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Turning the driving agencies in a world of pandemics

Taking the frame of two pandemics of late antiquity (a. the so-called Antonine Plague, a type of smallpox outbreak which probably killed a quarter of the population of the Roman Empire during the later 2nd century AD, and b. the so-called Plague of Cyprian, probably a disease similar to Ebola in the mid-3rd century AD), has left us with a number of witnesses (historical descriptions, letters, sermons and inscriptions) which show how agencies rapidly changed and developed in a challenging socio-religious environment which impacted ritual practices, political and religious authorities, undermining the trusts in the so-called gods, creating new social relations with infected people, and working out hands-on new social and religious coordinated temporal units and spaces (Scherrer 2015), counteracting politically driven and practiced social distancing with religiously motivated care for the dying and the dead. Different self–world relations transformed self-locations in a world where political and social relative peace of over 200 years was suddenly disrupted on a then global scale. In both cases one can test how ritually supported horizontal, hierarchical and vertical axes have been shattered and new forms of ritual practices in differently layouted frames emerged. Moreover, reports from hundreds of years after these events show the deep memorisation of new settings that these pandemics created, and how entrenched they became in rethinking the past.

While over the past years, these pandemics have been researched from the perspectives of network theories, economics and politics, there is little research done in the area of early Christian, or religious historical and ritual studies.

References

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