Tracing Augustine's Thought on Roman Intervention in the Donatist Schism

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Introduction

Augustine's role in the Donatist schism is a topic of extensive scholarly discussion. Of particular interest is Augustine's opinion on the Roman government forcibly coercing the Donatists to give up their beliefs and rejoin the Catholic church. By the end of the Donatist controversy, Augustine would support government coercion. In fact, he would even appeal to the Roman civil magistrates for intervention. But this was not always Augustine's position. This paper is concerned with tracing the development of Augustine's thoughts on the matter and its cause. First, we will briefly review the origins of Donatism. Then, we will discuss how Augustine's thought developed in three distinct stages. Finally, we will see that Augustine accepted government coercion because it proved more effective than the peaceful method he previously advocated for.

Donatism: It's Origins

Donatism traces its roots back to the Great Persecution under Roman emperor Diocletian. On February 23, 303, Roman officials destroyed the recently built church at Nicomedia, burned its scriptures, and confiscated its treasuries. On the following day, February 24, Diocletian published his first "Edict against the Christians."[1] Eusebius describes the content of the first edict in *Church History:*

> It was in the nineteenth year of the reign of Diocletian, in the month Dystrus, called March by the Romans, when the feast of the Saviour's passion was near at hand, that royal edicts were published everywhere, commanding that the churches be leveled to the ground and the Scriptures be destroyed by fire, and ordering that those who held places of honor be degraded, and that the household servants, if they persisted in the profession of Christianity, be deprived of freedom.[2]

[1] Timothy David Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Mass. London: Harvard university press, 1981), 22.

[2] Eusebius, "Church History," 8.2.4, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Arthur Cushman McGiffert, vol. 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890), https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/250108.htm.

The first edict outlawed assembling for Christian worship. To enforce this prohibition, the edict ordered the destruction of all Christian churches and of any private home where scriptures and/or church property was discovered. Additionally, all scripture was to be burned, and Christian artifacts were to be confiscated. Christians who refused to recant were stripped of any legal status and privileges. To make matters worse, the edict required that anyone who sought to plead their case to the courts had to first sacrifice to the gods before his case would be heard.[3]

The edict itself seemingly did not specify punishment for failing to comply. As such, governors could enforce the edict with mildness or severity.[4] Eusebius, writing from the East, described varying degrees of persecution faced by Christians who did not recant, ranging from imprisonment to execution.[5] In the West, persecution was scarce. For instance, "In Gaul, Britain, and Spain, Constantius did not go beyond destroying some churches; no one was executed."[6] The persecution in the West was also short-lived. By 312, Constantine had become the sole emperor of the West, making it certain "that persecution would not affect provinces under his control."[7]

However, despite the short-lived and sporadic nature of Western persecution, Christians in Africa suffered greatly. As mentioned above, individual Roman governors enforced the edict

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[3] Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 22.

[4] Barnes, 23.

[5] See "Church History," book 8, chapters 3-13, for a thorough account of the various persecutions, tortures, and executions faced by Christians throughout the Eastern empire.

[6] Henry Chadwick, ed., *The Early Church: The Story of Emergent Christianity from the Apostolic Age to the Dividing of the Ways between Greek East and the Latin West*, Rev. ed, The Penguin History of the Church 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1993), 122.

[7] Chadwick, 122.

with varying degrees of severity. The proconsul of Africa and governor of Numidia (a Roman providence located in modern north-east Algeria) chose maximum severity:

> The Christians in their provinces could nowhere feel safe… By physical force, they were compelled to burn incense, to deny Christ, to join in the destruction of churches, and to consign the holy Scriptures to the flames. Anullinus, the proconsul of Africa, added his own interpretation to the imperial edict. Besides the surrender of the scriptures and the destruction of the churches, he ordered that Christians should sacrifice to the gods.[8]

Due to the severity of the persecution in Africa, many Christians complied. For instance, Mensurius, bishop of Carthage, held no public worship, and even though he did not surrender any of the scriptures, he did satisfy the authorities by handing over heretical writings.[9] Mensurius viewed those who refused to cooperate as provocative. Even going so far as to deny martyrdom to any Christian who willingly surrendered to the authorities or boasted that they would not give up their copies of the scriptures.[10]

Mensurius's policy of going along to get along did not rest well with certain Christians. To some, the act of surrendering scripture (or books passed off as scripture) was apostasy, and "to think otherwise was to derogate from the glory of those who had died rather than surrender."[11] The tension between the two sides is seen in the correspondence between Mensurius and Secundus, the senior bishop of Numidia. In his letter, Mensurius takes the above stance, explaining how he had substituted heretical volumes for the scriptures and denied martyrship to

[8] Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius*, 23.

[9] Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 123.

[10] John Chapman, "Donatists," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909), https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05121a.htm.

[11] Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 123.

any who sought arrest. Secundus replied by praising the martyrs who had been tortured and executed for refusing to surrender scriptures.[12]

There was also friction between Mensurius and his congregants. Many of the 'confessors'[13] in Carthage viewed him as a traitor and denounced him and all his works.[14] In retaliation, Mensurius ordered his archdeacon Caecilian to guard the prison to prevent food and drink from being delivered to the confessors there. Indeed, if the Donatist work, *The Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs,* is to be believed*,* Caecilian was "more ruthless than the tyrant, more bloody than the executioner."[15] According to *Acts* Caecilian and his posse stood outside the doors of the prison, armed with whips, and would strike down anyone attempting to bring food to the confessors: "The cups for the thirsty inside in chains were broken. At the entrance to the prison food was scattered only to be torn apart by dogs. Before the doors of the prison the fathers of the martyrs fell and the most holy mothers. Shut out from the sight of their children."[16]

This tension devolved into schism upon Mensurius's death in 311. Due to the primacy of the bishop of Carthage, it was expected that the new bishop of Carthage would be elected by neighboring bishops, including the bishops of Numidia (including Secundus himself).[17] Instead, "Caecilian was hastily consecrated Mensurius's successor by three country bishops."[18] To make

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[12] Chapman, "Donatists."

[13] Christians who went to prison for refusing to recant or give up scriptures.

[14] Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 123.

[15] Maureen A. Tilley, ed., "The Acts of the Abitinian Martyrs," in *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa*, Translated Texts for Historians, v. 24 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 45–46.

[16] Tilley, 45.

[17] Chapman, "Donatists."

[18] Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 123.

matters worse, one of the three had supposedly turned over scriptures to the authorities.[19] Secundus and his Numidian bishops were outraged. They declared Caecilian's ordination invalid and consecrated a rival bishop of Carthage named Majorinus. Ultimately, Rome recognized Caecilian, and Secundus, Majorinus, and their followers were declared schismatics. The Donatists would get their name from Majorinus's successor, Donatus the Great. Despite being considered schismatic by the catholic church, the Donatist movement continued to grow, and soon, many cities would have two bishops, one Catholic and one Donatist.[20] This popularity was especially true in Africa. Donatism "appealed to many Africans because of its successful opposition to the Roman power in Africa and to the Catholic Church, which strong African nationalists were inclined to look upon as an ally of the imperial power."[21] This nationalistic undercurrent naturally led to violence, which would become a common tool in the Donatist's resistance to the Catholic church.[22]

Donatism and Augustine

By Augustine's ordination in 391, Donatism was stronger than ever, especially in Numidia, Augustine's own providence. While the towns were mostly loyal to the Empire, Donatism thrived in the country. There, its anti-Roman propaganda and anarchist tendencies made it attractive to the nationalistic residents.[23] Donatists adhered to strict separation from the

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[19] Chadwick, 123.

[20] Chapman, "Donatists."

[21] Geoffrey Grimshaw Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy* (London: S.P.C.K., 1950), 9.

[22] For a history of the spread of Donatism, and the violence surrounding it, in the time leading up to Augustine's ordination see Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy,* 8-13. For our purposes it is enough to say that violence was a hallmark of the Donatist controversy (on both sides).

[23] Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy*, 26–27.

Catholic church. For instance, Donatists would not bury a Catholic in their graveyard. A Donatist could not marry, greet, or even sit in the same room as a Catholic. Donatist bishops would not answer Catholic letters or admit a Catholic into their church. Unfortunately for Augustine, Donatism was especially popular in Hippo.[24] Given this background, we will examine how Augustine's views on Donatist changed over time.

Phase One: 391-395

During the first phase of his thinking, Augustine wholly rejected using force against the Donatists.[25] During this phase, Augustine's primary concern was pastoral: "The flock committed to his bishop's care must be defended from the contamination of schism."[26] This focus can be seen in his introduction to *Psalmus contra partem Donati,* his first work concerning Donatism. There he says:

> Wishing also to bring the issue of the Donatists to the attention of the very simplest people and, in general, of the ignorant and unlearned, and to do so in a way that would be as easy for them to remember as possible, I made up a psalm that went through the Latin alphabet and that could be sung by them, but it only got as far as the letter V. Things of this sort are referred to as abecedarian. While it is true that I left out the final three [letters], in place of them I added something at the end to serve as a sort of epilogue, as though Mother Church were speaking to them… I did not want to do this in some other song-form lest the requirements of meter would force some words on me that were less well known to the general public.[27]

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[24] Willis, 28–29.

[25] Alexander F. C. Webster, "Just War and Holy War: Two Case Studies in Comparative Christian Ethics," *Christian Scholar's Review* 15, no. 4 (1986): 364.

[26] Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy*, 36.

[27] Augustine, "Psalm against the Party of Donatus," in *The Donatist Controversy I*, by Augustine, ed. Boniface Ramsey and David G. Hunter, trans. Maureen A. Tilley and Boniface Ramsey, vol. 1, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2019), 32.

Throughout the *psalm*, Augustine calls for unity. This is emblematic of his pastoral approach to the Donatist controversy. At this stage in his thinking, Augustine's concern is not with eradicating the Donatists; instead, he hopes to heal the schism that has divided his city. For instance, he pleads, "Let the error come to an end now, and let us be in unity."[28] Later, he says: "the one who has Christ's charity (*karitatem)* can't hate peace."[29] Again, such strong language indicates that violence is the last thing Augustine wants, and similar calls for peace and unity are found throughout the *psalm.*

His letters to Donatist bishops written during the period are also filled with calls for unity and peace. For instance, in a letter to Maximinus, the Donatist bishop of Sinitum, he requests to dialogue with Maximinus over the issue of rebaptism. However, he promises that such a debate would not take place in the presence of Roman soldiers "lest any of you should think that I wish to act in a violent way, rather than as the interests of peace demand." He also asks that the debate occur free of the presence of Circumcellions (the Donatist group particularly prone to violence) and that their arguments "appeal to reason and to the authoritative teaching of the Divine Scriptures, dispassionately and calmly."[30] In addition to these overt requests for peace and civility, the letter has a friendly and charitable tone. Far from calling Maximinus his enemy, he calls him a "well-beloved lord and brother" and one who is "worthy of honour." He then says, "I not only love you, but love you as I love myself."[31] These examples demonstrate that Augustine

[28] Augustine, 36.

[29] Augustine, 39.

[30] Augustine, "Letter 23," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J.G. Cunningham, vol. 1, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), sec. 7, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102023.htm.

[31] Augustine, sec. 1.

desired peace and reconciliation between the Donatist and Catholic churches during the first stage of his ministry.[32]

Phase Two: 395-405

Augustine's ascension to Bishop-coadjutor of Hippo in 395 put him in the crosshairs of violent Donatists who saw him as a formidable opponent. It seems that the Donatists' attacks against Augustine ranged from verbal abuse to assassination attempts.[33] During this time, Augustine took up a more concentrated campaign against the Donatists and wrote his first significant works against them. Namely: *Answer to the Letter of Parmenian, Baptism,* and the first book of *Answer to the Writings of Petilian.* Despite the increased threat to his own life, Augustine mostly maintained the stance he had taken before his promotion. This can be seen in his sermons and letters from this period. In a 396 letter to Eusebius, he states that:

> It is because of my love for Christian peace that I am so deeply moved by the profane deeds of those who basely and impiously persevere in dissenting from it. He knows also that this feeling of mine is one tending towards peace, and that my desire is, not that any one should against his will be coerced into the Catholic communion, but that to all who are in error the truth may be openly declared, and being by God's help clearly exhibited through my ministry, may so commend itself as to make them embrace and follow it.[34]

These and his other letters to Donatist leaders are filled with the same friendly approach that pervaded his earlier letters. He continued to seek peaceful relations with them, even as he came under increased attack from certain Donatist elements. Augustine wanted the schism remedied.

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[32] Augustine's call for peace did not mean he wanted a policy of "agree to disagree." He wanted the Donatists to see their error in their beliefs, forsake them, and rejoin the Catholic church.

[33] Augustine, "Letter 35," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J.G. Cunningham, vol. 1, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), sec. 4, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102035.htm; Possidius, "Life of St. Augustine," turtullian.org, 1919, chap. XIII, https://tertullian.org/fathers/possidius_life_of_augustine_02_text.htm#C10.

[34] Augustine, "Letter 34," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J.G. Cunningham, vol. 1, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), sec. 1, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102034.htm.

But he desired for the Donatists to be brought back into the fold of the Catholic Church through debate and logic, not through violent coercion. He believed that the Donatists could be convinced to see the error of their ways.

Accordingly, his desire to dialogue with Donatists also continued. Shortly after his promotion, Augustine invited Proculeianus, the Donatist bishop of Hippo, to a friendly debate on the issue.[35] Similarly, in 398, Donatist Bishop Honoratus suggested to Augustine that they debate the issue by letter to avoid the potential disturbances of a public debate, a request that Augustine was happy to oblige.[36] His sermons from the first five years of his episcopate were likewise filled with pleas for church unity and warnings against the Donatist errors.[37]

Despite the continued desire for healing, we also see Augustine beginning to warm up to the idea of state intervention, an idea that he had wholly shunned prior to 395. This is evident in his work *Answer to the Letter of Parmenian,* in which he considers the role of the civil magistrate in suppressing the Donatists. He begins by discussing the Donatist claim that their persecution by the Roman government was proof that they were the church of the Martyrs.[38] Augustine argues that suffering at the hands of the government does not automatically make you a martyr. Augustine argues that the Donatists are "punished both deservedly… and appropriately

[35] Augustine, "Letter 33," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J.G. Cunningham, vol. 1, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102033.htm.

[36] Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy*, 46.

[37] For an overview of Augustine's anti-Donatist sermons during this time see Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy, 47-48*.

[38] i.e. the true church.

by the authorities" for their crimes.[39] Augustine is referring to the violence caused by the Donatist, rather than the schism. Even still, this marks a hostility towards the Donatist's that had been absent up until this point.

His letters also show a growing consideration and acceptance of government intervention. Here, we will consider two of Augustine's letters. The first is a 402 letter to the Donatist bishop of Calama, Crispinus, with whom Augustine had previously offered to discuss the schism.[40] However, the friendly tone that had permeated Augustine's previous letters to Donatists is now missing. Instead, Augustine chastises Crispinus for rebaptizing eighty people by force, and, most notably, he threatens to force Crispinus to pay the legal penalty of ten pounds of gold for his crime.[41]

The second is a 405 letter to the provincial governor, Caecilianus. In the letter, Augustine praises Caecilianus for his work to promote catholic unity within his providence, which includes vigorously "enforce[ing] your proclamation." Augustine also stresses that the remaining Donatists must be subjugated because of the extent and nature of their crimes.[42]

We must not take these letters and works out of context. As stated above, in most of Augustine's writings from the time, he maintained a desire to bring the schismatic Donatists back

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[39] Augustine, "Answer to the Letter of Parmenian - First Book," in *The Donatist Controversy I*, by Augustine, ed. Boniface Ramsey and David G. Hunter, trans. Maureen A. Tilley and Boniface Ramsey, vol. 1, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2019), 285.

[40] Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy*, 56.

[41] Augustine, "Letter 66," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J.G. Cunningham, vol. 1, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), sec. 1, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102066.htm.

[42] Augustine, "Letter 86," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J.G. Cunningham, vol. 1, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102086.htm.

into the Catholic church peacefully. However, this period marks a step in Augustine's thinking towards fully accepting Roman intervention. What sets this transitory period apart is that while Augustine does not yet urge government intervention, he begins "ethically, theologically, and instrumentally to rationalize moderate forms of political coercion of a negative, restrictive nature."[43] For instance, in *Answer to the Letter of Parmenian*, Augustine rationalizes government intervention rather than condemning it, and in the two letters we examined, we see an Augustine that is seemingly in favor of government intervention, even if he isn't actively calling for it yet.

During this time, the Catholic Church took its first step in appealing for protection from the Roman government. In 404, the Ninth Council of Carthage sent emissaries to Emperors Arcadius and Honorius, asking for protection from the Donatists. This led to Honorius issuing the first Edict of Unity. Among other things, it outlawed rebaptism, declared schismatics to be legally considered heretics, and ordered all Donatist churches to be handed over to the Catholics.[44]

Phase Three: 406-411

Throughout 406-411, Augustine wrote several letters in which he fully embraced the Roman government's intervention. Between 405 and 407, the first Edict of Unity failed to be adequately enforced, and Donatist violence escalated. This led to the Church once again sending emissaries to the emperor to appeal for intervention. As part of this effort, Augustine wrote a letter to the minister of state reinforcing the appeal of the emissaries and begging the minister to take action. These appeals led to all heretical assemblies being outlawed, and punishments being

[43] Webster, "Just War and Holy War," 364–65.

[44] Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy*, 51.

prescribed for those who ransacked basilicas, in addition to the strict enforcement of the previous laws.

Around 408, Augustine wrote a long letter to Vincentius, the bishop of a small schismatic sect in Cartenna, in which he goes on a lengthy defense of state coercion. Augustine's argument amounts to 'the ends justify the means.' His general argument is that it is okay for the state to persecute the Donatists because it causes them to "be shaken up in a beneficial way by a law… and awake to the salvation which is to be found in the unity of the Church."[45] In chapter two, he argues that when good and evil use the same means, the ends determine which is good and which is evil. He gives the example of Pharaoh and Moses. Both, he argues, afflicted the Jewish people. But while their actions were alike, their motives were not. Pharaoh was motivated by a desire for power and aimed to oppress the Israelites. On the other hand, Moses was motivated by love and desired to correct the Israelites and lead them back into righteousness. Moses's motivations and desired outcome made his affliction good, while Pharaoh's was evil. Likewise, the state's affliction of the Donatists is motivated by love. The state persecutes the Donatists, not to oppress them but to lead them back into the unity and salvation of the Catholic Church.[46] Throughout the letter, Augustine constantly appeals to scripture to justify his position. The example above is just one among many.

What changed Augustine's mind?

Augustine's letter to Vincentius also tells us why he changed his opinion. He admits that, at first, he was against forcibly coercing the Donatists back into the Catholic Church. Instead, he

[45] Augustine, "Letter 93," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and J.G. Cunningham, vol. 1, First Series (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), chap. 1.2.

[46] Augustine, chap. 2.6.

wanted to win them back by persuasive arguments. However, Augustine admits that the evidence was overwhelming. Hippo was overwhelmingly Donatist and Augustine tried for years to convert the Donatist through debate, tracts, and logical arguments, to no avail. However, once the Roman government started cracking down on Donatism, the Donatists in Hippo were "brought over to the Catholic unity by fear of the imperial edicts."[47] Under threat of punishment, more and more Donatists forsook Donatist teaching and joined the Catholic church. To Augustine's surprise, these converts seemed genuine.[48] Given the evidence, Augustine accepted state coercion. By 408, Augustine had been fighting Donatism for over a decade, and years of fighting peacefully through debates, letters, and tracts had yielded no substantial fruit. However, the success of state coercion was quick and thorough. Given the circumstances, it is easy to see why Augustine would embrace it.

Conclusion

As we have discussed, Augustine's change in opinion on the government's intervention in the Donatist schism can be categorized into three distinct stages. From 391-394, Augustine was wholly against forced coercion. Instead, he hoped that debate and logic would win the day. From 395-405, Augustine held out hope that he could peacefully persuade the Donatists to rejoin the Catholic church. Nonetheless, he was beginning to consider and accept government intervention. By 406, it had become apparent to Augustine that the Donatists could not be peacefully persuaded, and he fully accepted government coercion.

[47] Augustine, chap. 5.17.

[48] Augustine, chap. 5.16-17.

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