This book discusses at length the struggle between the Roman Catholic Church
and the Donatists, the members of the Christian communities that had sepa-
rated from this church. This was intense during the 4th and 5th centuries and
uprooted and damaged the church and society of that time seriously. According
to many scholars Augustine in particular harmed the right to exist and the self-
consciousness of the Donatists so seriously through his writings and his appeal
to the worldly Roman authorities that subsequently they, unlike their conge-
ners in Egypt, were no longer able to deal with the pressure of Islam and in the
end were absorbed in this religion. Brent D. Shaw does not agree with this view
and argues that Augustine did his utmost to create unity and heal the divisions,
though with a sharp defence against the forces that destroyed this unity.

The main issue of this conflict dates back to 305-307, when Emperor
Diocletian persecuted the North-African Christians severely. Under death
threat they had to swear an oath of allegiance to the emperor, venerate him,
confess that he was their Lord and deny that Jesus was their Lord. They were
also forced to give up their basilicas and give their holy books and liturgical
objects to the Roman authorities. After this short period of persecution the
church leaders took stock of what had occurred and concluded that many
church members had succumbed under the heavy pressure and had given in to
the imperial powers to save their lives. They were called traitors (traditores) for
having delivered the Holy Scriptures and having watched them consumed by
the flames. The Catholic Church decided to maintain the church membership
of these people. They were called lapsi (fallen people), but could re-enter the
Christian community and even return in their positions as bishops after hav-
ing confessed their sins. The Donatists did not agree with this decision. They
demanded that the traitors were declared pagans and could only re-enter the
community of the church after having received catechism and being baptized
again. Moreover they would never be re-appointed bishops.

The term Donatist come from bishop Donatus, who resided in Carthage in
270-369. He entered an official protest against the appointment of Caecilianus
to become co-bishop of Carthage. He accused him of having lapsed and
delivered the Holy Scriptures to the Roman authorities. Although Donatus
was unsuccessful in preventing his appointment, he succeeded in mobilis-
ing many priests and bishops for his position. He found much support among
the people in the countryside, predominantly Berbers and Punic farmers.
Coming from Numidia Donatus felt himself at home with the Jewish tradition which emphasizes the observation of the Biblical commandments as well as the holiness of their priests and their leaders. His followers were unwilling to receive the sacraments of those who had renounced their faith in the period of persecution. Although there did not exist dogmatic differences between the North-African Catholic church and the Donatists, the antitheses regarding the practice of faith and holiness of the clergymen were sharpened. The Catholics argued that the sanctity of the sacraments did not depend on the ministers. The Donatists established that a faithful attitude during the persecutions of 305-307 was a criterion to test the attitude of the Christians in later times, for example, during the persecutions of 340. Thus the events of 305-307 remained topical in particular for the next hundred years when the Donatists themselves were persecuted by the local authorities.

The reason for the persecution of the Donatists was not only a different view of the practice of Christian life, but also the way they defended themselves against the Catholic church and the Roman authorities. The Donatists compared the Catholics with Judas as the representative of ultimate evil because of his betrayal of Jesus and because of the cause he defended. According to the Donatists this attitude legitimated excessive violence against the Roman landowners and colonists. Yet, it was not the faithful and priests who used violence but the groups of gangsters they supported. These gangs, called *circumcelliones*, were identified with the Donatists, which gave their adversaries reason to start punitive expeditions against the Donatist ecclesial communities. The members of these gangs, clouded by alcohol and drugs, not only killed their victims, but also mutilated them. Catholic clerics were severely injured. Some of them had tongues cut out, ears cut off or were blinded so that they were unable to fulfil their duties. The fury of these gangs went so far that they tended to commit suicide in such a way that they simultaneously killed both themselves and honourable citizens. In 410 Emperor Honorius organized a conference to discuss the problems hoping that this would put an end to the glaring chasms. Before it Augustine made an appeal for peace. At the conference, however, the Donatists were not reconciled, which only deepened the existing divisions and led to a new explosion of violence. But from 420 both churches suffered more from the violence of the attacking Vandals than from the violence they used against one another.

Shaw based his views on these developments from the *Optavus* by Milevis, who around 360 wrote seven books about the issue of the Donatists, which were republished in France in the 17th century. Shaw also frequently refers to the texts of Augustine. Shaw does not say much about the persecution of the Jews that also took place in North-Africa at that time. Neither does he relate...