



COVID-19

A GLOBAL CRISIS EXAMINED

GLST 287

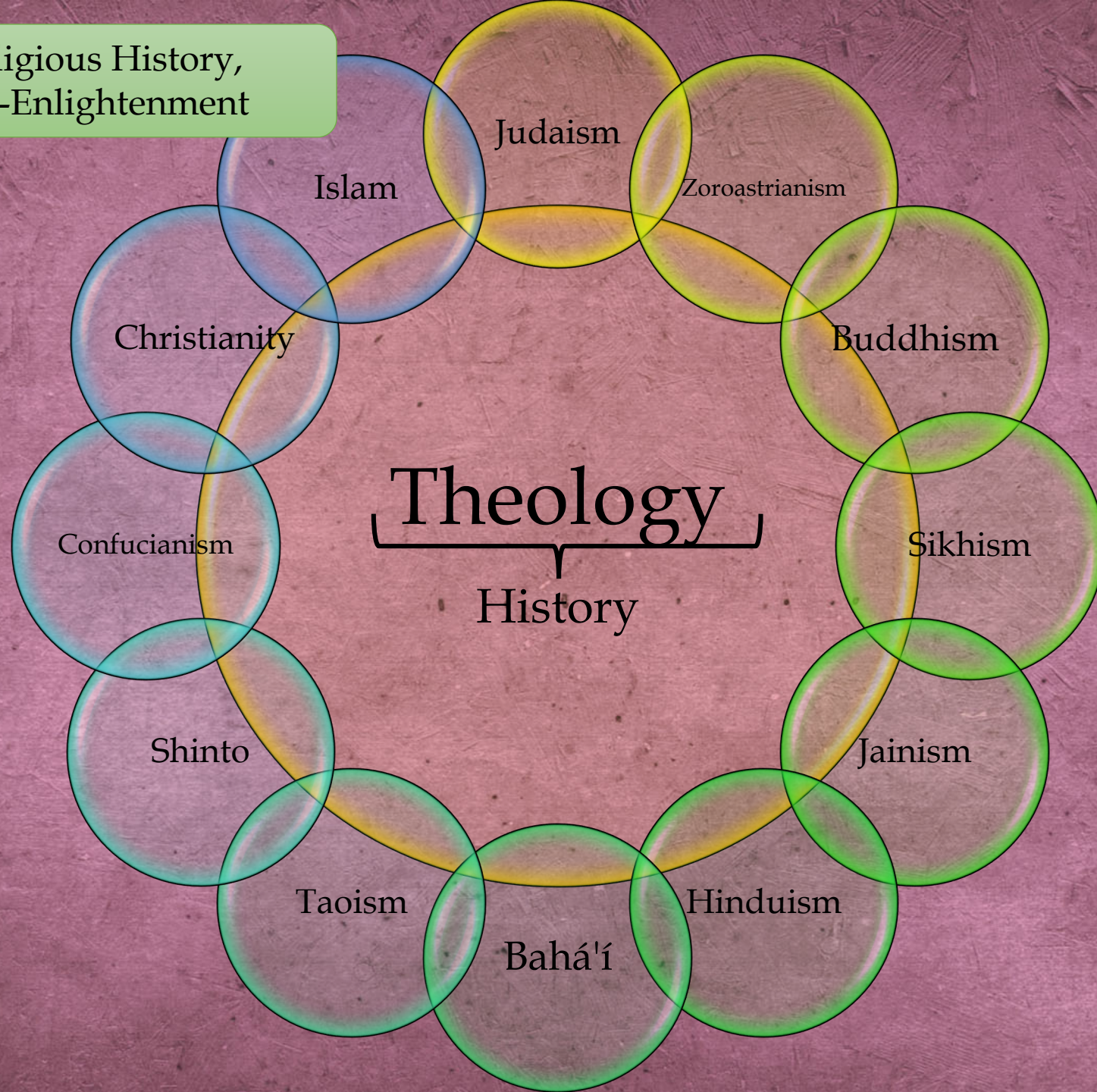
*Christian Responses to Plagues and Public Health:
Two Perspectives from the History of Religion*

Dr. Brenda Llewellyn Ihssen, Department of Religion

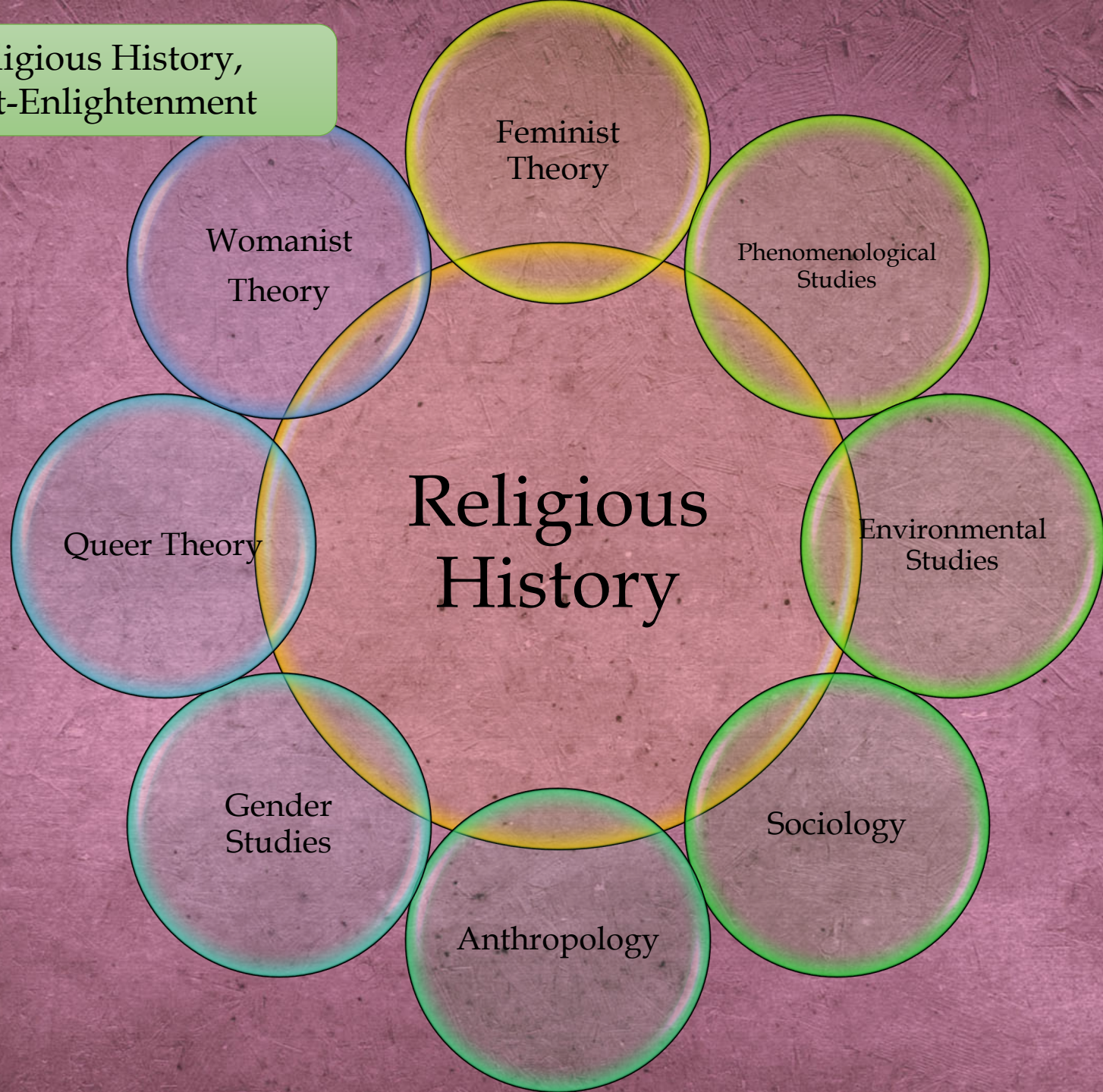
Outline

1. The Disciplines involved:
 - Religious History
 - Medical/Health Humanities
2. Medicine in Late Antiquity.
 - Methods of distribution
3. The context and perspectives of the authors
 - The Cyprian Plague and Cyprian
 - The Justinian Plague and John of Ephesus
4. Questions/strategies that the authors raise.
5. Concluding thoughts.

Religious History,
Pre-Enlightenment



Religious History,
Post-Enlightenment



Ways to Study Religion, Post-Enlightenment

Groups

Texts

Theologies

Rituals

Ethics

Histories

What to do with the evidence of history

1. Contextualize	2. Evaluate	3. Analyze
Who created the source? What do you know about the author?	What assumptions does the author bring into the work?	With what gaps am I left? What questions are unanswered? What do those gaps mean or what do they teach me?
What is the <i>genre</i> ? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Literature?• Poem?• Art?• Architecture?• Law?• Receipt?	What is the general topic or idea that the source presents?	What is said and what is concealed in this source, and what does what is said/not said teach me about a larger point that author might be trying to make?
When, where, why and for whom was it created?	What are key words and/or phrases, and what do they mean?	What elements does the source share with other sources from the same era, or how is it different?
What do you know about the audience?	What factual information is in the source?	What does the editing and/or translation history of this text reveal to me about how it has been understood?

What to do with the evidence of history

1. Contextualize	2. Evaluate	3. Analyze
Who created the source? What do you know about the author?	What assumptions does the author bring into the work?	What is the source's purpose? What does it teach?
What is the <i>genre</i> ? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Literature? Poem? Article? Book? Letter? Recipe? 		What is the source's message? What is it trying to teach?
When, and for what purpose, was it created?		What does the source share with other sources from the same era, or how is it different?
What do you know about the author's background?	What is the author's background?	What does the editing and/or translation history of this text reveal to me about how it has been understood?

The meta-analysis:
How does my privilege or lack of privilege, race, gender identity, social status or situation vis-à-vis colonial and post-colonial history shape what I am reading and how I am analyzing this text?

We try to understand people, their ideas, practices and institutions on *their* terms, not ours.

We focus on *how* an experience of the divine made a difference, rather than on whether a person experienced something divine.

Our approach to the primary sources

We do not impose assumptions on people living in a different time and place

We recognize that religion is connected to, shaped by and influences historical context.

Health Humanities

- interdisciplinary
- explores health, illness & healing through creative arts & disciplines of the humanities

HEALTH HUMANITIES *Reader*

Edited by
Therese Jones, Delese Wear,
and Lester D. Friedman



What is wrong,
and why

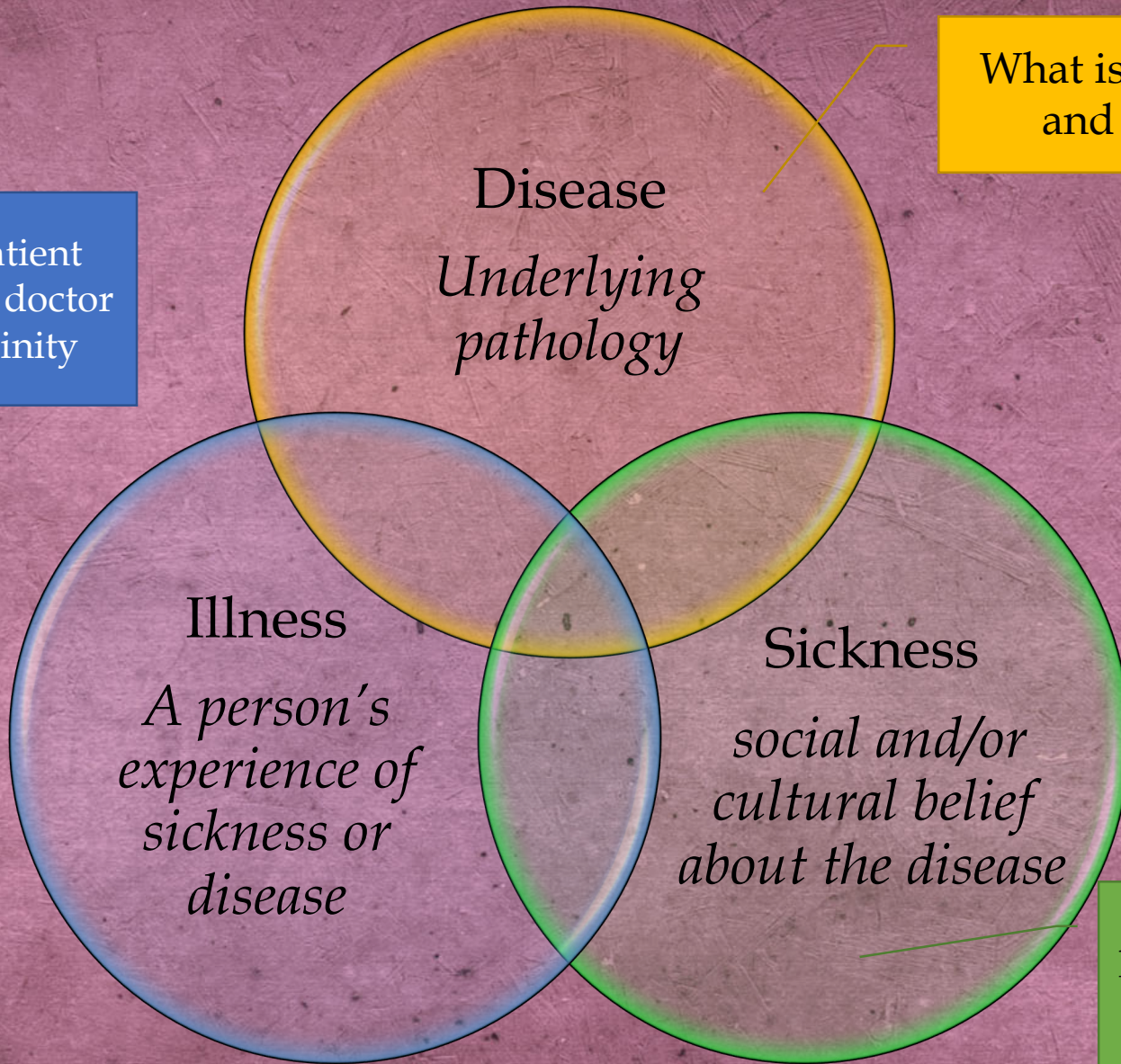
Disease
*Underlying
pathology*

What a patient
takes to the doctor
or the divinity

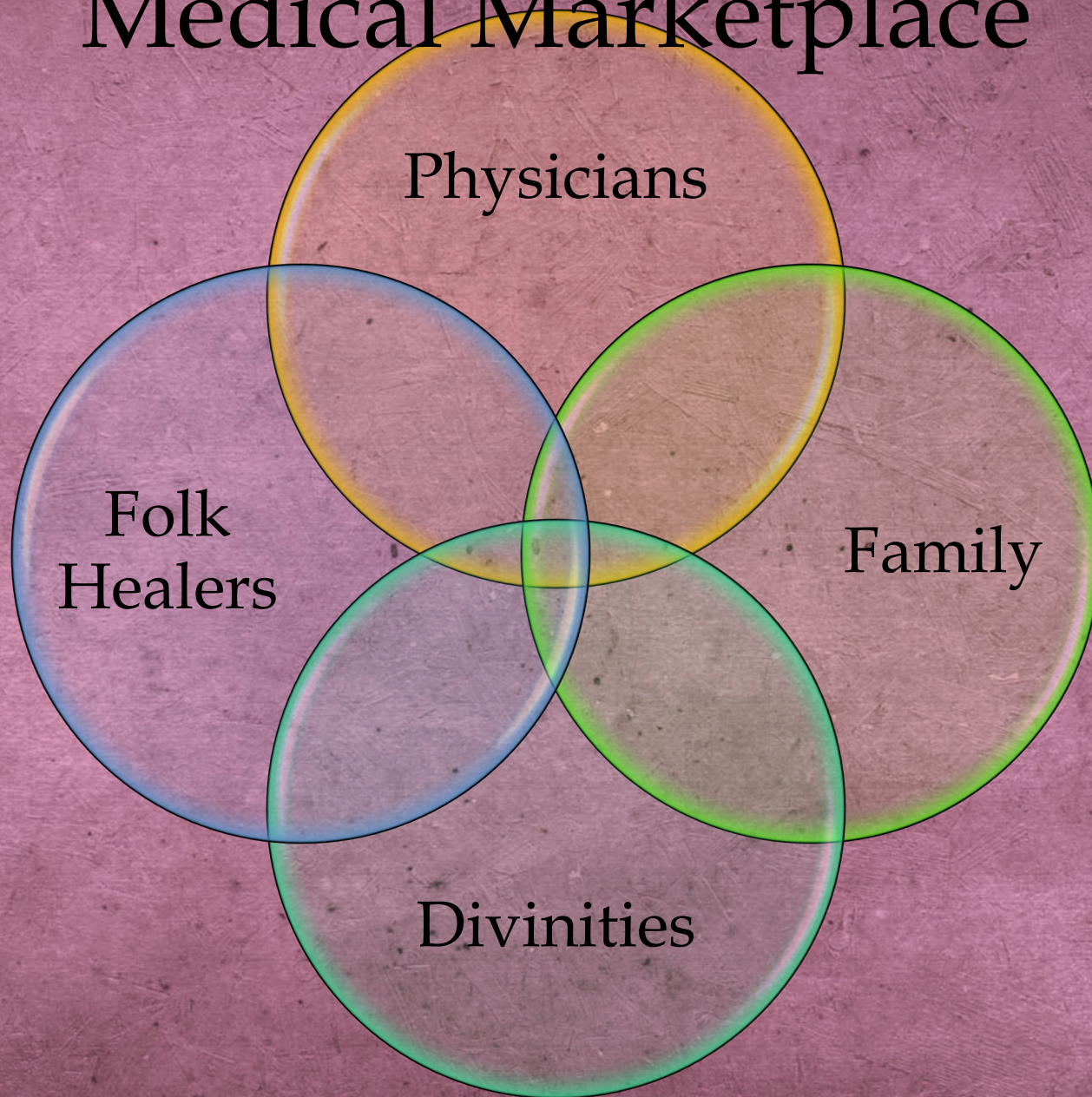
Illness
*A person's
experience of
sickness or
disease*

Sickness
*social and/or
cultural belief
about the disease*

How other
people think
about a
person who
is ill



Medical Marketplace



Medical Marketplace



Family

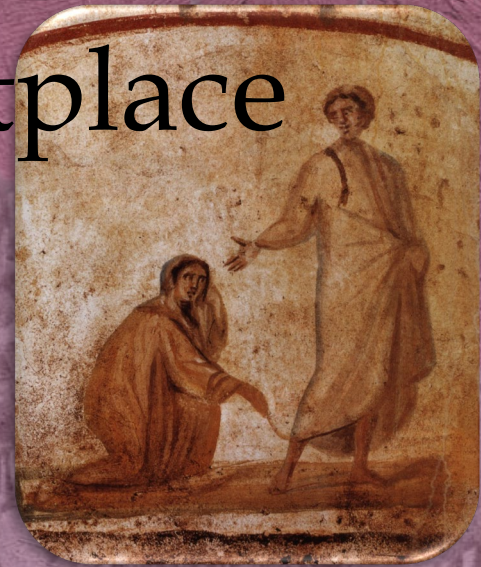
Medical Marketplace

Physicians

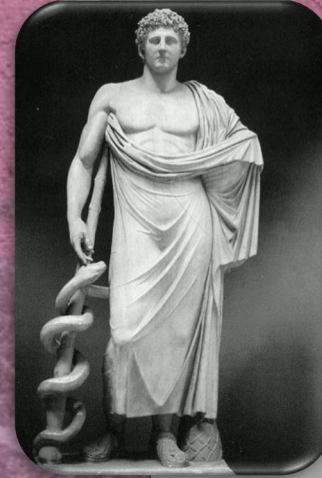


Medical Marketplace

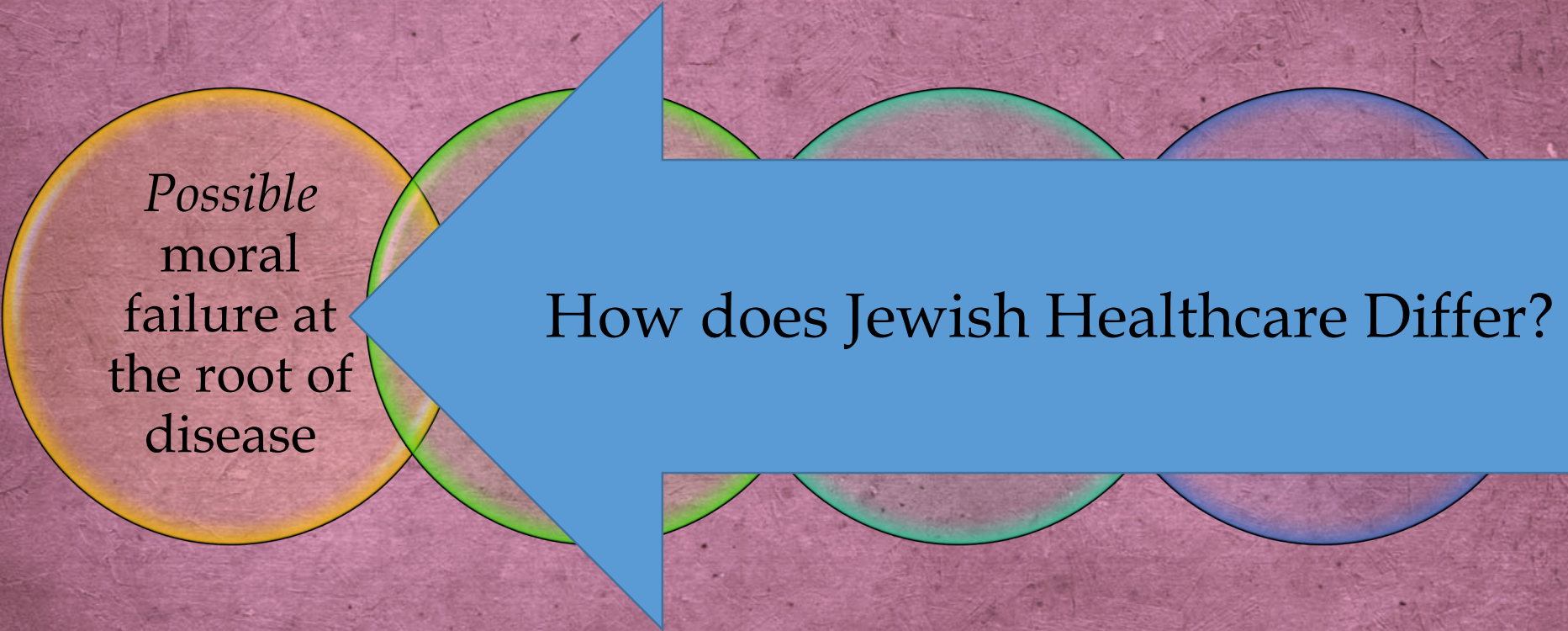
Folk Healers



Medical Marketplace

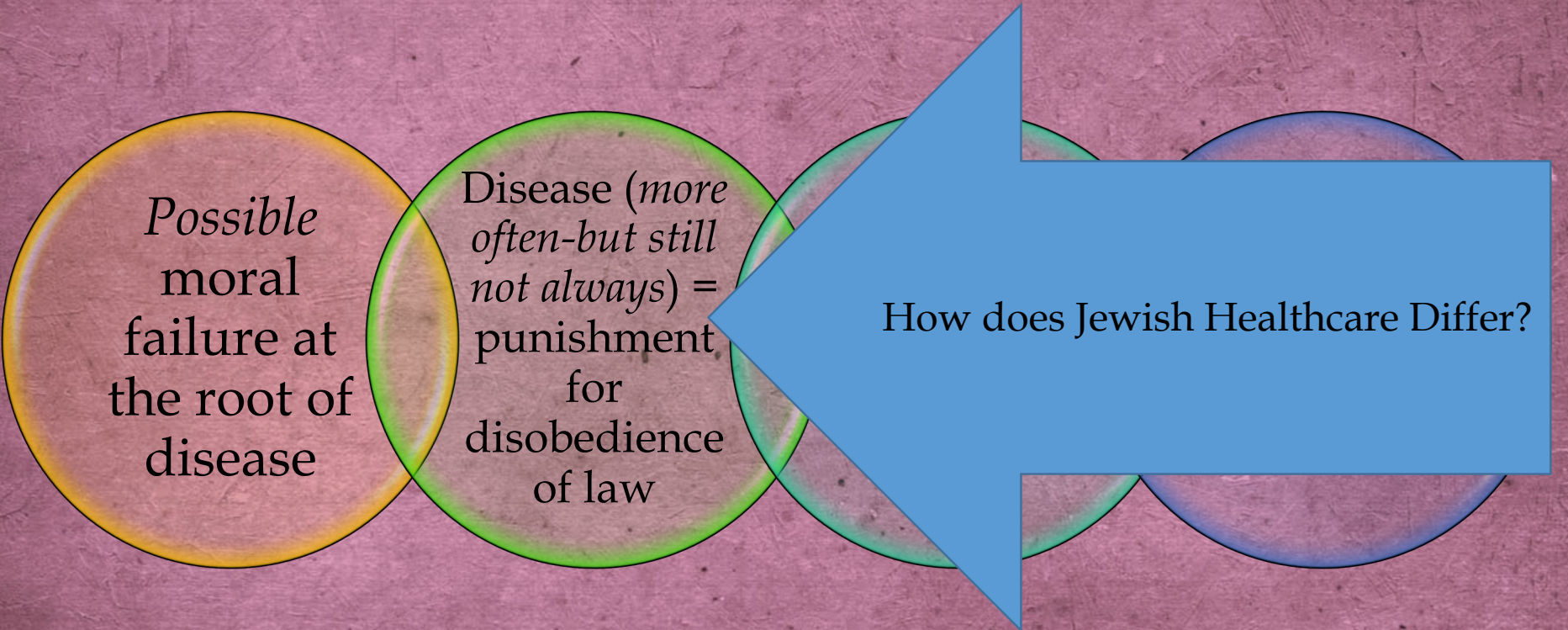


Divinities



*Possible
moral
failure at
the root of
disease*

How does Jewish Healthcare Differ?



*Possible
moral
failure at
the root of
disease*

*Disease (more
often-but still
not always) =
punishment
for
disobedience
of law*

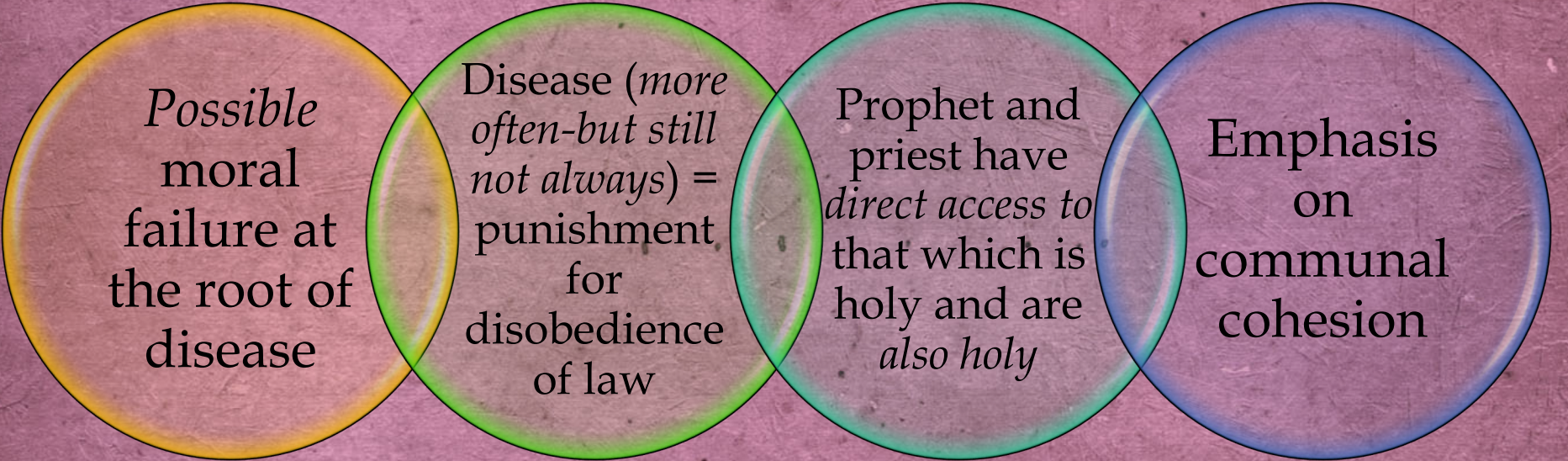
How does Jewish Healthcare Differ?

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*Prophet and
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that which is
holy and are
also holy.*

How does Jewish
Healthcare
Differ?



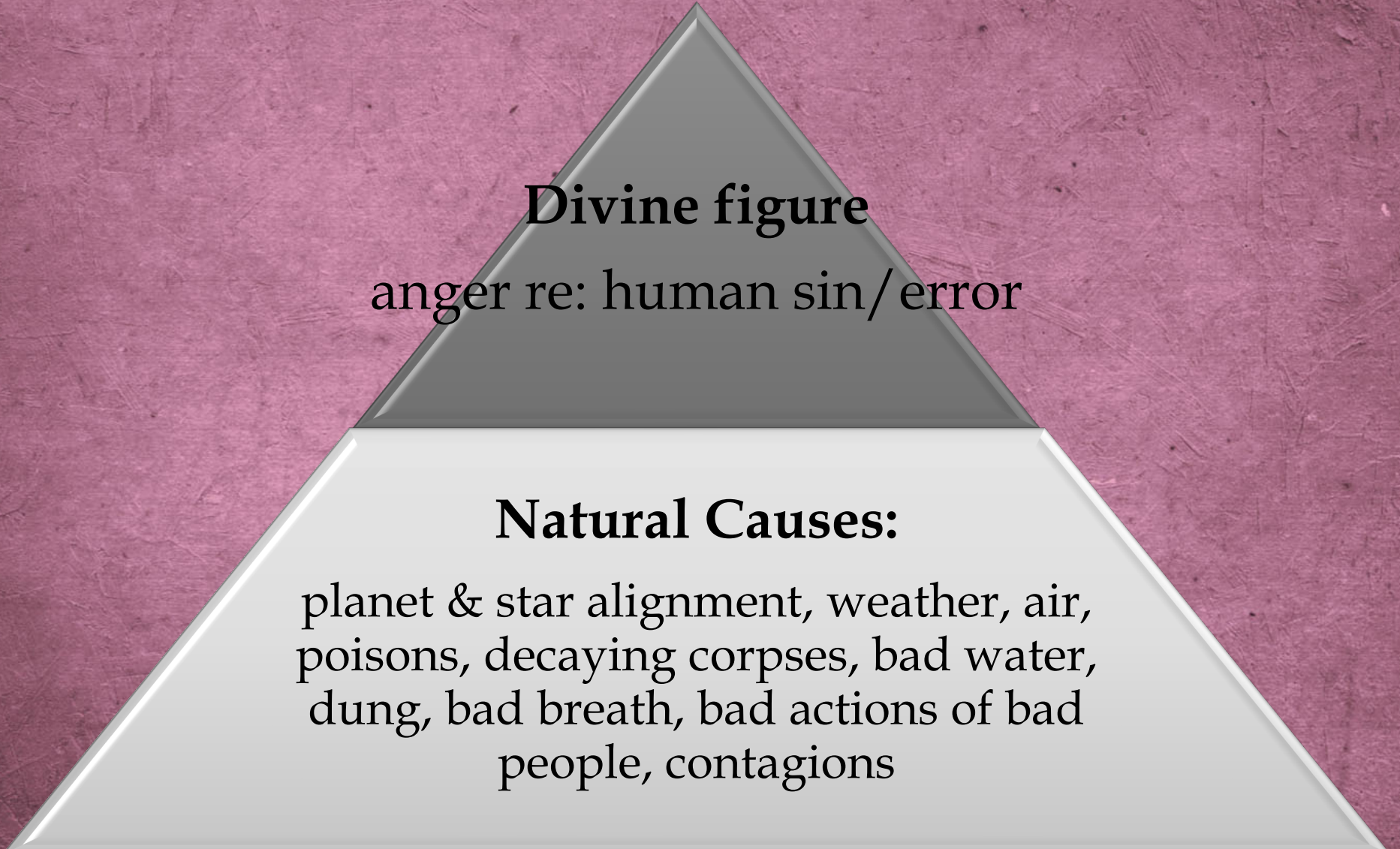
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Prophet and
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also holy

Emphasis
on
communal
cohesion

Irrespective of specific cult/religion:
hierarchy of cause for disease



Divine figure
anger re: human sin/error

Natural Causes:
planet & star alignment, weather, air,
poisons, decaying corpses, bad water,
dung, bad breath, bad actions of bad
people, contagions

Important for *any* student of human behaviour:

Divine figure

anger re: human sin/error

Everyone
is dealing
with
some
level
and/or
degree of
these
factors



Natural Causes:

planet & star alignment, weather, air,
poisons, decaying corpses, bad water,
dung, bad breath, bad actions of bad
people, contagions



Our authors and their context

St. Cyprian of Carthage, ca. 200-58



The Plague of Cyprian

- Ethiopia, spring of 250 CE - Rome in 251 CE, eventually Greece and Syria.
- contagious, transmitted directly and indirectly (Ebola?).
- 20 years, (height) nearly 5,000 people *per day* in Rome.
- Drought, floods and famine; political (rivals & deaths), military, economic and religious upheaval.
- Response of Christianity (not legal): provided theological rationale for suffering *distinct* from indigenous religions and Judaism; cared for the ill and buried the dead. All this contributed to growth of the religion.

Our authors and their context

St. John of Ephesus/ Asia, c. 507 – c. 588



The Plague of Justinian

- Point of origin: China or India, then to Egypt; spread north to Alexandria and east to Palestine.
- Identified as *Yersinia pestis*, w/ evidence of bubonic, pneumonic and septicemic.
- Initial outbreak, four months; recurring - two centuries, w/ pop. decline of 40% (50 million).
- Odd weather affected crops, food shortages, migration of highly infectious people and rats during warfare.
- Response of Christianity (legal & official): bishops built and maintained hospital complexes – provided free care, food, alms, and clothing; conducted liturgies, prayer, rituals, vigils.

Regina Coeli (“Mary, Queen of Heaven”)



St. Cyprian of Carthage, *Treatise 7* from *De mortalitate* (*On Mortality*)

“the ethical challenges posed by the pandemic”

Cyprian writes, *‘And further, beloved brethren, what is it, what a great thing is it, how pertinent, how necessary, that pestilence and plague which seems horrible and deadly, searches out the righteousness of each one.’*

His thesis is that an individual’s unique response to pain and suffering, disease and death is a test of faithfulness to one’s **ideology** and an indication of one’s **character**, and this is an example of how these events have shaped his theological views and social activity. Choosing one of his biblical examples — Job, Tobias, Abraham, Paul *or* an example of your own — describe the limits and possibilities of this thesis to those inside or outside of faith traditions as you have witnessed them in our current pandemic climate, and explain how these events have shaped your figure’s theological views and social activity.

John of Ephesus' "The Story of the Plague" from *Ecclesiastical History*

"intersection of the pandemic w/social and economic inequalities globally"

Along with vivid descriptions of the physical toll the plague took on the city, along with terrifying images of thousands of corpses being dumped into the sea, John of Ephesus emphasized with several stories accounts of those who tried to profit off the plague. This is one example of how a public health crisis can introduce specific economic and social injustices in Syria at that time. Why would this crime of looting the gold and silver of the dead be particularly heinous? Why, if the dead are dead, does it matter?



“the role of the arts throughout the pandemic globally”

John of Ephesus writes *“And for whom would he who wrote be writing?”* (76.82). This is a poignant statement that provides insight into his state of mind.

That said, why do these men write? How might documenting the public and graphic effects of their society’s disease or plague assist them internally (spiritually, emotionally or mentally) as they are situated as leaders during a traumatic moment?

- How are we seeing this artistic commitment happening now? What are some examples of creative responses to public health crises?

Why *write* now?
Why *right* now?
(Health Humanities
approach)



Additional questions to consider:

According to the text (Cyprian or John):

- How does religion and/or religious belief inform responses to disease or fear of disease?
- What can we learn from historic, religious responses to disease to better prepare us to respond to disease, the spread of disease, or fear of the spread of disease?
- How do religious philosophies of the body and views of philanthropy and consolation shape responses to one's own diseased body, as well shape how the diseased is viewed?

Concluding thoughts

Irrespective of one's personal view of the value of religion, there is an historic importance to religious responses to public health crises, in the opportunities that are gained or lost in these pivotal moments

1. Creativity: development of art, science & industry
2. Spirituality: reflection on life, death, hierarchy of cause:
 - How can we support people who are approaching medically 'pivotal' moments
 - How can we support people whose lives are shaped by death?
 - How can we support people who survive?

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