Discipline, Coercion, and Correction

Augustine against the Violence of the Donatists in Epistula 185

Geoffrey D. Dunn

University of Pretoria (Pretoria)

gdd62au@hotmail.com

Summary

In the lengthy *Epistula* 185 to Boniface, Augustine outlines the difference between Arians and Donatists. The letter quickly turns to the question of violence perpetrated by the followers of Donatus and Caecilianus. Augustine claims that the violence inflicted by the Donatists against the Caecilianists or themselves was violence indeed, while that inflicted by the Caecilianists against the Donatists, which he could not deny was happening, was classified as discipline and correction. Further, Augustine was attempting to convince a state official that their enforcement of imperial legislation needed to be corrective, and therefore could not be shirked nor could be undertaken without the right intent. This paper examines the arguments and tactics Augustine uses to condemn the Donatists while at the same time justifying the Caecilianists.

Keywords

Augustine of Hippo – Donatism – religious violence – classical rhetoric

The lengthy *Epistula* 185 of about 417¹ from Augustine, bishop of Annaba (ancient Hippo Regius in the province of Numidia) from 395 until 430,² to

- 1 Augustine, *Ep. 185*; S. Aureli Augustini Hipponiensis episcopi *Epistulae*, pars 4: *Ep. clxxxv-cclxx*, ed. by A. Goldbacher (CSEL, 57), Vienna, 1911, pp. 1-44 [= NBA, 23, Rome, 1974, pp. 10-74]. English translation in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*: part II, vol. 3: *Letters 156-210*, trans. by R. Teske, Hyde Park, NY, 2004.
- 2 On Augustine see A. Mandouze, *Prosopographie Chrétienne du Bas-Empire* [= *PCBE*], vol. 1: *Prosopographie de l'Afrique chrétienne (303-533)*, Paris, 1982, pp. 105-127 (Aurelius 1); P. Brown,

Boniface,³ military tribune in Africa and later to be *comes Africae*, one of the six *comites rei militaris* mentioned in *Notitia dignitatum* who held high military command, *comes domesticorum et Africae*,⁴ and then *magister militum* or *magister utriusque militiae*⁵ and *patricius*⁶ in 432, has been described recently by Brent Shaw as “a miniature history presented to the high-ranking official as a beginner’s primer on the nature of the Christian conflict in Africa.”⁷ The conflict in Africa to which he refers, of course, is Donatism.⁸ Erika Hermanowicz notes that in recounting recent events, particularly with regard to the underplaying of the extent to which African bishops influenced the imperial

Augustine of Hippo: A Biography, Berkeley–Los Angeles, 2000, rev. edn; and S. Lancel, *St Augustine*, trans. A. Nevill, London, 2002, Eng. edn. The new biography by R. Lane Fox, *Augustine: Conversions to Confessions*, New York, 2015, is of no help, since it only covers Augustine’s early years.

- 3 On Boniface see J.R. Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire* [= *PLRE*], vol. 2: *A.D. 395–527*, Cambridge, 1980, pp. 237–240 (Bonifatius 3); and *PCBE* 1.152–155 (Bonifatius 13). See also J. Matthews, *Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court AD 364–425*, Oxford, 1998, 2nd edn, pp. 316 and 378–379. There is no entry in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by A. Fitzgerald, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1999.
- 4 See *Notitia dignitatum occidentis* 1.13–14, and 32; *Notitia dignitatum accedunt Notitia urbis Constantinopolitanae et Laterculi prouinciarum*, ed. by O. Seeck, Berlin, 1876, pp. 103 and 104. See also A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire: 284–602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, Oxford, 1964, pp. 125, 184, 191, 197, 610, and 652; and P.S. Barnwell, *Emperor, Prefects, and Kings: The Roman West, 395–565*, Chapel Hill–London, 1992, pp. 33–37.
- 5 See *Notitia dignitatum occidentis* 1.5–6; ed. by Seeck, p. 103; Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, pp. 124–125, 174–178, 341–344, and 375–376; and Barnwell, *Emperor, Prefects, and Kings*, pp. 41–44.
- 6 See W. Ensslin, “Zum Heermeisteramt des spätromischen Reiches. III. Der magister utriusque militiae et patricius des 5. Jahrhunderts,” *Klio*, 24 (1931), pp. 467–502; T.D. Barnes, “*Patricii* under Valentinian III,” *Phoenix*, 29 (1975), pp. 155–170; J.M. O’Flynn, *Generalissimos of the Western Roman Empire*, Edmonton, 1983, pp. 65–66; R.W. Mathisen, “Patricians as Diplomats in Late Antiquity,” *ByzZ*, 79 (1986), pp. 35–49; and Barnwell, *Emperor, Prefects, and Kings*, pp. 44–47.
- 7 B.D. Shaw, *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*, Cambridge, 2011, p. 242.
- 8 The bibliography on Donatism is enormous and ever expanding. See especially W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*, Oxford, 1952; G.R. Lewis, “Violence in the Name of Christ: The Significance of Augustine’s Donatist Controversy for Today,” *JETS*, 14 (1971), pp. 103–110; A.R. Birley, “Some Notes on the Donatist Schism,” *Libyan Studies*, 18 (1987), pp. 29–41; P.I. Kaufman, “Donatism Revisited: Moderates and Militants in Late Antique North Africa,” *JLA*, 2 (2009), pp. 131–142; *The Uniquely African Controversy: Studies on Donatist Christianity*, ed. by A. Dupont, M.A. Gaumer, and M. Lamberigts (LAHR, 9), Leuven, 2015; and *The Donatist Schism: Controversy and Contexts*, ed. by R. Miles (TTHC, 2), Liverpool, 2016.

promulgation of the Edict of Unity in February 405,⁹ Augustine “distorts the events.”¹⁰

This paper seeks to analyse the letter in terms of Augustine’s comments about the violence perpetrated by the Donatists and about how any violence committed by the Caecilianists¹¹ and the state was not to be labelled as violence but as correction and discipline. Augustine was advising a state official that any action against the Donatists needed to be undertaken in the right spirit. Indeed, in *Retractationes* Augustine later would identify *Epistula* 185 as the book *De correctione Donatistarum*.¹² My purpose is not to critique Augustine’s ethics against more modern standards. I propose that Augustine’s arguments are not as threadbare as Peter Brown asserts.¹³ They are the product not just of the historical moment but of a man also with a theological, salvific agenda who utilised a rhetorical method for arguing his case. Indeed, when we read this letter carefully, it is clear that one cannot agree with Brown that “his attitude to coercion should not be constructed as purely punitive,”¹⁴ but rather see that Augustine’s attitude was not punitive at all. It is precisely because Augustine has his theological agenda that he does not deal with violence as a phenomenon, but only in an instrumentalist sense to distinguish himself from Donatists and to justify the use of coercion.¹⁵ This paper highlights the

- 9 See *Cod. Theod.* 16.5.38; *Codex Theodosianus*, vol. 1: *Theodosiani Libri XVI cum constitutionibus Sirmondinis*, part 2: *Textus cum apparatu*, ed. by Th. Mommsen and P. Krüger, Berlin, 1990, p. 867; 16.6.3-5; ed. by Mommsen and Krüger, 1/2.881-883; and 16.11.2; ed. by Mommsen and Krüger, 1/2.905-906.
- 10 E.T. Hermanowicz, *Possidius of Calama: A Study of the North African Episcopate at the Age of Augustine* (OECs), Oxford, 2008, p. 153.
- 11 The labelling of this religious conflict as being between Donatists and Catholics has attracted criticism in recent decades, for both sides had wished to claim the epithet ‘catholic’. If we accept the term Donatists for one group, named after Donatus (315-355), even though it was Donatus’ predecessor, Majorinus (311-315), who became the first of the rival bishops, we ought to call the other group Caecilianists, named after Caecilianus (311-c. 336). See M. Tilley, “Redefining Donatism: Moving Forward,” *AugSt*, 41 (2011), pp. 21-32.
- 12 Augustine, *Retr.* 2.48(74); *Augustinus Retractationum libri II*, ed. by A. Mutzenbacher (CCL, 57), Turnhout, 1984, p. 128 [= 2.48(75); NBA, 2, Rome, 1994, p. 220].
- 13 P. Brown, “St. Augustine’s Attitude to Religious Coercion,” *JRS*, 54 (1964), pp. 107-116, at p. 108.
- 14 Brown, “St. Augustine’s Attitude to Religious Coercion,” p. 114. Admittedly Brown goes on to say “that it should appear as a positive process of corrective treatment” The first half of his statement would have been better without the use of the word “purely.”
- 15 See E.L. Grasmück, *Coercitio. Staat und Kirche im Donatistenstreit* (Bonner Historische Forschungen, 22), Bonn, 1964, pp. 168-250; and C. Conybeare, “Making Space for Violence,” *JLA*, 6 (2013), pp. 203-215.

importance of defining words to create arguments as a rhetorical strategy to exonerate the Caecilianists and condemn the Donatists, when both groups could seem to have been behaving in nearly identical fashion.

In terms of the levels of intensity of religious rivalry in late antiquity, as outlined by the participants of the Canadian Society of Biblical Studies seminars, Augustine's portrayal of Donatism here has gone beyond the level of competition, and beyond that of confrontation, to that of conflict. In the categorisation offered by CSBS, conflict is exemplified by hostility, material deprivation, and physical harm.¹⁶ Violence is an extreme form of conflict and ought to be condemned. On the other hand, Augustine wanted to justify his own side and to reassure state officials that they were not engaging in violence when they enforced the laws against the Donatists but in correction, so long as they approached their task with the right spirit. Correction, by definition, was not to be classified as violence and so ought not to be seen as religious conflict, but only as religious confrontation. However we brand it, Augustine's point was that the Donatists engaged in illegitimate violence while the Caecilianists engaged in legitimate violence, better described simply as correction.

1 Boniface and Arians

It would appear from the start of Augustine's letter that Boniface had asked him what the difference was between Donatists and Arians, since it is on this topic that Augustine's reply begins.¹⁷ What connection might Boniface have had with Arianism? We know that in 413 he was in Gaul and that he had seriously wounded Athaulf, the leader of the Goths after the death of the latter's brother-in-law Alaric,¹⁸ outside Marseille (ancient Massalia in the province of Viennensis) as the Goths, much to the relief of the local inhabitants, marched westwards out of Italy with the emperor Honorius' half-sister, Galla Placidia,¹⁹

16 T.L. Donaldson, "Concluding Reflections," in: *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Caesarea Maritima*, ed. by T.L. Donaldson (SCJ, 8), Waterloo, 2000, pp. 331-339, at p. 337. See also R.S. Ascough, "Religious Coexistence, Co-operation, Competition, and Conflict in Sardis and Smyrna," in: *Religious Rivalries and the Struggle for Success in Sardis and Smyrna*, ed. by R.S. Ascough (SCJ, 14), Waterloo, 2005, pp. 245-252, who has omitted confrontation for the list of levels of religious intensity.

17 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.1.1; NBA, 23.10-12.

18 On Athaulf see *PLRE* 2.176-178.

19 On Galla Placidia see *PLRE* 2.888-889 (Placidia 4); Ch. Pietri and L. Pietri, *PCBE*, vol. 2: *Prosopographie de l'Italie chrétienne (313-604)*, 2 vols, Rome, 1999-2000, pp. 1803-1806 (Placidia 1); S.I. Oost, *Galla Placidia Augusta: A Biographical Essay*, Chicago-London, 1968; H.

in tow.²⁰ It would be fair to conclude that Boniface was a leading military figure in the army Flavius Constantius,²¹ the *magister utriusque militiae*, had led into Gaul in 411 to deal with the usurper Constantine III²² at Arles and then with the arriving Goths. It is quite possible that, between the end of 411 and 414, when he took up the siege of the Goths at Narbonne (ancient Colonia Narbo Martius, capital of the province of Narbonensis Prima), where Athaulf had married Galla Placidia at the start of 414,²³ Constantius had been back in Ravenna. This would mean that for several years the campaign in Gaul was carried on by Constantius' generals. Indeed, we hear that Claudius Postumus Dardanus,²⁴

Sivan, *Galla Placidia: The Last Roman Empress* (Women in Antiquity), Oxford, 2011; and J.E. Salisbury, *Rome's Christian Empress: Galla Placidia Rules at the Twilight of the Empire*, Baltimore, 2015.

- 20 Olympiodorus, *frag.* 22.2; *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire*, vol. 2: *Text, Translation and Historiographical Notes*, ed. by R.C. Blockley (ARCA Classical and Medieval Texts, Papers and Monographs, 10), Liverpool, 1983, pp. 184-186: ἔνθα πληγεῖς Βονηφατίου τοῦ γενναιοτάτου βαλόντος, καὶ μόλις τὸν θάνατον διαφυγών, εἰς τὰς οἰκείας ὑπεχώρησε σκηνάς, τὴν πόλιν ἐν εὐθυμίᾳ λιπὼν καὶ δι' ἐπαίνων καὶ εὐφημίας ποιουμένην Βονηφάτιον.
- 21 On Flavius Constantius, later Constantius III for several months in 421, who would marry Galla Placidia at the start of 417 when he entered his second consulship see *PLRE* 2. 321-325 (Constantius 17); *PCBE* 2.475-476 (Constantius 12); O'Flynn, *Generalissimos of the Western Roman Empire*, pp. 63-73; W. Lütkenhaus, *Constantius III. Studien zu seiner Tätigkeit und Stellung im Westreich 411-421* (Habelts Dissertationsdrucke: Reihe Alte Geschichte, 44), Bonn, 1998; M.A. McEvoy, *Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West, AD 367-455* (OCM), Oxford, 2013, pp. 197-215; and G.D. Dunn, "Flavius Constantius and Affairs in Gaul," *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association*, 10 (2014), pp. 1-21.
- 22 On Constantine III see *PLRE* 2.316-317 (Constantine 21); J.F. Drinkwater, "The Usurpers Constantine III (407-411) and Jovinus (411-413)," *Britannia*, 29 (1998), pp. 269-298; and M. Kulikowski, "Barbarians in Gaul, Usurpers in Britain," *Britannia*, 31 (2000), pp. 325-345.
- 23 Olympiodorus, *frag.* 24; ed. by Blockley, 2.186-188; Orosius, *Hist. adu. pag.* 7.43.1; *Pauli Orosii Historiarum aduersum paganos Libri VII accedit eiusdem Liber apologeticus*, ed. by C. Zangemeister (CSEL, 5), Vienna, 1882, p. 559; and Hydatius, *Chron.* 19.47 (55) and 20.49 (57); *The Chronicle of Hydatius and the Consularia Constantinopolitana: Two Contemporary Accounts of the Final Years of the Roman Empire*, ed. by R.W. Burgess, Oxford, 1993, p. 84.
- 24 On Dardanus see *PLRE* 2.346-347; L. Pietri and M. Heijmans, *PCBE*, vol.4: *Prosopographie de la Gaule chrétienne (314-614)*, 2 vols, Paris, 2013, pp. 548-550; Drinkwater, "The Usurpers," pp. 291-292; and M. Salzman, *The Making of a Christian Aristocracy: Social and Religious Change in the Western Roman Empire*, Cambridge, MA-London, 2002, p. 87.

the new praetorian prefect in Gaul,²⁵ had executed another usurper, Jovinus,²⁶ at Narbonne.²⁷ One of the extracts of Renatus Profuturus Frigeridus, preserved in Gregory of Tours, records that Constantius' generals put many Gallic noblemen to death at this time.²⁸ It would be fair to conclude that Boniface is to be counted with Dardanus as among those responsible. The point to be made here is that the Goths were Arian and that Boniface was a non-Arian Christian.

In about 426 Boniface would marry Pelagia as his second wife.²⁹ Martindale entertains the possibility that she was Gothic.³⁰ She was Arian and their daughter was baptized by an Arian presbyter.³¹ Boniface was Christian, of sufficient orthodoxy for Augustine to be satisfied, although the general could be chastised by the bishop of Hippo Regius for allowing his household to be overtaken by Arianism, even if only indirectly.³²

Even though *Epistula* 185 was written nearly a decade before Boniface's second marriage, his time in Gaul would have given him sufficient cause to be familiar with the existence of Arians. Augustine's reply is that while both Arianism and Donatism are errors (*errores*), and that errors are sent to test one's faith and love; the former (a heresy, although Augustine does not here specify that) to test Christian faith so that one may not be deceived and the latter (a schism, again unspecified) to test Christian love so that one may work

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- 25 On this office see *Notitia dignitatum occidentis* 1.3 and 3.1; ed. by Seeck, pp. 103 and 110; Jones, *The Later Roman Empire*, pp. 50–51, 100–103, and 370–372; Barnwell, *Emperor, Prefects, and Kings*, pp. 58–62; and R. O'Hara, "An Assessment of the *Notitia Dignitatum* as Historical Source for the Late Roman Bureaucracy," PhD diss., National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2013, pp. 81–115.
 - 26 On Jovinus see *PLRE* 2.621–622; and Drinkwater, "The Usurpers," pp. 287–290.
 - 27 Olympiodorus, *frag.* 20; ed. by Blockley, 2.182–184. Hydatius, *Chron.* 19.46 (54); ed. by Burgess, p. 84, notes simply that Jovinus and his brother Sebastian were crushed by Honorius' *duces* in Narbonne. Earlier, at 17.42.50; ed. by Burgess, p. 82, Hydatius mistakenly had called Constantius *dux*.
 - 28 Gregory of Tours, *Libri historiarum decem* 2.9; *Gregorii Turonensis Opera*, Teil 1: *Libri historiarum* X, ed. by B. Krusch and W. Levison (MGHSSrerMerov, 1/1), 2nd edn, Hannover, 1951, p. 57.
 - 29 See *PLRE* 2.856–857 (Pelagia 1); Marcellinus comes, *Chron.* 432; *Chronica minora saec. IV. V. VI. VII*, vol. 2, ed. by Th. Mommsen (MGHAA, 11), Hannover, 1894, p. 78; and John of Antioch, *frag.* 201; *Fragmenta Historicorum Graecorum*, ed. by K. Müller, vol. 4, Paris, 1851, pp. 614–616.
 - 30 Martindale, *PLRE*, 2.238.
 - 31 Augustine, *Ep.* 220.4; NBA, 23.624.
 - 32 Augustine, *Ep.* 220.5; NBA, 23.624.

for their correction and the protection of the weak.³³ So the error of the Donatists was not with regard to orthodoxy (in terms of Trinity or christology) but orthopraxy (in terms of the church and the exercise of leadership).³⁴ Even if Caecilian had sinned, a point Augustine only posits for the sake of argument, this was no reason for his opponents to have broken off communion with the rest of the church, created their own schism, and appealed to the emperor, charges that the Donatists levelled similarly against the Caecilianists.³⁵ Like those who accused Daniel, the tables were eventually turned and the Donatists' appeal to the emperor was decided against them.³⁶

2 Correction of the Donatists

It is from here that Augustine is able to consider what has happened to Donatists at state hands at the 314 Synod of Arles³⁷ and after to be not punishment but correction. Such laws against the Donatists have brought many to their senses; they have been corrected (*correctos*), liberated (*liberatos*), or healed (*recepta sanitate*) of their error.³⁸ The doctor dealing with a madman and a father dealing with an undisciplined son deal with them harshly (through restraining or compelling) out of an interest to save. Augustine says, "If, however, they neglect them and permit them to perish, this false gentleness is in fact

33 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.1.2; NBA, 23.12: "... ac sic et fides et dilectio nostra possit esse probatio; fides utique, ne ab eis decipiamur; dilectio autem, ut etiam ipsis corrigendis, quantum possumus, consulamus; non solum instantes ne infirmis noceant, atque ut ab errore nefario liberentur, sed etiam orantes pro eis, ut aperiat Dominus illis sensum, et intelligent Scripturas." One may note in passing that Augustine's main concern in both instances was for the status of the Christian being tested. However, that is the extent of his concern with regard to Arians, but with the Donatists he is concerned also about rescuing them from their error.

34 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.1.3-4; NBA, 23.14-16.

35 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.1.5-185.2.6; NBA, 23.16-18.

36 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.2.7; NBA, 23.20. See Dan 6:2-25, especially v. 25.

37 See *Concilia Galliae a. 314-a. 506*, ed. by C. Munier (CCL, 148), Turnhout, 1963, pp. 9-22; Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 10.5.21-24; *Eusèbe de Césarée. Histoire ecclésiastique, Livres VIII-X, et Les martyrs en Palestine*, ed. by G. Bardy (SC, 55), Paris, 1993, pp. 109-110; and K.J. Hefele, *A History of the Councils of the Church from the Original Documents*, vol. 1: *To the Close of the Council of Nicaea, A.D. 325*, trans. W.R. Clark, Edinburgh, 1894, pp. 180-199.

38 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.2.7; NBA, 23.20: "Et qui oderant diligunt, molestasque sibi fuisse saluberrimas leges, quantum in insania detestabantur, tantum recepta sanitate gratulantur; et in residuos, cum quibus fuerant perituri, iam simili dilectione nobiscum, ut pariter instemus ne illi pereant, excitantur."

cruel.”³⁹ In the context of speaking about laws, it is clear that Augustine wanted Boniface to see the state as the doctor and the father. Perhaps Augustine took inspiration from Proverbs 12:10b.⁴⁰ This is a prime example of what, many centuries later, Shakespeare would have Hamlet say to his mother, Gertrude, in the reverse, “I must be cruel only to be kind.”⁴¹

Of course, in writing to Boniface, Augustine was not attempting to correct him of any Donatism, as he had with a number of Donatists directly.⁴² Here instead he was using the epistolary tool to remind Boniface of why the Donatists needed to be dealt with more directly now than with mere letter-writing. To ignore the Donatists was not an option, although what Augustine wanted the state to be engaged in was no mere punishment but a correction. It was the motive that distinguished punishment from correction and made the same action either acceptable or not.

Those who resist bad laws are rewarded with martyrdom, while those who resist good laws are punished (such as unrepentant Donatists) and those who obey good laws are corrected.⁴³ Indeed, as Augustine would point out in a letter written about a year later, it was the cause that made a martyr not the punishment.⁴⁴ Augustine provided scriptural examples, like Nebuchadnezzar

39 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.2.7; NBA, 23.20: “Si autem illos negligant, et perire permittant, ista potius mansuetudo falso crudelis est.”

40 Vulgate: “... uiscera autem impiorum crudelia.”

41 W. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 4.

42 See J. Ebbeler, *Disciplining Christians: Correction and Community in Augustine's Letters* (OSLA), Oxford, 2012, pp. 151–189.

43 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.2.8; NBA, 23.20–22: “Quicumque ergo legibus imperatorum, quae contra ueritatem Dei feruntur, obtemperare non uult, acquirit grande praemium; quicumque autem legibus imperatorum, quae pro Dei ueritate feruntur, obtemperare non uult, acquirit grande supplicium.” On Augustine on martyrdom see J. den Boeft, “*Martyres sunt, sed homines fuerunt*: Augustine on Martyrdom,” in *Fructus Centesimus: mélanges offerts à Gerard J.M. Bartelink à l'occasion de son soixante-cinquième anniversaire*, ed. A.A.R. Bastiaensen, A. Hilhorst, and C.H.J.M. Kneepkens (*Instrumenta Patristica et Mediaevalia*, 19), Brepols, 1989, pp. 115–124; C. Garbarino, “Augustine, Donatists, and Martyrdom,” in *An Age of Saints?: Power, Conflict and Dissent in Early Medieval Christianity*, ed. P. Sarris, M. Dal Santo, and P. Booth (*Brill's Series on the Early Middle Ages*, 20), Leiden, 2011, pp. 49–61; and A. Dupont, “Augustine's Homiletic Definition of Martyrdom: The Centrality of the Martyr's Grace in his Anti-Donatist and Anti-Pelagian *Sermones ad Populum*,” in *Christian Martyrdom in Late Antiquity (300–450 AD): History and Discourse, Tradition and Religious Identity*, ed. by P. Gemeinhardt and J. Leemans, Berlin, 2012, 155–178.

44 Augustine, *Ep.* 204.4; NBA, 23.450. See A. Ployd, “*Non poena sed causa*: Augustine's Anti-Donatist Rhetoric of Martyrdom,” *AugSt*, 49 (2018) (forthcoming). For the Donatist perspective see M.A. Tilley, *Donatist Martyr Stories: The Church in Conflict in Roman North*

whose law was resisted by the three youths until he changed the law, as we read in Daniel 3, like Hagar in Genesis 16 who was rightly punished by Sarah, in contrast with David in 1 Samuel 18 who was unjustly punished by Saul. To suffer for a good cause was righteous, but to suffer for an unjust cause was pointless unless one were then to experience it as correction.⁴⁵

The intent was therapeutic not punitive: if one responded to harsh treatment then one was corrected or healed, but if one did not, then that treatment was punishment. Thus, one could argue, Augustine was happy with state violence against Donatists so long as it was directed towards corrective rather than punitive ends. Corrective violence was not violence, punitive violence was; the former was acceptable, the latter was not. This point was made by Peter Brown when he wrote about Augustine that: “[h]e was determined that the coercive legislation should be applied in Africa only in a way that expressed the principles and aided the propaganda of the Catholic Church.”⁴⁶ In a letter to an imperial official, seeking to persuade him to endorse state corrective coercion rather than punitive violence, Augustine did not want to point to instances where the state and the Caecilianists were not of one mind on this.

Of course, we must raise the question: what if the Donatists failed to respond to the harsh corrective? Augustine could distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate punishment on the basis of the intention of the one inflicting it rather than on the reaction of the one receiving it. Punishment was legitimate if the intention had been corrective, even if the one to be corrected had not accepted the correction (thus, the difference between correction and legitimate punishment being the degree to which the one being corrected had accepted or rejected the correction). It was illegitimate punishment if the intention had been punitive.

Africa (TTH, 24), Liverpool, 1996. On the martyr narratives as constructive of Christian identity see D. Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism*, Stanford, 1999; L. Grig, *Making Martyrs in Late Antiquity*, London, 2004; C. Moss, *Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom*, Oxford, 2010; E.A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making*, New York, 2004; and É. Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200-450 CE*, New York, 2012.

45 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.2.8-9; NBA, 23.22.

46 P. Brown, “Religious Coercion in the Later Roman Empire,” *History*, 48 (1963), pp. 283-305, at p. 300. Brown considers that aim to have been the expansion of the church through the correction of heretics. The argument here is that Augustine was more interested in the unity of the church rather than its expansion, and the salvation of all its members, Caecilianists and Donatists alike.

3 Coercive Correction

Should the church persecute? Focus is shifted from the state to the church. Immediately Augustine turns the question back on the Donatists: their claim that they only suffered persecution and did not inflict it patently was false.⁴⁷ Then he turns to the question itself; it is all a matter of definition.⁴⁸ Sarah did not punish Hagar but restrained her (*coercendo*) and disciplined her (*imponerebat ... disciplinam*). Psalm 18(17):38(37) provides a justification.⁴⁹ On this basis Augustine makes the claim: “that persecution is unjust which the wicked inflict upon the church of Christ, and that persecution is just which the churches of Christ inflict upon the wicked.”⁵⁰ Augustine is aware that violence is a bad thing, hence the need to redefine it, at least as far as his side in the conflict is concerned. Lest this Old Testament understanding be criticized for being contrary to the message of Jesus in the New Testament about forgiveness and reconciliation, Augustine adds hastily, given that the idea of a just persecution would be something that needs clarification.

The church persecutes by loving, they [the Donatists] persecute by raging. The church persecutes in order to correct; they persecute in order to destroy. The church persecutes in order to call back from error; they persecute in order to cast down into error. The church, finally, persecutes and lays hold of enemies until they collapse in their vanity so that they may grow in the truth. They return evil for good because we have at heart their eternal well-being, while they try to take from us even our temporal well-being.⁵¹

Here he can use the one term (persecution) with regard to both groups because he distinguishes the motivations clearly. While Cam Grey, building on other scholarship, sees someone like Augustine making a distinction between violence and force, with the former being irrational and illegitimate and the

47 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.2.10; NBA, 23.24.

48 The question about the definition of violence is just as relevant for scholars today who look at Augustine's time. See C. Grey, “Shock, Horror, or Same Old Same Old? Everyday Violence in Augustine's Africa,” *JLA*, 6 (2013), pp. 216–232.

49 Vulgate: “Persequar inimicos meos et adprehendam et non reuertar donec consumam eos.”

50 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.2.11; NBA, 23.24: “... est persecutio iniusta, quam faciunt impii ecclesiae Christi; et est iusta persecutio, quam faciunt impiis ecclesiae Christi.”

51 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.2.11; NBA, 23.24–26: “Proinde ista persequitur diligendo, illi saeuiendo; ista ut corrigat, illi ut euertant; ista ut reuocet ab errore, illi ut praecipitent in errorem: denique ista persequitur inimicos et comprehendit, donec deficiant in uanitate, ut in ueritate proficiant; illi autem retribuantes mala pro bonis, quia eis consulimus ad aeternam salutem, etiam temporalem nobis conantur auferre”

other rational and justified, he does not consider the question of goal as part of the definition, which seems more to the point as far as Augustine was concerned.⁵² At the heart of Augustine's definition of what constituted violence was its purpose: simply to attack and cause terror or to punish was violence indeed, but to act so as to prevent further violence or to seek to rehabilitate was correction. Motive was everything.⁵³

Attention is deflected quickly away from the Caecilianists to the Donatists. The suicidal-like behaviour of some Donatists (the Circumcellions)⁵⁴ was condemned not because it could be seen as suicidal (that was not Augustine's point here), but, because it was an unjust cause, their deaths were of no avail.⁵⁵ The imperial laws against the Donatists, in fact, rescued many of them from Donatism.⁵⁶ Donatist suicides were a terrorist tactic to deter wavering Donatists from leaving or Caecilianists from trying to rescue them. Force needs to be used against these suicidal individuals, or rather, the threat of suicide is not to be a deterrent against acting for the protection of others.⁵⁷ It is an argument about the greatest good.⁵⁸ To leave these Donatists unchecked led to thuggery and mob rule.⁵⁹ This would be Augustine's answer to the question of why not simply tolerate the Donatists. To some extent, he was intolerant of them not simply because they were wrong,⁶⁰ but because it would put his own group at risk to do nothing and because it was incumbent upon him to try and rehabilitate not reject his wayward colleagues.

In response to the Donatists splintering among themselves, with the ordination of Maximian as a rival to Primian, repentant Maximianists were welcomed back to the Donatist fold, the very same compromise to ecclesial purity that they accused the Caecilianists of following, a realisation that saw many Dona-

52 Grey, "Shock, Horror," p. 222.

53 M. Gaddis, *There is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (TCH, 39), Berkeley–Los Angeles, 2005, p. 139.

54 See Gaddis, *There is No Crime*, pp. 111–119; and Shaw, *Sacred Violence*, pp. 675–720, who is rather sceptical of Augustine's presentation. For an endorsement with correction of Shaw see N. Lenski, "Harnessing Violence: Armed Forces as Manpower in the Late Roman Countryside," *JLA*, 6 (2013), pp. 233–250, at pp. 239–241.

55 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.3.12; NBA, 23.26–28.

56 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.3.13; NBA, 23.28.

57 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.3.14; NBA, 23.28–30).

58 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.3.14; NBA, 23.30: "Vt enim omnes uiuant, ardentius exoptat; sed omnes ne pereant, plus laborat."

59 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.4.15–16; NBA, 23.30–32.

60 See H.A. Drake, "Monotheism and Violence," *JLA*, 3 (2013), pp. 251–263, on the dangers of equating Christian intolerance with its monotheistic outlook.

tists join the Caecilianists when confronted with this truth, while the remaining Donatists were roused to even greater acts of violence.⁶¹

The Donatist argument was that Christians ought not appeal to imperial authority to sort out internal disputes since the apostles did not do so. Augustine's response was that that was a different time when emperors did not believe in Christ. Now that they did, their duty was to respond "by forbidding and punishing with religious severity actions done against the Lord's commandments"⁶² Laws need to be upheld with appropriate force (*uigore sanciendo*) by rulers. As series of Old Testament rulers are presented as examples.

Christians were persecuted because rulers once were impious; now that rulers were pious they needed to be concerned about sacrilege.⁶³ While learning through positive reinforcement and instruction was preferable to negative reinforcement (the threat of punishment and punishment itself), this does not mean that negative reinforcement was completely unacceptable, particularly for those further away from God. Augustine quotes favourably passages from Proverbs, including 13:24, best known in the seventeenth-century version of the English poet Samuel Butler of sparing rods and spoiling children.⁶⁴ Paul is taken as a New Testament example of someone whom God punished in order to bring to faith.⁶⁵ When the shepherd goes to find the lost sheep and brings it back (Matt 18:12-13 and Luke 15:4-7), he may need to beat it if it refuses to return in order to achieve that outcome.⁶⁶ The wedding guests in the Lukan version of the parable were first invited then forced to come in (Luke 14:16-24).⁶⁷ In a comment where Augustine could be accused of approving the end justifying the means, he notes that those who complain about being forced should desist since it is to the kingdom they are being directed. All the examples are meant to show the significance of motive.

Augustine explained his change of attitude with regard to the Donatists. Originally he thought that the emperor need only enact laws to protect the

61 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.17-18; NBA, 23.32-34.

62 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.5.19; NBA, 23.36: "... ea quae contra iussa Domini fiunt, religiosa seueritate prohinendo atque plectendo"

63 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.5.20; NBA, 23.36-38.

64 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.6.21; NBA, 23.38-40.

65 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.6. 22; NBA 23.40. P. van Geest, "*Timor est servus caritatis* (s. 156,13-14): Augustine's Vision on Coercion in the Process of Returning Heretics to the Catholic Church and his Underlying Principles," in: *The Uniquely African Controversy*, ed. by Dupont, Gaumer, and Lamberigts, pp. 289-309, at p. 299, sees Augustine's words about Paul as toning down any rampant acceptance of violence.

66 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.6.23; NBA, 23.42.

67 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.6.24; NBA, 23.42-44.

Caecilianists from Donatist aggression and to fine Donatists in areas where Caecilianists were terrorised, in the hope that harsher punishment could be avoided.⁶⁸ The emperor, however, in the light of reports of even greater suffering by Caecilianists, such as Maximian of Ksar-Bagai (ancient Bagai in the province of Numidia), enacted harsher legislation, which Augustine characterised as “moderately severe discipline” (*aliquantula seueritate disciplinae*), because it would have been more cruel not to punish them.⁶⁹ Words alone had failed to achieve the desired result, and firmer action was necessary, Augustine now believed. Thus, Grasmück’s comment that *Epistula* 185 “bringt keine neuen Argumente, sondern wiederholt die uns schon geläufigen ...”⁷⁰ The motive in approaching the imperial court was not revenge but protection. As Maijastina Kahlos observes: “Augustine’s view of love is an essential part of his legitimization of religious coercion: religious dissidents must be helped and educated with love even against their own will.”⁷¹ Even the apostle Paul had done the same.⁷² The laws worked and that experienced overcame Augustine’s former trepidation; many Donatists became Caecilianists, learning that the fear in which they held the Christian group represented by Augustine was unjustified.⁷³ Peter Brown, however, warns against seeing a sudden about-face in Augustine’s attitude, arguing that “[w]e may be dealing less with a *volte-face* provoked by external circumstances, than with a phenomenon common to

68 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.7.25; NBA, 23.44. See *Cod. Theod.* 16.5.21; ed. by Mommsen and Krüger, 1/2.862-863. On Augustine’s change of mind see *Ep.* 93; NBA, 21/2.806-876, from 408, where the parable from Luke 14 is also employed. See J.F. Álvarez Valdez, “La carta de san Agustín y el uso de la fuerza pública en materia religiosa,” *Augustinus*, 54 (2009), pp. 33-61; and M. Kahlos, *Forbearance and Compulsion: The Rhetoric of Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Late Antiquity*, London, 2009, pp. 111-112. P. van Geest, “*Quid dicam de vindicando vel non vindicando?* (*Ep.* 95, 3). Augustine’s Legitimation of Coercion in the Light of His Roles of Mediator, Judge, Teacher and Mystagogue,” in: *Violence in Ancient Christianity: Victims and Perpetrators*, ed. by A.C. Geljon and R. Roukema (SuppVC, 125), Leiden–Boston, 2014, pp. 151-184, sees Augustine move in rough chronological order from being mediator, to judge, to teacher, to mystagogue in dealing with the Donatists, locating *Ep.* 185 in the last phase. J.R. Bowlin, “Augustine on Justifying Coercion,” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 17 (1997), pp. 49-70, at pp. 49-50, with some precision, argues that Augustine never changed his mind about coercion, but only changed it with regard to the aims to be sought by coercive means.

69 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.7.26-27; NBA, 23.46-48.

70 Grasmück, *Coercitio*, p. 235, is true only when *Ep.* 185 is compared with Augustine’s statements from around the same time, but not true overall.

71 Kahlos, *Forbearance and Compulsion*, pp. 112-113.

72 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.7.28; NBA, 23.48.

73 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.7.29; NBA, 23.50. See Gaddis, *There is No Crime*, p. 132.

many aspects of the thought of Augustine – that is, with a sudden precipitation, under external pressures, of ideas which, previously, had evolved slowly and imperceptibly over a long time.”⁷⁴ While Brown’s argument may well be correct, that Augustine had been attracted to the idea of coercion for some time before it was expressed clearly, we must point out that in the letter Augustine wanted Boniface to believe that he had had a more sudden change of heart, in light of the imperial policy’s success.

As Frederick Russell points out, Augustine’s change of heart about using coercion to bring the Donatists back to unity could have come from his experience of conversion as narrated in *Confessiones*, where God forced conversion upon him.⁷⁵ This was not *coercitio* but *correptio*.⁷⁶ Many of those who joined the Caecilianists as a pretence (a long-held concern for Augustine) gradually came to accept the truth.⁷⁷ *Disciplina* could lead to *doctrina*, *correptio* could lead to *correctio*, and *cogo* could lead to *cogito*.⁷⁸ Thus, Paul van Geest is right in stating that we ought not turn to *Epistula* 185 simply to see Augustine’s justification of violence and coercion; it is more about his interest in promoting unity.⁷⁹ Where the struggle between Donatists and Caecilianists continued, the patient and loving witness provided by Caecilianists who were the target of violent attacks helped achieve more unity.⁸⁰ Indeed, in the context of Augustine’s other moderate comments about physical coercion as a last resort⁸¹ and his opposition to the death penalty,⁸² his attitude in this letter appears harsher. However, that could be due to the fact that he is talking to Boniface not about

74 Brown, “St. Augustine’s Attitude to Religious Coercion,” p. 109.

75 F.H. Russell, “Persuading the Donatists: Augustine’s Coercion by Words,” in: *The Limits of Ancient Christianity: Essays on Late Antique Thought and Culture in Honor of R.A. Markus*, ed. by W.E. Klingshirn and M. Vessey (Recentiores: Later Latin Texts & Contexts), Ann Arbor, 1999, pp. 115–130, at p. 116. The overall argument is that God provides signs in Scripture and in creation to “coerce” conversion. They are to act in a persuasive manner (thereby respecting human free will), but if they failed to achieve their intent, then more coercive means could be employed.

76 Brown, “St. Augustine’s Attitude to Religious Coercion,” p. 114.

77 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.7.30; NBA, 23.50–52. Augustine could console himself with reference to scriptural passages forbidding the separation of the good from the bad in this life as a reason to tolerate false conversion. See Kahlos, *Forbearance and Compulsion*, pp. 114–117.

78 Russell, “Persuading the Donatists,” p. 122.

79 Geest, “*Quid dicam de vindicando*,” p. 178: “Thus violence against the Donatists has to form the onset to their reform and their return to the Church.”

80 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.7.31; NBA, 23.52.

81 Russell, “Persuading the Donatists,” p. 123.

82 P.M. Thompson, “Augustine and the Death Penalty: Justice as the Balance of Mercy and Judgment,” *AugSt*, 40 (2009), pp. 181–203.

what the church should be doing to the Donatists, but specifically about what the state should be doing to them. In all this Augustine searches for a Goldilocks solution between imperial action that was too harsh because it was punitive and too lenient because it was non-existent. His “just right” solution was for there to be corrective discipline imposed.

For Boniface’s sake, Augustine argued that the Donatists were a small branch in Africa broken off the great Christian tree that spread throughout the world.⁸³ While it could be acceptable for a small branch to be lost for the sake of the whole tree, every effort should be made to save every part of the tree. Augustine likened saving Donatists to saving a person from a house about to collapse; saving them even justified removing them by force if they did not want to leave. After they were saved, they would see the benefit of having been rescued. Their free will in accepting salvation would follow from the coercion initially exercised.⁸⁴ Further, the rescuer cannot be blamed if the person to be rescued preferred to kill himself rather than be rescued or allow others to be rescued.⁸⁵

The topic then turns for the remainder of the letter to matters of property, initiation, and reconciliation, which need not concern us here.⁸⁶

4 Augustine’s Rhetorical Purpose

Gaddis argues that part of the motivation for adopting a corrective “calibrated violence” rather than punitive one was that anything more extreme would create martyrs out of Donatists, which would only escalate rather than resolve the problems.⁸⁷ This is no doubt true, and is perhaps to be seen in Augustine’s comments early in the letter about the true nature of martyrdom, but it must be integrated, as Augustine himself sought to do, with his broader views about the corrective potential for coercion.

Even beyond that, however, we must see Augustine as engaged in a rhetorical strategy. Even though what the state and the Caecilianists did, on the one hand, and what the Donatists did, on the other, might appear to be similar if not identical, they were done from different motives, and therefore could be

83 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.8.32; NBA, 23.52.

84 See Brown, “St. Augustine’s Attitude to Religious Coercion,” p. 112; and Gaddis, *There is No Crime*, p. 132.

85 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.8.33; NBA, 23.54.

86 Augustine, *Ep.* 185.9.35–185.11.51; NBA, 23.56–74.

87 Gaddis, *There is No Crime*, p. 133.

defined differently and thereby distinguished as not in the least bit similar. Rhetorical theory, particularly since the time of Hermagoras, had looked at the basis or ground of an argument (στάσις or *status*), one of which was definition (*finitio* in Quintilian).⁸⁸ It arises in trials, for example, from a defendant's point of view, when one admits the action but then defines it in a way as to exclude culpability. As Quintilian says, "For the man who cannot assert that he has done nothing, must needs take refuge in the assertion that he has not committed the act which is alleged against him."⁸⁹ What constitutes definition is genus, species, difference, and property.⁹⁰

In this situation the difference between Caecilianists and Donatists was motive. Since the Donatists' actions were punitive, they could be labelled as violent, but since the Caecilianists' actions were corrective, they could be labelled as disciplinary.

The question of coercion finds its treatment in a different part of rhetorical theory, viz., that concerned with the types (*genera*) of oratory. That concerned with recommending future action is known as deliberative, and at its heart is the question of what is expedient or honorable.⁹¹ In this case, it is argued that it is necessary to discipline the Donatists because it is advantageous both for them and for others.

Using all the rhetorical skills he had learnt early in life, Augustine was able to disentangle himself from the charge that what his side did was engage in violence; it was discipline not violence. He was also able to justify why discipline needed to be applied to those who did not want it: because it was for their own good and for the safety of others. Augustine's dexterity in constructing and defending a position is on display most clearly in *Epistula* 185.

5 Conclusion

Epistula 185 from Augustine to Boniface was a letter to a government military official informing him why it was important that the imperial laws against the

88 Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 3.6.5. On stasis theory see R. Nadeau, "Classical Systems of Stases in Greek: Hermagoras to Hermogenes," *GRBS*, 2 (1959), pp. 53-71; A. Braet, "The Classical Doctrine of *status* and the Rhetorical Theory of Argumentation," *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 20 (1987), pp. 79-93; and M. Heath, "The Substructure of *Stasis*-Theory from Hermagoras to Hermogenes," *CQ*, n.s. 44 (1994), pp. 114-129.

89 Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 7.3.1: "Nam, qui non potest dicere nihil fecisse, proximum habebit, ut dicat, non id fecisse, quod obiciatur."

90 Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 7.3.3.

91 Quintilian, *Inst. or.* 3.4.16; and 3.8.1-70.

Donatists needed to be enforced, on the one hand, but in the right spirit, on the other. That right spirit would be in the same way that Augustine understood it. Not doing anything was not an option. Corrective efforts against the Donatists, including coerced conversion and violence, whether carried out by the Caecilianists or the state, had a therapeutic aim and therefore was a legitimate form of discipline (and should not be seen as violence), while punitive efforts against the Donatists, like the violence perpetrated by the Donatists themselves, were merely intended to terrorise and therefore was not legitimate, being only intended as a form of punishment. Coercion seemed to work in bringing many Donatists back to the ecclesial fold, and therefore could be endorsed (although it was termed as 'rebuke' not 'coercion'), given that the alternative would be to endanger their eternal salvation, as Augustine saw it. The greater good of rehabilitating some Donatists made the possibility of more extremist Donatists engaging in self-destructive behaviour in reaction to those efforts tolerable and justified that rehabilitation even against their will.

As with many arguments, the terms employed needed careful definition: one side's violence was the other side's correction; and one side's persecution was the other side's discipline. The need for definition comes about because of what appears to be tension within the scriptures. This is, as Peter Brown points out, "a polarity of severity and mildness, of fear and love, which approximated to, without ever coinciding with, the division of the Old and New Testament."⁹² Indeed, Augustine's appeal to the Lukan parable of the wedding guests shows that harshness was not simply a feature of an interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Augustine never had to think through, in the context of the Donatist controversy, in a systematic and coherent way, how to reconcile his interpretation of the parable with other scriptural texts that prohibited violence, nor how to reconcile his thoughts on free will with religious coercion. *Epistula* 185 is an occasional piece, seeking to persuade one imperial official of the distinction between the Donatists and other Christians and the need for the state to do all in its power to reintegrate them into the mainstream church.

92 Brown, "St. Augustine's Attitude to Religious Coercion," p. 113.