

Augustine and other brands of Christianity

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Περίληψη: Στο σύντομο αυτό σημείωμα θέλησα να θέσω έναν προβληματισμό σχετικά με το εάν δικαιούμαστε από τις διαθέσιμες πηγές να θεωρούμε ότι ο Αυγουστίνος ήταν πραγματικά τόσο ακραίος σε σχέση με τους συγχρόνους του απέναντι στους θρησκευτικούς του αντιπάλους, όσο παραδοσιακά του αποδίδεται.

Summary: This brief note presents some of the evidence that points to Augustine having a moderate approach in comparison with his contemporaries towards religious dissidents. It is misguided to ignore all of the available evidence and to unjustly label Augustine ‘the forerunner of the Inquisition’ as it is the common trend in scholarship.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: Αυγουστίνος, Θρησκευτική Βία, Αιρετικοί

Key words: Augustine, Religious Coercion, Religious Dissidents

The primary disagreement between Donatists and the rest of the early Christian Church in North Africa was over the treatment of those who had in one way or another renounced their faith during the persecutions of emperor Diocletian. Donatists were rigorists who hesitated to accept back in the Church, as full members, all those Christians who hadn't openly proclaimed their faith in front of the Roman authorities once they were presented with the dilemma ‘sacrifice or die’; and they sacrificed with a troubled conscience or without one, or chose to flee, or send their pagan slaves or friends to sacrifice for them, or handed to the authorities Christian writings, or bribed the authorities to leave them alone.¹ Augustine in his writings and in his sermons systematically attacked Donatists and was of the opinion that

all Christians once they repented could have a place in the Church, under the watchful guidance of priests and bishops. Augustine portrayed Donatists as terror to their neighbors,² as unscrupulous people who showed cruelty to those who abandoned Donatism.³ Some Donatists, who were contemplating of joining other “brands” of Christianity, were seriously afraid of the violence of their former brothers. Augustine reported how, on one day, Donatists rushed upon a bishop who regarded as heretic, bishop Maximianus, with fearful violence and cruel fury as he was standing at the altar. They beat him savagely with cudgels and weapons of every kind and, at last, even with the very boards of the broken altar. They wounded him with a dagger in the groin severely, dragged him along the ground so that the dust forced into the spouting vein stanchd the blood whose effusion

¹ B. D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011.

² Augustine, *Epistula 185*, 3.14.

³ Augustine, *Epistula 185*, 4.16.

was rapidly on the way to cause his death.⁴ One needs to understand that the tone and language Augustine used when he was reporting such unhappy occurrences was rarely hysterical. Donatists were often designated by Augustine as brothers—“bad brothers, yet brothers (*mali fratres, tamen fratres*)”.⁵ Furthermore, not all Donatists were the same, “there was always wheat to be found among the chaff”,⁶ as Augustine used to say and the saying still goes.

Augustine understood Donatists, as well as all other Christian dissidents, as “sick,”⁷ and firmly believed that bishops had the huge and inescapable responsibility to act as the doctors of the church.⁸ He believed that “there is a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace”.⁹ Augustine thought that religious coercion could be justifiable,¹⁰ but only under certain very specific conditions. Violence was first and foremost necessary against violence.¹¹ In addition, not all violence was the same: Donatist violence was destructive, while mainstream Christian violence was allegedly preventive, defensive, and leading to formation and restoration of the unity in the church.¹² Furthermore, violence and coercion ought to be motivated by love.¹³ Hence the saying, “Love and do what you want (*dilige et quod vis fac*)”.¹⁴ Augustine was a supporter of moderate severity; i.e., fines and confiscation of property (on condition that the offenders were allowed to

keep enough to be able to live), exile, and the annulment of wills.¹⁵ He was against maiming of the bodies of religious dissidents.¹⁶ In any case, it was not their death, but their deliverance from error, their salvation from eternal judgment that he wished.¹⁷ Augustine confessed that the harshest punishment he ever imposed on Donatist bishops was to have them beaten with a wooden rod. He did not approve of beating with iron rods. He considered this disproportional.¹⁸ Above all, Augustine desired uniformity and thus, he held that Donatist bishops who repented could remain in their office—for the sake of peace in the church.¹⁹ He proved himself being in line with, or in fact influenced, Emperor Honorius who, in his legislation, declared that bishops should not demand revenge, but should rather be merciful.²⁰

Many imperial officials at the time, as well as even some landowners with no such authority, were possibly influenced by harsh Christian bishops and imposed without hesitation the death penalty on Donatists who were accused of having mutilated priests or damaged churches.²¹ There survive quite a number of letters in which Augustine asked consuls, tribunes, and landowners not to follow the common trend.²² Augustine tried hard to restrain them (especially the landowners) and to persuade them, instead, to send the dissidents to him so that he might deal with them personally. He often urged judges, when they heard cases, to forget that they had the power of capital

⁴ Augustine, *Epistula* 185, 7.27.

⁵ Augustine, *Sermo* 46, 31.

⁶ John R. Bowlin, 'Augustine on justifying coercion', *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 17, 1997, p. 49-70, p. 54 and 58-59.

⁷ Augustine, *Epistula* 93, 1.3.

⁸ Augustine, *Epistula* 185, 11.51.

⁹ Ecclesiastes 3:8 in Ambrose, *Expositio Psalmi* 68.15.15-17.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Epistula* 185, 2.11.

¹¹ Augustine, *Epistula* 185, 7.26.

¹² Augustie, *Epistula* 105, 2.6.

¹³ Augustine, *Epistula* 93, 2.6 and *Epistula* 173, 2.3.

¹⁴ Augustine, *In Epistulam Ioannis ad Parthos tractatus decem* 7.8.

¹⁵ Augustine, *Epistula* 93, 3.10, *Epistula* 104, 1.4, *Epistula* 185, 7.26, *Contra litteras Petiliani* 2.59.134, and *Sermo* 47,22.

¹⁶ Augustine, *Epistula* 133, 1.

¹⁷ Augustine, *Epistula* 100, 1.

¹⁸ Augustine, *Epistula* 133 and *Retractationes* 2. 5. 32.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Epistula* 185, 10.47.

²⁰ Augustine, *Epistula* 76.

²¹ Augustine, *Epistula* 133, *Epistula* 134, and *Epistula* 139.1-2.

²² Augustine, *Epistula* 88, 9.

punishment and to behave like affectionate fathers; i.e., to employ clemency and humanity, and not to punish crimes of Christians with extreme severity.²³ Torture, he insisted, was more proper in investigation than in the infliction of punishment.²⁴ Augustine adamantly opposed the death penalty, for it excluded the possibility of repentance, and was in favor of a mild treatment for another, more pragmatic, reason: so as not to make Christian dissidents martyrs and heroes.²⁵

This brief note presented some of the evidence that points to Augustine having, in comparison to his contemporaries, a moderate approach towards religious dissidents. It is misguided to ignore all of the available evidence and to unjustly and in a haste label Augustine ‘the forerunner of the Inquisition’ as it is the common trend in scholarship. In an article which is in press²⁶ I have tried to show that violence was not sporadic during Augustine's lifetime; it was rather unremarkable and embedded in everyday life. Augustine was probably far more subtle about the application of coercion against religious deviants than most in his days. He was in favour of mildness in executing a sentence and he thought that coercion was meaningful only if followed by formation while his contemporaries kept pursuing a more rigid line and did not share his genuine concern for intellectual persuasion and moral example: ‘for if they were only being terrorized and not instructed at the same time, this would be an inexcusable tyranny on our part’.²⁷

²³ Augustine, *Epistula 133*, 2.

²⁴ Augustine, *Letter 133*, 2.

²⁵ Augustine, *Epistula 139*.

²⁶ Despina Iosif, ‘Bring them back like sheep, by fear or even the pain of the whip if they show symptoms of resistance. Augustine and Religious Coercion’ in *Augustine in Context*, ed. Tarmo Toom, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

²⁷ See the perceptive article of P. van Geest, “*Quid dicam de vindicando vel non vindicando?*” in C. Geljon and R. Roukema, eds., *Violence in Ancient*

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