



JUSSI HANSKA

Strategies of Sanity and Survival

Religious Responses to National Disasters in the Middle Ages

Studia Fennica
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Jussi Hanska

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Religious Responses to
Natural Disasters in the Middle Ages



Studia Fennica Historica 2

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Tampere, March 2002

Jussi Hanska

Introduction

Today we live in times of unforeseen technological and scientific change, yet we are still unable to predict and control nature. Every now and then we find ourselves dealing with the unexpected, be it a hurricane, an earthquake or a flood. We have all the advantages of modern society, such as central governments committed to the welfare of their citizens, international aid organisations, good infrastructures, and scientific knowledge that allows us to forecast possible catastrophes and minimise their effects on the population. Despite all these, natural disasters cause unforeseen damage and social problems. This was even more so during the Middle Ages and the early modern period.

I do not use the word medieval in a precise manner; it is simply a general term used here to describe the feelings and attitudes of people living during a considerably long time period. It is, by necessity, an oversimplification. The ideas presented here regarding ‘medieval man’ were certainly not accepted by everyone in all the parts of Europe, or during all the centuries covered in this book. Nevertheless, it is my firm belief that most of the ideas were shared by a reasonably large majority of the population.

Medieval ideas of nature were very ambivalent. Nature was a benevolent provider of human needs and as such it was an absolute prerequisite for life itself. At the same time, it was also seen as an erratic and irrational element, which could bring sudden destruction and wreak havoc among society.¹ In a situation like that, one needed strategies of survival. In the first place, it was important to try to protect oneself and the whole community against the wrath of nature, that is, to survive biologically. When all possible precautions had been taken and the catastrophe still struck, it was equally important to find some explanation for it, to process it and get on with life, that is, to survive mentally.

Élisabeth Carpentier has asked in her classic study *Une ville devant la peste* whether it is possible to use the methods of psychoanalysis in studying the *Black Death*. She claims that concrete religious manifestations, such as

1. Donald Weinstein and Rudolph M. Bell, *Saints & Society. Christendom, 1000–1700* (Chicago, 1982), pp. 145–146.

flagellant movements, would provide the materials on which such a study could perhaps be based. She also argues that there might be some evidence in less spectacular manifestations of the religious battle against the plague epidemics, which could be equally useful when properly used. She therefore proposed that the influence of religion on the fight against the *Black Death* deserved thorough research.²

This book attempts to find out how medieval people used religion as a means to fight, survive and explain natural disasters, not only plague epidemics, but all kinds of natural disasters; floods, droughts, earthquakes and so on. It might be a good moment to point out that the very word natural disaster is a modern construct. It was not known in the medieval period.³ If one would look for a medieval concept that would cover all the phenomena we like to call natural disasters, it would be *tribulatio*. If we considered what kinds of things were presented as *tribulationes*, we see that it was much wider concept than natural disaster is today. *Tribulatio* includes wars and other catastrophes, which today would be known as *manmade disasters*.

The oldest appearance of a concept that comes close to the modern term natural disaster, is found in a German encyclopaedia printed in Leipzig in 1740. It has an entry called *Natur Ubel*. This word is used to designate all those problems caused by man's imperfections resulting the Fall. These included unhealthy air, pestilence, normal as well as epidemic diseases, natural accidents, damage caused by bad weather, bad harvests, famines, wars, fires, water damages and so on. The encyclopaedia also points out that not only sinners suffer these tribulations, but also the just.⁴ Thus we see that an idea of natural disasters as a common category, even though it was still strictly connected to theology and morals, had started to develop by the middle of the eighteenth century. With the passing of time this idea developed into the concept of natural disasters, as it is understood today.

But how are natural disasters understood today? Strangely enough I have been able to find only one definition for natural disaster in encyclopaedias and dictionaries. Whether this means that the concept of natural disaster is so obvious that it needs no clarification, or that it has been considered to be one of those concepts that are not important enough to have their own entry,

2. Élisabeth Carpentier, *Une village devant la peste. Orvieto et la peste noire de 1348* (Bruxelles, 1993; deuxième édition revue), p. 25.
3. Jacques Berlioz, 'Les recits exemplaires, sources imprevuees de l'histoire des catastrophes naturelles au Moyen-Age', in *Sources travaux historiques* no. 33 (1933). Histoire des catastrophes naturelles. Paysages-environment, p. 8.
4. *Grosses Universallexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste*. Vol. N-Net (Leipzig und Halle, 1740), f. Hhhh3r. 'Natur Ubel, Ubel der Natur, Naturliche Ubel, Mala naturae, Mala naturalia, sind die jenigen Unvollkommenheiten, die in dem Lauffe der Natur zugleich mit eingepflohten sind, nachdem der erste Mensch gefallen, da sie vor dem nicht gewesen, und auch niemals gekommen seyn würden. Dahin gehören zum exempel ungesunde Lufft, Pest, gewöhnliche Krankheiten allerley Art, graszirende ansteckende Krankheiten, natürliche Unglücksfälle, Wetter-Schaden, Witterungs-Unannehmlichkeiten, unfruchtbare Jahre, theure Zeit, Krieges-Feuers- und Wassers-Noth etc. Diese Ubel sind allen Menschen gemein, und betreffen den Frommen sowol als den Gottlosen.'

is an open question. Nevertheless, the German dictionary that bothered to include it defines the concept *Naturkatastrophen* as follows: ‘*disastrous natural phenomenon, for example big volcanic eruption, serious earthquake, a wide reaching flood, a long lasting drought.*’⁵

This is not a definition in the strict sense of the word. It is more like a random catalogue of things that can be called natural disasters. The same thing can also be said of the few definitions I have been able to find in research literature concerning natural disasters. A good example is the definition given by B. G. McGaughey, Kenneth J. Hoffman and Craig H. Lewellyn: ‘*Disasters are often classified as either natural or manmade based on their perceived cause. Natural disasters include earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, etc.*’⁶

In the absence of a proper definition, it is important to define just what is the subject of this book: how do we intend to define the concept of natural disaster. Let us for the moment forget the word natural and look into the concept disaster, which luckily has been treated in different dictionaries. *The Oxford English Dictionary* explains the word *disaster* as follows: ‘*Anything that befalls of ruinous or distressing nature; a sudden or great misfortune, mishap, or misadventure; a calamity.*’ *Webster’s Encyclopaedic Dictionary* gives almost the same explanation. According to Webster’s, a disaster is ‘*a calamitous event, especially one occurring suddenly and causing a great damage or hardship.*’

Thus natural disaster could be defined as a calamitous event caused by nature, as opposed to those disasters caused by man. One problem remains, however. According to the English or American understanding of the word disaster, it is something that supposedly occurs suddenly. As we have seen above, that is not how it was perceived in the eighteenth-century German dictionary. This also included more long lasting disasters.

There are, indeed, some major disasters, which do not occur suddenly but during the course of a considerably long periods of time. Such disasters are, for example, long lasting heavy rains or long lasting droughts. In medieval society, the effects of such disasters were truly terrible, as they are in underdeveloped societies today. Furthermore, as will be shown, the responses of medieval society to these long-term disasters were equal to the more traditional types of natural disasters. It is not reasonable to exclude them from a book that is dealing with medieval men and natural disasters. Therefore I have decided to adopt the wider understanding of the word natural disaster.

5. *Meyers Enzyklopädisches Lexikon*. Band 16 Mei-Nat (Mannheim, 1976), p. 813. ‘*Naturkatastrophen = folgenschwere Naturereignisse, z.B. große Vulkanaisbrüche, schwere Erdbeben, weiträumige Überschwemmungen, langanhaltende Dürre-perioden.*’
6. B. G. McGaughey, Kenneth J. Hoffman and Craig H. Lewellyn, ‘The Human experience of earthquakes’, in *Individual and community responses to Trauma and Disaster. The structure of human chaos*. Edited by Robert J. Ursano, Brian G. McGaughey and Carol S. Fullerton (Cambridge, 1995), p. 137.

It has become customary to separate man-made disasters from natural disasters. This was not the case during the Middle Ages. All tribulations were regarded as equal and caused by similar reasons. Both were ultimately originating from either God or, with His allowance, from the devil and his army of demons. Many medieval sources treat wars in the same context as floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters. They were explained and understood as very much similar processes.

Here, however, I have preferred to define the subject of this book according to the modern understanding of the word natural disasters. Man-made disasters, such as wars, have been excluded, despite the fact that such exclusion is more or less artificial. This, I feel is a necessary concession to the modern understanding of the concept of natural disaster. One might say that this book is concerned with natural disasters in the widest possible sense of the word, that is, all the disasters which nature causes according to our modern understanding.

The key problem of this book, coping with natural disasters, can be divided into three important questions. Firstly, how did people try to protect themselves against such phenomena? The emphasis is on the spiritual means of protecting oneself. Scientific means of foreseeing disasters and preparing oneself against them are discussed only briefly. Partly this is because it is the spiritual life of medieval man that interests the writer of this book; partly it is because in the middle ages spiritual or religious means of seeking protection were considered to be more important than scientific and technological ones.

The role of the Christian religion in medieval Europe has often been overestimated. Nevertheless, there are few seriously deny the dominant position of religion and magic compared to technology and sciences in medieval society. These forms of religious 'disaster management', religion and magic, or as seen by Keith Thomas, magical religion, occupy the central position in this book.⁷

The second question is how did medieval men respond to imminent danger? The idea is to sketch an impressionistic picture of what happened in a medieval community when disaster struck. How did people react to the situation and what concrete measures were taken?

The third and most difficult problem is: how did people pull themselves together when the acute crisis was over, and more importantly, how did they overcome the situation to get on with their lives? This problem deals with the psychology of an individual person. What were the effects of natural disasters on him? How did he try to deal with the situation at a mental level?

This book shares the tripartite division of Élisabeth Carpentier's study: *avant*, *pendant* and *après*. However, it operates on a slightly different level. Carpentier concentrates on the community of Orvieto before, during and after the *Black Death*, that is, on what the process actually did to the city of Orvieto and its inhabitants. This book, on the contrary, is not interested in

7. Keith Thomas, *Religion & the Decline of Magic* (New York, 1971), p. 50.

demographic trends or economic changes. The attention is focused on the mental state of common people, that is, the victims of disasters and, more importantly, the survivors.

These three key problems concerning religion and natural disasters are approached from two different perspectives. The first is the collective one. This book seeks to present the collective reactions and feelings to natural cataclysms. The second, far more problematic perspective of this study concerns individual man. What were the reactions of individual persons in the case of a natural disaster? Did they overlap with the reactions and publicly stated opinions of communities, or did there exist an individual way of perceiving natural disasters that was different from the publicly spoken and well documented official, or as it also could be called, ecclesiastical perception? Were individual responses compatible with the official theological views of the causes of cataclysms and the means of protecting oneself against them?

The disposition of the book is built around a certain chronology, a chronology of a disaster. The first main chapter deals with the background information that the reader needs to appreciate the points made in later chapters. How big a problem were natural disasters in reality? To what extent have natural disasters been studied by historians? What are the sources used in this book and what kind of problems do they pose? This chapter points out the problems caused by the overemphasis of existing studies on the plague epidemic we often call the *Black Death*.

The second chapter deals with anticipating disasters and preparing oneself against them. What were the means of gaining protection against disasters? This chapter deals with the historical process of disaster prevention, and its slow metamorphosis from pagan magical rites to the religious ceremonies performed by the Church. It also evaluates the cult of protective saints. Furthermore, this chapter discusses the rationality of medieval means of disaster management.

The third chapter deals with the short and hectic moments when the disaster actually occurred. What were the feelings and reactions of the people? These are looked at on the collective as well as on the individual level. The latter was particularly important in cases where there simply was no time to organise collective liturgical ceremonies. This chapter includes a rather long section on medieval catastrophe sermons and their meaning for the reactions and activities of the congregation.

The fourth chapter deals with the aftermath of disasters. It analyses the different contemporary explanations for the disasters. The most important means of explaining natural disasters that were available for medieval man were scientific, or from the point of view of modern natural sciences, pseudo-scientific explanations, and religious explanations. It is shown that both of these explanations were divided into different sub-categories. Finally, this chapter deals with the means available to the church to help the survivors of natural disasters to understand what happened.

The fifth and final chapter is a sort of epilogue for this book. It takes the story to the early modern period and examines how medieval means

of coping with natural disasters survived reformation and renaissance to slowly wither away with the dawn of modern scientific thinking. This chapter emphasises the continuity of medieval mentality, that is the phenomenon called *long Moyen Âge* by the eminent French historian Jacques Le Goff. The development of post-Tridentine Catholicism is compared to the various forms of Protestantism that came into being in the course of the sixteenth century. As the title suggests, this chapter is merely an epilogue to the actual substance of the book, and hence it is not based on an examination of primary sources, but is rather a general over view based on existing historical work. Nevertheless, one feels that it is important to establish the strong continuity between the medieval and early modern period in respect of dealing with natural disasters.

1 The Background

Disastrous Times

Before we embark on an analysis of disasters and the means used to protect oneself against them, and to survive and explain them, it is important to establish just how frequently natural disasters occurred, and how important they were from the point of view of everyday life. This is even more important, since the global nature of modern day information and news services causes us to overlook a good deal of such catastrophes when they are only of a local importance. We are informed about natural disasters when they kill enough people, when they happen in our own backyard, or when they endanger some cultural treasures that are considered to be of universal importance. Good examples of such media disasters are the floods in Florence in 1968, and the earthquake that damaged the Basilica of Saint Francis in Assisi while this book was written.

If an earthquake only destroys some property or kills an ‘insignificant number of people’ we do not get to read about it in our daily newspaper. All these things make modern people perceive natural disasters as something huge and terrifying, which, luckily enough, happens only rarely, and only in certain geographic areas. The fact is however, that natural disasters, especially when the word is understood in the broader sense used in this book, happen every day and cause huge amounts of economic damage and significant loss of human lives.

This also holds true for the Middle Ages. Here it is impossible to provide a thorough list of all known natural disasters during the Middle Ages, nor is it necessary. The idea is to look into the period of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries using secondary sources to give the reader an impression of how frequently these disasters occurred and what conditions influenced their severity.

Why choose these two centuries? The thirteenth century has traditionally been seen as a time of wealth, growth and prosperity. Even though the image of the thirteenth century as a golden age has been questioned by modern historical research, the fact remains that the climatic conditions were reasonably good from the point of view of agriculture, which, of course, was the single most important issue for the essentially agricultural medieval society. It was a time of relative well being when compared to the

centuries immediately preceding or following it.⁸ The thirteenth century saw no epidemics comparable to the *Black Death*. Thus it could be labelled as a model century, in which everything was as good as it could be during the Middle Ages.

The Fourteenth century, of course, was completely the opposite. Barbara Tuchman rightly calls it '*the calamitous fourteenth century*' in her popular book, *Distant Mirror*. The climatic conditions were much worse than during the preceding century and there was also the *Black Death* and other outbreaks of the plague. All these problems were aggravated by constant warfare and the problems caused by the great schism.

Looking at the conditions of these two centuries from the view point of natural disasters, one can obtain an idea about what was the scale of these disasters between the good times and bad times. Some natural disasters, such as earthquakes, are of course totally independent from general climatic conditions, but they generated others, such as floods and droughts. It is also worth pointing out, as self-evident or banal it may sound, that the ferocity and damage caused by some disasters was very much dependent on general climatic conditions. People weakened by consecutive crop failures were rather vulnerable to outbreaks of epidemics.

In fact, even during the prosperous thirteenth century, a large share of the European population did not have enough resources to be in the best possible physical condition to tolerate the hardships brought on by natural disasters. Many families were living in a state of perpetual malnutrition, which made them more susceptible to epidemics.⁹

Robert Fossier has compiled a summary of climatic problems and crop failures in England between the late tenth century and the year 1325. From this catalogue, we can identify one year of total catastrophe during the thirteenth century, that is, the year 1250. Furthermore there were several years with exceptional rains and floods: 1246, 1248 and 1285. In addition, there were outbreaks of epidemic disease during the years 1277 and 1299.¹⁰

When we come to fourteenth century England the first thing that needs to be mentioned is the great famine of 1315–1317, which in some regions even lasted until 1322. According to Robert Fossier and H. Neveux, the famine was caused mainly by several bad harvests. The year 1314 had been average whereas the years 1315 and 1316 were bad. The yield ratio of 1317 was an average one, so that the scarcity ended only with the good harvests of 1318. One average year followed by two years of continuous rains and crop failures

8. See for instance M. Bourin-Derruau, *Temps d'équilibres, temps de ruptures XIIIe siècle*. Nouvelle histoire de la France Médiévale 4 (Paris, 1990), p. 7; Carlo Cipolla, Before the Industrial Revolution. European Society and Economy, 1000–1700 (London, 1980), pp. 204–207; Jussi Hanska, "And the Rich Man also died; and He was buried in Hell". *The Social Ethod in Mendicant Sermons*. Bibliotheca Historica 28 (Helsinki, 1997), pp. 17–20.
9. Robert Fossier, 'Le temps de la faim', in *Les Malheures des temps. Histoire des fléaux et des calamités en France*. Sous la direction de Jean Delumeau et Yves Lequin (Larousse, 1987), p. 135; Jussi Hanska, "And the Rich Man also died; and He was buried in Hell", p. 19.
10. Robert Fossier, 'Le temps de la faim', pp. 137–140.

Natural disasters have long been a neglected subject in the study of history. At most they have been casually mentioned as a background material for political or social history. During the 90s this state of affairs has slowly begun to change. Nevertheless, there is still no general history of natural disasters available in any language.

This book aims to cover one grey area in historical studies, that is, spiritual responses and survival strategies of medieval man in front of natural disasters. It asks what were his means to deal with natural disasters, phenomena he could not scientifically understand. How did he try to prevent them? What were his feelings and actions when the situation was on? How did he manage to carry on with his life afterwards?

It is an unusual book in many respects. It is a specific study based on original and in most cases unedited sources, but it can also be read as a general introduction. It crosses boundaries between different fields of learning and traditionally accepted time periods of history. Even if it is essentially a book on medieval man, it stretches far beyond the middle ages as conventionally understood. The final chapter traces the slow disappearance of the medieval mentality until the early nineteenth century.



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