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Reexamining Heresy: The Donatists

Emily C. Elrod

On the first day of June in A.D. 411, Carthage, two hostile groups of Christians faced off in the summer heat to settle their differences. They met at the massive Baths of Gargilius (*Thermae Gargilianiae*).¹ On one side of the baths stood 284 Donatist bishops and on the other side 286 orthodox Christian bishops gathered.² Both sets of bishop claimed for their authority the doctrines of St. Cyprian and the creed that each professed hardly differed from the other. Yet since 312, they had oppressed each other with a violence that only the arrival of Islam in the area around Carthage in A.D. 698 could diffuse.³ For the orthodox Christians, the Council of Carthage ought to have ended the confrontation; for the Donatists, it became just one more battle in their hundred-year struggle to resist centralization by the Roman state.⁴

The division between the orthodox Christians and Donatists began during the Persecution of Diocletian (303-05). Diocletian had hoped to avoid extreme measures to suppress the Church “by bringing pres-

¹ Brent D. Shaw, “African Christianity: Disputes, Definitions, and ‘Donatists’” in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Religious Movements: Discipline and Dissent*, ed. Malcom R. Greenshields and Tomas Robinson (Lewistown, New York: Edwin Mellen P, 1992), 6.

² Peter Brown, “Religious Dissent in the Later Roman Empire: the Case of North Africa,” *History*, XLVII, (1963): 289.

³ Allan D. Fitzgerald, ed., *Augustine Through the Ages: an Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 285.

⁴ Shaw, “African Christianity,” 19.

sure to bear upon the clergy,” so as “to render the laity leaderless, and . . . bring about general apostasy.”⁵ The clergy were to hand over Scriptures to the authorities to be burnt, an act of desecration that became known by the Donatists as the sin of *traditio*. Bishops who committed this sin had no spiritual power and became known as *traditores*; Mensurius, the Bishop of Carthage who died in 311, stood accused of *traditio*.⁶ Upon his death, Caecilian filled the vacancy. He was unpopular among many Christians due to his opposition to the popular cult of the martyrs. Rumors of his alleged cruelty towards the martyrs of Abitina in 304 circulated before his consecration.⁷ His enemies then accused one of his consecrating bishops, Felix of Apthungi, of having committed the sin of *traditio*. Secundus, the bishop of Tigisis and primate of Numidia, endorsed this accusation largely because of an injury to his pride and status at the time of Mensurius’s consecration, to which he had not received an invitation.⁸ It was thus declared by the bishops of the province of Numidia that Mensurius had not been truly consecrated. Majorinus, a member of the faction opposing Mensurius, took his place, but

⁵ Gerald Bonner, *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), 28.

⁶ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 28-29. Many clergy avoided this sin by handing heretical books over to the authorities. In a letter to Secundus (bishop of Tigisis and primate of Numidia), Mensuris wrote how he had given heretical books over to the authorities to be burned instead of Scripture.

⁷W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1952), 17; Maureen A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress P, 1997), 9.

⁸ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 30.

in 313, shortly after his consecration, he died.⁹ Donatus of Casae Nigrae succeeded to the office and gave his name to the emerging controversy over *traditio*.¹⁰

Both the Donatist and orthodox Christian churches claimed Cyprian (d. 258), who was later made a saint, as their inspiration and appealed to his life and his writings. Cyprian had been concerned with the Christians who had fallen away from the Church in the time of the Decian persecution of 250 to 251 and sacrificed to the pagan gods.¹¹ These people were known as the *lapsi*. Cyprian accepted rebaptism of the *lapsi* or any apostate who returned to the communion of the Church. After a suitable length of time, the penitent could receive communion.¹² In 255-6, Cyprian defended this view against Stephen, Bishop of Rome, who demanded that he follow the Roman custom of one baptism. The Church in Rome threatened him with excommunication if he did not obey. Cyprian acquiesced, since he believed in the importance of the unity of the Church although he never renounced his views on rebaptism. The underlying argument of his major work, *De Unitate*, even claimed that outside of the Church there could be no valid ministry since there was no valid spirituality. There is only *One Church*, he wrote, “one origin, one mother prolific with offspring; of her are we born, by her milk

⁹ Fitzgerald, *Augustine Through the Ages*, 284.

¹⁰ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 31.

¹¹ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 126; Edward White Benson, *Cyprian: His Life, His Times, His Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1897), 65.

¹² Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 24, 279.

we are nourished, by her spirit we are quickened.”¹³ In a paradoxical turn of events, this bishop who had persistently preached on the importance of unity would later become the principal authority for a schismatic church.¹⁴

The problems that afflicted Donatists in the early to mid-fourth century were not of their own making but rather the effect of Emperor Constantine’s actions. With the proclamation of the Edict of Milan (313), Constantine made Christianity a legal form of worship in the Roman Empire. He was the first of the emperors in the words of an orthodox Christian admirer, to “[repudiate] errors . . . [and acknowledge] . . . the majesty of the unique God.”¹⁵ He considered himself the head of the church he had legalized and he hoped his position as a Christian Emperor would help unify his empire, just as former pagan emperors considered themselves to be the empire’s first religious citizens. The Donatists resisted the claim to spiritual leadership by the Emperor; Donatus himself later asked what the Emperor had to do with the Church?¹⁶ To establish his control of orthodoxy, Constantine turned to advisors and bishops who supported his spiritual hegemony against “various brands of Christianity that [had] evolved in different regional and cultural contexts around the Mediterranean.”¹⁷ From 316-321, the

¹³ Ibid., 280-1.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ In W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1984), 485.

¹⁶ “Quid est imperatori cum Ecclesia?” E. L. Woodward, *Christianity and Nationalism in the Later Roman Empire* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1916), 36.

¹⁷ Shaw, “African Christianity,” 9.

Roman state would use violence against the followers of Donatus, whose deaths sealed a reputation for Donatism as the church of the martyrs. Even their successful resistance to state centralization depended on regionalism. The Donatists represented a local orthodoxy within the North African Christian tradition opposed to the orthodoxy manufactured at Constantine's court.¹⁸

Several scholars have researched the religious and social roots of Donatism. W. H. C. Frend's *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (1952), is the most comprehensive work on the Donatist schism, linking the rise of Christianity to social revolution. In that view, heresy and schism cannot be explained in religious terms only. In Frend, Donatism belonged to a continuous native tradition within Berber religious history. In his "Religious Dissent in the Later Roman Empire: the Case of North Africa" (1961), Peter Brown challenges any argument for purely local roots to the controversy. Brown contends that the tension between orthodox Christians and the Donatists echoed throughout much of the Christian church. No local model for discontent can explain its appearance and persistence in the Latin world. Studies of Donatism within a narrower time frame include Gerald Bonner's *St. Augustine of Hippo: Life and Controversies* (1963). Bonner gives a concise overview of Donatism and Augustine's response to it, without an original interpretation for either. More recently, Brent D. Shaw has concluded, after a close reading of documents surrounding the Conference of Carthage in 411, that the historian has played into the

¹⁸ Ibid., 11-12.

dominant power structure by labeling North African Christians “Donatist” schismatics when they were simply continuing a local tradition of Christianity.¹⁹

Primary sources useful for examining this debate include Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Life of Constantine* (written after 337) and his *Ecclesiastical History*, both valuable records for examining the roots of heresies in the Church. Optatus of Milevis’s *On the Schism of Donatists* (circa 366) is another important source that St. Augustine made central in his anti-Donatist writings.

The modern historian often assumes with Frend that only an exceptional degree of social and ethnic tension could provoke the violent religious protests of Donatism.²⁰ That view, however, does not effectively emphasize the religious aspects of the schism. While the Donatist schism is arguably more political than theological in origin, historians have only recently begun to drift away from this social/ethnic theory for the schism to look at religion as a motivating factor in the split. By tracing the roots of the schism in Constantine’s policies to the controversy’s culmination in Augustine’s response, this paper seeks to show how social, ethnic, and religious attitudes combined to create the Donatist schism.

¹⁹ Brent D. Shaw, “African Christianity: Disputes, Definitions, and ‘Donatists’” in *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Religious Movements: Discipline and Dissent*, ed. Malcom R. Greenshields and Tomas Robinson (Lewistown, New York: Edwin Mellen P, 1992).

²⁰ Brown, “Religious Dissent,” 250.

Social and Ethnic Attitudes of Donatism

Christianity in North Africa

Christianity in North Africa was an interesting blend of local and universal traditions.²¹ In the latter half of the third century A.D., Christianity triumphed over paganism in North Africa. It was not, however, any “conversion from heathendom to a higher form of religion.”²² It was common for people to become quasi-Christians and preserve many pagan aspects of worship. By that measure, even Constantine remained a quasi-Christian. The harsh environment in which early Christians had to survive readily stirred fears of unseen spiritual powers to enlist or placate.

Many features of Native African paganism translated easily to Christianity. For example, the Berbers’ worship of Saturn tended towards monotheism. Their existing submission to an omnipotent Divine Will likely aided the process of conversion. Most importantly, the worshippers of Saturn came primarily from the lower classes in the towns and country.²³ In early third century A.D., the Saturn cult was especially strong in Numidia, and many of the Saturn sites of worship would later become Donatist strongholds.²⁴ The worship of Saturn died out almost completely between 240 and 275 when a massive conversion to Christian-

²¹ R. A. Markus, “Christianity and Dissent in Roman North Africa: Changing Perspectives in Recent Work,” in *Schism, Heresy and Religious Protest*, Derkek Baker, ed. *Studies in Church History Volume 9* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1972), 21.

²² Frend, *Donatist Church*, 104.

²³ *Ibid.*, 80; 100-104.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

ity occurred on the High Plains. By the mid-third century, Christianity had triumphed throughout of North Africa.²⁵

The Berbers believed that spiritual powers ruled their lives. The Christianity they accepted was not the Christianity of later Western Europe with its forgiving and merciful God. Theirs was a harsh God, waiting to bring the world to the Last Judgment. For the majority, an acceptance of Christianity did not mean denying any of the basic ideas of African paganism. For example, martyrdom was an idea that came to dominate the Christian imagination of North Africans who believed it to be the only death worthy of a Christian. The emphasis on martyrdom had its roots in local religious tradition and Donatism embraced this theme of martyrdom.²⁶

Donatist Geographical Distribution

Different landscapes and cultures provide the background to Donatism and orthodox Christianity in North Africa. Evidence from written sources, such as the exchanges at the Council of Carthage and Augustine's letters, shows that Donatism was largely a Numidian and agrarian movement.²⁷ There are two different geological formations in North Africa: the Tell, about ninety miles of forest and fertile valleys extending from the Tunisian and Algerian coasts, and the High Plains, an area about 2,700 feet above sea level

²⁵ Ibid., 83, 87.

²⁶ Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa*, 57. For a more thorough discussion of Donatist martyrdom, see Maureen A. Tilley, trans., *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa* (Liverpool: Liverpool U P, 1997).

²⁷ Frend, *Donatist Church*, 48-50.

with little rainfall. Donatism largely occupied the inland plains while orthodox Christianity occupied the coastal cities and towns on the Tell.²⁸ The areas were divided climatically as well as physically—over the Tell and to the east, rainfall was moderate, while rain falls heavily near the coast. Due to the preserve of waters, Carthage, the coast, and river valleys experienced relatively high fertility. These areas could sustain a large population “supported by mixed farming—wheat, vines, and stock-raising.”²⁹

The lack of rainfall on the High Plains, which included southern Numidia, Maurentania Sitifensia, and part of Byzacenia, prevented urban centers from developing and meant a low standard of living for its people.³⁰ The inhabitants of the High Plains necessarily differed from their neighbors on the more Romanized coast and were far more rooted in their ancient traditions.³¹

By the late third century Donatists dominated Christianity throughout Numidia. They also held sway over the High Plains and the country of the Nemenchas that extended south to the Sahara Desert.³² In this entire area, only about six sees had an orthodox bishop. However, Orthodox Christians dominated larger towers, like Theveste, Mascula, Macomades, and Thamugadi. Yet even there where energetic orthodox bishops preached from the pulpits and an occasional Donatist converted, popular opinion

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 52.

was rising against orthodoxy.³³

Evidence from over two hundred archaeological sites in Romano-Berber villages has confirmed many of the churches in Numidia were Donatist.³⁴ At least a dozen have the Donatist war cry “Deo Laudes” inscribed on them.³⁵ The impression gained from these sites is that Donatism was the faith of choice for most people in the hinterland. Orthodox Christianity was simply unable to maintain itself in Numidia.³⁶

While adherence to Donatism or orthodox Christianity was related to regional geographical and climatic conditions in North Africa, there may also have been connections between religious allegiance and certain economic interests.³⁷ For example, Donatism may have been associated with the cultivation of olive trees, for some of the olive presses carry Christian inscriptions and even the Donatist motto “Deo Laudes.”³⁸

Like geography, linguistic divisions mapped religious differences onto the North African landscape. There were two native languages in Roman North Africa: Punic, written in a Semitic script, and “Berber,” which was also called “Libyan.”³⁹ Latin was the imported imperial language used everywhere for official

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 53.

³⁵ Ibid., “Praise God.”

³⁶ Ibid., 55.

³⁷ Ibid., 56.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Fergus Millar, “Local Cultures in the Roman Empire: Libyan, Punic and Latin in Roman Africa,” *Journal of Roman Studies* (1968), 128. “Berber” is an Arabic loan-word from the Greek *barbaros*. Millar refers to it as “Libyan” because no ancient literary source calls it “Berber.”

business. Many people knew Latin throughout the provinces by the mid-third century though it remains unknown but doubtful if the peasantry was knowledgeable in Latin. In Augustine's time, there are some references to preaching in Punic for certain congregations. All the same, references to Punic go unmentioned in the works of Tertullian and Cyprian.⁴⁰ While Latin was not simply the language of the cities while people in the countryside spoke Libyan (and, thus, largely made up of the Donatists), it does appear that on the high plains of Numidia the indigenous population spoke Berber and were peasants.⁴¹ In other words, language, geography, and Donatism did map onto each other.

Constantine and the Donatists

Donatism's early years can only be known imperfectly.⁴² Scholarly opinion about when the controversy first emerged fluctuates between 306-7 and 311-312. The writings of Tyconius suggest the earlier date, while the 311-12 marks the death of Mensurius and the disputed election of Caecilian. This paper adopts W. H. C. Frend's date for the schism of 312 because Donatus is absent from the controversy until that year.⁴³

The Emperor Constantine inherited an unexpected

⁴⁰ Ibid., 128; 133-34.

⁴¹ Frend, *Donatist Church*, 57-8.

⁴² T. D. Barnes, "The Beginnings of Donatism," *Journal of Theological Studies* (April 1975): 13.

⁴³ W. H. C. Frend and K. Clancy, "When Did the Donatist Schism Begin?" *Journal of Theological Studies*, 28 (1977): 104-109.

conflict when he gained control of Africa in 312.⁴⁴ In three separate letters to Anullius, the proconsul of Carthage, in the winter of 312-13, Constantine ordered that property seized from the Christians during the Great Persecution under Diocletian be immediately restored and that the orthodox Christian clergy over whom Caecilian presided be released.⁴⁵ One of these letters, written in either March or April of 313, would make it difficult later for Constantine to arbitrate the controversy since he ordered that “these men . . . over which Caecilian presides . . . shall be held totally free and exempt from all public offices, to the end that they may not by any error or sacrilegious deviation, be drawn away from the service due to the Divinity.”⁴⁶ This was an important decision, because it granted Caecilian’s clergy exemption from municipal levies while also allowing them to pledge their property against the city’s taxation.⁴⁷ This is an example of how Constantine’s policy of supporting the traditional social structure of the Empire would conflict with the Church—the priesthood was in danger of becoming a refuge for the curial class. Now orthodoxy had financial benefits which undercut within elite opinion the position of Caecilian and his supporters even more.⁴⁸

After receiving petitioners who denounced Caecilian, Anullius subsequently replied to Constantine. The

⁴⁴ Ibid.; T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1981), 56.

⁴⁵ Ibid., Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* trans. Christian Frederick Cruse (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1962), 428-29.

⁴⁶ Eusebius, *History*, 433.

⁴⁷ Frend, *Donatist Church*, 146.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

petitioners had given Anullius two documents containing charges against Caecilian—one sealed and the other unsealed. He thus appealed to the “best of emperors” to “make haste to have judges given to [the Africans] from Gaul.”⁴⁹ Constantine complied with his request, sending to Rome “ten bishops, who appear to accuse him, and ten others, who he himself may consider necessary for [Caecilian’s] cause.” The bishop of Rome would preside over the case.⁵⁰ This was a decisive moment in the history of the early church because “for the first time schism or unorthodoxy could become an offense punishable by law.”⁵¹

Constantine, now a Christian, believed it to be a duty “freely entrusted to [his] fidelity” to settle disputes between bishops.⁵² The hearing he proposed was not a negotiation but a Church council “according to ecclesiastical precedent.”⁵³ On 2 October 313, Constantine reached his decision: he acquitted Caecilian, and condemned Donatus because he had allowed rebaptism, which was now declared illegal.⁵⁴ Constantine did not wait to hear what the opposition had to say before reaching his verdict. The reason for his bias is unclear, but evidence shows that two ecclesiastical advisors, Hosius and Ursus, who were

⁴⁹ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, trans. Mark Edwards (Liverpool: Liverpool U P, 1997), 1.22.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Frend, *Donatist Church*, 147.

⁵² Eusebius, *History*, 429.

⁵³ Barnes, *Constantine*, 57.

⁵⁴ Majorinus died during this interim period and Donatus of Casae Nigrae was chosen as his successor. Donatus was probably not consecrated before heading to Rome. Frend, *Donatist Church*, 148.

already prejudiced against the Donatists, influenced Constantine. Hosius, bishop of Corduba, was personally hostile to the Donatist cause and suspected of heresy himself. Constantine paid little attention to this alleged heresy, however, and his newfound zeal for the Christian Church made him favor the orthodox Christians under Hosius's direction.⁵⁵ In addition to this influence, Constantine followed the recommendation of Ursus (the financial officer of the Imperial Estates in Africa), instructing him to give Caecilian 3,000 *folles* for his use during the winter of 312-13.⁵⁶ Constantine eventually appealed to the bishop of Rome, who decided in favor of Caecilian.⁵⁷ Constantine's decision to side with Caecilian by no means ended the conflict; it only became more bitter.⁵⁸

The following year, Constantine was again approached by the Donatist opposition. Worried by accusations of prejudice which he did not himself believe, he reopened the case. A council of bishops was summoned from all the western provinces to meet at Arles on 1 August 314. At the same time, Constantine launched an inquiry into the case of Felix of Aptungi to find out if he was a *traditor*.⁵⁹ At Arles, the Donatists lost the debate once again. This time, Constantine penned a passionate letter to the orthodox Christian bishops affirming their decision: "you have . . . a better . . . destiny [than] those whom the malig-

⁵⁵ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 145-6.

⁵⁶ Eusebius, *History*, 431. This sum of money would equal about 10,000 dollars; Frend, *Donatist Church*, 145-46.

⁵⁷ Fitzgerald, *Augustine Through the Ages*, 285.

⁵⁸ Barnes, *Constantine*, 57.

⁵⁹ Frend, *Donatist Church*, 150.

nity exceeding brilliance of the catholic religion . . . What then are they thinking of, these [Donatist] officers of the devil?"⁶⁰ Whether or not Constantine truly believed the opposition was crazed and deluded by the devil, this rhetoric effectively deprived them of any imperial authority in ministering to the faithful.

Constantine hoped dissention would end now, but he was not so fortunate. In Carthage on 19 August 314, the Donatists made their next move. A certain Maximus announced that the case against Caecilian and Felix had to be argued before Constantine himself. Maximus produced evidence in a correspondence that he sent to Constantine that Felix was indeed a *traditor*. The new evidence surprised Constantine and part of the letter condemning Felix turned out to be a forgery.⁶¹ The next months are sketchy at best, but a Donatist riot broke out, and Constantine had his verdict acquitting Caecilian publicized. For unknown reasons, Constantine ordered both parties to appear before him in Rome.⁶² Caecilian did not come, and the case was adjourned to Milan. Once in Milan, Constantine decided to travel personally to Africa to settle the case.⁶³ A war with Licinius intervened, and Constantine never visited Africa to settle the Donatist issue. Instead, in a letter dated 10 November 316, Constantine took action. He ordered all Donatist churches confiscated and the Donatist clergy sent into

⁶⁰ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 189; Barnes, *Constantine*, 58.

⁶¹ Barnes, *Constantine*, 58-9.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 59.

exile.⁶⁴ Repression of the Donatists followed directly. The Donatists acquired their first martyrs on 12 March 317, when Roman soldiers, on the orders of Caecilian, killed several Donatists and two Donatist bishops in Carthage.⁶⁵ Outside the city, the persecution was not as severe. But this incident contributed to the permanent split between the two churches. The fact that orthodox Christians worked with pagan magistrates and soldiers confirmed the Donatist belief that orthodox Christians were schismatics.⁶⁶

By 321, there was a complete reversal in imperial policy. Constantine would fight the forthcoming war against Licinius as a champion of Christianity, rescuing his fellow believers from pagan persecution in the East. However, he too was persecuting Christians, although they were schismatics. Constantine knew this, so on 5 May 321, he recalled all Donatist exiles.⁶⁷ This political move was veiled in theological rhetoric: "But while the heavenly medicine does its work," Constantine wrote, "our policy is to be so . . . regulated that we practice continual patience . . . Let nothing be done to reciprocate an injury."⁶⁸ Revenge was now God's alone. It was clear to Constantine that persecution and political maneuvering would not beat the Donatists; the traditions of the masses were not so easily changed.⁶⁹

With this new concession, the Donatists thrived. While the Donatists never had any of the legal privi-

⁶⁴ Ibid.; Frend, *Donatist Church*, 159.

⁶⁵ Barnes, *Constantine*, 60.

⁶⁶ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 162.

⁶⁷ Barnes, *Constantine*, 60.

⁶⁸ Optatus, *Against the Donatists*, 196.

⁶⁹ Barnes, *Constantine*, 60.

leges of orthodox Christians, their “local influence in the cities of Africa could defeat the emperor’s intention to confer benefits” on only the orthodox Christian church.⁷⁰ Donatists forced lectors, subdeacons, and other clerics from their midst into the local senate to gain political power. In addition, they took possession of the basilica Constantine built in Cirta—and the emperor let them keep it. He even provided money to the orthodox Christians to build a second basilica.⁷¹

The Donatists exerted economic pressure over the orthodox Christians as well. While Constantine had previously exempted Caecilianist clergy from municipal obligations, by 330 the tides had changed. Now, the Numidian Donatists made their opponents accept municipal obligations, showing that they truly were supreme in the province. Constantine addressed a decree to Valentius, *Consularis* of Numidia, demanding that this practice cease, but there is no proof that it ended.⁷² Despite all of Constantine’s efforts, the Donatists continued to dominate the North African church.

Worse still for the orthodox Christians, the Donatists began to establish themselves abroad. They ventured into Spain but their undertakings led to nothing. In Rome, however, they were more successful. For a time, the Donatists were favored in Rome over the orthodox Christians because of the assumed lapse of orthodox Christian bishops during the Great Persecution of Diocletian. The Donatists by no means intended to be confined to Africa only, but in the end,

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Frend, *Donatist Church*, 163.

without any permanent converts abroad, they fell back on the region of the Empire where they originated.⁷³

In the last years of Constantine's reign, three problems faced Donatus: the independence of the Church in regards to imperial edicts, the isolation of Africa from the rest of the Christian world, and the issue of rebaptism.⁷⁴ While the orthodox Christians leaned on imperial authority, Donatus was hostile to Roman authorities, which also aligned the Donatists with the African Christian tradition of hostility to authority. Neither Roman orthodoxy nor the Roman Empire appealed to the majority of African Christians.⁷⁵

Towards the end of Constantine's reign, a council of two hundred and seventy Donatist bishops gathered. Historians know little about this meeting, except that the main issue was the validity of rebaptism. Donatus believed there could be no baptism outside the Donatist faith and favored rebaptism of orthodox Christians. Many Donatist bishops preferred to reject Caecilian and deny the validity of a second baptism. In the end, Donatus modified his position slightly to maintain his control over the African Church—rebaptism was acceptable but not required in every case. He left the issue appropriately vague.⁷⁶

Rebaptism was now a tenet of the Donatist faith with its roots in the theology of Cyprian. While Cyprian had made peace with Stephen, Bishop of Rome, for what he believed to be the greater good of

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 165-67.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 167-68.

the Church, he did not repudiate rebaptism. The Donatist looked to Cyprian, who wrote, “To be sure, that spiritual grace [of baptism], received equally by all believers in baptism, may be diminished or increased by the subsequent conduct of our own lives,” meaning that the potency of baptism changes throughout a person’s life.⁷⁷ “Likewise, a person who is baptized has also to be anointed,” Cyprian continues, “so that he may become the anointed of God. . . . But someone who has neither altar nor Church could not sanctify the material substance of oil. It follows that neither can there be any spiritual anointing among heretics . . .”⁷⁸ Cyprian believed that because of this, a person could be rebaptized, and the Donatists were indeed the true heirs of Cyprian’s form of Christianity because of their adherence to rebaptism. However, the orthodox Christians challenged Donatist views on rebaptism because orthodox Christians believed in the validity of the sacraments—one baptism signified a commitment to the Christianity for life.⁷⁹ To them, to be rebaptized cheapened the original baptism.

Rebaptism now signified heresy. However, this did not deter followers. When Constantine died in 337, Donatus was the ascendant in Africa. After the Council of Nicaea, Caecilian disappears from the historical record. Donatism had become the religion of town, village and lower classes of North Africa.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ St. Cyprian, *The Letters of St. Cyprian of Carthage Volume 4*, trans. G. W. Clarke (New York: Newman P, 1986), 69.14.1

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.2.2.

⁷⁹ R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1970), 109-10.

⁸⁰ Frend, *Donatist Church.*, 168; Markus, *Saeculum*, 109.

Augustine and the Donatists

The Interim Years

From 361-63 under the reign of the pagan Emperor Julian the Apostate, there was renewed imperial tolerance for the Donatists and the orthodox Christians decided to try to enter into a debate with them once again. Optatus, the orthodox bishop of Milevis, wrote *On the Donatist Schism*, which was the first direct appeal for cooperation between the rival bishops. But the “Donatist mind was remarkably impervious to argument,” and most Donatists were not persuaded to convert to orthodoxy upon hearing the arguments against them.⁸¹

Terrorist bands of extremist Donatists formed to counter official repression. Known as the Circumcelliones, these peasants from Upper Numidia and Mauretania haunted the shrines of the martyrs, terrorized dissenters, and sought martyrdom for themselves. Their name came from the fact they lived *circum cellas*, or “around the shrines” of martyrs where they received their food. The Circumcellions carried clubs called “Israels” and later supplemented them with slings, axes, stones, lances, and swords. They raged against pagans and orthodox Christians alike, and they often sought martyrdom by suicide. As Augustine said, they “lived like brigands, died as Circumcellions, and then were honored as martyrs.”⁸² Throughout the controversy, Donatist alternatively

⁸¹ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), 211-12; Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 259.

⁸² In Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 241.

encouraged and discouraged such violent behavior.⁸³

Augustine's Response

Augustine of Hippo, later to become St. Augustine of Hippo, came home to Africa from Milan in 388 and became Bishop of Hippo in 395. He returned to a divided country where the Donatist Church had expanded for three-quarters of a century and now dominated the high plains of Numidia, where Berber-speaking peasants refused to become subjects of the Roman Empire in anything but name.⁸⁴ The Donatist Church looked like it could not be beaten at the beginning of the last decade of the fourth century, for it had numbers, enthusiasm, and successful evangelizing behind it. However, within twenty years, all of this changed for the Donatists.⁸⁵

Augustine, originally from the orthodox Christian stronghold Thagaste, came into the controversy as a "foreigner in spirit" for "he did not even read the same translation of the Bible as his opponents."⁸⁶ His interpretation of the Church differed greatly from his Donatist rivals. He defended the orthodox Church as a Neo-Platonic philosopher, determined to bring the Donatists back to the universal church.⁸⁷

While the Donatists thought of themselves as a group that existed to preserve and protect an alternative to the Empire and *traditores*, orthodox Christians

⁸³ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 172-77; Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 240-1.

⁸⁴ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 237.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁸⁶ Brown, *Augustine*, 210.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 212.

like Augustine believed the opposite of this. They believed the Church existed independently of the human agents of the Church. Augustine's understanding of the sacraments was based on his belief in Christ as the sole giver of sacramental grace. Imperfect (and even unworthy) humans could administer the sacraments, but their imperfection would have no bearing on the validity of the sacrament. The effectiveness of the sacrament depended on the recipient.⁸⁸

In place of the Donatist church of the saints, Augustine offered a Universal Church "throughout the world and containing within itself both good and evil until the final separation of the Last Day."⁸⁹ The Donatists solved the problem of evil by withdrawing from it; for Augustine, separation was not enough. The Catholic Church could absorb the world without losing her identity. A good Christian must perform a threefold task: "he must himself become holy; he must coexist with sinners in the same community as himself, a task involving humility and integrity; but he must also be prepared, actively, to rebuke and correct them."⁹⁰ For Augustine, the Church was a body that could "absorb, transform and perfect, the existing bonds of human relations."⁹¹ Confident and expanding, Augustine's church consisted of international followers and fostered "the respect of Christian Emperors."⁹² It was an institution at once sought out by nobles and intellectuals and capable of bringing Plato's

⁸⁸ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 292.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 287.

⁹⁰ Brown, *Augustine*, 218.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 221.

esoteric truths to the masses.⁹³ It was an active, dynamic church made up of moving elements. It was not an alternative to society made up of pure and righteous members but embraced everyone.

The Donatists asked if the church was pure; if the Church was the only place on earth in which the Holy Spirit resided, how could its members fail to be pure? Augustine answered using Neo-Platonic reasoning that the world is in a state of becoming; it is in a constant state of tension where imperfect forms strive to become their ideal form, capable of comprehension by the mind alone. The same followed for the orthodox Church—the rites of the Church were holy because they participated in Christ while the reality of the church in the world is only an imperfect shadow. Those who administered the sacraments strove imperfectly to realize this holiness.⁹⁴

All the same, the Donatists had a secure position from which to debate the orthodox Christians. They had secured the popular devotion of the indigenous peasantry. They benefited from the Circumcellions, and the locale elite of thinkers and leaders.⁹⁵ The Donatist bishop of Carthage from 363 to 391, Parmenian, was a capable administrator and author. In 398, at least seven years after Parmenian's death, Augustine felt compelled to write *Contra Epistulam Parmeniani*. Apart from Parmenian, leading Donatists included Optatus of Thamugadi, Emeritus of Caeserea, Petilian of Constantine, and Primaian of Carthage, whom Augustine recognized as powerful opponents

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 217.

⁹⁵ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 244.

and described as the “most obstinate defenders of a very bad cause.”⁹⁶

Nonetheless internal dissention existed within the Donatist schism. The greatest Donatist thinker was a layman by the name of Tyconius, whom Parmenian had denounced and excommunicated. Tyconius’s “heresy” proclaimed the real division existed between the city of God and the city of the devil. In his theology the Donatist principle of separation was wrong because the church is universal. This idea, though Donatist in origin, became the basis for Augustine’s most influential work, *City of God*.⁹⁷ Parmenian restated the Donatist belief that the churches overseas had forfeited their claim to catholicity by remaining in communion with *traditores*. Tyconius, however, never joined the orthodox faith. Thus, the Donatists discarded one of their most influential thinkers.⁹⁸

The years 391 and 392 were decisive in the conflict between the Donatists and orthodox Christians. Both Parmenian and his orthodox rival Genethlius died around 391-2, leaving the sees of Carthage vacant. The orthodox Christians elected Aurelius, who was neither a scholar nor a theologian, but who was a brilliant organizer able to lead the African Church through the later phases of the Donatist controversy with Augustine’s help.⁹⁹ The Donatists elected Primian, a violent man who had neither diplomatic or leadership skills. Opposition to Primian soon began to form, lead by the deacon Maximian and led to one of

⁹⁶ In *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 245-6.

⁹⁹ Frend, *Donatist Church*, 227.

the first in a line of internal schisms: Rogatus of Cartenna and nine colleagues also broke away from the Donatists out of disgust over the Circumcellions. This Donatist group of schismatics managed to maintain themselves until Augustine's time. Claudian, the Donatist bishop of Rome, (who was expelled from Rome in 378), also formed his own party, the Claudianists. The beleaguered Primian excommunicated Maximian and committed various acts of violence that won further disdain. A deacon who had baptized the sick without his permission was thrown into a sewer with his approval. In 392, Primian was himself excommunicated and Maximian became bishop of Carthage.¹⁰⁰

The orthodox Christians used the Maximianist schism against the Donatists. They pointed out that Donatist leaders had received Maximianists back into their church without rebaptism. But what such conflicts within Donatism revealed was the narrow-minded nature of the sect. According to Gerald Bonner, Donstists lacked "breadth of vision" and "it became clear that the essence of Donatism was a despotism, enunciated by the bishops, applauded by the mob, and enforced, in the last resort, by the violence of the Circumcellions."¹⁰¹

In addition to these internal schisms, Donatism continued to weaken by allying with unsuccessful rebellions in Africa, bringing down upon itself the established imperial authority. In 346, they appealed to Emperor Constans and were unsuccessful. The Donatists had lent their support to Firmus in 372,

¹⁰⁰ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 248.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

only to be later repressed under Theodosius. Thus, they had a pattern of continually attempting and failing to make a bid for supremacy in Africa, for the imperial authorities were sympathetic to the orthodox religion.¹⁰²

Augustine focused his own priesthood (from 391 to 395) in Hippo on combating Donatism. At first, he contained his action to Hippo alone. His first work, the *Psalmus contra partem Donati* written in 393, contained the “ABC’s of Donatism” in order to combat them. He described his intentions thus: “Wishing even the lowliest and most ignorant people to know about the case of the Donatists, and fix it in their memory, I wrote an alphabetical psalm to be sung to them.”¹⁰³ Augustine understood that the orthodox laity needed encouragement and instruction in how to answer Donatist propaganda. Thus, Augustine laid the foundations for his long struggle with Donatism, which would soon be carried beyond Hippo and into the entire North African Church. However, Augustine never fully realized his goal of destroying Donatism completely, perhaps because he could not convince the Donatists of their errors.¹⁰⁴

In 395, Augustine was consecrated Bishop-coadjutor of Hippo and furthered his campaign to end Donatism. Many of the books that he wrote against the Donatists are lost.¹⁰⁵ By around 400, Donatism saw its most complete domination over North Africa: Optatus of Thamugadi ruled southern Numidia and

¹⁰² Ibid., 250.

¹⁰³ In Geoffrey Grimshaw Willis, *Saint Augustine and the Donatist Controversy* (Cambridge U P, 1950), 36.

¹⁰⁴ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 258.

¹⁰⁵ Willis, *Saint Augustine*, 40-2.

waged war on orthodox Christians and Maimianists and Africa's military commander, Count Gildo, supported him. The Circumcellions also increased their activity. When Gildo's bid for power ended in his death, the Donatists faced the inevitable repression following the failed revolt. Gildo's defeat marked a turning point in the two churches, for now imperial authority was even more likely to be sympathetic to the orthodox Christians in North Africa because they had not participated in the revolt.¹⁰⁶

The orthodox Christians in general and Augustine in particular were not idle during this time period. In 397, Augustine held conferences with the Donatist bishop Fortunius in Thubursicum Numidarum. The same year while Gildo was still in power, a third Council of Carthage decided that sons and daughters of bishops and clergy were forbidden to marry schismatics or heretics. The issue of Donatists who had converted back to orthodoxy could take holy orders would be deferred to the bishops of Rome and Milan. Apparently, the Italian bishops waffled, but in June 401 the issue was raised once again. The decision was finally made that except when clerical assistance was urgent, ex-Donatist clergy could only be laymen.¹⁰⁷

Until the fourth Council of Carthage in 401, Augustine continued to turn out works against the Donatists. Between 398 and 400 he wrote the first of his great theological works against the Donatists, *Contra Epistulam Parmeniani*, in which he defended the views of Tyconius and recounted the history of the

¹⁰⁶ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 259, 261; Frend, *Donatist Church*, 224.

¹⁰⁷ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 260.

controversy to prove Caecilian innocent. Later, he wrote *De Baptismo contra Donatistas* on the theological issue of rebaptism.¹⁰⁸ From 393 to 398, Augustine also tried—and failed—to bring prominent Donatists into a debate with him.¹⁰⁹

The Roman state did not always support orthodox Christian attacks upon the Donatists. For the rulers it was extremely important to “maintain the peace and good order of a province whose importance, as a source of supply to Italy, could not be overrated.”¹¹⁰ Up to 405, emperors preferred non-violent measures in dealing with the Donatists since they did not want to alienate a large part of the population. However, Augustine himself believed in religious coercion against the Donatists.¹¹¹ The Catholic Church was confirmed as the religion of the empire in 399, and fines could be imposed on dissenters.¹¹² In 404, the Catholic council decided to appeal to the state for the repression of Donatists. When the Catholic envoys arrived at the court, they found that the Imperial Court had already decided to put an end to Donatism.

The ex-Donatist bishop Maximian of Bagai had just

¹⁰⁸ Wills, *Saint Augustine*, 43-4.

¹⁰⁹ Frend, *Donatist Church*, 240.

¹¹⁰ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 299.

¹¹¹ Peter Brown, “St. Augustine’s Attitude to Religious Coercion,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 54 (1964): 107. Brown argues that while at first Augustine was against the religious coercion of the Donatists, he later changed his mind due to his belief in the legitimacy of using force against pagans, thinking of it as kind of Old Testament justice. Interestingly enough, Augustine never used the word *cohercicio* (where the English *coercion* stems), regarding the Donatists. Instead, he uses the word *correptio*, meaning to rebuke or set right.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 261.

testified in Ravenna and had shocked the court with his story and visible scars. Maximian had been a Donatist bishop who converted to orthodoxy and was almost killed in 403 by the Circumcelliones as a result. He had escaped to Ravenna and testified there to the bitter, violent religious feud going on in Africa.¹¹³

In 405, the government issued an “Edict of Unity” which made the schismatics liable to the penalties for heretics. The edict confiscated Donatist property for the Catholic Church, prohibited their meetings, threatened Donatist clergy with exile, and forbade rebaptism.¹¹⁴ In 411, a conference held in Carthage ended in a triumph for the orthodox Christians.¹¹⁵ One hundred years after the schism began, the Donatists were finally brought to public debate. The consequences of the conference began the decline—but not extinction—of Donatism. Only the arrival Vandals in 429 would finally blur the distinction between orthodox Christian and Donatist.¹¹⁶

After the Conference of Carthage, the Donatists immediately appealed to Emperor Honorius, but instead of finding support, they once again met repression. On the orders of the Emperor, the Donatist clergy was driven by law into exile throughout all areas of the Empire. Donatism was a criminal offense, punishable by fines ranging from fifty pounds of gold for a member of the senatorial class, five pounds for a plebian, ten pounds of silver for a Circumcellion, and beatings for Donatist slaves. Donatist property was

¹¹³ Frend, *Donatist Church*, 262-3.

¹¹⁴ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 265.

¹¹⁵ Fitzgerald, *Augustine Through the Ages*, 285; Frend, *The Donatist Church*, 301.

¹¹⁶ Frend, *Donatist Church*, 301.

handed over to the orthodox Christians. There was no death penalty for being a Donatist, as there were with previous edicts.¹¹⁷

But this orthodox success would not bring conversion to North Africa. Although Augustine seemed to regard Donatism as finished, he did admit in 420 that many Donatist conversions to orthodox Christianity were not sincere. At the same time, Augustine was becoming preoccupied with a new heresy, Pelagianism, brought into North Africa by Julian of Eclanum.¹¹⁸

The villages where Donatism was the strongest remained largely Donatist. Evidence from Augustine suggests that the countryside was largely resistant to conversion. For example, the priest Donatus of Mutugenna threw himself down a well rather than face Augustine. Archaeologists have yet to find evidence of a Donatist church that transformed into an orthodox Christian one. Thus, it is unclear how the Edict of Unity was enforced, if at all. A large portion of North African villagers may have continued their practice of Donatism well into the fifth century.¹¹⁹

To assume that by 420 the struggle with Donatism was over would be erroneous. A letter written to Augustine from the bishop Honoratus in 428 asks what is to be done in the case of a barbarian invasion, illustrating a fear of an attack on orthodoxy and perhaps pointing to a continuation of Donatism. With the arrival of the Arian Vandals soon after, Donatist and orthodox Christian would have suffered alike because both believed in the consubstantiality of the

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 289.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 290.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 298-9.

Son with the Father in the Trinity.¹²⁰ During the period of Vandal domination and Byzantine reconquest, the Donatists do not appear in any extant sources regarding African history. However, at the end of the sixth century, they reappear in the correspondence of Gregory the Great. He was alarmed by the survival of Donatism in Numidia and in August 596 he dispatched a letter in Emperor Mauricius in Constantinople expressing his concerns.

We do not know if the appeal succeeded, but Christianity in Africa had little time left. The first Arab raiders arrived less than forty years later, and the Berbers were soon won over to Islam.¹²¹ Islam drew its strength from the Moorish occupants of the African interior, much as Donatism had done. In 698, the fall of Carthage marked a decisive victory for the Islamic invaders. While some Christian communities maintained themselves until the eleventh century, they did eventually vanish.¹²²

Traces of Roman domination soon faded away; no romance language survived in North Africa, no Roman institutions were preserved, and Christianity did not survive as it did in other Islamic countries like Egypt and Syria. In the end, neither Donatism nor orthodox Christianity prevailed. Instead, Islam arrived in Africa with little opposition, great strength, and considerable toleration for oppressed peoples. It found its strength in the lower classes and in the same geographical regions of Donatism. So if the Donatist schism helped pave the way for the absorption of Christianity by

¹²⁰ Bonner, *St. Augustine*, 274.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 274.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 275.

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Islam, then Donatism was part of a larger social revolution with roots in the lower classes that helped divide Rome from Carthage.¹²³

¹²³ Frennd, *Donatist Church*, 336.