**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**The Great Dying in Context: Pandemics in World History (Chapter 13)**

**SLIDE 13.1**

Individual human beings are not the only movers and shakers of history. The Great Dying, one of the worst natural disasters to befall humankind, serves as a reminder of the role played by pathogens—that is germs—in shaping the course of world history.

**SLIDE 13.2 [Image: Florentine Codex]**

Due to their isolation from the Afro-Eurasian world and a lack of domesticated animals, Native Americans had not acquired immunity to Old World diseases such as small pox, measles, typhus, influenza, malaria and the bubonic plague. Therefore, the result of contact between Native Americans and the Europeans and Africans who bore those diseases was a human tragedy of immense proportions as deadly pandemics spread among the population killing appalling numbers. Many existing Native American societies collapsed and survivors were frequently incorporated into growing European empires. Immigrants from Europe and Africa found room to settle in regions decimated by pandemic diseases. These newcomers often mixed with surviving Native Americans creating new societies in the process.

What separates the Great Dying from other periods where pathogens have influenced the course of human history is the number of deadly diseases that spread through the Americas over a short period of time. More common were singular pandemics, most often resulting from an existing pathogen mutating into a more deadly form. In the second wave era, both the Roman and Han Empires were weakened by pandemic diseases which resulted in significant declines in population. In the fourteenth century, the Black Death swept through much of Eurasia carrying off perhaps 30 to 50 percent of the population in many regions. Beyond the immediate devastation, the plague brought permanent changes to societies like that of Western Europe where serfdom largely disappeared and for a time living standards and opportunities grew for workers and peasants. Such pandemics have continued to impact on human history even in modern times. For example, the flu pandemic of 1918 swept across the world killing millions over just a few months.

**SLIDE 13.3 [Image: The Plague]**

Deadly pandemics like these are relatively rare. This is in part because of the nature of pathogens. In order to spark a widespread pandemic, there are several circumstances that must all be present. First, a pathogen must kill its host, but it cannot become so deadly that its host dies too quickly because for the pathogen to survive and spread the pathogen must have time to infect others. Which leads to a third limiting factor; pandemic diseases must possess the ability to easily infect new hosts. Only if a pathogen is sufficiently contagious will it infect enough people to survive and spread. Without all of these attributes, new or mutated pathogens are unlikely to spark a widespread pandemic.

The Great Dying was the result of the long isolation of Native Americans from Afro-Eurasian human populations and their diseases, a situation unlikely to be repeated on such a large scale in the modern globalized world. Nonetheless, pathogens continue to play a significant role as actors in human history. Today public health officials remain vigilant in their efforts to identify and isolate potential new pandemic diseases. Over the past several decades AIDS, various outbreaks of bird flu and Ebola have all emerged as potential pandemic threats. Even in an age of modern medicine, pathogens continue to be historical actors in World History.