

Why do we salute a person who sneezes?

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

“A CASHEW,” says someone during a discussion about nuts in a piece by Ogden Nash.

“*Gesundheit!*” comes the reply.

Good wishes or blessings after a sneeze seem to be traditional everywhere. The Americans got *Gesundheit* from the Germans, and it means ‘Health!’ We say *Bless you!* or *Deiseil!* or other things which I discussed in my last article. The Irish say *Dia linn!* ‘God be with us!’ The French say *À vos souhaits!* *À tes souhaits!* ‘Bless you!’ The Italians say *Salute!* The Greeks say *Yassu!* ‘Keep well!’

The Germans didn’t always say *Gesundheit!* One of the nineteenth-century German folklorists recorded a charming tradition that enchanted spirits used to hide under a bridge and sneeze, in the hope that some pious passer-by might say *God bless you!* and thus remove the spell.

We find it in non-Christian societies too. The Arabs say *Ham dulillah!* or *Ham dulallah!* ‘Blessings of God!’ The Greeks and Romans used to say things after a sneeze like *Long may you live!* *May you enjoy your health!* *May Jupiter preserve you!* When a Hindu sneezes, I believe, people say *Live!* and the sneezer replies, *With you!* Most remarkably of all, Charles Platt, in his ‘Popular Superstitions’, says: “Speke and Grant, the African explorers, were unable to discover any trace of religion among the natives of equatorial Africa, except an ejaculation (apparently a prayer) whenever a person sneezed.”

Platt goes on to say that the Thai version is *May the Judgement be favourable to you!* This, apparently, is because of the idea that the gods are continually turning over the pages of the Judgement Book, and when they come to the page relating to any particular person, that individual invariably sneezes.

Now that is a very neat piece of aetiology which explains in one go both why we sneeze and also why someone offers a blessing when we do. As I showed last time, the idea that a sneeze is an indication of spiritual activity, a sign from God or from the gods, is a very ancient one. Greek mythology tells us how, at the command of Zeus, Prometheus (one of the Titans) made the first man out of mud and water. This was all very well, but he still had to bring him to life. So he took a phial, stole some rays from the sun, and sealed them up. He brought the phial to this predecessor of Frankenstein’s monster, held it close to his nose and opened it up. The creature started sneezing, and that was him alive. Prometheus prayed fervently to Zeus that his creation be preserved. The man watched him and heard what he said, and was very careful to do the same forever after whenever his own descendants sneezed.

Homer, in the *Odyssey*, mentions a princess who prayed to the gods for the speedy return of her husband. She had hardly finished her prayer when her son sneezed, and she took this as a sign from the gods that her prayer was granted.

In the same way, when the great general Xenophon was addressing his soldiers, someone sneezed. A shout of adoration to Jupiter rose along the ranks, and the delighted general declared that this was a special sign from him that their cause was a just one.

The reason for such beliefs is not far to seek. Unlike coughing, sneezing is from the head, and the ancient Celts, Greeks and Romans believed that the head was the focus of spiritual activity in the body. It is not such a natural explanation for Christians who believe with St Paul that the soul lies elsewhere in the body. Nevertheless, as Platt says, “It is a very general custom among Italians, when a person sneezes, to say *God be with you!* This arises from the belief that when the ‘Self’ or ‘Soul’ leaves the earthly body for a short time, its going and returning are marked by sneezes.”

Again, a sneeze usually comes involuntarily and without warning. That kind of single ‘dry’ sneeze is holy. But there are other types of sneeze. There is the self-induced kind referred to once by Jonathan Swift. “God bless you, if you ha’n’t taken snuff!” The third is the kind that is very obviously full of disease and comes in multiples. The potential good luck of a sneeze traditionally turns to bad luck if it is repeated too often — which means more than three times, usually.

However, the only sneezes in the Bible, I believe, are that massive burst of seven (the lucky number) representing life flooding back to the corpse of the child whom the prophet Elisha has revived by mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. It is in 2 Kings, 34-5. “And he went up, and lay upon the child, and put his mouth upon his mouth, and his eyes upon his eyes, and his hands upon his hands; and he stretched himself upon the child, and the flesh of the child waxed warm. Then he returned, and walked in the house to and fro; and went up, and stretched himself upon him: and the child sneezed seven times, and the child opened his eyes.”

So sneezing is associated with birth and rebirth, but also with disease and death. Jewish tradition has it that, not long after the creation, God decreed that every man living should sneeze once, and that at that point his soul would depart and he would die without any prior illness. Here it is clear that the sneeze represents the departing soul.

Jacob, who wanted to be able to settle his affairs and his conscience, wrestled with the Lord and gained exemption from the decree. As a result, said the rabbis, it was decided that, from then on, sneezing should always be accompanied by thanks for the preservation of life, and wishes for its prolongation. (This, then, explains why Gaelic speakers sometimes offered thanks for a sneeze. It is rabbinical.)

Many people nowadays will find it hard to believe that sneezing was not simply considered to be a harbinger of disease, the sign of a sudden change of temperature or the symptom of sitting in a draught. And they have a point. But I think that changing ideas of the location of the soul must have helped.

So, judging from Opie and Tatem’s ‘Dictionary of Superstitions’, the first suggestion that *disease* has anything to do with blessing a person who sneezes comes at the height of medieval Christianity, in 1483. The

'Golden Legend' claims that God imposed upon the Christian Romans "a great pestilence . . . that was cruel and sudden, and caused people to die: in going by the way, in playing, in being at table, and in speaking one with another suddenly they died. In this manner sometime sneezing they died, so that when any person was heard sneezing anon they that were by said to him, *God help you*, or *Christ help*, and yet endureth the custom."

Similarly, Sir Thomas Browne, in his so-called 'Vulgar Errors' of 1646, wrote: "Concerning sternutation or sneezing, and the custom of saluting or blessing upon that motion, it is . . . generally believed to derive its original from a disease, wherein sternutation proved mortal, and such as sneezed died." The antiquarian John Aubrey must have read this, for in 1688 he wrote: "I have heard, or read, a story that many years since, sneezing was an epidemical disease and very mortal, which caused this yet received custom."

In a journal called the 'Monthly Packet' of 1875, we have: "It is strange how many educated people will persist in dating the national 'God bless you!' from the time of the Great Plague; though we have clear proof to the contrary in 'The Golden Legend' . . . printed by Caxton in 1483."

Of course, every country had the custom, so every country was liable to remember a different plague by which to explain it. Garnier's 'History of France' attributed it to Pope Gregory. "The year 750 is commonly reckoned the era of the custom of saying 'God bless you' to one who happens to sneeze. It is said that, in the time of the pontificate of St Gregory the Great, the air was filled with such a deleterious influence that they who sneezed immediately expired. On this the devout pontiff appointed a form of prayer, and a wish to be said to persons sneezing for averting them from the fatal effects of this malignancy."

So, as Pliny said, *Cur sternutamentis salutamus?* Why do we salute a person who sneezes? Is it because of the doctrine of the soul, or because of the fear of catching cold? Arguments based on the former sound so fanciful, don't they, while arguments based on the latter sound so sensible. But there *is* a deciding factor. You salute a person who sneezes, but not one who coughs.

As I suggested last time, then, a sneeze was seen primarily as a sign of involuntary spiritual activity, which therefore has to be Christianised, or otherwise claimed for one's side, whatever that may be.

So in origin the sneeze-blessing has nothing to do with disease. And really, as Mary Beith would agree, I'm sure, that's a conclusion which is rightly complimentary to our ancestors' knowledge and wisdom. People who knew how to look after themselves could tell one sneeze from another. When sneezes held diseases, they knew all about it.

Deiseil!

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