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Donatism Revisited: Moderates and Militants in Late Antique North Africa

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The little we know about the relationships between moderate and militant Donatists in the late fourth and early fifth centuries tells us more about the opposition that both groups stirred among the Caecilianists. What follows is an effort to reenter the Caecilianists' polemic to discover what we can learn about Donatism and its critics, chiefly Augustine, by reading the evidence with some useful conclusions drawn from the study of more recent religious violence.

The first decade of the fifth century was grim in many parts of North Africa. Tension between Caecilianist and Donatist Christians kept the leading partisans of each side exasperated with those of the other. The winners, the Caecilianists, wrote the history, and the Donatists came off rather badly, as inconsistent, incorrigible, and uncharitable. Elements of the *pars Donati*, if we may trust Optatus of Mileve and Augustine of Hippo, were prone to violence. The following study suggests that several studies of religious violence in another grim decade, the first of the twenty-first century, may help us evaluate the winners' accounts of the losers in late antique North Africa and stir us to repossess the anxieties that influenced all African Christians' formulations of charges and countercharges.

Disputes between Christian confessors and their clerical critics were not uncommon during the third century. The latter were impatient with, and irritated by, the former's claims to authority based on the courage they had displayed during patches of intense persecution. Once some measure of security had been restored, confessors cursed clerics who had left their posts to avoid detention or worse. In the early fourth century, the Melitian schism divided the church in Egypt, and the Donatists' secession split Christianity in North Africa. The origins of both are somewhat uncertain. It is difficult to say, for example, exactly when the opposition to bishop Caecilianus of Carthage became a rival church. Perhaps as early as 305 CE, although more likely in the next decade, neighboring prelates objected to the incumbent's alleged disdain for confessors, questioned the validity of his consecration,

and elected Majorinus to replace him. Caecilianus and his partisans refused to step aside.[1]

Animosity survived for more than a century on a steady diet of propaganda. Stories of courage and accusations of cowardice and corruption circulated widely in North Africa and reached officials on the other side of the Mediterranean. Many of the stories survive, but to write a history of the Donatist secession or schism and to allocate emphasis to various socioeconomic and ideological factors that prompted and perpetuated the crisis, one must make difficult decisions with little help from the sources. Caecilianists claimed their man was conciliatory from the start.[2] Donatist passion narratives, however, have Caecilian and his predecessor Mensurius exuding menace.[3] In secessionists' explanations and justifications for their refusals to honor the memory of Mensurius and negotiate with Caecilian, those two bishops and their partisans displaced Roman persecutors as the villains responsible for African Christianity's late third- and early fourth-century ordeals.[4]

The most damaging assertions about Caecilian's unworthiness and his clerical colleagues' failures of nerve during persecutions were formulated by the time the rival church elected Donatus to succeed Majorinus. The Donatists continued to claim that a number of the first Caecilianists had been *traditores*, bishops who collaborated with Christianity's enemies and allowed them to confiscate sacred texts. Every other Caecilianist was guilty by association. Among Donatists, therefore, secession was the only option for African Christians who wished to remain true to their faith. The inferences that Augustine hastened to draw, exaggerate, and attack were that his adversaries long and falsely believed that their own secessionist forbears were guiltless at the start and that the *pars Donati* was, and would remain, faultless. The Donatists, Augustine belligerently charged, were obstinate, obtuse, and pugnacious, as well as guilty of "scelerata superbia," or alarmingly shameful pride.[5] When

[1] Timothy Barnes, "The Beginnings of Donatism," *Journal of Theological Studies* 26 (1975), 13–22, prefers the earlier date; for other views of Donatist origins, see W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford, 1952, repr.1985), 16–21; Bernhard Kriegbaum, *Kirche der Traditoren oder Kirche der Martyrer* (Innsbruck, 1986); and 152–54; and Maureen A. Tilly, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis, 1997).

[2] Augustine, *Epist.* 46.6 (*CSEL*) echoes Optatus of Mileve, *De schismate Donatistarum* 1.19 (*SC* 412–13). Kriegbaum, *Kirche der Traditoren*, 111–13, endorses the drift of Optatus' account yet notes inaccuracies, as does Innocent Hazikimana, "Recherches augustiniennes des dernières 35 années sur la controverse antidonatiste," *Teresianum* 57 (2006), 335–38.

[3] E.g., Maureen A. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa* (Liverpool, 1996).

[4] See Alan Dearn, "The Abitinian Martyrs and the Outbreak of the Donatist Schism," *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 55 (2004), 1–18.

[5] Augustine, *Contra epistulam Parmeniani* 2.7.12–13 (*CSEL* 51); hereafter, *Parm.* Tilly, *Bible*, 53–92, usefully recounts how Donatists, "in controversy," reconstructed their innocence,

Augustine thought an extra insult was useful, he coupled Donatist moderates with the extremists and terrorists who, he maintained, proved useful to the secessionist church. These thugs were called "circumcellions" because they apparently tended to assemble around rural shrines dedicated to the memory of Christian martyrs ("cellas circumiens rusticas").[6]

Augustine blamed the circumcellions for atrocities committed against Caecilianist clerics, some affluent landowners, and the occasional itinerant government official.[7] Augustine's animosity leaves the association between Donatist moderates and terrorists half-lit, at best. Although we cannot be sure whether he embellished wildly or temperately, his embellishments are nonetheless the closest we can come to the bands of brigands identified with sectarian violence in North Africa.[8] It seems a safe guess that critics exaggerated the support circumcellions enjoyed from Donatist moderates. Analogously, what Sageman writes about the coverage of Muslim moderates and Islamist terrorists arguably has some application to the fragile parcel of fourth- and fifth-century "analyses" of the connection between the extremists and less unruly secessionist bishops: "Have just one imam express sympathy for terrorist aims," Sageman says, "and . . . the front page of the Islamophobic press" spreads that singular opinion abroad, leaving under-

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in ways that Augustine conveniently overlooked, and documented their scriptural pedigree. Frend, *Donatist Church*, 141–59, tracks the circulation of Donatists' early invectives against the *traditores* and discloses what the emperor Constantine I and European bishops knew, when they knew it, and what they did about it, namely, vindicate the Caecilianists.

[6] Augustine, *Contra Gaudentium Donatistarum episcopum* 1.28.32 (*CSEL* 53), hereafter, *Gaud.* The inference that, indigent and homeless, they camped and begged at the shrines does not correspond with other evidence, for which, see Hans-Joachim Diesner, *Kirche und Staat im spätrömischen Reich* (Berlin, 1963), 81–84.

[7] Augustine, *Contra Cresconium grammaticum* 3.42.46 and 4.65.77 (*CSEL* 52.1), hereafter, *Cresc.*; Augustine, *Epist.* 88.8; and the other sources cited in P. Kaufman, *Incorrectly Political: Augustine and Thomas More* (Notre Dame, 2007), 86–90.

[8] Brent Shaw, "Who Were the Circumcellions?" in Andrew H. Merrills, ed., *Vandals, Romans, and Berbers: New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa* (Aldershot, 2004), 227–54, which reappears in a slightly different, abbreviated form as "Bad Boys: Circumcellions and Fictive Violence," in H.A. Drake, ed., *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices* (Aldershot, 2006), 179–96, effectively disputes the reliability of "external" (European) evidence for violence by the circumcellions, who can surface as devotees of "a bizarre and somewhat irrational suicide cult" or as pseudo-prophets. Shaw disagrees with Frend and Diesner, who characterized the circumcellions as peasant insurgents and terrorists, and nearly suggests that the circumcellions' violence—not just the "external" reports of it—was "fictive." Augustine's rhetoric and rage go more or less unremarked in Shaw's studies, as does the likelihood that African correspondents might have indulged the bishop's exaggerations, but not fictions. It now seems clear that the circumcellions were not a coherent social movement and, as Shaw avers, that their level of organization and irrationality have been overstated. Still, Diesner was almost certainly correct that circumcellions were important, unruly, and much feared: Diesner, *Kirche und Staat* 90 ("eine wichtige Schicht innerhalb der Gesellschaft des spätrömischen Nordafrika").

reported or unreported the reservations of other, less forthcoming imams.[9] Caecilianists saw no polemical advantage in reporting moderate Donatists' reservations.

Historians ordinarily probe behind the front page and sift the headlines that polemicists and pundits in the past have occasioned with their exaggerations and simplifications. True, one could argue that a polemicist's duty is to exaggerate an adversary's excesses and eccentricities. Modern pundits are known to have let the momentum of such coverage, and of current revulsion, carry them perilously close to the conclusion that polemicists' houses of cards are formidably fortified assessments of the pricklier predicaments their societies confront. But historians of religious controversy during the fourth and fifth centuries are in an unenviable position because most of their evidence comes from pundits and polemicists who outlasted their competition. The evidence does suggest that Donatist extremists were feared, as are Islamist jihadis in the early twenty-first century.[10] Moreover, militant Christians in late antique Africa and militant Muslims of late also appear to share vivid ideas about their critics' infectious, reprehensibly favorable attitudes toward "modernization," and both manifest a strong urge to purge their respective religious cultures of both the critics and their attitudes.[11] But, then and now, moderates, modernizers, and militants seem to be creatures as well as creators of the pervasive cultures of fear. And one need not overwork the similarities to concede that Hegghammer, urging caution on Islamicist colleagues in the west, has good advice for those preparing to revisit Donatism's moderates, terrorists, and critics: "Societies touched by terrorism," he warns, "are always the least well placed to understand their enemies."[12]

Even so, we are compelled to rely on Optatus of Mileve and especially on Augustine for our understandings of their enemies. They convey much of the little we know about Donatism. They simplified their rivals' arguments to compose convincing counterarguments. They indulged their imaginations. Historians appreciate, of course, that they now pay a price for garnering secessionists' views and evidence for terror tactics from Donatism's detractors. But what follows here shows that we can learn from recent literature on Muslim

[9] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia, 2008), 161.

[10] Optatus, *De schismata* 3.4; *Parm.* 2.3.6; Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 132.6 (*CCSL* 40); *Epist.* 105.3; 185.12; 185.26–27.

[11] Augustine, *Contra litteras Petiliani* 2.88.195 (*CSEL* 52.2); hereafter, *Petil.* and *Parm.* 3.5.26.

[12] Thomas Hegghammer, "Jihadi Studies," *Times Literary Supplement* (London), 4 April 2008, 17.

moderates and militants some ways to purchase greater insight at a reduced fee from the fourth- and fifth-century polemicists.

The aim is to attempt to read beneath the bias of late antique African sources, which defamed the Donatists after restrictions on their worship were lifted in the early 360s and their numbers and influence increased.[13] Caecilianists were alarmed; their rivals' resurgence seemed unstoppable.[14] To be sure, factions developed among secessionists as they enjoyed their new freedoms. Some even harder-line devotees seceded from fellow Donatists who welcomed their new respectability. But the leadership, notably Parmenian, the irenic and effective Donatist bishop of Carthage ca. 363–391, rose to the challenge. He has been depicted as a Donatist "bridge-builder," but there was no bridging the chasm that had opened decades before between secessionists and Caecilianists.[15] Parmenian managed to stave off Donatist disintegration, and when he died in 391, the year Caecilianists in Hippo ordained Augustine a priest, members of the secessionists' confederation outnumbered their rivals in Numidia. Beginning in the 390s, Augustine concentrated on outmaneuvering the competition. He packed criticisms of Parmenian's efforts to reconcile feuding Donatists into anti-Donatist treatises and correspondence. According to Augustine, the reconciliation involved forgiving fractious sectarians, yet Parmenian and the secessionists mulishly refused to forgive Caecilianists for crimes allegedly committed a century ago, crimes of which Caecilian and his comrades had been acquitted, and thus likewise refused to reunify the African church.[16]

That tendentious take on the controversy was almost surely composed to tell the government which African Christianity would better serve a superpower looking to hold together what had come to look like a scissors-and-paste empire.[17] Word of enduring schism would have been unwelcome in official circles if only because African and Roman authorities understood that religious disaffection could easily stoke political disaffection and instability. They would not have missed the signs in the late 390s, when secessionist bishops either supported, or, as Augustine accused, turned a blind eye to, insurgents who joined Gildo, an African commander formerly in service to Rome, and Donatist bishop Optatus of Thamugadi.[18] The rebellion failed, yet authorities seemed wary, at least for a time, because Augustine boasted

[13] For the legislation and its local effects, see Claude Lepelley, *Aspects de l'Afrique romaine: Les cités, la vie rurale, le Christianisme* (Bari, 2001), 236–38.

[14] Augustine, *Epist.* 29.12.

[15] Tilly, *Bible*, 96–112.

[16] *Parm.* 2.3.6.

[17] *Cresc.* 3.3.5.

[18] Augustine, *Epist.* 87.4–5; *Parm.* 2.9.19; *Cresc.* 3.13.16; 4.25.32.

that he could have Donatists dispossessed for evangelizing.[19] His ability to do so, if overstated then, was greater after 405, when the emperor Honorius registered his dissatisfaction with the African secessionists. He empowered regional officials to prohibit Donatists from rebaptizing Caecilianists, to stop secessionists from leaving and receiving legacies, and to exile their obstreperously "heretical clergy."[20] Augustine pressed his advantage. He wrote to the Donatist bishop of Casae Nigrae, coupling moderates and militants. "Your circumcellions and your clergy oppress us brutally," he declared, doubtlessly expecting that government authorities would notice both the pairing and the possessive pronouns and that they would keep up the pressure.[21]

Augustine certainly did, ceaselessly firing the kiln in which he baked rumors of atrocities and reports of the circumcellions' intimidation and battery into his chronicle of the Donatists' recent, violent behavior. He maintained that Parmenian's peaceful overtures to those who seceded from the secessionists' main body were only effective because he had hired circumcellions to terrorize (*terruistis*) dissidents.[22] Parmenian had been heard to harp on the Caecilianists' alleged treachery, yet, Augustine contended, he left unremarked the greed, theft, and thuggery that had been associated with Donatism from the onset.[23] The circumcellions, of course, were the villains who attracted most of Augustine's attention, the grim "reapers" (*messores*) who mowed down Caecilianists and others the secessionist leadership designated as targets.[24]

Sometimes, however, Augustine interpreted the collusion differently. He gave the reins to the militants. He insinuated that, from the sect's fanatical fringe, circumcellions dictated to the Donatist bishops. They bullied and led the leadership. But whether Augustine described circumcellions as the prime movers or as the moderates' hired thugs, the result was much the same; he linked the two in plots to undermine Africa's political and religious order.[25]

[19] Augustine, *Epist.* 66.1.

[20] *CTh* 16.5.37–39: Th. Mommsen, ed., *Theodosiani libri XVI cum constitutionibus Sirmondianis et leges novellae* (Berlin, 1905).

[21] Augustine, *Epist.* 88.1.

[22] *Cresc.* 3.60.66: "Non frustra laborastis, non in cassum terruistis, non inaniter agitastis. displicuit eis adflictis animositas sua, fracti sunt, emendati sunt, correcti ac recepti sunt post suam damnationem, post aliorum dilationem, post vestram persecutionem."

[23] *Parm.* 3.3.18, rehearsing what he took to be Parmenian's claim that God had decided to deposit a particularly pure form of Christianity in Africa: "Et Africa electa est ubi purgata massa consisteret, cetera autem omnem terram palea separata vestiret? unde ergo tanti greges circumcellionum? unde tantae turbae conviviorum ebriosorum et innuptarum sed non incorruptarum innumerabilia stupra feminarum? unde tanta turba raptorum avarorum faeneratorum?"

[24] Augustine, *Epist.* 76.2, citing Matthew 13 and substituting circumcellions for the angelic reapers mentioned there; see also *Epist.* 105.3; *Parm.* 2.9.19; *Cresc.* 4.50.60.

[25] *Parm.* 2.3.6; *Cresc.* 3.42.46–47; *Petil.* 1.24.26; *Epist.* 108.14–18. Note also the distinction between some irenic moderates and others who deployed circumcellions to defend their truths by

Gildo's insurrection was all the proof he needed. Historians now suggest that Augustine exaggerated the Donatists' contributions to the mayhem.[26] Probably so, as he seems to have been comfortable trading in gossip and innuendo to gain a propaganda advantage.

Optatus of Thamugadi became a favorite target, not simply because he was both bishop and militant but because his participation in the late fourth-century rebellion enabled Augustine to underscore the Donatists' ostensibly disproportionate responses to unbecoming conduct. Optatus' reputation was far from unspotted even before he conspired with Gildo.[27] So, when the secessionist grammarian Cresconius, writing to defend Donatism, brushed aside Optatus' misconduct ("I neither absolve nor condemn him"), Augustine pounced. It appeared to him that every attempt to sell the secession, not just Cresconius', and to justify rebaptizing Caecilianists, began with a rehearsal and disavowal of Caecilian's partisans' purported timidity. And secessionists then proceeded to make the claim that Caecilianists' cowardice during the persecutions of the late third and early fourth centuries constituted apostasy. Cresconius followed that line and concluded that the apostasy made sacraments administered by men ordained and consecrated by the cowards' heirs absolutely ineffective. Although Optatus may have been a criminal and rebel, he was not trapped in what the Donatists considered the cowards' episcopate, so it came as no surprise that Cresconius should resist criticizing him and agree that the sacraments he performed had been valid. Donatists rebaptized and repudiated fellow African Christians a century removed from the Caecilianists' alleged apostasy, yet Cresconius and his fellow Donatists declined to rebaptize Christians baptized by Optatus, who, by their own logic, should have lost the ability to perform the sacraments. Nor did the Donatists reordain or reconsecrate men whom Optatus had initiated into, or advanced in, the ministry. Optatus' treachery was current; the cowardice of some early Caecilianists, which, even had it been demonstrated to the satisfaction of government authorities then or thereafter, paled by comparison. Augustine concluded one section of his response by arguing that Cresconius was condemned by his refusals to condemn the bishop of Thamugadi.[28]

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disrupting "publicam quietam": Jean-Louis Maier, ed., *Le dossier du Donatisme*, 2 vols. (Berlin, 1987–1989), 2.122–23.

[26] See Hans-Joachim Diesner, "Gildos Herrschaft und die Niederlage bei Thagaste," *Klio* 40 (1962), 179–81; Emin Tengström, *Donatisten und Katholiken: Soziale, wirtschaftliche, und politische Aspekte einer nordafrikanischen Kirchenspaltung* (Göteborg, 1964), 84–87.

[27] *Cresc.* 4.25.32.

[28] *Cresc.* 3.13.16.

To Augustine's dismay, other Donatists reckoned Optatus' cause just and considered him a martyr.[29] Their eulogies must have made Cresconius' "neither absolve nor condemn" appear rather tame. Indeed, the grammarian's neutrality may have signaled that Caecilianists had regained the upper hand in Africa after the failure of the Gildo's enterprise and that a number of secessionists were beginning to back down. After inciting ruffians to ambush Possidius, Caecilianist bishop of Calama, a Donatist priest suddenly changed course and called off his crew. The priest was determined to frighten the barricaded bishop and his companions but not, Augustine surmised, to leave corpses and risk becoming a victim himself of the government's counterterrorism program.[30] But the priest's prudence was exceptional, according to Augustine, who usually characterized circumcellions as ruthless and incautious. He considered the most reckless of them deranged, relishing their roles as casualties-waiting-to-happen, threatening and attacking others to provoke reprisals.[31]

Seemingly suicidal circumcellions probably understood themselves to be standing (and falling) in a long line of Donatist martyrs. Persecution, after all, was Donatism's *thème préféré*.[32] Arguably, desperation drove the most self-destructive militants in Late Antiquity, desperation not unlike that studied by Richard Pape, who emphasizes the political motives of murderous Islamist militants. "Suicide terrorism," he says, is undertaken to end foreign occupation, offering as proof the Hezbollah "discourse on martyrdom." [33] Religious imagery therein misleads: it clutches at a reader's attention, but the "discourse" was spawned by territorial rather than theological concerns. The magnitude and frequency of "suicide attacks" are determined by occupiers' susceptibility to coercion; given the occupiers' superiority in conventional weaponry, the occupied transform weakness into strength. Their references to "violated sanctities" sanction their calls for slaughter and self-sacrifice.[34]

A comparison between Donatist and Muslim extremists is not altogether out of bounds. To be sure, one must concede that the Roman occupation of North Africa was long standing by the time the circumcellions initiated their "protests." The current occupation of Iraq is not likely to last a decade, but a case can be made that what Bernard Lewis uncontroversially calls "the

[29] *Parm.* 2.2.4.

[30] *Cresc.* 3.46.50.

[31] *Cresc.* 3.49.54; *Epist.* 185.12; Kriegbaum, *Kirche*, 152–54.

[32] Emilien Lamirande, "Aux origines du dialogue interconfessionel: Saint Augustin et les Donatistes," *Studia Canonica* 32 (1998), 217.

[33] Robert Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (New York, 2005), 189–91, quoting the Hezbollah "Open Letter" of 1985.

[34] Ibid.

dominance of the west in much of the Arab world" has generated resentments for two centuries, during stretches of which foreign troops have been garrisoned in North Africa and the Middle East. In the late fourth century, Gildo's defeat and the execution of bishop Optatus of Thamugadi could only have reinforced many Donatists' feelings of inferiority, which, possibly, were not far different from the feelings that now appear to accompany the indignation of many Islamists described (much more controversially) by Lewis.[35]

After Gildo's defeat, the circumcellions stepped up attacks on the Caecilianists' churches and missionaries. The appeals for government protection on behalf of the latter may have reminded Donatists of the collaboration between proto-Caecilianists and government authorities charged with persecuting Christians.[36] That is plausible but unprovable. We do know that secessionists were impressed by the close collaboration between their rivals and the emperor's agents in Africa, because they worked that impression into their deliberations at the Council of Carthage in 411, to which their bishops had been summoned by the government. They came armed with biblical passages, which, in their minds, condemned the partnership between Caecilianists and the government. The church that flirts with the world is no church; it becomes indistinguishable from the world, according to Donatist bishop Emeritus, who rattled off several scriptural injunctions to make his point.[37] He also inveighed against the decidedly inadequate discipline of the proto-Caecilianists.[38]

Emeritus and his secessionist colleagues found that, for that latter purpose, the Council of Cirta was a sensational illustration of the invidious influence of foreign intervention. Conferees at Cirta had been unwilling, in 303 or 304, to disqualify bishops who obliged authorities hostile to Christianity. For their part, Caecilianists used the outcome at Cirta to document that the faithful considered and repudiated divisive disciplinary measures. The lesson for Caecilianists was that division and secession were to be avoided, even if cowardice and some dollops of corruption had to be overlooked. Donatists responded that, although Cirta could be used to document cowardice and corruption, the decisions taken there to pardon both were not precedents because a council convened during an antagonistic political regime was tainted. Political pressures created an unwholesome atmosphere. In effect, Cirta was not a church council at all. "Quod persecutionis tempore non

[35] Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong: The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Modern Middle East* (New York, 2003).

[36] The numerous early fifth-century Caecilianist appeals to the emperor prior to the Council of Carthage in 411 are collected in Maier, *Dossier* 2.106–71.

[37] Serge Lancel, ed., *Actes de la conférence de Carthage en 411*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1972–1991), 3.1226, citing John 15:19; 17:25, Romans 3:19, 1 John 2:15; 4:5.

[38] Lancel, *Actes* 3.1186–88.

posset concilium congregari": persecutions invalidated councils, a judgment that gave Donatists a chance to question the validity of the bishops' conferences that had condemned them. Additionally, the judgment obviously served to question the validity of the Council of Carthage in 411, to which they had come under some duress.[39]

Donatists seem to be suggesting that because of official "terror," particularly in 411, the penalties awaiting dissidents who would not come to councils or come to terms could only bring simmering discontent to a boil. Augustine would have none of this. He judged that connections between political persecution and conciliar illegitimacy were cleverly drawn to cover Donatists' typical intransigence. Councils called during the early fifth century, after the government determined to keep secessionists in Africa at a disadvantage, had been summoned simply to see whether they would be reformed and reconciled, or punished.[40] From what we know about Augustine's conduct in 411, we can reasonably infer the sincerity of his growing desire for reconciliation with his rivals.[41] Nonetheless, there was no echo in his correspondence at that time of his appreciation for the sources of Donatists' intransigence in the culture of fear created by the quarrel. Nearly twenty years earlier, however, Augustine had shown some sensitivity on that count. In 392, he wrote to the secessionists who recently had dared to rebaptize a deacon in his church, denoting this an "immanissimum scelus," a monumental offense.[42] Rebaptism declared that the original, Caecilianist baptism was bogus.

But shortly after suggesting that no greater insult could be imagined, Augustine, in the same letter, mentioned the unfortunate consequences that heated rhetoric had for any meaningful conversation between parties. He then proposed a bilateral agreement to put an end to the formulation and exchange of trumped-up charges.[43] Alluding to the dread the Donatists experienced on hearing their conduct condemned in the presence of Roman soldiers—for Augustine had the army at his back, quite literally, on occasion, when he accused the secessionists of cruelty—he offered a mutually beneficial arrangement. He promised to stop arraigning his rivals when armed troops were nearby if Donatist moderates tried to stop circumcellions from terrorizing Caecilianists.[44] Augustine's gesture and wording are significant. He used the

[39] Augustine, *Breviculus collationis cum Donatistas* 3.17.31–33 (*CCSL* 149a).
[40] Augustine, *Epist.* 88.10.
[41] Lamirande, "Dialogue interconfessionel," 223–28.
[42] Augustine, *Epist.* 23.2.
[43] Augustine, *Epist.* 23.6.
[44] Augustine, *Epist.* 23.7: "Neque id agam cum miles praesens est, ne quis vestrum arbitretur tumultuosius me agere voluisse, quam ratio pacis desiderat, sed post abscessum militis, ut omnes, qui nos audiunt, intellegant non hoc esse propositi mei, ut invite homines ad cuiusquam

word *terror* twice, suggesting that he was aware that secessionist terrorists were themselves terrorized by the superiority of "conventional" forces and, presumably, by the partnership between Caecilianists and imperial officials.

Yet, as time passed, Augustine became less sensitive to the dread or terror he was helping to generate. He grew frustrated as well because his accusations and arguments got African Christianity no closer to reunification. He grudgingly admitted that the army and intimidation were useful,[45] and he deployed stories about the circumcellions' fury to alert colleagues and correspondents in government to the supposed danger Donatist extremists continued to pose to Caecilianists' bishops and altars. Augustine's vocabulary seemed calculated, on occasion, to inspire terror. For instance, he described the Donatists living in the larger African cities as the Caecilianists' hostages (*obsides*) to keep circumcellions in the countryside from becoming more rambunctious and aggressive than they already were.[46] Years later, he consoled himself that he had done the right thing; in 417, the circumcellions were cultivating fields, he said, rather than digging graves.[47]

Perhaps Augustine came to think that his heated rhetoric (and government pressure) had turned that trick, for he seems to have forgotten—and historians follow his lead—his proposal to stop terrorizing the terrorists. But we cannot read his mind, notwithstanding the palpable sense of satisfaction he expressed in 417 with reference to peaceable circumcellions. He would have known how difficult it was to reach any rapprochement late in his career, for the Donatists had pushed back whenever he pushed them. They insisted on the integrity of their local communities, and on the superior righteousness of their local resistance to efforts to reclaim them for a supra-regional church. Unlike leading Caecilianists, notably Augustine, Alypius, and Possidius, secessionist bishops were quite unworldly and untraveled. They were unfamiliar with court life and had not learned to massage and manipulate official opinion. But they knew how to turn their simplicity into a virtue and their rivals' refinement into a liability. The Donatist bishop Petilian admitted that the Caecilianists adroitly interpreted profane law to their own advantage, but he insinuated that their sophistication applied to the Bible resulted in sophist-

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communionem cogantur, sed ut quietissime quaerentibus veritas innotescat. cessabit a nostris partibus *terror* temporalium potestatum; cesset etiam a vestries partibus *terror* congregatorum circumcellionum" (emphasis added).

[45] See Augustine, *Epist.* 93 and 185, for arguments and purported scriptural precedents for the use of coercion; the former, earlier letter justifies the word "grudgingly."

[46] *Petil.* 2.83.84.

[47] Augustine, *Contra Gaudentium Donatistarum episcopum* 1.29.33 (*CSEL* 53): "Neque enim isti, qui pereunt, illorum saltem numero aequantur, qui ex ipso genere nunc iam tenentur ordine disciplinae colendisque agris amisso circumcellionum et opera et nomine inserviunt, servant castitatem, tenent unitatem."

ry.[48] For their part, Donatists seem to have trusted that their purity and piety enabled them authoritatively to lecture their opposition on the meaning of their sacred texts because that opposition somehow had been contaminated by the first Caecilianists' timidity and errors and by its close association with the government.[49]

Add this insistence, which Augustine considered arrogance, to the militants' aggressiveness, and to the real, if often exaggerated, threats of violence, and one can retrieve, in part, the troubles that the Caecilianists encountered. Read Augustine's replies and allegations, and one can sense the problems Donatists faced in the early fifth century. Problems and posturing on both sides created the climate or culture of fear that intensified the acrimony. True, what we know of this derives from Augustine, and he would have had to have been uncharacteristically imperceptive not to see that secessionists shaped their ecclesiology, to an extent, in response to the world's inhospitality. Indeed, he once confirmed, as an accusation, that the Donatists' self-definition owed less to biblical law, prophets, gospels, and apostles than to their sense of injuries and insults unfairly received.[50] Their church was a fortress, and their siege mentality, as Zocca explains, was braced by their certainty that the Caecilianists, the Caecilianists' political allies, and the profane world in which both were comfortable and conformable were soaked with "fallibilità e pecaminosità" ("sin and error").[51] Dread spread through the other camp as well. Circumcellions were the most savage of Donatists on Augustine's watch; other secessionists were in cahoots with them, intimidated by them, or culpably indifferent to them. When propaganda trumped perception, they all could be made to seem the same; as Augustine reported, all called themselves Christians: "They profess their faith in Christ yet give their hearts to Donatus."[52] Is truth served any better, one wonders, when we substitute "Muhammad" for "Christ" and "Osama" for "Donatus" in statements of this sort?

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[48] Lancel, *Actes* 2.640.

[49] Lancel, *Actes* 3.1126.

[50] Augustine, *Epist.* 185.2.

[51] Elena Zocca, "L'identità cristiana nel dibattito fra cattolici e donatisti," *Annali di storia dell'esegesi* 21 (2004), 116–18.

[52] *Parm.* 2.2.5: "Si verba dant Christo, cor autem Donato."