost of his pearl⁷⁰ in a dream, the father decries the injustice of the Christian world, but is offered reassurance and comfort by his daughter from the afterlife. She describes her apparent setting by saying “Hereinne to lenge forever and play/ Ther mys nee mornynge com never nere.”⁷¹ David Coley observes that within the poem “Christian soteriology [the study of salvation] offers the maker of *Pearl* a way to write about the pandemic that we now call the Black Death, a means of relating and subduing the

⁶⁷ Gloria Fiero, quoted in Elina Gertsman, “Visualizing Death: Medieval Plagues and the Macabre,” in *Piety and Plague From Byzantium to the Baroque* ed. Franco Mormando and Thomas Worcester (Kirkville: Truman State University, 2007), 65.

⁶⁸ No conclusive identity has yet been uncovered regarding the author of this poem, but it is widely accepted that was written by the same author as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

⁶⁹ Andrew Breeze, “*Pearl* and the Plague of 1390-93,” *Neophilologus: An International Journal of Modern and Medieval Language and Literature* 98 (2014), 337-41.

⁷⁰ Throughout the poem the author uses the term pearl to refer to the man’s deceased daughter.

⁷¹ *Pearl*, ed. Sarah Stansbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 5: the second line translates to “where neither loss nor mourning” ever come near

unfathomable cultural and personal losses of the disease and, furthermore, a means of offering solace to his presumably courtly audience and public.”⁷² While Boccaccio, Chaucer, and many of their contemporaries expressed a public turn against the corruption and shortcomings of Church’s officials and institutions, the *Pearl* poet reminds us that faith in the Church’s monopoly over salvation and the afterlife remained unshaken, if not strengthened by the omnipresence of death that arose through the Black Death and the horrors of the fourteenth century.

Aberth claims that “the idea that plague engendered a popular reaction against the Church that eventually led to the Reformation, particularly in England, had once been championed by an older generation of scholars such as G. G. Coulton and A. G. Dickens, but by now this is a very sterile debate.”⁷³ Aberth correctly problematizes the direct linkage of the Black Death to the Reformation. However, when discussing the immediate aftermath of the pandemic perhaps amending the argument to include my claim that the popular reaction remained limited to the Church’s officials and institutions, rather than its teachings and monopoly on the afterlife would allay his concerns. In fact, much of Aberth’s evidence of the Church’s “seemingly satisfied community” comes through examination of last wills and testaments.⁷⁴ In actuality, his research does not negate the dissatisfaction with priests and ministers who failed to fulfill their duty when confronted with the Black Death, but rather reaffirms my

⁷² David K. Coley, “*Pearl* and the Narrative of Pestilence,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 35 (2013).

⁷³ John Aberth, *From the Brink of Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 126.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

contention that, in the realm of death, the Church maintained its dominant role in European society. The widespread practice of leaving sums of money to the Church in wills served a similar purpose to the purchasing of indulgences, preservation of the eternal soul, which indisputably remained the realm of the Church in the eyes of the European public.

Conclusion:

As the Black Death reached the pinnacle of its rampage across Europe, individuals were only prepared to question the material figures and practices before them. Beginning to unravel the basic Christian thought that shaped the ways in which Europeans understood the world would come later, as new generations built on the transformative momentum sparked by those who survived the Black Death of the fourteenth century in ways wholly their own. The fact that Martin Luther could rally a following against the sale of indulgences implies that by the sixteenth century much of the public remained willing to purchase indulgences in the first place. But this should not be interpreted as evidence against the transformative influence of the Black Death in European religious thought. By the arrival of the disease, generations of reliance on the Church as a public health provider legitimized the institution and its officials. The perpetuation of this reality developed a path dependence that required a significant exogenous shock to disrupt. Where the *Pearl* poem shows the preservation of the Church's hold over salvation and eternity in the minds of Europeans, Boccaccio and Chaucer demonstrate that those Europeans who survived the Black Death would never again view the Church, its institutions, or its members in the same light they once had.

In doing so, the authors suggest the nature of the epidemic as a critical juncture in their societies. While this may not be the revelatory transformation at times suggested by historians who study this era, such a fundamental shift in thinking about Europe's most powerful institution cannot be understated. Seeing the position of such a powerful and enduring body shaken by a catastrophe completely beyond its control should help to reframe the ways in which historians look at disasters, not just as simple moments of change, but as moments of destabilization in which the people who survive them are able to make change if in no other way than through the challenging of long-held beliefs.

Chapter Two: Catching Fire: Clearing the Path for Conflict During London's Greatest Inferno

In 1665, London witnessed a resurgence of the Black Plague, as the disease ravaged the English countryside and wiped out a significant portion of London's population. Yet when Londoners consider the late-Stuart Period, this is not the disaster that comes to mind. Rather, the Great London Fire of 1666, only one year after the plague outbreak, delivered the trauma that captivates the public memory of tragedy in this period. Only six years after the restoration of the monarchy following the English Civil War of 1642-51, the fire ignited in an atmosphere of political uncertainty and international competition with popular sentiments of paranoia and suspicion. Like the Black Death in the fourteenth century, the London Fire significantly interacted with and impacted the dominant sociocultural norms of its time.

Unlike the Plague, however, the London Fire did not serve as a critical juncture interrupting a path dependence, but rather cleared the way for emerging ones: rising imperial tensions and anti-Catholic sentiment and paranoia. The former was expressed primarily by civilian Londoners in the streets, while members of Parliament pursued the latter, using the fire to attack the presence of Catholicism in the country and the monarchy itself. Although imperial rivalries and anti-Catholicism experienced tremendous growth before the first embers of the London Fire ever ignited, the chaos of the conflagration removed the societal structures that prevented everyday Londoners from taking part in that rivalry by providing an impetus for the population to fiercely express its opposition to foreign groups such as the French and the Dutch. Similarly, it

provided Parliament with a cause around which to orchestrate an attack in response to their fears of Catholic influence even on King Charles II himself.

In order to understand the broader meaning of the riots and targeted violence that erupted following the fire, it is important to establish the context of the changing power dynamics among the European empires that defined the early to mid-seventeenth century. Accordingly, this chapter will begin with a discussion by tracing the shift in the European balance of power following the Thirty Years' War and the resulting friction between the British, Dutch, and French empires. I will then briefly establish the fragile context of London in 1666, one year removed from a devastating plague outbreak, and less than a decade after the Restoration of the English Monarchy following the English Civil War and Cromwell's Protectorate. Following a short description of the course of the fire itself, I will then analyze the explosion of public paranoia and aggression towards England's imperial rivals through a close examination of the diaries of John Evelyn, Samuel Pepys, and a number of artistic productions produced after the fire. After a brief explanation of the standing anti-Catholic fears within the English Parliament at the time of the fire, I will similarly discuss the state response in the form of the parliamentary inquiry that sought to blame London's Catholics for a disaster that was almost undeniably a complete accident.

Shifting Imperial Tensions:

Spanish Decline:

Recent memory depicts Spain as a country plagued by debt, a collapsing economy, and internal strife brought on by intense conflict around the movement for

Catalonian independence. Students of the country's history, however will remember that, during the Age of Exploration, Spain rose to become one of the most powerful empires on the planet. Alongside the Portuguese, Spain's colonial holdings once outweighed most of Europe, far eclipsing the British, French, or Dutch. Prior to the Thirty Years' War, Spain possessed the most powerful empire in Europe.⁷⁵ At times, during its Zenith, this empire prompted the formation of coalitions between its fellow European powers in order to maintain some semblance of a power balance on the continent.

During the mid-Seventeenth century, Spain's position shifted, as a number of factors, political, economic, and military contributed to a significant decline in the empire. Perhaps most important among these contributors are: "Britain's victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588, the collapse of clerical supremacy during the Protestant Reformation, and defeat in the Thirty Years' War."⁷⁶ Together, these blows rendered the empire more vulnerable than it had been in over a century. A series of subsequent revolts within the empire marked the fatal tipping point. Spain would never again hold the title of Europe's greatest power. As Spain began its long and slow decline, it would leave a power vacuum in Europe, one that several nations stood ready to fill. France soon established itself as the dominant power on the continent itself, while England and the United Provinces of the Dutch Republic employed their vast nautical forces to compete for control of the seas. Together these flourishing empires stood ready to force

⁷⁵ Jason Farr, "Point: The Westphalia Legacy and the Modern Nation-State," *International Social Science Review* 80, no. 3-4 (2005), 158.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

a new era of imperialism onto the world, and they required equal readiness to combat each other in the process.

The Anglo-Dutch Wars:

While animosity was far from a new phenomenon between perennial enemies (and occasional allies) France and England, the rivalry rapidly became tinged with growing global implications, but in the immediate context of the Great Fire of London, the Dutch stole center-stage as the most direct threat to England. As the two most powerful maritime empires of the seventeenth century, English and Dutch were bound to clash over control of the seas, and escalating competition between the two resulted in two Anglo-Dutch Wars. As Gijs Rommelse and Roger Downing observe that most historians have taken the view that:

“Oliver Cromwell, during and after the English Civil War (1642–1651), had created a powerful fleet, which was deployed to enforce England’s claim of “sovereignty of the seas” and extend its overseas commerce. This resulted, in the United Provinces, in a reciprocal shipbuilding programme in order to defend the country’s doctrine of *mare liberum* and thereby its maritime trade. From this perspective, it was these incompatible material interests that caused the political and military partnership of recent decades against Habsburg Spain, and the religious and cultural traditions shared by the two countries, to give way to estrangement and enmity.”⁷⁷

In recent decades, historical scholarship has expanded to include the importance of ideological conflicts between the Dutch and English over dynastic allegiances (in the

⁷⁷ Gijs Rommelse and Roger Downing, “Victims of an Ideological Rift? Dutch Prisoners of War during the First Anglo-Dutch War (1652–1654),” *The Journal of Military History* 80 (2016), 650.

case of the First Anglo-Dutch War) and perceptions of anti-monarchism (during the Second Anglo-Dutch War) as central causes of the wars.⁷⁸

The First Anglo-Dutch War— taking place over two years during Cromwell’s Protectorate between 1652 and 1654— began the era of intense anti-Dutch sentiment within England. The conflict featured an intense campaign of propaganda within England, and while its effects are impossible to categorize conclusively, “there does appear to have been a general dislike of the Dutch, amounting to “Hollandophobia,” at this period.”⁷⁹ At the same time, a “military revolution at sea,” brought on by developments in technology and naval tactics, pushed the conflict further and further from the daily lives of English citizens.⁸⁰ This distance reduced the opportunities for involvement that average Londoners had regarding conflict with the Dutch, as Britain sent increasing amounts of resources and manpower to engage in combat further from London than earlier international conflicts. As a result, Londoners experienced little direct contact, and thus little direct engagement, with the battles or those fighting them. However, this distance would suddenly seem to vanish when London burst into flames in September of 1666. Expression of the “Hollandophobia” by lower-class Englishmen was further constrained by the limited duration of the war and the relatively rapid victory for the English. The same cannot be said of the Second Anglo-Dutch War,

⁷⁸ Ibid, 652.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 666.

⁸⁰ M. A. J. Palmer, “The ‘Military Revolution’ Afloat: The Era of the Anglo-Dutch Wars and the Transition to Modern Warfare at Sea,” *War in History* 4 (1997) 125.

which began in 1665, the same year plague ravaged the population of London, and ended in 1667, the year after the fire, with a victory for the Dutch.

Conflict over maritime supremacy and international trading dominance could not remain subdued for long after the First Anglo-Dutch War. In part due to influential English politicians and military leaders who sought to encourage conflict with the Dutch, by June of 1665, the two nations found themselves deeply embroiled in warfare once again.⁸¹ Despite enormous initial success for the English in the battle of Lowestoft in the opening days of the war, the Dutch recovered quickly, rebuilding their fleet and revitalizing their economy.⁸² Less than a year later, the English suffered increasing losses and expenses, made worse by the fear of a growing alliance between the Dutch and the French under the infamously-warlike King Louis XIV. In June of 1666, the English suffered a humiliatingly lopsided naval defeat against the Dutch in the Four Days' Battle, only a few months prior to the Great Fire, losing seventeen ships while sinking only four Dutch ships.⁸³ It was in this context of slowly losing an increasingly expensive war that London burst into flames the night of September 2, 1666.

The Ignition and Course of the fire, September 2-5, 1666:

⁸¹ Gijs Rommelse, "The role of mercantilism in Anglo-Dutch political relations, 1650–74," *Economic History Review* 63 (2010), 593.

⁸² Gijs Rommelse, "Prizes and Profits: Dutch Maritime Trade during the Second Anglo-Dutch War," *International Journal of Maritime History* XIX (2007), 152.

⁸³ M. A. J. Palmer, "The 'Military Revolution' Afloat: The Era of the Anglo-Dutch Wars and the Transition to Modern Warfare at Sea," *War in History* 4 (1997), 138.



Figure 2.1: Museum of London’s chronological map charting the spread of the Fire day-by-day in red. Pudding Lane (the fire’s point of origin) is slightly to the northeast of London Bridge in the area labeled Sunday 2 Sept.⁸⁴

Late at night on Sunday, September 2, flames erupted in the bakery of Thomas Farriner on Pudding Lane. The fire began to spread uncontrollably, raging for over three days, and when finally died out on Wednesday, September 5 it had claimed only six lives but laid waste to so many buildings that much of Northbank between Temple Bar and the Tower of London appeared unrecognizable. The spectacle is perhaps best described by the dramatic recollections of John Evelyn, a prominent London diarist who witnessed

⁸⁴Meriel Jeater, “Creating Fire! Fire!” Museum of London (15 July, 2016).

the event, and whose diaries—alongside those of Samuel Pepys— provide vivid descriptions of the catastrophe and its aftermath:

“The conflagration was so universal, and the people so astonished, that, from the beginning, I know not by what despondency, or fate, they hardly stirred to quench it; so that there was nothing heard, or seen, but crying out and lamentation, running about like distracted creatures, without at all attempting to save even their goods; such a strange consternation there was upon them, so as it burned both in breadth and length, the churches, public halls, Exchange, hospitals, monuments, and ornaments; leaping after a prodigious manner, from house to house, and street to street, at great distances one from the other... Oh, the miserable and calamitous spectacle! such as haply the world had not seen since the foundation of it, nor can be outdone till the universal conflagration thereof. All the sky was of a fiery aspect, like the top of a burning oven, and the light seen above forty miles round about for many nights. God grant mine eyes may never behold the like, who now saw above 10,000 houses all in one flame! The noise and cracking and thunder of the impetuous flames, the shrieking of women and children, the hurry of people, the fall of towers, houses, and churches, was like a hideous storm; and the air all about so hot and inflamed, that at the last one was not able to approach it, so that they were forced to stand still, and let the flames burn on, which they did, for near two miles in length and one in breadth”⁸⁵

By the end of the very first night, Evelyn declared that “London was but is no more.”⁸⁶

The trauma of this three-day inferno on Britain’s public memory and the inhabitants of London in 1666 cannot be understated. In the words of Walter George Bell, author of a classic book on the Great Fire, “Shakespeare’s London disappeared in the Fire—Disappeared wholly save for a small area left immune about the eastern and

⁸⁵ John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn* ed. by William Bray (London: M. Walter Dunne, 1901), 20-1.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 21.

northern wall.”⁸⁷ To a city at war, only just spared the horrors of a devastating plague outbreak, the collective sense of vulnerability only worsened the impact of the disaster. As hinted by the excerpt from Evelyn’s diary, the confusion that immediately followed the fire seemed crippling to individuals and the city as a whole. To many observers, among the most inexplicable yet defining phenomena of the fire was the almost complete lack of early efforts to combat it. In the absence of modern fire-fighting methods and technology, Samuel Pepys advised the king that the only way to prevent the spread of the fire was to pull down houses in its path to rob it of fuel through which to spread.⁸⁸ Despite the eventual acceptance on this advice, few genuine efforts to contain the fire materialized among the public. Rather, as the historian Sutherland Ross argues, “the ignorant, as usual, were blaming all their troubles on the evil foreigners. It was much easier than fire-fighting, of which Pepys still saw no sign as he walked home to Seething Lane along streets full of distracted people.”⁸⁹ Readers can reasonably attribute Ross’ fiery condemnation of the crowds to the conviction of hindsight, but nonetheless he makes a valuable observation about the xenophobic nature of the immediate reaction to the conflagration.

Xenophobia and the Imperial Nature of the Public Response:

⁸⁷ Walter George Bell, *The Great Fire of London in 1666* (New York: John Lane Company, 1920), 2.

⁸⁸ Samuel Pepys, “Wednesday 5 September 1666,” *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: Daily entries from the 17th century London diary*, <https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/09/>

⁸⁹ Sutherland Ross, *The Plague and The Fire of London* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1965), 98.

Strange as it may seem that responders could not muster greater efforts to pull down buildings in the path of the fire, the urge to find someone to blame should present less of a surprise. Scholars can never properly examine the Great Fire without considering that “the country was waging with Holland and France a costly and unpopular war.”⁹⁰ To make matters worse, by the time the first embers caught fire the English were losing that war. In such an environment, with tensions already running high, the most prominent national enemies drew immediate and contagious animosity from the members of the public parading through the street in confusion. In this volatile atmosphere, unfounded accusations easily produced a frenzy. London’s Dutch community found itself fortunate enough to avoid the destruction of their church at Austin Friars, but regardless “suffered much from the Fire and persecution.”⁹¹ Walter George Bell describes how:

“the people believed that the Dutch and French had set fire to the city. They said that the conflagration was begun by a Dutch baker, who was bribed to do this work, and that the French went about scattering fireballs in the houses. All foreigners alike were held to be guilty, no discrimination being shown, and many who were well known to be of good character, and upon whom no suspicion could rest, were cast into prison.”⁹²

Only days earlier, civilians could only participate directly in conflict with the Dutch by serving as privateers attacking Dutch ships. With the chaos of the fire, Londoners allowed paranoia and fear to spur them to violence, and the debilitation of central

⁹⁰ Walter George Bell, *The Great Fire of London in 1666*, (New York: John Lane Company, 1920), 266.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 309.

⁹² *Ibid*, 320.

authority—namely the Royal Court, city magistrates, and lower officials—left them free to act on that impulse, at times with the aid of police.

John Evelyn describes a similar observation that “In the midst of all this calamity and confusion, there was, I know not how, an alarm begun that the French and Dutch, with whom we were now in hostility, were not only landed, but even entering the city.”

⁹³ He further recalls that this belief inspired so much fear that crowds of people:

“ran from their goods, and, taking what weapons they could come at, they could not be stopped from falling on some of those nations whom they casually met, without sense or reason. The clamor and peril grew so excessive, that it made the whole Court amazed, and they did with infinite pains and great difficulty, reduce and appease the people, sending troops of soldiers and guards, to cause them to retire into the fields again, where they were watched all this night.”⁹⁴

The diary of Evelyn’s friend and contemporary, Samuel Pepys, also describes Pepys being woken by the raising of a false alarm against the French and Dutch.⁹⁵ A rational man, and close advisor to the King, and thus beneficiary of a greater sense of international perspective than most of the public, Pepys placed little faith in the veracity of these rumors. However, he expressed a much more rational paranoia that the fire would embolden the French and Dutch —whom he believed to be in poor shape before

⁹³ John Evelyn, *The Diary of John Evelyn*, edited by William Bray (London: M. Walter Dunne, 1901), 25.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ Samuel Pepys, “Wednesday 5 September 1666,” *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: Daily entries from the 17th century London diary*, <https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/09/>

the fire— to attack the city. The belief that the Dutch became aggressive to bolster morale among their own population served to worsen this sentiment.⁹⁶

As has been suggested in the excerpts above, the volatile crowds that took to the streets did not limit their violence and false accusations to the Dutch. Perennial rivals and recent Dutch allies, the French experienced fierce persecution as well. William Taswell, a schoolboy at Westminster, “saw ugly evidence of the suspicion and hatred which the fire was already causing... ‘a blacksmith, in my presence,’ he tells us, ‘meeting an innocent Frenchman walking along the street, felled him instantly to the ground with an iron bar.’”⁹⁷ He goes on to describe “a crowd bursting into the shop of a French painter, robbing it of all its goods and then, for good measure, pulling the shop down.”⁹⁸ Clearly, the actions Taswell describes, as well as those witnessed by Evelyn and Pepys, reveal a crowd motivated by a greater determination to lash out against an enemy than to pursue justice or the truth behind the fire. Such a reaction could be expected given the volatility of human nature in times of duress, particularly in crowds. The violent outbursts seen here, however, are directly colored by the developing trajectory of imperial tension in England, as the fire and its aftermath pulled everyday Londoners into the conflict.

⁹⁶ Samuel Pepys, “Tuesday 11 September 1666,” *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: Daily entries from the 17th century London diary*, <https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/09/>

⁹⁷ Sutherland Ross, *The Plague and The Fire of London* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1965), 98.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

The intensity of the public persecution of foreigners, and the momentum behind expressions of imperial rivalry could not indefinitely overcome the complete lack of evidence of Dutch or French participation in starting the fire. Writing several days of entries at once, with the benefit of hindsight, when Samuel Pepys first mentions the accusations against the French and Dutch, regardless of their multiple-day lifespan, he clarifies that those allegations come to nothing.⁹⁹ The London Gazette suffered a delay in its September 3 publication due to the fire, but when it did release its first issue after the catastrophe Thomas Newcomb addressed the violent fallout for foreigners in London and presented its case for dismissing the accusations against them:

“Divers[e] Strangers, Dutch and French were, during the fire, apprehended, upon suspicion that they contributed mischievously to it, who are all imprisoned and Informations prepared to make a severe inquisition here upon my Lord Chief Justice Keeling, assisted by some of the Lords of the Privy Council; and some principal Members of the City, notwithstanding which suspicion, the manner of the burning all along in a Train, and so blown forwards in all its way by strong Winds, make us conclude the whole was an effect of an unhappy chance, or to speak better, the heavy hand of God upon us for our sins.”¹⁰⁰

The final clause of this passage, attributing the growth of the fire to the will of God, proved prophetic for the next stage of scapegoating regarding the origins of the fire, as Catholics found themselves replacing foreigners in the English crosshairs. Efforts to target the French and Dutch originated in the streets, with everyday Londoners inserting

⁹⁹ Samuel Pepys, “Wednesday 5 September 1666,” *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: Daily entries from the 17th century London diary*, <https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/09/>

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Newcomb, “From Monday, Septemb. 3 to Monday, Septemb. 10. 1666,” *The London Gazette*, September 3, 1666, 1.

themselves onto the stage of imperial conflict. This source of the persecution lends itself to high intensity, but low longevity. Although the persecution began to die out as the crowds dispersed, the failure of evidence to emerge in support of the imperial xenophobia ensured that the violent persecution would not continue. The second component of the scapegoating process, which sought to place blame on Catholics, both inside and outside of London, would prove much more enduring and consequential.

Parliament Joins the Fray:

By September of 1666, anti-Catholic sentiment had a long and extremely charged history within England. Discussing it in depth is far beyond the purview of this thesis, but several key elements merit attention to understand the significance of the anti-Catholic campaign, largely engineered from within Parliament, that followed the Great Fire of London. Just over a century prior to the fire, Henry VIII famously split with the Catholic Church, declaring himself Supreme Head of the Church of England and establishing England as a Protestant country, primarily to enable himself to divorce and remarry. Furthermore, in the late-1530s Henry dissolved the country's monasteries to claim enormous wealth and "assert his royal authority."¹⁰¹ This decision set England on a religious trajectory, a path dependence of sorts, as a country with deeply contentious ties between the Catholicism, the religious status of its Sovereign, and the religion practiced by the country as a whole. Foregoing the lengthy analysis of decades of religious tumult between Henry VIII and the English Civil War, it is important to mention

¹⁰¹ G. W. Bernard, "The Dissolution of the Monasteries," *History* 96 (Oct, 2011), 390.

the fragility of Charles II (the reigning king at the time of the fire) and his position as the spiritual and political head of England.

English Protestants had spent decades terrified of the prospect of a Catholic monarch plunging England into religious chaos, much like Queen Mary I, infamously known as Bloody Mary for her persecution of Protestants, had in the sixteenth century. Charles II ruled with total awareness that his father, King Charles I, who had been executed in 1649 during the English Civil War experienced deep hatred from the public for his marriage to a Catholic queen, his sympathies for Catholics, and his pursuit of religious toleration in a fiercely Protestant country. Charles II, too, was known to have Catholic sympathies, and as the first monarch to hold the throne since the Restoration, many in England wanted to see him lose his already tenuous grip on the throne. Accordingly, when members of Parliament and the public alike sought to place blame for the fire at the feet of the Catholics, it produced a conspiracy much slower to fade than the xenophobic persecution of the Dutch and the French, as it remained directly linked to the legitimacy of the crown. That legitimacy had remained in question since Elizabeth I died with no heir, an anxiety that seeped into Shakespeare's portrayal of the monarchy in *I Henry IV*, with his duplicitous character Falstaff's replacement of the physical crown with a symbolically-loaded pillow.¹⁰² In the aftermath of the fire, that question of legitimacy merged with religious conflict within England and Charles II's already unpopular reign fell under scrutiny with the investigation of Catholics.

¹⁰² Stephen Dickey, "The Crown and the Pillow: Royal Properties in Henry IV," *Cambridge University Press* (2007), 102-17.

Shortly after the fire had ended, an official investigation into the cause of the disaster became inevitable. On September 18, Parliament established a committee to investigate the origins of the fire, yet “this committee was from the first determined to blame the Roman Catholics for everything, and it was soon dissolved, but the search for scapegoats went on, with eventual success.”¹⁰³ What Sutherland Ross introduces here is the short-lived Parliamentary Committee meant to identify the cause of the conflagration, whose impact far outlived its brief tenure. A report from the Committee, released in 1679, summarized its earlier findings condemning “the horrid Popish Plot, concerning the great fire: wherein is plainly proved, that the papists were the contrivers and actors in the burning of that great and noble city.”¹⁰⁴ In his Diary from November 5, two months following the fire, Samuel Pepys details a conversation with Thomas Wriothesley, the Lord Treasurer, and claims that:

“He do, from what he hath heard at the Committee for examining the burning of the City, conclude it as a thing certain that it was done by plots; it being proved by many witnesses that endeavours were made in several places to encrease the fire, and that both in City and country it was bragged by several Papists that upon such a day or in such a time we should find the hottest weather that ever was in England, and words of a plainer sense.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Sutherland Ross, *The Plague and The Fire of London* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1965), 118.

¹⁰⁴ “London’s Flames: Being an Exact and Impartial Account of Divers Informations Given in to the Committee of Parliament”, House of Commons, Committee to Enquire into the Burning of London. (1679).

¹⁰⁵ Samuel Pepys, “Monday 5 November 1666,” *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: Daily entries from the 17th century London diary*, <https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/11/>

This description ominously mirrors the allegations raised surrounding the French and the Dutch, but the religious nature of this conclusion, as well as the fact that it originated from within Parliament, lent it an additional degree of credibility, as well as tangible consequences for the monarchy.

Wriothesley was an extremely loyal supporter of Charles II, but this conclusion he drew from the Parliamentary Committee stood in stark contrast to the position of the King himself. As Walter George Bell argues:

“The King was greatly perturbed by the popular agitation which sought to throw responsibility for the Fire of London upon the Catholics. The Dutch war had brought him no credit... and [with] large sections of his subjects gravely discontented by his own religious measure, he realized that neither the State nor the Monarch had anything to gain from a recrudescence of violent religious strife, but much evil to fear.”¹⁰⁶

The King perceived, quite rightly, that certain members of his Parliament sought to use the fire as an opportunity to undermine Catholics and by extension Charles himself.

However, this strategy did not end with Parliament. Pepys describes an exchange between himself and John Evelyn, thus documenting a conversation from the two most prolific witnesses to the Great Fire itself, in which Evelyn laments that “none of the nobility come out of the country at all to help the King, or comfort him, or prevent commotions at this fire; but do as if the King were nobody; nor ne’er a priest comes to

¹⁰⁶ Walter George Bell, *The Great Fire of London in 1666* (New York: John Lane Company, 1920), 196.

give the King and Court good council, or to comfort the poor people that suffer.”¹⁰⁷

Many nobles feared that Charles’ might continue to display the Catholic sympathies of his father, and the fire’s devastation paired with the inquiry designed to vilify Catholics destabilized Charles’ position in a way that they never could. Public support of Charles plunged in the immediate aftermath of the Great Fire, but despite the efforts of ardently anti-Catholic nobles and members of Parliament, the damage never reached sufficient levels to cost Charles his throne, or his head.

While the anti-Catholic inquiry and resulting public fervor did not produce dynastic upheaval, the aftermath of the Great Fire pulled religious strife back to the forefront of English public life. In another conversation between Pepys and Evelyn, recorded in Pepys’ diaries from mid-December of 1666, Pepys recalled efforts to trace the Catholic plots to months before the fire ignited. He cites a London Gazette article “that mentioned in April last a plot for which several were condemned of treason at the Old Bayly for many things, and among others for a design of burning the city on the 3rd of September.”¹⁰⁸ The paranoia, now far beyond the hands of the Parliamentary Committee, stirred up a general sense of resentment towards Catholics, even reviving anger surrounding Catholics role as the plotters and perpetrators of the Gunpowder Plot meant to assassinate King James I in 1605, over sixty years before the Great Fire. These attacks on the loyalty of English Catholics reached such a fever pitch that Roger Palmer,

¹⁰⁷ Samuel Pepys, “Wednesday 26 September 1666,” The Diary of Samuel Pepys: Daily entries from the 17th century London diary, <https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/09/>

¹⁰⁸ Samuel Pepys, “Friday 14 December 1666,” The Diary of Samuel Pepys: Daily entries from the 17th century London diary, <https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/12/>

the Roman Catholic Earl of Castlemaine, published his eloquent and detailed response in the form of a pamphlet known as the “Catholique’s Apology.” Pepys describes the “Apology” as:

lamenting the severity of the Parliament against them, and comparing it with the lenity of other princes to Protestants; giving old and late instances of their loyalty to their princes, whatever is objected against them; and excusing their disquiets in Queen Elizabeth’s time... and ends with a large Catalogue, in red letters, of the Catholiques which have lost their lives in the quarrel of the late King and this. The thing is very well writ indeed.”¹⁰⁹

Pepys was not alone in his positive impression of the pamphlet, and the powerful appeal for tolerance and peace contained within its pages.

Palmer traces a variety of examples of unfair treatment towards Catholics by the English, presenting a well-reasoned case for public consumption attempting to summarize the common complaints against his fellow Catholics and arguing for a change in England’s religious dynamics. He calls attention to the fact that “tis generally said, that Papists cannot live without persecuting all other Religions within their reach.”¹¹⁰ This phobia certainly held true for critics of the Vatican across Protestant Europe, with varying degrees of accuracy in various countries, and England was no different. Palmer goes on to protest the attacks from Protestant Englishmen that emerged in response to the Great Fire, asking “what have we done, that we should now deserve your Anger?”

¹⁰⁹ Samuel Pepys, “Saturday 1 December 1666,” *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: Daily entries from the 17th century London diary*, <https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1666/12/>

¹¹⁰ Roger Palmer, Earl of Castlemaine, “To all the Royalists that suffered for His Majesty, and to the rest of the good people of England, the humble apology of the English Catholicks,” *Early English Books Online* (1666), 4.

Has the Indescretion of some few Incenst you?"¹¹¹ Here, Palmer calls attention to the fact that the indictments of certain Catholics for various plots over decades, including some after the fire, could not reasonably provide evidence against English Catholics as a whole group. He concludes the letter with the catalogue of names mentioned by Pepys, but not before making an appeal to the goodwill and comradery of his English countrymen, pleading to his readers that "we know your wisdom and generosity... [and] nor do we doubt when you shew favour to these [Irish Catholic soldiers captured and held in English prisons], but you will use mercy to us, who are both fellow Subjects, and your own flesh and bloud also."¹¹² Palmer's writing affected many educated and rational readers, such as Pepys, but on a larger scale the Pandora's Box of anti-Catholicism opened by the fire could not be closed so easily.

After the fire faded, the xenophobic mobs returned to their homes, the Parliamentary Committee had been disbanded, and the city rebuilt, London was left with the question of how to commemorate the destruction and the lives lost in the inferno. The final decision placed Sir Christopher Wren in charge of designing a monument, creatively titled The Monument, to be erected near Pudding Lane. The final product, a pillar standing 202 feet high, was built between 1671 and 1677, years removed from the enflamed passions of the fire itself, contained inscriptions on its four sides that reveal much about the enduring anti-Catholic sentiments in England directly

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 6.

¹¹² *Ibid*, 8.

related to the ire.¹¹³ The final lines of the Latin inscription from the north side reads: “three days after [September 2], when this fatal fire had baffled all human counsels and endeavours, in the opinion of all, it stopped, as it were, by a command from heaven, and was on every side extinguished. But papistical malice, which perpetrated such mischiefs, is not yet restrained.”¹¹⁴ John Schofield explains that “another inscription on the west side, attributing the fire to the ‘treachery and malice of the popish faction’, and ‘their horrid plot of extirpating the protestant religion’, was erased in the reign of James II, recut under William and Mary and finally removed in 1831.”¹¹⁵ This means that for sixty-five years after the Great Fire, the City’s official monument perpetuated the claim that Catholics, or “popish faction,” remained liable for the plot to burn London to the ground.

¹¹³ John Schofield, *The Building of London: From the Conquest to the Great Fire* (Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 1999), 174.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. The full Latin inscription from the north side of the memorial is shown in Appendix A, along with a complete translation of the text.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 174



Figure 2.2: A Drawing of The Monument in 1753 by Sutton Nichols.¹¹⁶

Conclusion:

Outbursts of xenophobia, often colored by overarching themes of nationalism are by no means uncommon in times of crisis or uncertainty. Religious strife was far from an unusual phenomenon across Europe in the early centuries following the Reformation. However, the emergence of these strains of conflict after the Great Fire of London contains particularly revealing insights about the broader themes of its day and the role of the disaster itself in understanding that history. Where the Black Death of the fourteenth century had marked a critical juncture in the centuries-long path

¹¹⁶ "Monument to the Great Fire of London"
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monument_to_the_Great_Fire_of_London

dependence of the Catholic Church as a public health institution, the Great Fire served to briefly clear the way for increased violence and paranoia of still-developing path dependencies: the growth of globally-reaching imperial conflict with the Dutch and French as friction increased between their growing empires, and anti-Catholicism in an England struggling to reconcile its growing Protestantism and questions of legitimacy of its Catholic-sympathizing Monarchy after its Civil War.

Chapter Three: Shaking the Landscape of Lisbon

On Saturday, November 1, 1755, Lisbon experienced a terrible trifecta of natural disasters when it suffered an earthquake, tsunami, and a series of fires within the course of the same day. Only twenty-four hours earlier, Lisbon—one of the largest and most recognizable cities in Europe—stood tall as a symbol of European cities from the pre-Enlightenment era.¹¹⁷ With its towering cathedrals and Manueline architecture, few cities of the era offered greater testament to the image of Europe's past. Within a single day, that historic cityscape all but vanished. By the time of the earthquake, the Portuguese empire was in decline, and Lisbon, for all its majesty and tradition, failed to reflect the Enlightenment era qualities of a "modern" city, namely a rationally-constructed urban design meant to maximize efficiency and function. In a sense, the increasingly empirical European continent was leaving Portugal behind, and Lisbon was no exception. As quickly as a year after the earthquake, a vastly different picture began to emerge. Comparable to the Black Death several centuries prior, the earthquake's sheer destruction gave the city a blank slate. Largely under the leadership of the Marquis de Pombal,¹¹⁸ Portuguese reformers ensured that this blank slate would produce a critical juncture enabling Lisbon to rebuild as an Enlightenment city and enabling the restructuring of the national economy in the same moment that the

¹¹⁷ "In 1755, Lisbon was the fourth-largest European city after Paris, London, and Naples;" Ryan Nichols, "Re-evaluating the Effects of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake on Eighteenth-Century Minds: How Cognitive Science of Religion Improves Intellectual History with Hypothesis Testing Methods," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82.4 (2014), 974.

¹¹⁸ The remainder of this paper will refer to him simply as Pombal.

earthquake pushed continental intellectuals to challenge the ways in which they conceptualized disasters at all.

In a short time after the disaster, Pombal established himself as the foremost authority in Lisbon. He bolstered his position with the blind trust of the King, who “lived for pleasure and the self-indulgence to which pleasure leads. [Pombal] pandered to it by holding the reins of government in his own hands.”¹¹⁹ His decades-long tenure, termed the Pombaline Era, became the focal point for most scholarship on both the Lisbon Earthquake and early-eighteenth century Portugal. Positioning himself as *de facto* dictator of Lisbon, Pombal transformed urban planning, architecture, economics, and even religion in Portugal. While the life of a single individual, no matter how well-positioned, cannot tell the complete history of an entire region, no study of Lisbon after 1755 would be complete without a thorough discussion of Pombal. With that in mind, the intention of this chapter is not to contribute yet another piece of scholarship on Pombal himself. Although he will feature heavily in this chapter, I include Pombal to examine the nature of his reforms as an outgrowth of the earthquake as a critical juncture in Portugal’s path towards accepting the mindset and innovations of the Enlightenment. To do so, before investigating the momentous societal shifts he oversaw during his rule, it is worth discussing that the goals of his reconstruction project existed in his mind long before the morning of November 1.

¹¹⁹ Mary H. Allies, “The Voltaire of Portugal: Sebastian Joseph De Carvalho, Marquis of Pombal,” *The Catholic World* XCVI (Oct, 1912 to Mar, 1913), 49.

Anthropologist Daniel Calvo reminds his readers that “in many ways, the earthquake was not directly responsible for [Pombal’s] developments. After all, Pombal had already pondered many of these policies and reforms when he was an ambassador in London in the 1740s. However, until the earthquake, Pombal did not have the power to implement these reforms.”¹²⁰ This observation offers an opportune moment to consider the applicability of the path dependence model to historical disaster studies. Considering the fact that Pombal developed his plans to modernize Lisbon before the earthquake, one could easily interpret the quake’s interaction with path dependence similarly to how I describe the Great Fire of London. But unlike the pre-fire Anglo-Dutch/French imperial competition or British anti-Catholicism, Pombal failed to express his policies at all prior to the earthquake. His modernization efforts were not yet a noteworthy factor in Lisbon by November 1, 1755, thus I interpret the quake, not as clearing the way for a developing pattern of actions, but as a critical juncture in the purest sense. Critical junctures never arise out of thin air, as some basis for change likely exists beforehand, but those junctures become significant for their sudden and dramatic ability to send an individual or society on a new path. In this case, little doubt pervades that the energy for Pombal’s modernization remained unexpressed until after the earthquake.

The Lisbon Earthquake bridges the gap between local and international disasters, having impacted individuals across a vast area. Firsthand accounts and modern

¹²⁰ Alvaro S. Pereira, “The Opportunity of a Disaster: The Economic Impact of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake,” *The Journal of Economic History* 69.2 (2009), 488-9.

simulations suggest shockwaves from the earthquake reaching across Europe and as far as Finland, North Africa, Greenland, and even the Caribbean. Whereas the Black Death touched lives around the world and the London Fire's most noteworthy effects remained contained within the city itself, the Lisbon Earthquake sparked a revolutionary period of both reconstruction within Lisbon and intellectual reflection across the continent. Sociologist Russell Dynes famously termed the earthquake the "first modern disaster," considering that it "occurred at a time and place which made it part of the debate over modernity," including the challenging of traditional ideas, institutions, and the reach of religious authority, as well as the development of nation states.¹²¹ Daniel Calvo furthers this argument, referring to the earthquake as the "first 'global event' experienced in modern Europe as a 'press scoop' linked to the new Enlightenment ideas of the natural cause of disasters."¹²² These scholars call attention to the fact that the Lisbon Earthquake occurred at a transformative moment in European history, a critical juncture waiting to happen. Thus, the earthquake provided the spark igniting a powder keg ready and waiting at the heart of the Portuguese Empire.

The Day of the Quake:

On November 1, 1755, Lisbon awoke to celebrate All Saints' Day, lighting candles around the city in veneration of the Saints, one of the most important rituals of the

¹²¹ Russell R. Dynes, "The Dialogue between Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake: The Emergence of a Social Science View," *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 18, no. 1 (March 2000), 97.

¹²² Daniel Malet Calvo, "The meaning of centrality and margin in Lisbon's Rossio: Spatializing urban processes before and after the 1755 earthquake," *Portuguese Journal of Social Science* 14.2 (2015), 128.

Catholic Church. At approximately 9:40 a.m. the earthquake, began.¹²³ The earthquake itself, estimated at a magnitude of 8.7, posed unimaginable risks to a city designed with little to no capacity to withstand the tremors.¹²⁴ Severely worsening the devastation, the quake produced a massive tidal wave and overturned thousands of the All Saints Day candles, which in turned caused deadly fires throughout the city. Lúcia Lima Rodrigues and Russell Craig note that Edward Hay, the British consul in Lisbon:

“gave an eyewitness account of the great scale of devastation: The part of the town towards the water where was the Royal Palace, the public tribunals, the Customs House, India House, and where most of the merchants dealt for the convenience of transacting their business, is so totally destroyed by the earthquake and by the fire, that it is nothing but a heap of rubbish, in many places several stories high.”¹²⁵

Estimates of the casualties and property damage vary significantly. The loss of important records, incompleteness of others, and inconsistency of personal accounts increase the difficulty of assigning reliable figures to the losses within the city and surrounding countryside. The initial report by the Marquis de Pombal estimated 6,000-8,000 casualties, an unrealistically low estimate, yet many modern sources overestimate anywhere from “40,000 to 100,000 dead.”¹²⁶ Rodrigues and Craig claim that “the most

¹²³ André Belo, “Between History and Periodicity: Printed and Hand-Written News in 18th-Century Portugal,” *e-Journal of Portuguese History* 2, no. 2 (Winter 2004).

¹²⁴ “Historic Earthquakes: Lisbon, Portugal,” U.S. Geological Survey. Accessed March 28, 2018. http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/world/events/1755_11_01.php

¹²⁵ Lúcia Lima Rodrigues and Russell Craig, “Recovery amid Destruction: Manoel da Maya and the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755,” *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 43.4 (2008), 399.

¹²⁶ Benigno E. Aguirre, “Better Disaster Statistics: The Lisbon Earthquake,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XLIII, no. 1 (Summer 2012), 32, 35; Aguirre cites evidence that the shockingly low estimate by the Marquis de Pombal likely arose from a desire to

careful and reliable estimates put the death toll between ten and fifteen thousand.”¹²⁷

Yet, through extensive reconstructive modeling and compiling various accounts of the disaster, historian of economics Alvaro Pereira makes a compelling case for an approximate death toll of between 20,000 and 30,000 lives lost within Lisbon alone—acknowledging thousands of additional deaths outside of the capital— and around 13,000 dwellings destroyed with 10,000 more substantially damaged.¹²⁸ Considering Lisbon’s population of around 191,000 at the time of the disaster, even if one places faith in the moderate or lower death rates (saying nothing of the awe-inspiring amount of damage to property and infrastructure) the fatalities remain undeniably cataclysmic.

The Marquis de Pombal’s Modernizing Project:

By the end of All Saints’ Day, Portugal’s greatest and most iconic city lay in ruins. The dead littered the by the thousands, most of the buildings and infrastructure had crumbled, the royal family had fled to the safety of the countryside, and prospects for recovery seemed bleak. Yet, despite this unprecedented downturn, “in little over a decade Lisbon rose spectacularly.”¹²⁹ Such a dynamic revival required similarly dynamic leadership. Faced with the seemingly insurmountable challenge of rebuilding Lisbon, reviving the heart and soul of the Portuguese Empire, and managing the rapidly-

“downplay the real impact of the disaster to protect Portugal’s stature as an ally of Britain on the eve of the Seven Years’ War (1756-1763).

¹²⁷ Lúcia Lima Rodrigues and Russell Craig, “Recovery amid Destruction: Manoel da Maya and the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755,” *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 43.4 (2008), 399.

¹²⁸ Alvaro S. Pereira, “The Opportunity of a Disaster: The Economic Impact of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake,” *The Journal of Economic History* 69.2 (2009), 468-72.

¹²⁹ Liam Brockey, “Stirred, Not Shaken,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2005.

escalating economic fallout of the disaster, the country's governing twin pillars, the Crown and the Church, did not rise to the occasion. Instead, the task of overseeing the recovery process fell to Sebastião José de Carvalho e Melo, the First Marquis de Pombal. A true proponent of Enlightenment-era rationalism, Pombal's rise to power marked a turning point for Lisbon, reborn within a matter of years as a "modern bourgeois city."¹³⁰

Born in Lisbon in 1699, Pombal began his political career as an ambassador to Great Britain and Austria before serving as Minister of Foreign Affairs and eventually receiving an appointment as Prime Minister by King Joseph I in 1755, the same year as the earthquake. Throughout his life, Pombal remained an ardent supporter of Enlightenment-era rationalism and placed great faith in modern science. A longtime Fellow of The Royal Society, which selects members who have made "a substantial contribution to the improvement of natural knowledge, including mathematics, engineering science and medical science," Pombal relied on this rational and scientific devotion as the core of his strategy to revitalize the city and the nation.¹³¹ Historian Mary H. Allies recalls an exchange between Pombal and King Joseph I that would prove characteristic of their respective roles and outlooks following the earthquake: the King asked of Pombal "what is to be done to meet this infliction of Divine justice?" Pombal

¹³⁰ Daniel Malet Calvo, "The meaning of centrality and margin in Lisbon's Rossio: Spatializing urban processes before and after the 1755 earthquake," *Portuguese Journal of Social Science* 14.2 (2015), 123-4.

¹³¹ "Elections: Types of Fellowships," The Royal Society, <https://royalsociety.org/fellows/elections/>

famously replied “your Majesty... let us bury the dead and help the living.”¹³² To Pombal, the tragedy that befell his beloved city contained a consequential silver lining. “Before 1755 Lisbon was a medieval town with small and disorganized streets. Since the city center was almost completely destroyed by the earthquake, Pombal and several military architects regarded this as an opportunity to redesign the city and to transform it into a modern metropolis.”¹³³

Pombal’s Revolution in Urban Planning:

As previously mentioned, prior to the Earthquake Lisbon’s urban layout closely resembled a European city from generations earlier. The cityscape revolved around relatively narrow streets, closely-cramped buildings and domiciles, and a fundamental emphasis on prominently-placed churches. This design had largely gone out of fashion in building new cities and urban quarters across mainland Europe, as countries began to witness the benefits of more pragmatic approaches to urban structures. Pombal had long-envied this shift, and seized upon the opportunity to make it a reality in Lisbon. Fittingly, Liam Brockey states “the marquis had an ambitious reconstruction plan. His goal was to transform Lisbon from a medieval jumble of irregular streets and awkward squares into a model of rational urban planning.”¹³⁴ Doing so with the pragmatism and

¹³² Mary H. Allies, “The Voltaire of Portugal: Sebastian Joseph De Carvalho, Marquis of Pombal,” *The Catholic World* XCVI, (Oct, 1912 to Mar, 1913), 49.

¹³³ Alvaro S. Pereira, “The Opportunity of a Disaster: The Economic Impact of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake,” *The Journal of Economic History* 69.2 (2009), 487.

¹³⁴ Liam Brockey, “Stirred, Not Shaken,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2005; Brockey’s use of “medieval” in this context is somewhat controversial. The jumble to which he refers remained a defining feature of cities well into the early-modern period. The substance of his claim that the tangled design of the city constituted an outgrowth of

scientific deliberateness of “a modern ruler, Pombal also imposed a new modular and rectangular pattern – the Baixa Pombalina – over the ruins of the medieval city centre, thereby solving the traditional discomfort experienced by the city elites in respect of the medieval urban structure,” which Calvo contrasts with London after the Great Fire where the urban structure remained almost entirely unchanged.¹³⁵ Here, the temporality of the earthquake as a critical juncture becomes particularly evident. The London Fire failed to produce a reimagining of the city’s urban structure because such a precedent did not yet exist on the continent, and there was no incentive—comparable to Lisbon— to seize on the opportunity to radically restructure the city. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century brought about the wave of revolutionary urban design that influenced the recovery from the Lisbon Earthquake, while London’s dominant backdrop at the time of its fire revolved around religious and imperial tensions.

The influence of Enlightenment era urban planning remains alive in the city of Lisbon that we see today. Maria Helena Ribeiro dos Santos and Ferran Saggarra i Trias argue that its influence on Pombal’s rational approach to the “Lisbon Plan” “is evident at different scales. It is evident at the scale of the regular urban grid, at the scale of the modular organization of façades and lots, and, finally, at the scale of the structural

constructions from the medieval period, but the word itself should be applied cautiously.

¹³⁵ Daniel Malet Calvo, “The meaning of centrality and margin in Lisbon’s Rossio: Spatializing urban processes before and after the 1755 earthquake,” *Portuguese Journal of Social Science* 14.2 (2015), 129.

building system that is already well known.”¹³⁶ These various scales become particularly visible in the Rossio region of the *Baixa Pombalina* district. The Rossio, a popular commercial square in central Lisbon above the city’s southern shorefront, experienced severe damage during the earthquake. Under Pombal, “the historical organization of space was reshaped, the Rossio’s traditional functions displaced and the meaning and contents of the hegemonic city representations and imaginaries such as fado music and the annual People’s Saints (Santos Populares) celebrations renewed.”¹³⁷ A jumbled and disorganized sprawl before the earthquake, the rebirth of the *Baixa* offers a concise example of the transformation experienced by the city as a whole. Figure 3.1 shows the original plan that urban engineer Eugénio dos Santos presented in 1758 for the reconstruction of the *Baixa*. Dos Santos’ neatly organized and rectangular structure exemplifies the Lisbon that Pombal sought to build, and depicts the design that would come to define Lisbon.

¹³⁶ Maria Helena Ribeiro dos Santos and Ferran Sagarra i Trias, “Trading properties after the earthquake: the rebuilding of eighteenth-century Lisbon,” *Planning Perspectives* 26.2 (2011), 308.

¹³⁷ Daniel Malet Calvo, “The meaning of centrality and margin in Lisbon’s Rossio: Spatializing urban processes before and after the 1755 earthquake,” *Portuguese Journal of Social Science* 14.2 (2015), 123-4.

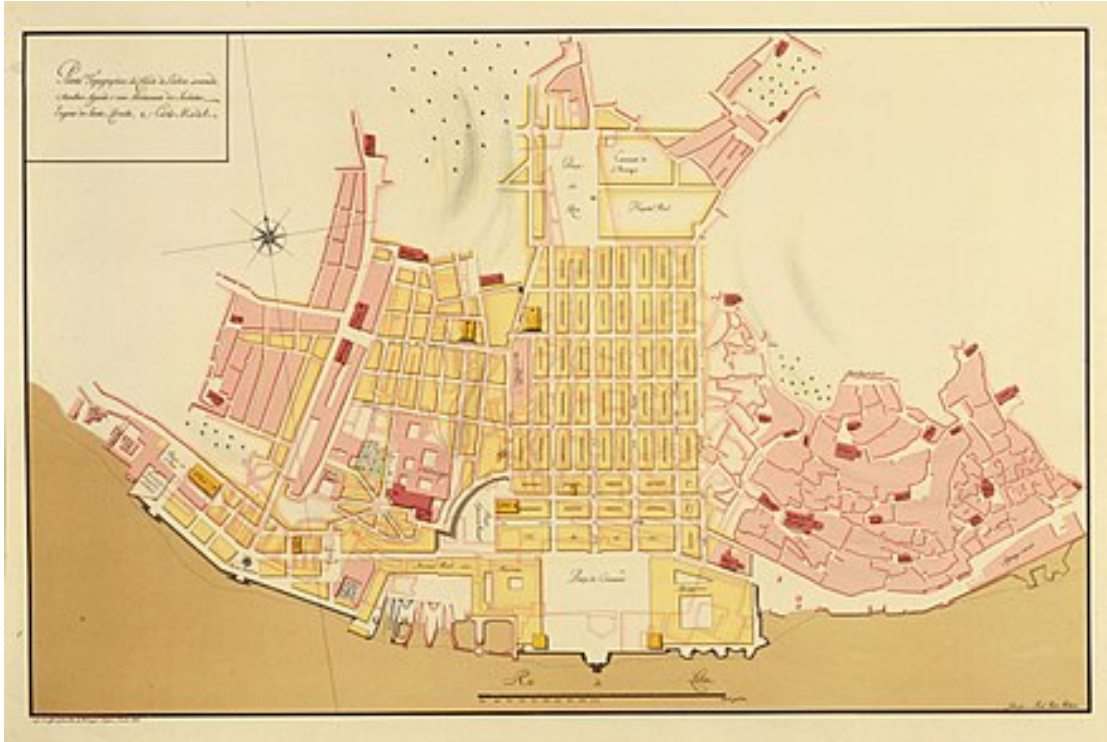


Figure 3.1: Eugénio dos Santos' plan to rebuild the *Baixa Pombalina* in the city's new rectangular pattern. Available from: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lisbon#/media/File:Pombaline_Baixa_Lisbon_map_1756.jpg

Dos Santos was not the only engineer employed by Pombal in the aftermath of the earthquake. Pombal commissioned a team of military engineers, led by an 80-year-old general, Manuel da Maia, to survey the city and oversee its reconstruction."¹³⁸ Maia becomes a fascinating official from the Pombaline era and a key figure in the Lisbon Plan. During his service to the recovery efforts, Maia contributed to the modernization of the city and avoided showcasing many of Pombal's less-savory characteristics. While

¹³⁸ Liam Brockey, "Stirred, Not Shaken," *New York Times*, November 5, 2005; The spelling of De Maia's last name was eventually originally spelled de Maya and changed over time, but the two remain interchangeable. For the purposes of this thesis usage of either spelling is in reference to the royal engineer in chief of Portugal after the Earthquake; Also, Brockey may have been rounding in this quote, as other records indicate that Maia was Eighty-three at the time of the earthquake.

he lacked the authority and historic impact that Pombal commanded, Maia executed his duty to the city with greater consideration for the individuals who inhabited it. For example, Ribeiro dos Santos and Sagarra i Trias argue that:

“one of Manuel da Maia’s main contributions was a fair and feasible method for transferring the old properties into new ones with appropriate equivalent values. These equivalent values were to be set up by dividing the total new surface area created within the Plan by the total value of the old properties... Previous rents would be taken into consideration, as would, for example, the proximity to the Rossio or to the river, when the existing legal obligations – like majorats (morgados), chapels (capelas) or leases (aforamentos) – were transferred to the new lots.”¹³⁹

This system of compensations, while often grouped together with broader Pombaline plans, owes its existence to Maia, yet it may not be his most significant long-term contribution to Lisbon’s recovery.

Before his appointment as a lead engineer on Pombal’s Lisbon Plan, Maia served as the director-general of the Torre do Tombo, Lisbon’s Royal Archive. An old building fallen into ill-repair, the Archive suffered complete collapse during the earthquake. The records survived in only because the rubble protected them from the fires and the tsunami, as well as exhaustive efforts led by the octogenarian engineer to retrieve them.¹⁴⁰ Maia’s remarkable campaign to rescue the archives successfully preserved priceless records and pieces of Lisbon’s history, an accomplishment that stands out

¹³⁹ Maria Helena Ribeiro dos Santos and Ferran Sagarra i Trias, “Trading properties after the earthquake: the rebuilding of eighteenth-century Lisbon,” *Planning Perspectives* 26, no. 2 (2011), 302.

¹⁴⁰ Lúcia Lima Rodrigues and Russell Craig, “Recovery amid Destruction: Manoel da Maya and the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755,” *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 43.4 (2008), 403.

alongside his work on redesigning the city. Rodrigues and Craig go so far as to argue that:

“although Maya is better known as the chief engineer of Portugal, in which role he and his assistants replaced ‘a maze of winding streets [in Lisbon] and poorly planned public and private buildings . . . [with] a rectilinear street system with standardized building heights, as well as façades,’ Maya's leadership in ensuring the preservation of the archival records of Portugal deserves greater recognition.”¹⁴¹

While the transformative urban planning of Lisbon after the earthquake will always remain inextricably linked to the Pombaline reforms, Pombal alone cannot be credited with breathing life into the revived and revolutionary cityscape. Enlightenment-era rationality had seeped into the bedrock of intellectuals and reformers across Portugal by the time of the earthquake, and the more capable of these individuals, such as Maia, answered Pombal's call to modernize the city when the time came.

Engineering a New Economy:

In addition to the astronomical human costs and structural damage, the earthquake quickly plunged the country into a national economic crisis. The extensive property damage produced an enormous loss of wealth for all classes of society in Lisbon. Pereira points out that the earthquake's “destruction took place in one of the richest and [most] opulent cities of eighteenth-century Europe, which was the main recipient of the huge gold and diamond inflows from Brazil. In light of these immense riches, it is not surprising that the reports of the losses were catastrophic.”¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 406.

¹⁴² Alvaro S. Pereira, “The Opportunity of a Disaster: The Economic Impact of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake,” *The Journal of Economic History* 69.2 (2009), 473-4.

Furthermore, “the earthquake occurred at a moment when customs and warehouses were faced with excessive stocks of goods, which substantially elevated the value of the losses.”¹⁴³ This wealth can produce a misleading image of Portugal’s economic status on the eve of the earthquake. As Benigno Aguirre explains, the peak of the empire’s prosperity came under King João V’s from 1706 to 1750 due to the growth of the empire “from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, when the Portuguese economy grew increasingly dependent on the mineral wealth of Brazil.”¹⁴⁴ He elaborates, however, that by “the time of the earthquake, however, the kingdom had stagnated, and its economic dependence on Britain had become onerous.”¹⁴⁵ Particularly against the backdrop of the consolidation of nation states across Europe, Pombal and his contemporaries feared this increased reliance on Britain, and resented the inability of the monarchy to limit the growing ties.

Granted additional authority by the King after the Earthquake, Pombal and his advisors took aim at this phenomenon. In his article on the post-earthquake economics of Lisbon, Pereira explicitly emphasizes that Pombal used political capital to centralize the state but also to “reduce the dependency vis-à-vis Portugal’s main trading partner,

¹⁴³ José Luís Cardoso, “El terremoto de Lisboa de 1755 y la política de regulación económica del Marqués de Pombal,” *Historia y Política: Ideas, Procesos y Movimientos Sociales* 16 (2006), 213; original text: “Así, el terremoto ocurrió en un momento en que las aduanas y almacenes se encontraban con stocks excesivos de mercancías, lo que elevó sustancialmente el valor de las pérdidas”

¹⁴⁴ Benigno E. Aguirre, “Better Disaster Statistics: The Lisbon Earthquake,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* XLIII, no. 1 (Summer 2012), 30.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 30-31.

Britain.”¹⁴⁶ Part of these efforts came directly through the process of repairing and overhauling the cities buildings. In order to continue the reconstruction efforts, Portugal needed to shift its importing partners, moving away from Britain towards countries like Sweden, Russia, and Denmark who offered greater supplies of wood and iron.¹⁴⁷ This shift only continued to grow as Lisbon’s recovery gained momentum and retook an active role in international trade. Pereira concisely summarizes the process with his claim that “the relief and reconstruction efforts widened the trade deficit, boosted gold outflows, and shifted the pattern of imports. Imports from Britain loomed large in the immediate aftermath of the disaster, but declined in importance during reconstruction. Consequently, Portugal’s dependency on Britain diminished considerably.”¹⁴⁸ Again, the exogenous shock of the earthquake creates a critical juncture for Lisbon and Portugal, as the recovery process allowed the nation to break from its path dependence of literal dependence on Britain and begin to restructure the foundations of its mercantilist economy.

Before transitioning away from Pombal himself to a broader discussion of the interactions between his reforms and the place of religion in Lisbon, the memory of Pombal as a historical figure requires some complication. Pereira makes the crucial observation that Pombal has, politically, been mythologized as “an enlightened dictator who rescued Portugal from the asphyxiating influence of the church, the rent-seeking

¹⁴⁶ Alvaro S. Pereira, “The Opportunity of a Disaster: The Economic Impact of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake,” *The Journal of Economic History* 69.2 (2009), 488.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 491.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 493.

nobility, and economic dependency on Britain. In reality, Pombal was a controversial figure who defies simple characterization.”¹⁴⁹ Time inevitably obscures the character of actions that individuals and societies commit in the name of progress. As a result, the word modernity often becomes cloaked in positive connotations, which place reformers like Pombal on misleading pedestals. Pombal undoubtedly found success in pulling Lisbon from the brink of collapse and forging a thriving city from the ashes of one of history’s most-devastating earthquakes, but he did so first and foremost as a dictator. With King Joseph’s desire to abstain from ruling, Pombal seized total authority and insisted on wielding it exclusively.

Furthermore, scholars have gone to great lengths to remind us that his reforms were not campaigns by and for the people. Pombal lived with wealth and power, and his reforms prioritized benefits to the wealthy and the powerful. His new urban structure improved the city’s ability to function efficiently and lessened the crowding of the earlier design, yet it primarily served to alleviate discomforts and inconveniences that disproportionately impacted the city’s elite and wealthy residents.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, “the reconstruction of Lisbon was a mechanism for political domination over the city and its population, giving Pombal the opportunity to reshape the social, economic and spatial urban organization,” an opportunity he took to remove his aristocratic enemies and grant property to wealthy allies.¹⁵¹ Thus, when structuring a narrative of modernization

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 486.

¹⁵⁰ Daniel Malet Calvo, “The meaning of centrality and margin in Lisbon’s Rossio: Spatializing urban processes before and after the 1755 earthquake,” *Portuguese Journal of Social Science* 14.2 (2015), 129.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 130.

around Pombal's reforms, he should not be oversimplified as Lisbon's purely benevolent savior leading his people from despair to prosperity.

Shifting The Visibility of Religion:

Returning to the physical rebuilding of Lisbon, another defining feature of the restructuring under Pombal and Maia concerns the spatial and political role of religion in the new city. Prior to the earthquake, public squares emphasized "magnificent ecclesiastical building façades... meant to impress and overawe the population... [as] churches and their adjacent plazas were the physical and social focal points of the neighborhoods in which they were situated."¹⁵² To a rationalist like Pombal, a modern European city simply could not be a city built around churches. As historian Timothy Walker explains, "the Enlightenment-era reconstruction of Lisbon achieved... the deliberate and dramatic reduction of the physical profile of religious structures within the rebuilt city center, lowering their perceptibility and thus symbolically manifesting the reduced power and role of the Church in Portuguese society."¹⁵³ Despite Pombal's best efforts, the Church did not willingly accept its new position in the country. The Jesuits joined select nobles as the only group seeking to limit Pombal's authority.¹⁵⁴ Mary Allies elaborates on this clerical resistance with her findings that "a bitter hatred characterized Pombal's dealings with the Jesuits because they thwarted his plans in two

¹⁵² Timothy D. Walker, "Enlightened Absolutism and the Lisbon Earthquake: Asserting State Dominance over Religious Sites and the Church in Eighteenth-Century Portugal," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 48, no. 3 (Spring 2015), 312.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 307.

¹⁵⁴ John R. Mullin, "The reconstruction of Lisbon following the earthquake of 1755: a study of despotic planning." *The Journal of the International History of City Planning Association* 45 (1992), 3.

particulars. He wished to depreciate the priesthood as well as the religious life, and to break with Rome. To this end he dealt summarily with the Jesuits, and thought to suppress them in Portugal and Portuguese colonies."¹⁵⁵ Particularly with their increased vulnerability after the earthquake, the Church could not hold Pombal at bay for long. As Liam Brockey eloquently puts it "the discarded hulks of the Portuguese Inquisition and the Jesuit order were monuments to the strength of Pombal's will."¹⁵⁶

Prior to November of 1755 Lisbon's design placed tremendous emphasis on its churches and spiritual sites granting them spatial dominance throughout the city. Russell Dynes goes so far as to argue that at the time of the earthquake "a good case could be made that Lisbon was much more religious than London or Paris."¹⁵⁷ Thus, the sudden reduction in the Church's presence within the rebuilt city merits close investigation. In order to fully realize the potential of the earthquake as a critical juncture, however, that result became almost inevitable. Walker argues that "Pombal well understood that architecture is a manifestation of power and asserting control over symbolic urban space projects power."¹⁵⁸ Accordingly, winning a structural victory over the influence of religion in Portuguese society required asserting total mastery over that urban space. Thus Brockey summarizes that:

¹⁵⁵ Mary H. Allies, "The Voltaire of Portugal: Sebastian Joseph De Carvalho, Marquis of Pombal," *The Catholic World* XCVI, (Oct, 1912 to Mar, 1913), 52.

¹⁵⁶ Liam Brockey, "Stirred, Not Shaken," *New York Times*, November 5, 2005.

¹⁵⁷ Russell R. Dynes, "The Dialogue between Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake: The Emergence of a Social Science View," *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 18, no. 1 (March 2000), 99.

¹⁵⁸ Timothy D. Walker, "Enlightened Absolutism and the Lisbon Earthquake: Asserting State Dominance over Religious Sites and the Church in Eighteenth-Century Portugal," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 48, no. 3 (Spring 2015), 308.

“no church was built to command the city's new focal point. Instead, Pombal organized the government's ministries around a square that he dedicated to business, the Praça do Comércio. Even the names of the city's new arteries reflected Pombal's conviction that Lisbon needed earthly efforts rather than divine assistance to regain its prosperity; the Street of the Crucifix ceded its place of honor to the Street of Gold.”¹⁵⁹

While various contemporaries felt greatly alarmed by this development, Brockey's description fits the model of a modern, post-Enlightenment city in whose urban spaces religious observance is explicitly subordinated to effective government and commerce. Many Lisboners were quick to adjust to the diminishing place of religion throughout urban space, as “other avenues [beyond the Praça do Comércio] saw age-old saintly patrons dismissed in favor of humble tradesmen like leatherworkers and shoemakers.”¹⁶⁰ Completing the triumph of Enlightenment-inspired secularism and urban planning, Pombal forced all churches to conform to his new construction parameters, uniform to all buildings, and prohibited churches in the *Baixa* from building their traditional bell towers.¹⁶¹

Similar to the increased criticism directed at the Catholic Church following the Black Death of the fourteenth century, this campaign against religion in Pombal's urban design did not signal the death of religion in Portuguese society. Pombal's work eventually provoked a reaction. In 1777, King Joseph I's extremely-pious daughter Maria I took the throne and quickly dismissed Pombal from her service completely. She

¹⁵⁹ Liam Brockey, “Stirred, Not Shaken,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2005.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Timothy D. Walker, “Enlightened Absolutism and the Lisbon Earthquake: Asserting State Dominance over Religious Sites and the Church in Eighteenth-Century Portugal,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 48, no. 3 (Spring 2015), 313-4, 317.

proceeded to initiate “the building of a magnificent baroque and neo-classical church, the *Basilica da Estrela*, on a height to the west of the *Baixa*. The Basilica dominates the skyline of western Lisbon; its dome and towers can be seen all over the city and from the seaward approaches.”¹⁶² However, the impact of Pombal’s reforms on the church’s place in Lisbon never truly vanished. While antagonism towards religious entities in Lisbon’s city planning may have peaked during Pombal’s tenure, the abolition of the monarchy in 1910 preceded the secularization of certain key religious sites, and the city birthed by Pombal and his engineers would never again feature religion in public space to the levels of Lisbon before 1755.¹⁶³

For the most part, historians have acknowledged this complex relationship between Pombal’s modernization campaign and the prominence of religion. However, at times this narrative becomes oversimplified into a linear decline of religion in Portugal after the earthquake, and the decreased exhibition of religion in public spaces becomes over-conflated with a decrease in broader religious thought. This mischaracterization, elicits reactive scholarship like that of philosopher Ryan Nichols. Nichols presents two different theories about the cognitive effects of the Lisbon earthquake. He contrasts the “Cognitive Science of Religion Hypothesis”—“that people of the period interpreted this earthquake as caused (1) by God; (2) on purpose; (3) as a punishment; [and] (4) on the outgroup”—with the “‘Secularizing Interpretation’, which argues that the earthquake caused cognitive change across social classes and

¹⁶² *Ibid*, 321.

¹⁶³ *Ibid*.

geographical regions” that caused widespread secularization.¹⁶⁴ Already these categories run the risk of oversimplifying understandings of religious thought at an individual level, a topic that fundamentally defies sweeping categories. More controversially, however, Nichols goes on to argue that these two theories are entirely incompatible, that the accuracy of one invalidates the other entirely, and positions himself in defense of the latter thesis finding no evidence of “secularizing cognitive change.”¹⁶⁵

Nichols’ argument raises an important issue surrounding the historiography of the Lisbon Earthquake. He presents a strong argument against a dramatic decline in religious thought, but Nichols fundamentally mischaracterizes the nature of historical analysis that suggests a secularizing effect of the earthquake. He claims that this argument relies on the acceptance of the idea that “the effects of the earthquake presented unavoidable and abundant counterevidence to the existence of an all-powerful, all-loving God.”¹⁶⁶ However, the perspective that he portrays as a watershed change in thinking, could easily be construed as a revitalization of the age-old question that follows disaster: how could a righteous God allow this to happen? The first difficulty with answering this question in sweeping terms arises from the fact that every individual’s answer will differ at least slightly. As a result, any comprehensive evaluation

¹⁶⁴ Ryan Nichols, “Re-evaluating the Effects of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake on Eighteenth-Century Minds: How Cognitive Science of Religion Improves Intellectual History with Hypothesis Testing Methods,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 82.4 (2014), 970-1.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 972.

of this topic must grapple with the nuances of a society's commitment to the spirituality that forms a pillar of its culture and identity, as well as how it interacts with the aftermath of a life-changing natural disaster. This becomes even more complicated in the case of Lisbon, which suffered its disaster in a historical moment with continent-wide momentum to reconsider the role of religion in the modern world.

At the heart of Nichols' argument he seems to be responding to an argument that few scholars are making. The most-recently-published source employed by Nichols to describe his maligned Secularizing Interpretation, a 2006 article, outdates his own by nearly a decade. He finds his other examples almost exclusively in sources published prior to the 1980s. While the past several decades have witnessed a relative drop in the ratio of research on the Lisbon Earthquake presented by historians compared to other disciplines, an earnest search for historical scholarship on the subject would turn up more recent work than Nichols chooses to interrogate. Few students of the Lisbon Earthquake take the position that the disaster secularized Portugal overnight. This thesis, for instance, addresses the impact of the quake on the church by continuing the work of Timothy Walker assessing the process of transforming the place of religion in urban spaces. This phenomenon signifies an incorporation of Enlightenment-era secularism in design and urban planning, which exemplifies the utility of analyzing the earthquake as a critical juncture allowing Lisbon to embark on a path towards creating a modern, post-Enlightenment city. It does not, however, imply the triumph of a deeper, societal secularization arising solely out of the earthquake.

Any contemporary proponent of Nichols' argument that the Lisbon earthquake produced no secularizing effect must address the work of philosopher Susan Neiman. Neiman argues that "people of the time period began believing that the earthquake was caused by nature rather than God. The earthquake 'was the beginning of a modern distinction between natural and moral evil. It is crucial to such a distinction that natural evils have no inherent significance.'"¹⁶⁷ By reconsidering perceptions of evil in Europe after the Lisbon Earthquake, Neiman introduces another element of the disaster that demonstrates the potential of considering it as a critical juncture in the development of Enlightenment Europe. Her work brings the disaster into conversation with the philosophers of mainland Europe, influential intellectuals whose thinking shifted irreversibly after the earthquake. This international element adds a final dimension to a discussion of the disaster and its impact on path dependence in Europe.

Trans-European Effects on Philosophy and Science:

In all fairness to Nichols, while few modern scholars would argue the earthquake spelled the end of European piety, this argument was not unheard of in the eighteenth century. José Luís Cardoso points to Voltaire as an example of an individual "for whom the Lisbon earthquake was a demonstration that, contrary to what the philosophy of optimism inspired by [Gottfried] Leibniz and [Alexander] Pope claimed, the supreme goodness of God does not exist."¹⁶⁸ Cardoso contributes to a formidable volume of

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 977.

¹⁶⁸ José Luís Cardoso, "El terremoto de Lisboa de 1755 y la política de regulación económica del Marqués de Pombal," *Historia y Política: Ideas, Procesos y Movimientos Sociales* 16 (2006), 227-28; original text: para quien el terremoto de Lisboa era la

scholarship examining the impact of the earthquake on Europe's most-esteemed minds. For example, Daniel Calvo argues that "the intense debate between nature and religion in the context of the philosophy of the European Enlightenment took the catastrophe in Lisbon as a standard in the polemics that involved the likes of Kant, Rousseau and Voltaire."¹⁶⁹ Alvaro Pereira cites the same trio of intellectual titans to make when explaining that "in the eyes of the contemporaries, the destruction was of apocalyptic proportions, sparking a vigorous debate in Europe on the causes of the earthquake in the years that followed, in which many of the most influential thinkers of the European Enlightenment intervened."¹⁷⁰

The Lisbon earthquake shook the worldviews of observers across Europe to an extent rarely seen since the Black Death in the fourteenth century. The Enlightenment spirit of challenging long-held assumptions and dogma through reason and empiricism served to enhance this phenomenon. Russell Dynes contends that "Voltaire used the earthquake as a vehicle to attack optimism."¹⁷¹ For instance, in his "Poem on the Disaster of Lisbon or Examination of this axiome 'All is Well'" he declares:

"What! the whole universe, without this hellish pit
Without swallowing up Lisbon,

demostración de que, contrariamente a lo que pretendía la filosofía del optimismo inspirada en Leibniz y Pope, la suprema bondad de Dios no existe.

¹⁶⁹ Daniel Malet Calvo, "The meaning of centrality and margin in Lisbon's Rossio: Spatializing urban processes before and after the 1755 earthquake," *Portuguese Journal of Social Science* 14.2 (2015), 128.

¹⁷⁰ Alvaro S. Pereira, "The Opportunity of a Disaster: The Economic Impact of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake," *The Journal of Economic History* 69.2 (2009), 467.

¹⁷¹ Russell R. Dynes, "The Dialogue between Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake: The Emergence of a Social Science View," *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 18, no. 1 (March 2000), 105.

Are you assured that the eternal cause
Who does everything, who knows everything, who created everything for her,
Could not throw us into these sad climates
Without forming volcanoes lit up under our feet?
Would you thus limit the supreme power?
Would you forbid him to exercise clemency?
Does not the eternal craftsman have in his hands
infinite means ready for his designs?
I humbly desire, without offending my master,
That this chasm, inflamed with sulfur and saltpetre,
should have lit its fires in the depths of deserts.
I respect my God, but I love the universe.”¹⁷²

He expresses similar sentiments in his famous novel *Candide*. *Candide* offers a direct attack on Leibniz’s theory that the Earth contains the “best of all worlds” God could have created. In the book, the philosophical Dr. Pangloss seeks to break his young companion, Candide, of the tendency to look for the optimism in every situation. When the two witness the Lisbon Earthquake firsthand, Pangloss reiterates his disgust of this optimistic philosophy and sarcastically consoles Lisbon residents that “things could not be otherwise. ‘For... all that is is for the best. If there is a volcano at Lisbon it cannot be elsewhere. It is impossible that things should be other than they are; for everything is right.”¹⁷³ Many scholars contend that this sharp rebuke of optimism arose primarily out of the Lisbon Earthquake’s impact on Voltaire, marking a significant turning point in his philosophy and writing.

¹⁷² Voltaire, “Poem on the Disaster of Lisbon (1756),” Athena e-texts. Edited by Christine Rossi. http://athena.unige.ch/athena/voltaire/voltaire_desastre_lisbonne.html

¹⁷³ Voltaire, *Candide* Edited by Philip Littell (New York: Boni and Liveright Inc, 1918), 21.

Voltaire's cynicism defines the response of some to the disaster, but contrasting positions pervaded as well. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for instance, pushed back against the anti-religious elements of Voltaire's position, and positioned himself closer to the side of optimism. Dynes quotes the concluding line from a letter Rousseau sent to Voltaire in which he tells the philosopher for whom he carried a great deal of admiration that "you enjoy, but I hope, and hope adorns everything."¹⁷⁴ And Rousseau's take on the Lisbon Earthquake was not purely reactionary. His approach to the disaster embraced a social science methodology that would prove central to many of his writings. In response to Voltaire, Rousseau put forth "the idea that disaster is a social construction, defined by existing cultural norms and that whether an event is considered a disaster depends on who is affected."¹⁷⁵ This position closely resembles Virginia García-Acosta's argument, which Rousseau predates by nearly two-and-a-half centuries, that destructive natural phenomena can only be considered hazards until they interact with "preexisting critical conditions" and become true disasters.¹⁷⁶

In the case of Lisbon, the preexisting conditions that Rousseau identified were hallmarks of his broader societal critique. In much of his philosophical writings, Rousseau laments the transition away from small, naturalistic communities to densely packed urban areas. He expresses this argument in his letters to Voltaire, entreating his

¹⁷⁴ Russell R. Dynes, "The Dialogue between Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake: The Emergence of a Social Science View," *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 18, no. 1 (March 2000), 107.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid*, 107.

¹⁷⁶ Virginia García-Acosta, "Historical Disaster Research," in *Catastrophe and Culture* edited by Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2002), 50.

senior philosopher to “admit, for example, that nature did not construct twenty thousand houses of six to seven stories [in Lisbon], and that if the inhabitants of this great city had been more equally spread out and more lightly lodged, the damage would have been much less and perhaps of no account.”¹⁷⁷ In conversation with Voltaire’s skepticism, Rousseau seeks to draw a firm distinction between nature and disaster. Emphasizing the role of societies in constructing the conditions of in which their own disasters become possible permits Rousseau to maintain his faith in a benign God while critically analyzing the greatest disaster of his lifetime. In doing this, Rousseau’s disaster framework in response to the Lisbon earthquake demonstrates another pillar of Enlightenment thought developed in response to Lisbon.

Immanuel Kant, third member of the Enlightenment trilogy to produce widely distributed responses to the earthquake, took a contrasting approach to both Voltaire and Rousseau. “Kant saw his task as that of giving a general scientific description and explanation of the phenomena of earthquakes, for the benefit of the citizens of Konigsberg, even though his home region was scarcely affected by the Lisbon disturbance.”¹⁷⁸ It is important to note that Kant’s methodology proves far more telling than his actual findings. Writing at a time when seismological science remained virtually non-existent, Kant posits that certain regions suffer from earthquakes to the greatest extent because:

¹⁷⁷ Russell R. Dynes, “The Dialogue between Voltaire and Rousseau on the Lisbon Earthquake: The Emergence of a Social Science View,” *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 18, no. 1 (March 2000), 106.

¹⁷⁸ O. Reinhardt, and D.R Oldryod, “Kant’s Theory of Earthquakes and Volcanic Action,” *Annals of Science* 40 (1983), 248.

“If it is agreed that a subterranean conflagration causes the shakings, then one can easily see that because the caverns in mountainous regions are larger, the emission of inflammable vapour there is less restricted, and the association with the air trapped in the subterranean regions, which is always necessary for combustion, will be freer.”¹⁷⁹

Kant arrived at this conclusion tying earthquakes directly to subterranean eruptions in part through his own experimentation. He references burying iron fillings, Sulphur, and water in soil and watching vapor rise out of the ground before flames break the surface, and he points to the prominence of these substances underground as compelling evidence.¹⁸⁰ In a separate tract called the “History and natural description of the most noteworthy occurrences of the earthquake, which struck a large part of the Earth at the end of 1755,” Kant expands this theory by combining it with his observation that “the [recent] earthquakes have shown us that the surface of the Earth is full of vaults and cavities, and that underneath our feet are hidden mines with manifold labyrinths running everywhere.”¹⁸¹

Undoubtedly, Kant produced no findings that should serve as guides for modern seismologists, but the impact of his work during the mid-eighteenth century cannot be understated. As Walter Benjamin posits, Kant “eagerly collected all the reports of the

¹⁷⁹ Immanuel Kant, “On the causes of earthquakes on the occasion of the calamity which befell the western countries of Europe towards the end of the last year” (1756) translated to English by Reinhardt, O. and Oldryod, D.R. in “Kant’s Theory of Earthquakes and Volcanic Action,” *Annals of Science* 40 (1983), 255.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 256.

¹⁸¹ Immanuel Kant, “History and natural description of the most noteworthy occurrences to the earthquake, which struck a large part of the Earth at the end of 1755” (1756) translated to English by Reinhardt, O. and Oldryod, D.R. in “Kant’s Theory of Earthquakes and Volcanic Action,” *Annals of Science* 40 (1983), 259.

earthquake that he could find, and the slim book he wrote about it probably represents the beginnings of scientific geography in Germany. And certainly the beginnings of seismology.”¹⁸² Returning to Voltaire and Rousseau as well, the fact that these three legendary intellectuals emerged from the Lisbon earthquake with such radically different perspectives demonstrates that there was not one uniform response in Enlightenment thinking after the earthquake. To Voltaire, the earthquake signaled the end of optimism; Rousseau reaffirmed his spirituality by separating disasters from God and nature; and Kant sought to embrace the scientific method to establish a rational, empirical understanding of the devastation that struck one of Europe’s most iconic cities. What these philosophers have in common, however, is that the earthquake fundamentally altered the ways in which they conceptualized disasters. In essence, the powerful disaster inspired these Enlightenment thinkers to shift the ways society discussed disasters, which presents as a critical juncture in its own right.

¹⁸² Walter Benjamin, “The Lisbon Earthquake,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* Translated by Rodney Livingstone edited by Michael W. Jennings et al (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 538.

Final Conclusions:

Reflecting on the Lisbon earthquake Domingos Vandelli eloquently stated:

“sometimes miracles are necessary, natural phenomena, or great disasters in order to shake, to awaken, and to open the eyes of misled nations about their interests.”¹⁸³ This quote may imply a progressive element of disaster recovery not necessarily present in every instance, but the broad strokes of his observation resonate with the central contention of this thesis. Through these case studies, I have suggested that natural disasters cause moments of uncertainty that often produce critical junctures in various path dependencies of the societies they affect. In the Black Death of the fourteenth century and the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, the disasters served as interruptions of existing path dependencies allowing for departures, of varying magnitude, from patterns of the past. The Black Death highlighted institutional shortcomings within the Catholic Church as a public health institution, opening the doors for new expressions of religious criticism. The Lisbon Earthquake devastated the city and the Portuguese economy, allowing students of the Enlightenment to reform both through modernization-minded rationalism, as well as reshaping intellectual dialogues of disaster across Europe. Contrasting slightly, the paranoia and confusion that followed the 1666 London Fire helped to cultivate burgeoning path dependencies by removing obstacles to and exacerbating imperial and anti-Catholic tensions. To conclude, I will

¹⁸³ Domingos Vandelli, “Modo de evitar a ruína do reino ameaçado pelos ingleses,” *Aritmética Política, Economia e Financas*, edited by José Vicente Serrão (1994), as quoted in Alvaro S. Pereira, “The Opportunity of a Disaster: The Economic Impact of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake,” *The Journal of Economic History* 69.2 (2009), 466.

expand briefly on the utility of this framework for historians, and the importance of historical voices in dialogues of natural disasters.

To illustrate the relevance of both this framework and the contributions of historical methodologies to natural disaster studies, I return to the example of the Lisbon Earthquake. The widely contrasting disciplinary backgrounds of intellectuals I reference in Chapter Three hints at the range of the Lisbon Earthquake's allure to intellectuals, which has drawn generations of scholarship from a myriad of disciplines. In addition to its implications for Lisbon and the European continent, the Earthquake marked a turning point for many fields of study. In addition to the scientific fields, the aftershocks of the disaster shook the foundations of Western philosophy and the humanities. For example, Richard Hamblyn quotes Susan Neiman's observation in her book *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* that "the eighteenth century used the word Lisbon much as we use the word Auschwitz today . . . it takes no more than the name of a place to mean: the collapse of the most basic trust in the world, the grounds that make civilization possible."¹⁸⁴ Even economists devote considerable time and attention to this eighteenth century disaster to analyze the collapse and resurgence of the Portuguese economy after quake leveled its capital and coastal regions.

One might infer, logically, that the Lisbon Earthquake would hold equivalent, if not greater significance to historians. This is a fair assumption, yet the voices of

¹⁸⁴ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2002), 1. As cited in Richard Hamblyn, "Notes From the Underground: Lisbon after the Earthquake," *Romanticism* 14, no. 2 (2008), 108

historians often find themselves lost in the deluge of academic analysis that congregates around the disaster. This thesis includes the Lisbon Earthquake alongside the Black Death and the London Fire in part to suggest a departure from this phenomenon. This is not to suggest that any and all disasters of the past require examination solely by historians. Natural disasters tend to impact all elements of life within an affected society, which invites commentary from a range of fields. The Lisbon Earthquake, in particular, proved significant to a wide spectrum of disciplines, all of which offer meaningful contributions to dialogues of the disaster. However, there must be a limit to the interdisciplinary deference displayed by historians on these subjects. When economists, geographers, and philosophers dive centuries into the past to study a disaster, they can produce remarkably insightful results, but they often find themselves evaluating the topic with methodologies a historical analysis would deem incomplete. In these instances, it is vital that historians not remain silent.

For example, consider the work of geographer David Chester on the 1755 earthquake. Chester provides a thorough exploration of urban and hazard planning on the Iberian peninsula after the Lisbon earthquake. He comprehensively examines the developments in these areas over time, and highlights the difficulty of identifying relevant and accurate sources on this subject. However, Chester's approach to this study categorically dismisses the utility of countless primary sources central to many historical analyses of the disaster. Discussing those sources, Chester declares that:

“The problem with reconstructing the Lisbon earthquake from historical accounts is that this greatest of eighteenth century disasters occurred within an intellectual milieu in which the developing rationalism of the Enlightenment was

temporarily suspended by the apparently arbitrary suffering caused by the earthquake. Reconstruction and modelling of the impact of the earthquake has only proved possible as empirical observations have been separated from culture-bound interpretations.”¹⁸⁵

He goes on to argue that only through the works of observers who remained entirely rational can “information on the physical characteristics of, and methods of recovery from, the earthquake... be gleaned.”¹⁸⁶ This is a valid point if one prioritizes assigning exact casualty figures or seeking to understand the geological details of the Lisbon Earthquake, but something is lost by moving away from those historical accounts. This debate raises similar concerns to the discussion of John Aberth’s work surrounding the Black Death in Chapter One, wherein Aberth questions the comprehensiveness and accuracy of contemporary mortality accounts. Similar to my response to Aberth, I argue that this line of dialogue blatantly ignores the most valuable aspects of those sources.

Chester rightfully acknowledges that many firsthand accounts from the day of the earthquake inflate the scale of the disaster and its casualties. However, the decision to categorize eye-witness accounts, official and semi-official records, and most paintings and engravings as “information with value-free character”¹⁸⁷ is incredibly problematic to historians, who consider those sources irreplaceable. Without the sources that Chester dismisses, the psychological impact, as well as the social cultural shock of the earthquake will inevitably disappear from memory. In contrast to Chester’s example,

¹⁸⁵ David K. Chester, “The 1755 Lisbon earthquake,” *Progress in Physical Geography* 25.3 (2001), 364.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 365.

¹⁸⁷ *ibid*.

when historian Alvaro Pereira encountered similar difficulties with identifying reliable accounts with which to inform his models of Portugal's GDP loss, he explained acknowledged that inflated recollections needed to be excluded from his calculations, but did not dismiss them as sources with no historical value. Admittedly, it is not the responsibility of geographers and geologists to preserve and defend the accounts that Chester marginalizes. They will naturally gravitate towards the sources that most align with their own research methodologies and offer the greatest benefits to dialogues in their fields. Rather, it falls to historians, logically, to ensure that those perspectives are not lost to the pages of history.

Through an interdisciplinary framework, this thesis seeks to offer historians a tool with which to approach engagement in dialogues of natural disasters. To do so, it has discussed the Black Death as a critical juncture disrupting an established path dependency and the London Fire as a facilitator of a developing one. The Lisbon Earthquake, which could be interpreted in either direction, offers a perfect example of how pragmatic and malleable this process is. The earthquake allowed the Marquis de Pombal to modernize the urban design of Lisbon, prompted the reshaping of the Portuguese economy and the visibility of the Church within the city, and inspired intellectuals across Europe to reevaluate the ways in which they viewed natural disasters. In doing so, the earthquake could be viewed as a critical juncture prompting a new series of path dependencies or a brush fire clearing the way for those already in progress. I have focused on the Earthquake as a disruptive critical juncture to better understand why the earthquake seemed so cataclysmic and momentous to those who

survived and observed it. The direction a different scholar or study could take depends entirely on the questions they hope to answer. The shock effect of the Lisbon Earthquake offers insights into both the society it disrupted and the one it helped to create. What an observer hopes to glean from the disaster will determine which of those lenses will be most useful. This helps to illustrate the versatility of the path dependence framework for historians seeking to discuss disasters. If one views this methodology as a spectrum, a disaster could occur at any place along that spectrum. As a result, this methodology offers a means of approaching a historical analysis of nearly any disaster in any society regardless of time or place.

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