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Persuasion or Coercion: Augustine on
the State's Role in Dealing with Other
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**Persuasion or Coercion:
Augustine on the State's Role in Dealing with Other Religions and Heresies**

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I. Introduction

The religious environment of the Roman Empire changed significantly in AD 321 following Constantine's alleged conversion to Christianity and declaration that it be the official religion of the empire.¹ This announcement was rather ironic because the Christian movement, particularly in North Africa, had been suppressed and persecuted by the Roman authorities at different intervals from 180 to 305. Now having nothing to lose, many post-321 converts to Christianity were merely aligning themselves with the popular religion of the state much to the chagrin of church leaders like Augustine of Hippo (354-430) who lamented the presence of such an insincere element frequenting the church.²

With Christianity as the official religion, Constantine's declaration also created a challenge for the state in dealing with other religious groups in the Roman mosaic—particularly traditional pagans, Jews, and Manicheans. Should they be tolerated or forced to convert to the new religion of the empire? Sincere Christian leaders, whose task was to preach the message of Christianity and seek converts, were also posed with a dilemma—should they seek to persuade non-Christians to join or them should they allow the state to legislate conversion?

¹ François Decret, *Le Christianisme en Afrique du Nord Ancienne*, (Paris: Seuil, 1996), p. 141; for more on Constantine's conversion see Alistair Kee, *Constantine versus Christ* (London: SCM Press, 1982).

² See *Epistula* 29.

In this article, I would like to explore the thought and practical ideology of Augustine of Hippo in this area. During his tenure as bishop of Hippo, Augustine had significant contact with Jews, pagans, Manicheans, Donatists, Pelagians, and Arians—groups that obviously did not conform to orthodox Christianity and that he endeavored to bring into the Christian church. Did Augustine prefer an approach of persuasion or did he accept the intervention of the state in forceful conversion?

To answer this question fully, we must first consider how Augustine understood the state's role in religious matters. Secondly, we must particularly note Augustine's relationship with the Donatists as his interactions with this schismatic group most clearly revealed his thoughts on coercion and persuasion. Before concluding the argument, we must also compare his interaction with the Donatists to that of other non-Christian, schismatic, or heretical groups.

II. Augustine's View of the State

Augustine's philosophy of history, articulated in his significant work *De Civitate Dei* (*The City of God*), was characterized by two allegiances— an “earthly city” and a “heavenly” one. The earthly city was concerned with temporary, material, and worldly matters while the heavenly city was concerned with eternal, spiritual, and heavenly issues.³ Yet, according to Augustine, both realities were simultaneously present and interacting in a space-time, earthly context.

Augustine's political philosophy was also influenced by the notion of the two cities, as he believed that government and leaders, allowed to govern by the will of God, existed to serve the church or God's kingdom on earth. Donald Burt writes:

³ *De Civitate Dei*, 14.28; 15.4, 16; 17.4.

Augustine . . . believing that the authorities in the state were agents of God with the responsibility of promoting God's interests on earth and that those interests included the protection of the religious body that was the interest of his grace and revelation in time.⁴

While any secular leader should protect the interests of the church, Augustine believed that Christian emperors could especially be used of God to suppress heretical groups whose beliefs countered those of orthodox Christianity.⁵ Peter Brown writes: "Christian Roman emperors have an unquestioned right of *cohercicio* [coercion/correction], in the strict legal sense, to punish, to restrain and repress, those impious cults over which God's providence had given them dominion."⁶ That is, these servants, according to Augustine were merely working to fulfill God's will and the aims of the heavenly city in the context of the earthly city.⁷

Hence, within Augustine's political philosophy it was possible for a professing Christian emperor such as Constantine to protect both the interests of the church and suppress those who endangered the church or who refused to become a part of the church. While these measures were possible for Augustine, let us consider the extent to which Augustine, in his pastoral ministry in Africa, invoked these privileges when dealing with heretical and dissident groups.

III. The Donatist Background

The Donatists were a schismatic group that Augustine related to quite often during his time as bishop. As noted, through his practical dealings with them, Augustine's thoughts

⁴ Donald Burt, *Friendship and Society: An Introduction to Augustine's Practical Philosophy*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 200.

⁵ *Epistula*, 185.26-28.

⁶ Peter Brown, "Saint Augustine's attitude to religious coercion," *Journal of Roman Studies* 54 (1964): 110; see also Augustine's *Contra epistulam Parmeniani*, 8.15.

⁷ Brown, "Saint Augustine's attitude to religious coercion," 110.

on the role of the state and church became more developed. Yet, who was this splinter group that had such a following in Hippo as well as in the Numidian countryside?⁸

Their origin can be traced to 303 and the end of the Great Persecution of the church in Africa under the Emperor Diocletian.⁹ During this period, church leaders were often required by the Roman authorities to hand over the Holy Scriptures. As a result of the persecution, division arose between those who remained steadfast and refused to hand over the Scriptures and those who had surrendered the Scriptures or other books. The latter group were branded as *traditores* or apostates by their puritanical opposition.¹⁰ The conflict heightened in 311 when Caecilian was elected bishop of Carthage. Because one of the bishops who presided over his ordination had been accused of being a *traditor*, a group of Numidian bishops gathered and elected Majorinus as the rival bishop of Carthage. Later, Donatus of Casae Nigrae, whose name became associated with the group, succeeded Majorinus as the rival bishop of Carthage occupying that role until 347.¹¹ While the Donatists justified their schism over the sake of the church's purity, the catholics accused them of being hungry for power. More than being a puritanical movement within the catholic church, the Donatists began to view themselves as the true and unblemished church of Africa.¹²

The division among the African Christians drew the attention of Constantine and he referred the matter to the bishop of Rome who ruled against the Donatist party at the

⁸ For the most thorough treatment of the origins of the Donatists, see W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), pp. 141-91.

⁹ W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 489.

¹⁰ Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, p. 489; see also Robert Markus, "Donatus, Donatism," in Allan Fitzgerald, ed., *Augustine Through The Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 284, hereafter referred to as *ATTA*.

¹¹ Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, pp. 489-90.

¹² Markus in *ATTA*, 285.

council of Arles in 314.¹³ In 347, an imperial commission was sent to Africa and once again ruled against the Donatists. The intervention of the state did little to quell the movement as it responded to the repression by adopting the stance of a “church of martyrs.” In the latter half of the fourth-century, a rather violent faction known as the Circumcellions emerged within the Donatists. In 405, the Emperor Honorius issued an edict of unity forcing the Donatists to re-unite with the catholic church.¹⁴ Finally, at the council of Carthage of 411, the Donatists were officially condemned by Marcellinus, the Roman official who presided over the meeting, effectively making it a punishable crime to be a Donatist.¹⁵ Despite the state’s intervention, the Donatists continued to have a presence in Africa at the time of Augustine’s death in 430.

The doctrine of the catholic church and Donatist movement was almost identical except for the fact that the Donatists required those who had compromised their faith during persecution to be re-baptized and that they chose to separate from church leaders who had handed over Scripture.¹⁶ While the Donatists claimed support for their position from the teachings of the martyred bishop, Cyprian of Carthage (195-258), Augustine and the catholics also looked to Cyprian for his teaching on preserving the unity of the church against schism.¹⁷ Though it would be easy to characterize the Donatists as a repressed religious movement, we should note that it was the Donatists who initially invited the

¹³ *Epistula*, 88.

¹⁴ For a thorough summary of the edict of 405 see Emilien Lamirande, *Church, State, and Toleration: An Intriguing Change of Mind in Augustine* (Villanova: Villanova University Press, 1975), pp. 9-12.

¹⁵ Markus in *ATTA*, 285; see also Burt, p. 215.

¹⁶ James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), p. 14.

¹⁷ *Epistula*, 93.10.40-42; *Contra Epistulam Parmeniani*, 3; see Maureen Tilley, “*Epistulam Parmeniani, Contra*,” in *ATTA*, 312.

Roman authorities to intervene on their behalf during the early stages of the schism. Yet, when the state ruled against them, they adopted this posture of a church of martyrs.¹⁸

IV. Augustine and the Donatists

At the time of Augustine's consecration as bishop in 395, the Donatists outnumbered the catholics in Hippo and had a significant following in the rural areas of the Numidian province. Indeed, Augustine's desire to keep the church from being torn apart by schism as well as his passion to see the Donatists converted to the catholic church moved him to focus much attention and energy on the Donatist movement for the majority of his career as bishop. In light of the history of the movement, which included the consistent intervention of the state, let us consider Augustine's approach to dealing with the Donatists. To understand the development in Augustine's thought, we will analyze Augustine his interaction with the Donatists in three periods: from the time of his consecration as a priest 391 to Honorius' edict of unity in 405; from 405 to the conference of Carthage of 411; and then after 411.

1. 391-405

William Frend writes that in the first ten years of Augustine's tenure as bishop "he spent all his energies as a writer and a diplomat in combating [the Donatists], his object being first to defeat their leaders in argument and then, as a result of a general conference, to persuade the mass of the Donatist church to reunite with the catholics."¹⁹ Emilien Lamirande adds at that in this period "he emphasized mere pacific means of persuasion: personal contacts, writings, public discussions. Before 400, he is apparently an advocate

¹⁸ *Epistula* 185.2.6; Burt, p. 208; Lamirande, pp. 49-50; see also Jane Merdinger, *Rome and the African Church* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 104.

¹⁹ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 228.

of religious freedom.”²⁰ Indeed, prior to 405, Augustine related to the Donatists leaders and laity through a number of letters, books, and personal visits for the purpose of debate. Also, he played a significant role in some African church councils of catholic bishops in which the Donatist schism was the main issue.

(1) Letters

While making significant use of letters for teaching, exhorting, and correcting in his pastoral ministry, he also used this form in relating to the Donatist leaders. Between 392 and 405, he wrote twelve letters to Donatist leaders, groups of leaders, or Donatist laymen. Augustine’s first letter to a Donatist bishop, *Epistula* 23 to Maximinus, was penned around 392 when he was still a priest in the church at Hippo. While investigating allegations that Maximinus had re-baptized some catholics entering the Donatist communion, Augustine rebuked him for such practices and took time to teach about the true nature of the church.²¹

Prior to 396, Augustine in *Epistula* 33 invited Proculeianus, the Donatist bishop of Hippo, to debate the issues related to the schism face-to-face or at least by letter.²² In 396-397, Augustine wrote two letters to Eusebius (*Epistulae* 34 and 35) over concerns of the practice of re-baptism and appealed to Eusebius to help arrange a debate with Proculeianus. In *Epistula* 34, Augustine clearly communicates that he is against coercion as a means of converting the Donatists. He writes: “this feeling of mine is one tending towards peace, and that my desire is, not that any one should against his will be coerced

²⁰ Lamirande, p. 12.

²¹ *Epistula*, 23.2-4.

²² *Epistula*, 33.4.

into the catholic communion, but that to all who are in error the truth may be openly declared . . .”²³

In 396-397, Augustine wrote two letters (*Epistulae* 43 and 44) to a group of Donatist bishops in the region of Thuburiscum in Numidia. In *Epistula* 43, Augustine rather persuasively challenges these leaders to consider the origins of the schism while also attacking the inconsistencies in the Donatist policy of re-baptism. *Epistula* 44 was essentially the notes of his debate with Fortunius of Thuburiscum in 395— one of the many examples in which Augustine documented his debates or conferences with theological opponents.²⁴ Though his debate with Fortunius was a chaotic affair, Augustine emphasized a desire to continue to dialogue with the Donatist leaders while disregarding the state’s intervention against the Donatists.²⁵

Around 398, Augustine wrote *Epistula* 49 to the bishop Honoratus. Augustine challenges the notion of a separate African church while teaching on the nature of a catholic church; that is, a universal church existing among all nations. He also invited Honoratus to debate via letter on these issues.²⁶ In *Epistula* 52, he writes to Severinus, a Donatist leader who was also his own cousin. Again, Augustine attacks the division of the church and re-baptism and pleads with Severinus to return to the catholic church.

Augustine penned two letters (*Epistulae* 51 and 66) to Crispinus, the Donatist bishop of Calama. In *Epistula* 51, written around 399, Augustine invited him to debate the issues at least by letter.²⁷ He goes on to argue against the logical inconsistencies of

²³ *Epistula*, 34.1,

²⁴ Othmar Perler, *Les Voyages de Saint Augustin*, (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1969), pp. 436-37.

²⁵ *Epistula*, 44.11-14.

²⁶ *Epistula*, 49.2-3.

²⁷ *Epistula*, 51.1.

the Donatist position and chastises him for dividing the body of Christ through schism.²⁸ Augustine hints for the first time that if things did not change, he might be willing to accept the state's intervention.²⁹ Prior to 401, Augustine wrote *Epistula* 66 after Crispinus had forcefully re-baptized eighty rural farmers in Calama. Despite, Crispinus' aggressive action, Augustine invited him to debate the issues in a personal meeting.³⁰ Urging that people should be able to make their own decision about being Donatist or catholic, he writes: "let them hear both sides, and choose for themselves."³¹ Augustine warns Crispinus that if he does not cease with dividing the church, he would face the wrath of God, which may be an indication that Augustine was becoming open to the possibility of the state's intervention.³²

Around 404, writing on behalf of the catholic church, Augustine penned *Epistula* 76 to the Donatists as a whole. Again, recounting the origin and history of the schism, Augustine goes on to relate his own understanding of the church. That is, the Lord would separate the wheat from the tares (the good and bad elements of the church) on the last day. Hence, it was not the job of the clergy to judge the hearts of men and bring division to the church.³³ Finally, Augustine reiterated his invitation for the Donatist leaders to join him in debate.³⁴

Augustine's final letter to the Donatists prior to Honorius' edict of unity in 405 was *Epistula* 87 to Emeritus of Mauretania Caesarea. Augustine opens the letter by acknowledging his zeal to see the stubborn and resistant Emeritus converted to the true

²⁸ *Epistula*, 51.2-5.

²⁹ *Epistula*, 51.3.

³⁰ *Epistula*, 66.2; Burt, p. 214.

³¹ *Epistula*, 66.2.

³² *Epistula*, 66.2.

³³ *Epistula*, 76.2.

³⁴ *Epistula*, 76.4.

church.³⁵ Augustine accuses him of bringing division to the church,³⁶ of denying the existence of the church outside of Africa,³⁷ and warns him of God's judgment to come.³⁸ In this letter, he argues that the state has the right to punish a group like the Donatists because they are a disruption to society: "For they bear not the sword in vain; they are the ministers of God to execute wrath upon those that do evil."³⁹ Finally, through making reference to the origins of the Donatist schism, Augustine hoped that Emeritus would recognize his erroneous thinking and be converted to the church.⁴⁰

(2) Books

Between 393 and 405, Augustine authored six surviving works of a polemical nature against the Donatists. While serving as a priest in the church of Hippo in 393, he wrote *Psalmus contra partem Donati*, which was composed in the form of a song in order to connect with the uneducated rural population. Actually, Augustine had adopted this tactic from the Donatists who had used songs to propagate their message. In the book, Augustine appealed to the Donatists to cease being divisive and to return to the mother church.⁴¹

In 400, Augustine authored *Contra epistulam Parmeniani*, a reply to an old letter written by Parmenian, who had been the Donatist bishop of Carthage from 361-392. In his work, Augustine referred to the unwarranted origin of the schism while attacking the Donatists' inconsistent policy of re-baptism. Specifically, Augustine showed cases in which fallen Donatists were not required to be re-baptized when returning to the Donatist

³⁵ *Epistula*, 87.1.

³⁶ *Epistula*, 87.1.

³⁷ *Epistula*, 87.5.

³⁸ *Epistula*, 87.4.

³⁹ *Epistula*, 87.8.

⁴⁰ *Epistula*, 87.10.

⁴¹ Maureen Tilley, "*Psalmus contra partem Donati*," *ATTA*, 688

communion. Finally, Augustine strengthened his argument by citing the Donatist theologian Tyconius who believed in a universal church and Cyprian of Carthage who affirmed the unity of the church.⁴² Later, in 400 or 401, Augustine followed up *Contra epistulam Parmeniani* with *De Baptismo* providing more teaching on the sacrament of baptism. Most notably, Augustine argued that the efficacy of baptism did not depend on the holiness of the baptizing priest as the Donatists had argued.⁴³

In 401, Augustine addressed *Contra litteras Petiliani* to Petilian, the Donatist bishop of Cirta in which he challenges the legitimacy of the Donatist movement by again referring to the origins of the schism.⁴⁴ Between 402 and 405, Augustine responded to a certain Donatist pamphlet with *Ad Catholicos fratres*, a treatise on the nature of the true church— one that is spread out over the whole world and not limited to Africa.⁴⁵ Finally around 405, Augustine wrote *Contra Cresconium* and again attacked the origins of the Donatist schism.⁴⁶

(3) Personal Visits and Debates

Despite the fact that Augustine despised traveling and that a journey on the North African roads could be dangerous, the bishop of Hippo also sought to convert the Donatists by personally visiting their leaders and holding public debates. In 395, Augustine made the two-day journey to Thuburiscu Numidarum to debate the Donatist bishop Fortunius. Yet, according to Augustine, neither the bishop nor the gathered crowd seemed interested in a serious exchange of idea.⁴⁷ Later that year, Augustine pursued more discussions with

⁴² Maureen Tilley, “*Epistulam Parmeniani, Contra*,” *ATTA*, 312.

⁴³ Maureen Tilley, “*Baptismo, De*,” *ATTA*, 91-92.

⁴⁴ Maureen Tilley, “*Litteras Petiliani, Contra*,” *ATTA*, 504-505.

⁴⁵ Maureen Tilley, “*Catholicos fratres, Ad: or De unitate ecclesiae*,” *ATTA*, 150-151.

⁴⁶ Maureen Tilley, “*Cresconium, Contra*,” *ATTA*, 255-56.

⁴⁷ *Epistula*, 44; Perler, pp. 436-437.

Donatist leaders in Thiava.⁴⁸ Following his request in *Epistula* 51, he also managed to successfully debate Crispinus of Calama in 399.⁴⁹

From Augustine's letters, we also know that he initiated debates with Proculeianus of Hippo (*Epistulae* 33-35) and Severinus (*Epistula* 52).⁵⁰ Yet, after a short period, the Donatists began to refuse any form of public debate with Augustine because of his superior communication skills. Being aware of their reluctance to debate yet still desiring to engage the Donatists, Augustine wrote to Eusebius: "as it affects Proculeianus and myself; and if, perchance, he thinks himself not a match for me, let him implore the aid of any one whom he pleases as his colleague in the debate."⁵¹

(4) Church Councils

From 393 to 427, Augustine participated regularly in the catholic councils of the African church and his voice was undoubtedly the most influential among the bishops. The councils generally addressed issues of church practice, discipline, as well as heretical influences on the church. Prior to 405, Augustine and the African bishops discussed the Donatist issue during three church councils.

Following the council of Carthage of 401, the bishops decided to launch a missionary effort toward the Donatists in the rural areas and Augustine himself traveled in order to fulfill the will of this council.⁵² During the council of Carthage of 403, Augustine drafted a document on behalf of the bishops inviting the Donatists in each town to come to a public debate to resolve the schism.⁵³ At the same time, the bishops

⁴⁸ *Epistula*, 43.2; Perler, pp. 210-211, 436-437.

⁴⁹ Perler, pp. 442-443.

⁵⁰ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 249.

⁵¹ *Epistula*, 34.5.

⁵² *Contra Cresconium*, 3.60, 66; Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 252.

⁵³ Charles Hefele, *Histoire des Conciles* (Paris: Letouzey et Ané, 1908), 2.1.155

communicated to the Roman authorities their conviction that “the heretics of the community of Donatus should be admonished in a ‘kindly manner,’ so that they could meditate upon their error, and not neglect to recognize it.”⁵⁴ As the initiatives of the council of 403 were unsuccessful, the majority of bishops meeting in Carthage in 404 were prepared to appeal to the state to force the Donatists into unity with the catholic church. Yet, Augustine and a small group of bishops prevailed upon their colleagues to ask simply for the state’s protection against the violent elements of the Donatists.⁵⁵

Hence, when the Emperor Honorius issued the edict of unity in 405, it was not at the request of Augustine nor the African bishops. Rather, it was a sudden reaction by Honorius to the visit and personal appeal of Maximianus of Bagai, a catholic bishop who had been violently beaten by the Donatists inside his church.

(5) Summary

Prior to 405, Augustine actively endeavored to convert the Donatists to the catholic church. His letters were quite kind and respectful in their tone and generally included an invitation to meet personally. The main themes of both his letters and books in this period included: teaching on the true nature of the church, teaching on the proper theology and practice of baptism, a consideration of the origins of the Donatist-catholic schism, and an appeal for the Donatists to return to the true church.

Augustine’s invitation by letter for a personal meeting was realized on several occasions during this period as he traveled to visit and debate a number of Donatist leaders. His influence in the African church councils also encouraged the African bishops to approach their Donatist counterparts in a friendly and persuasive manner. Augustine’s

⁵⁴ Cited in Frend, *The Donatist Church*, pp. 258-259.

⁵⁵ *Epistulae*, 93.5, 17; 185.7; Perler, p. 251; Hefele, 2.1.156; Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 262.

only request of the state prior to 405 was that the catholic church be protected against the more violent elements of the Donatist party.

Though some of Augustine's letters allude to a possible acceptance of state intervention against the Donatists, his preference at this time was to see them converted through persuasion. While writing his *Retractationes* toward the end of his life, Augustine wrote: "And truly, at that time, such coercion displeased me because I had not yet learned either how much evil their impunity would dare or to what extent the application of discipline could bring about their improvement."⁵⁶

2. 405-411

Though Augustine had urged the African bishops not to appeal to the state to intervene against the Donatists in 404, he did accept Honorius' edict of unity in 405 and respectfully worked to carry it out. Lamirande writes: "[Augustine] accepts together with the majority of the catholic bishops of North Africa the actual application of defensive measures against the Donatists and soon after, the direct use of force to compel them back to the unity of the church."⁵⁷ As we consider Augustine's development during this period, let us again analyze his thought in letters and books directed to the Donatists as well as his contact with Donatist leaders through personal visits and his involvement in the African church councils which culminated in the council of Carthage of 411.

(1) Letters

From 405 to 411, Augustine continued to interact with the Donatists via correspondence by sending five letters. Around 406, Augustine sent *Epistula* 88 to Januarius, a senior ranking Donatist bishop. While not denying the state's intervention on behalf of the

⁵⁶ *Retractationes*, 2.31.5 cited in Lamirande, p. 18.

⁵⁷ Lamirande, p. 12.

catholics following Honorius' edict, Augustine reminds Januarius that it was the Donatists who first asked for the state's help during the initial stages of the schism under Constantine.⁵⁸ Hence, once again, he reminds Januarius of the origins of the schism. While complaining about the ongoing violent tendencies of the Circumcellions,⁵⁹ Augustine argues that it was such violence that forced the catholics to seek the help of the Roman authorities:

You have therefore no ground for complaint against us: nay more, the clemency of the catholic church would have led us to desist from even enforcing these decrees of the emperors, had not your clergy and Circumcellions, disturbing our peace, and destroying us by their most monstrous crimes and furious deeds of violence, compelled us to have these decrees revived and put in force again.⁶⁰

Augustine adds that the state's intervention had been the last resort after repeated, futile efforts to bring the Donatists together for a conference.⁶¹ Yet, he continues to plead with Januarius to meet personally and resolve their issues before the secular authorities became more involved.⁶² Even after accepting the state's role in dealing with the Donatists, Augustine still seems to favor persuasion as his preferred method of inviting the Donatists to reunite with the church. He writes:

And thus some of them we persuade, through their considering the evidences of the truth and the beauty of peace, not to be baptized anew for this sign of allegiance to our king they have already received . . . but to accept that faith, and love of the Holy Spirit, and union to the Body of Christ . . .'⁶³

The development of Augustine's thought on state intervention was most clearly expressed in *Epistula* 93 written in 407 or 408 to Vincent. He began by reiterating that the Donatists' violent nature was the compelling factor that led the catholics to seek the

⁵⁸ *Epistula*, 88.5.

⁵⁹ *Epistula*, 88.1-2.

⁶⁰ *Epistula*, 88.6.

⁶¹ *Epistula*, 88.7.

⁶² *Epistula*, 88.10, 12.

⁶³ *Epistula*, 88.9.

help of the state.⁶⁴ Yet, Augustine admitted that, stemming from the influence of his fellow bishops, he began to regard coercion as an effective means of converting the Donatists to the unity of the church. He writes: “my first opinion was that no one was to be forced into the unity of Christ . . . I have, then, yielded to the facts suggested to me by my colleagues . . . This opinion of mine has been set aside, not because of opposing arguments, but by reason of proved facts.”⁶⁵ He adds:

. . . the repression and correction of [the Donatists] . . . by the powers which are ordained of God, appears to me to be labor not in vain. For we already rejoice in the correction of many who hold and defend the catholic unity with such sincerity, and are so glad to have been delivered from their former error . . .⁶⁶

He continues the letter by arguing that the state’s intervention and coercion is a form of healing and loving correction and that the Donatists were forced to do something that was actually good for them.⁶⁷ He writes:

You now see therefore, I suppose, that the thing to be considered when any one is coerced, is not the mere fact of the coercion, but the nature of that to which he is coerced, whether it be good or bad: not that any one can be good in spite of his own will, but that, through fear of suffering what he does not desire, he either renounces his hostile prejudices, or is compelled to examine truth of which he had been contentedly ignorant; and under the influence of this fear repudiates the error which he was wont to defend . . . We see not a few men here and there, but many cities, once Donatist, now catholic, vehemently detesting the diabolical schism, and ardently loving the unity of the church . . .⁶⁸

Augustine further expresses his conviction that government, the agents of coercion in this case, existed to serve the church. He writes: “. . . let the kings of the earth serve Christ by making laws for Him and for His cause.”⁶⁹

⁶⁴ *Epistula*, 93.1.2.

⁶⁵ *Epistula*, 93.5.17 cited in Lamirande, p. 14; see also Lamirande, pp. 7, 15.

⁶⁶ *Epistula*, 93.1.1.

⁶⁷ *Epistula*, 93.1.3; 2.4-8.

⁶⁸ *Epistula*, 93.5.16.

⁶⁹ *Epistula*, 93.5.19.

After defending the state's intervention, Augustine takes time to teach on the true nature of the universal church, which he supports from the teaching of Cyprian and Tyconius.⁷⁰ Yet, Augustine warns Vincent about overemphasizing the teachings of a figure like Cyprian and urges him to find answers in the Holy Scriptures.⁷¹ Finally, Augustine expresses the heart of a pastor longing to see Vincent and his fellow Donatists converted to the church:

We seek you because you are lost, that we may rejoice over you when found, as over you while lost we grieved. Again we call you heretics; but the name applies to you only up to the time of your being turned to the peace of the catholic church, and extricated from the errors by which you have been ensnared.⁷²

Around 408, Augustine addressed *Epistula* 105 to the Donatists in general. He opens the letter by admitting his evangelistic motive for writing: 'We the love of Christ, to which we want to win all men, does not permit us to be silent.'⁷³ Augustine continues to remind the Donatists of the origin of the schism while challenging them on cases of violence.⁷⁴ He repeats the conviction that an earthly king can carry out God's will on earth and concludes by inviting the Donatist bishops to a conference.⁷⁵

In 409 and 410, Augustine wrote two letters (*Epistulae* 106 and 108) to the Donatist bishop Macrobius. In *Epistula* 106, he rebukes Macrobius for re-baptizing one of Augustine's sub-deacons. In *Epistula* 108, Augustine continues by challenging the theology and practice of re-baptism by making an argument against it from the

⁷⁰ *Epistula*, 93.6.21; 7.22-23; 9.28-34; 10.40-45.

⁷¹ *Epistula*, 93.10.35-39.

⁷² *Epistula*, 93.11.46; see also 93.13.51.

⁷³ *Epistula*, 105.1.

⁷⁴ *Epistula*, 105.2, 4.

⁷⁵ *Epistula*, 105.7, 11, 13.

Scriptures,⁷⁶ by showing how Cyprian refused to allow the church to be divided,⁷⁷ and through exposing inconsistent practices of baptism among the Donatists themselves.⁷⁸

(2) Books and Visits

Augustine only wrote one book to the Donatists during this period— *De unico baptismo contra Petilianum*, which he penned in 410 or 411. In a response to another pamphlet by the Donatist bishop Petilian, Augustine argued against the need for re-baptism and against dividing the church. As in other letters and books, he also appealed to the teachings of Cyprian on the unity of the church.⁷⁹

Augustine only made one recorded visit to the Donatists between 405 and 411. Interestingly, he traveled to Cirta in 409 to visit the Donatist bishop, church leaders, and their congregation who had announced their desire to return to the catholic church. Hence, the purpose of this visit was not to persuade or convert but to welcome this group into the church.⁸⁰

(3) Council of Carthage of 411

Following the council of catholic bishops in June of 410, Augustine and the African bishops were granted their request by the Emperor Honorius for a mandatory face-to-face conference with the Donatists.⁸¹ Having continually invited the Donatists to meet personally since becoming bishop in 395, Augustine's desire was fulfilled in the council of Carthage of 411.

⁷⁶ *Epistula*, 108.8.

⁷⁷ *Epistula*, 108.9-12.

⁷⁸ *Epistula*, 108.2-7.

⁷⁹ Maureen Tilley, "*Unico baptismo contra Petilianum, De,*" *ATTA*, 858-859.

⁸⁰ *Epistula*, 144; Perler, pp. 452-453.

⁸¹ Perler, p. 277-278.

From the outset of the 411 meeting, it was evident that the Donatist party would be defeated.⁸² Though the gathering was called a conference, the presiding Roman official Marcellinus, a catholic layman and friend of Augustine, announced that the purpose of the council was “to confirm the catholic faith.”⁸³ While the catholics surely had the advantage, the Donatist leaders proved to be quite defiant. Though Marcellinus had prescribed that each side would be represented by seven of its leaders, the entire Donatist delegation marched into the meeting place for the opening session.⁸⁴ As well, the Donatist bishop Petilian demanded a roll call for each catholic and Donatist bishop claiming that the catholics had created bishops that did not exist.⁸⁵ After the second day of meeting, the Donatists petitioned for a recess to verify the records of the roll call. Further, Petilian attempted to slander Augustine by referring to him as a Manichean. Augustine refused to fall into Petilian’s trap of personal accusation and graciously encouraged the Donatists to take their time and verify the record as well as to think about their arguments.⁸⁶ When the meeting re-convened five days later, Augustine’s prowess as an apologist and rhetor were put on display as he masterfully defeated the Donatist leaders in debate by continually focusing on the core issue— the origins of the schism.⁸⁷ This, of course, had been his strategy in letters and books prior to the council of 411.

Though Marcellinus had clearly favored the catholics in the conference, Augustine’s keen theological and rhetorical abilities only strengthened the verdict against

⁸² For a thorough treatment of the council of 411, see Frend, *The Donatist Church*, pp. 275-289; see also Serge Lancel, ed., *Actes de la Conférence de Carthage en 411*, 3 vol. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1972, 1975).

⁸³ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, pp. 275, 280.

⁸⁴ The conference met on June 1, 3, and 8; see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: a Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967, 2000), pp. 332-333.

⁸⁵ In the end the catholic bishops (both present and absent) numbered 286 while the Donatists numbered 284; see Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, pp. 332-333 and Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 277.

⁸⁶ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 286; Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 334.

⁸⁷ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 286; and Perler, p. 291.

the Donatists. As a result, the Donatists were ordered to give up their church buildings and to unify with the catholic church.

(4) Summary

From the announcement of Honorius' edict of unity in 405 to the council of Carthage in 411 in which the Donatists were officially condemned, Augustine had fully accepted the intervention of the Roman authorities forcing the Donatists to unify with the catholic church. In his letters from this period, he clearly explains the development in his thought on the role of the secular authorities. Nevertheless, through his letters, book, and arguments at the 411 conference, he continued to show the errors of the origins of the schism, argued against re-baptism and church division, and taught on the true nature of the church. That is, even at this stage, he still seems to value persuasion as a means of converting the Donatists.

3. Post-411

James J. O'Donnell asserts that despite the fact that the ruling at the council of Carthage in 411 was Augustine's greatest personal triumph, he never takes time to articulate his feelings about the catholic victory.⁸⁸ One explanation is that by 415, Augustine became quite involved in addressing the Pelagian controversy that was challenging the church. Secondly, we should remember that Augustine was a pastor seeking to persuade a dissident group to join the church. Hence, he had no motivation to gloat over the Donatists as if they were conquered enemies on a battlefield. Yet Augustine did continue to have contact with the Donatists after the council of Carthage. From 411 to 418, he continues to interact with them through letters, books, and at least one personal visit.

⁸⁸ O'Donnell, p. 15.

(1) Letters

During the period following the conference, Augustine wrote two letters to the Donatists. Around 412, Augustine penned *Epistula* 141 on behalf of the North African bishops in response to some Donatist allegations that the Catholics emerged victorious because Marcellinus had been bribed. Augustine answered succinctly by recounting each stage of the council, particularly those points where the Donatists admitted being at fault in the schism.

Between 411 and 414, Augustine wrote *Epistula* 173 to a Donatist priest named Donatus who had apparently resisted the closure of his church building and attempted to harm himself in the process.⁸⁹ Augustine defends the state's intervention by first arguing that coercion must be motivated by love. He writes:

If you could see the sorrow of my heart and my concern for your salvation, you would perhaps take pity on your own soul, doing that which is pleasing to God, by giving heed to the word which is not ours but His; and would no longer give to His Scripture only a place in your memory, while shutting it out from your heart. You are angry because you are being drawn to salvation, although you have drawn so many of our fellow Christians to destruction. For what did we order beyond this, that you should be arrested, brought before the authorities, and guarded, in order to prevent you from perishing?⁹⁰

Secondly, Augustine adds that the purpose of coercion is not merely restraining from evil, but also compelling one to do what is good.⁹¹ Finally, despite acknowledging and defending the state's role in suppressing the Donatists, Augustine takes time in the letter to remind Donatus of the debate that took place at the council of 411— essentially appealing to his Donatist counterpart through reason and persuasion. He writes:

For this end the mercy of the Lord appointed that both we and your bishops met at Carthage in a conference which had repeated meetings, and was largely attended, and reasoned together in the most orderly manner in regard to the grounds of our

⁸⁹ *Epistula*, 173.4.

⁹⁰ *Epistula*, 173.1.

⁹¹ *Epistula*, 173.2-4.

separation from each other. The proceedings of that conference were written down; our signatures are attached to the record; read it, or allow others to read it to you, and then choose which party you prefer.⁹²

(2) Books

Following the 411 council, Augustine continued to write instructive and persuasive books to the Donatists. After receiving the acts of the council from Marcellinus, Augustine had them posted inside the churches in the provincial capitals of North Africa.⁹³ He also wrote the *Breviculus conlationis cum Donatistis*— a simplified account of the conference written in accessible language for those with limited education.

Also in 411, Augustine wrote *Contra Donatistis post conlationem*, a work intended for the Donatist laity in which Augustine shows how the Donatist bishops misinterpreted the Scriptures during the 411 council. As in previous works, he appeals to Cyprian's teaching on unity and urges the Donatists to be unified with the catholic church.⁹⁴

In 419, Augustine authored his final anti-Donatist work, *Contra Gaudentium*. He was actually writing on behalf of the Roman official Dulcitus who, while attempting to carry out the anti-Donatist legislation in Numidia, was challenged by a Donatist leader named Gaudentius. In his work, Augustine refuted Gaudentius' claim that the Donatists were the persecuted group, challenged his interpretation of the Scriptures, as well as his interpretation of Cyprian.⁹⁵

(3) Visit to Emeritus

One of Augustine's key tasks after the 411 conference was helping the Donatists integrate into the catholic church by educating them from the acts of the council as well

⁹² *Epistula*, 173.7; see also 173.9.

⁹³ *Epistula*, 139.1; 28*.2; Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 290.

⁹⁴ Maureen Tilley, "Donatistis post conlationem, Contra," *ATTA*, 281.

⁹⁵ Maureen Tilley, "Gaudentium, Contra," *ATTA* 375-376.

as from the Scriptures. We know that on at least two occasions, Augustine preached to the former Donatist congregations in Hippo and Cirta.⁹⁶

Augustine's most famous visit at this stage came following the council of Carthage of 418 in which he made the fifteen day journey (1100 km) to Mauretania Caesarea to meet the Donatist bishop Emeritus who was still refusing to unite with the catholic church.⁹⁷ Emeritus already had a reputation for being stubborn as was observed in his role as a Donatist spokesperson at the 411 conference and through his prior correspondence with Augustine.⁹⁸ During the visit, Augustine preached the sermon, *Sermo ad Caesariensis ecclesiae plebem*, to Emeritus' congregation affirming them in their sincere faith while urging them to join the unity of the church.⁹⁹ In a separate meeting, Augustine publicly debated Emeritus appealing to him as a brother as well as arguing against the inconsistent re-baptism practices of the Donatists. The debate was recorded by copyists and has been preserved under the title *Gesta cum Emerito*.¹⁰⁰ It should be noted that Emeritus refused to be converted and probably remained a Donatist for the rest of his life.

The most significant aspect about this encounter is that seven years after Donatism was branded a criminal offense by the state, Augustine continues to appeal to Emeritus and his Donatist congregation through persuasion. Instead of making the long voyage to Mauretania Caesarea with an armed regiment of government soldiers to enforce legislation, Augustine simply arrives with the same arguments and appeals that had characterized his letters, books, and conferences for the previous twenty years.

⁹⁶ *Epistulae*, 139.2; 144; Frend, *The Donatist Church*, pp. 290-291; and Perler, pp. 306-307.

⁹⁷ Perler, pp. 466-467.

⁹⁸ *Epistula*, 88.

⁹⁹ Maureen Tilley, "*Sermo ad Caesariensis ecclesiae plebem*," *ATTA*, 770-771.

¹⁰⁰ Maureen Tilley, "*Gesta cum Emerito*," *ATTA*, 381-382.

4. Summary

Indeed, Augustine invested a great deal of time and energy in writing letters and books, making personal visits, and influencing church councils for the purpose of persuading the Donatists to convert to catholic unity in each of the three periods we have considered. While a conclusion on the larger question of whether Augustine preferred persuasion or coercion as a means toward conversion will be proposed later in this paper, the fact remains that Augustine did accept and defend the intervention of the state in the case of the Donatists. How did Augustine arrive at this change of mind on the issue?

(1) Resistance to Debate

The first reason why Augustine accepted the interference of the secular authorities around 405 was that the Donatists refused to meet and seriously debate the issues. Most of Augustine's letters to the Donatists, both before and after 405, included the perpetual invitation to meet and talk. Yet, leaders like Proculeianus, aware of Augustine's superior skills in debate, avoided this forum at all costs.¹⁰¹ Others, like Fortunius as well as the Donatist leaders at the council of 411 seemingly sought to sabotage the meeting once a debate was actually organized.

As noted, Augustine, writing in his *Retractationes* near the end of his life, indicated that prior to 405, he was purely interested in reaching the Donatists through reason.¹⁰² Yet, as Lamirande has asserted, "dialectics does not always ensure victory."¹⁰³ Reflecting on his transformation of thought in a letter to the Roman official Boniface around 417, Augustine wrote:

It is indeed better (as no one ever could deny) that men should be led to worship God by teaching, than that they should be driven to it by fear of punishment or

¹⁰¹ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 234.

¹⁰² *Retractationes*, 2.31.5; Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 240.

¹⁰³ Lamirande, p. 23.

pain; but it does not follow that because the former course produces the better men, therefore those who do not yield to it should be neglected.¹⁰⁴

Hence, as a last resort and due to the Donatists continual unwillingness to meet and debate the issues related to their schism, Augustine accepted the intervention of the Roman authorities.

(2) A Threat to Unity

A second significant reason for Augustine's acceptance of the state's involvement was that the Donatist movement posed a serious threat to the unity of the church—a doctrine and that he deeply cherished. As noted, Augustine had been influenced by Cyprian's teaching on the church's unity and fought as fervently as Cyprian had to preserve it. As we will see, Augustine defended the church against other heretical groups that existed in his day, yet none of these groups had the ability to divide the church as the Donatists did.¹⁰⁵ Hence, when Augustine allowed the state to intervene against the Donatists, he was acting in the interest of a shepherd seeking to protect his flock.

The Donatists were also different from other heretical groups because Augustine actually regarded them as brothers in the Christian faith who had gone astray.¹⁰⁶ In this sense, coercive measures against the Donatists were simply a means of church discipline.

Augustine elaborated on this in *Epistula* 185 to Boniface:

Why, therefore, should not the church use force in compelling her lost sons to return, if the lost sons compelled others to their destruction? Although even men who have not been compelled, but only led astray, are received by their loving mother with more affection if they are recalled to her bosom through the enforcement of terrible but salutary laws, and are the objects of far more deep congratulation than those whom she had never lost. Is it not a part of the care of the shepherd, when any sheep have left the flock, even though not violently

¹⁰⁴ *Epistula*, 185.6.21.

¹⁰⁵ Burt, pp. 220-221.

¹⁰⁶ *Epistula*, 129.3; *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 46.1; *Contra epistulam Parmeniani*, 3.1.1; *De Baptismo*, 1.1.2; Lamirande, p. 33.

forced away, but led astray by tender words and coaxing blandishments, to bring them back to the fold of his master when he has found them, by the fear or even the pain of the whip, if they show symptoms of resistance . . .¹⁰⁷

In keeping with Augustine's philosophy of government, a Christian emperor ought to be able to serve the church by helping it with its disciplinary matters.

(3) Violence

A third important reason that Augustine came to defend the state's intervention was that the Donatists, particularly the Circumcellion faction, were growing increasingly violent. In this respect, the Donatist-catholic schism was not some classroom theological debate; rather, some of Augustine's close friends and colleagues were being terrorized by the Circumcellions. The catholic missionary effort toward the Donatists in the Numidian countryside following the council of 401 had been met by violence.¹⁰⁸ In 404, Augustine's disciple and biographer Possidius was beaten by the Circumcellions in Calama and barely escaped with his life.¹⁰⁹ In 411, the Roman official Marcellinus ruled against a group of Donatists in Hippo for acts of violence and Augustine actually intervened on their behalf to keep them from receiving the death penalty.¹¹⁰ During a trip, Augustine himself was spared from being attacked by a band of Circumcellions because of an accidental wrong turn in the road.

In this sense, the Donatists were not being suppressed for their theological leanings but simply because they were a threat to an ordered society. Augustine believed that the government was entitled to intervene to protect the innocent as well as the state itself. Ironically, the Circumcellions had also been violent toward traditional Roman

¹⁰⁷ *Epistula*, 185.6.23.

¹⁰⁸ Frend, *The Donatist Church*, pp. 257-258.

¹⁰⁹ *Contra Cresconium*, 3.46.50; Frend, *The Donatist Church*, pp. 260.

¹¹⁰ *Epistula*, 133.1; 139.2.

pagans— a group that was also known for its violent tendencies.¹¹¹ In his letter to Boniface, Augustine related his belief that suppressing the Donatists would quell their violence and allow the catholics to worship in peace:

Our idea was that if they were frightened in this manner, and so did not dare to commit such acts, there would be freedom for the catholic truth to be taught and embraced, so that no one would be forced to it, but any who wished might follow it without fear, and thus we should not have any false or feigned catholics.¹¹²

(4) Coercion was Effective

As the Donatists refused to reason with Augustine and the catholics and while violence continued, Augustine began to accept coercion as an alternative for very practical reasons— it seemed to work with the Donatists.¹¹³ As Augustine communicated to Vincent in *Epistula* 93, it was Augustine’s fellow bishops that in part convinced him “by reason of proved facts” that state intervention was a necessary option with the Donatists.¹¹⁴ In his letter to Boniface, Augustine adds: “For many have found advantage . . . in being first compelled by fear or pain, so that they might afterwards be influenced by teaching and follow by action what they had learned through words.”¹¹⁵ While Augustine would have preferred simply reasoning with the Donatists, he became convinced that because of their stubbornness, they first needed to be compelled to listen.

(5) Coercion is Love

While Augustine came to believe that coercion was effective on a practical level, his philosophical views also seemed to change through the course of his interactions with the Donatists. That is, he realized that not every form of persecution was wrong, especially if

¹¹¹ Burt, pp. 212, 217, 220.

¹¹² *Epistula*, 185.25 cited in Lamirande, p. 16.

¹¹³ Burt, p. 213; Lamirande, p. 18.

¹¹⁴ *Epistula*, 93.5.17 cited in Lamirande, p. 14.

¹¹⁵ *Epistula*, 185.6.21 cited in Burt, p. 217.

it had rehabilitation as its purpose.¹¹⁶ Citing the account in the Gospels in which Jesus forcefully cleared out the moneychangers from the temple; Augustine likened the work of coercion to a physician administering medicine or painful treatment so that the patient would be healed.¹¹⁷ Peter Brown makes the interesting assertion that the Latin *cohercio*, from which we derive our word “coercion,” may better be translated as “correction.” That is, Augustine’s *cohercio* was not that of a military commander but rather the correction of a loving parent.¹¹⁸

Burt argues that for Augustine “any punishment imposed on heretics or schismatics had to be done out of love.”¹¹⁹ This was most evident in his letter to Marcellinus in 411 as Marcellinus was in the process of ruling against the Donatists in court. Augustine writes:

Fulfill, Christian judge, the duty of an affectionate father; let your indignation against their crimes be tempered by considerations of humanity; be not provoked by the atrocity of their sinful deeds to gratify the passion of revenge, but rather be moved by the wounds which these deeds have inflicted on their own souls to exercise a desire to heal them.¹²⁰

Augustine, as noted, urged the Roman officials not to apply the death penalty against the Donatists. In other cases, he successfully interceded for convicted Donatist leaders who had been fined large sums of money for their crimes.

Finally, Augustine regarded coercion as a means to persuasion. Throughout his writings, Augustine’s alludes to Jesus’ invitation to a wedding banquet recorded in Luke

¹¹⁶ *Ad Catholicos fratres*, 20.53; *De vera religione*, 16.31; Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 242; Lamirande, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ *Epistula*, 204.1; *Retractationes*, 1.12.6; Lamirande, p. 63; Brown, “Saint Augustine's attitude to religious coercion,” 108.

¹¹⁸ Brown, “Saint Augustine's attitude to religious coercion,” 114.

¹¹⁹ Burt, p. 217.

¹²⁰ *Epistula*, 133.2.

14:15-24.¹²¹ That is, since the Donatists were unwilling to reason, they needed to be lovingly compelled to enter the banquet (the church) where they would be convinced of the truth. In *Sermo* 112, Augustine said as much: “He who is compelled is forced to go where he does not wish to go, but when he has entered, he shares willingly in the banquet.”¹²² Hence, for Augustine forcing the Donatists to unite with the church simply put them in an environment where they could be persuaded.

V. Augustine and Other Religious Groups

Before reaching a final conclusion about Augustine’s thoughts on persuading or coercing heretics to join the church, let us briefly summarize the dealings he had with other non-Christian or heretical groups during his time as a priest and bishop in Hippo. Aside from the Donatists, Augustine interacted with pagans, Jews, Manicheans, Pelagians, Arians, Priscillianists, and Marcionites. A comparison of his approach to these groups to his manner of relating to the Donatists will certainly provide insight on his general thoughts on persuasion and coercion.

(1) Pagans

Roman paganism was concerned with the worship of traditional Roman deities, which in turn secured protection for the state and allowed it to prosper. Prior to 313, paganism was the official religion of the empire and Christians were routinely persecuted for refusing to engage in pagan sacrifice. Ironically, beginning in 391, the Roman authorities began to close the pagan temples and officially repress the traditional religion throughout the empire.¹²³ This of course incited the anger of the pagans, particularly against the

¹²¹ *Epistulae*, 93.2.5; 173.1; 185.6.24.

¹²² *Sermo*, 112.1-7 cited in Lamirande, p. 57.

¹²³ O’Donnell, p. 13; Brown, “Saint Augustine’s attitude to religious coercion,” 109.

Christians. In 408, Augustine's disciple Possidius was brutally beaten by a band of pagans in his city of Calama.

How did Augustine respond to the beliefs and actions of the pagans? Though we learn that Augustine, later in his life, seemed content that the pagan temples were being closed by the Roman authorities, there is no indication that he sought to convert them through coercion.¹²⁴ In the case of Possidius, Augustine urged his colleague to visit the court of the emperor in Ravenna and seek protection from the state against such violence.

When the Vandals sacked Rome in 408, there was also an angry reaction by the pagans against the Christians as they believed that the Roman gods had abandoned Rome because of the increase in Christian worship. It was this allegation that prompted Augustine to sit down and write perhaps his greatest apologetic work, *De civitate Dei* (*The City of God*).¹²⁵ Augustine dedicated the first half of the work to showing the futility of the pagan claim against the Christians.

In short, Burt asserts that his interaction with the pagans was polite, intellectual, and persuasive.¹²⁶ Gustave Combès adds that his approach toward the pagans was:

To convert by force of honesty, devotion, and tenderness, to seek occasions for making contact with their minds, to accumulate proofs which might convince them, to make appeal to sentiments which might move them, to lead those still hesitating to become Christians by appeal to their reason and their heart: such was the method of Saint Augustine with regard to the faithful of the ancient religion.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ *Contra Gaudentium*, 1.38.51; Lamirande, p. 30.

¹²⁵ Lamirande, p. 30.

¹²⁶ Burt, p. 219.

¹²⁷ Gustave Combès, *La doctrine politique de saint Augustin* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1927), p. 336 cited in Burt, 219.

(2) Jews

In general, Augustine seemed to have a respect for the Jews because of their prophets, holy books, and some aspects of faith held in common with Christians.¹²⁸ Despite the fact that Augustine did not regard them as Christians and often pointed out the error of their belief in sermons and in some of his writings, there is no indication that he wanted Judaism suppressed in Africa.¹²⁹ In fact, Augustine's anti-Jewish writings and sermons were never addressed directly to a Jewish audience. Rather, his goal was to explain to Christians the difference in Jewish and Christian belief.¹³⁰

(3) Manicheans

A third heretical group that Augustine had significant interaction with was the Manicheans. This relationship was particularly unique because Augustine had spent nearly ten years as a member of this sect prior to his conversion to Christianity in 386. Like the pagans, the Roman government had also officially suppressed the Manicheans throughout the empire.¹³¹

Augustine spent a great deal of energy in the early years of his Christian experience and ministry endeavoring to convert the Manicheans. Of his ten anti-Manichean works, two were actually written before his ordination to the priesthood in 391 and three others were published prior to his consecration as bishop in 395. His last apologetic work against the Manicheans appeared in 404. Like his approach to the Donatists, Augustine enjoyed engaging the Manichean teachers in public debate and they were much more willing to meet with Augustine in this forum than the Donatists.

¹²⁸ Burt, pp. 221-224.

¹²⁹ Lamirande, p. 35; Michael Signer, "Jews and Judaism," *ATTA*, 470.

¹³⁰ See Augustine's *Adversus Judeos* and *Epistula*, 196; Michael Signer, "*Adversus Judeos*," *ATTA*, 12-14.

¹³¹ Burt, p. 224.

Augustine debated the Manichean leaders Fortunatus (392) and Felix (404) in well-publicized debates in which he clearly defeated these opponents.¹³²

Despite the fact that Augustine could have easily petitioned the state to suppress the Manichean movement, he preferred to appeal to them in a friendly and intellectual manner.¹³³ Augustine, summarizing this approach, writes: “not by contention and strife, and persecutions, but by kindly consolation, by friendly exhortation, by quiet discussion.”¹³⁴ Burt rightly asserts: “one might say that Augustine’s tolerant approach to the Manicheans was always his preferred method of dealing with those of other beliefs.”¹³⁵

(4) Pelagians and Others

Once the Donatists were officially condemned at the council of Carthage in 411, Augustine began almost immediately to address the Pelagian heresy, which was affecting the church in Africa and abroad. The movement was initiated by Pelagius, a British monk who reacted to Augustine’s prayer in his *Confessiones*: “Command what you will . . . give what you command” (*et te facientem quod vis das mihi et dabis libenter sequi*).¹³⁶ While essentially denying man’s sinful nature, Pelagius defended man’s free will against Augustine’s teaching on original sin and God’s sovereignty in drawing believers to faith. Beginning in 411, Augustine spent the rest of his life dealing with the Pelagians.

Though the Roman state officially condemned the movement in 418,¹³⁷ how did Augustine seek to convert the Pelagians? The first way was through exposing the

¹³² Brown, “Saint Augustine’s attitude to religious coercion,” 109; Perler, pp. 434-435, 448-449.

¹³³ Burt, p. 225.

¹³⁴ *Contra epistulam Manichaei quam vocant Fundamenti*, 1 cited in Lamirande, p. 36.

¹³⁵ Burt, p. 227.

¹³⁶ *Confessiones*, 10.35.56.

¹³⁷ Eugene TeSelle, “Pelagius, Pelagianism,” *ATTA*, 637.

faultiness of their teaching at church councils in Milevus in 416 and in Carthage in 416 and 418. Secondly, between 411 and 430, Augustine wrote sixteen books refuting Pelagius' teachings. Hence, Augustine sought to convert the Pelagians through reason and persuasion. Though Augustine waged a ruthless battle with Pelagius, his pastoral compassion for his theological adversary is quite evident in *Epistula* 146, which he wrote to Pelagius around 411: "May the Lord recompense you with those blessings by the possession of which you may be good for ever, and may live eternally with Him who is eternal, my lord greatly beloved, and brother greatly longed for."

Finally, similar to his interactions with the Pelagians, Augustine interacted with the Arians, Priscillianists, and Marcionites on a lesser scale. Between 415 and 427, he wrote two apologetic works against the Arians and one each against the Priscillianists, and Marcionites.

VI. Conclusion

As we have shown, Augustine invested a great deal of time and energy relating to non-Christian and heretical groups during his time as a priest and bishop in the church of Hippo. With the exception of his approval of traditional pagans being suppressed by the Roman state, Augustine consistently appealed to the pagans, Jews, Manicheans, Pelagians, Arians, Priscillianists, and Marcionites through reason and persuasion. While seeking to convert them to Christianity or defend the church against their teachings, Augustine interacted with them through letters, books, personal debates, and indirectly through church councils. Hence, Burt's assertion, previously cited, seems to summarize

appropriately Augustine's manner of dealing with other religions and heresies: a "tolerant approach . . . was always his preferred method of dealing with those of other beliefs."¹³⁸

We have shown that Augustine did accept the state's intervention uniquely in the case of the Donatists.¹³⁹ It has been argued that he did this because of their constant refusal to meet and debate the issues; because they were a threat to the unity of the church; and because they were in some cases violent. Through the influence of other catholic bishops, Augustine also began to appreciate the practical effects of coercing the Donatists into unity. Finally, his thoughts on coercion changed because he realized that *cohercio* could also be a loving form of correction. Hence, Augustine allowed the Roman state to intervene against the Donatists as a last resort following fruitless efforts to convert them through persuasion.

Despite defending the role of Christian emperors carrying out the will of God following Honorius' edict of unity in 405, Augustine continued labored to persuade the Donatists to abandon their erroneous teaching and practice. This is most evident in his post-411 letters and books as well as his visit to Emeritus in Mauretania Caesarea in 418. In fact, Augustine's message to the Donatists through books, letters, and meetings remained consistent in each of the three periods studied.

While quite open about his intention to convert other religious groups and heresies to the Christian church, the evidence surveyed strongly suggests that Augustine's preferred approach was through persuasion. Hence, his attitude and concerns toward groups that did not conform to orthodox Christianity were pastoral rather than political

¹³⁸ Burt, p. 227.

¹³⁹ Lamirande, p. 4.

distinguishing him, for instance, from those who systematically oppressed heretics in Europe during the medieval period.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ See Lamirande's (Lamirande, pp. 70, 75) reaction to Reuter's thesis (H. Reuter, *Augustinische Studien*, p. 70) that Augustine was responsible for the Inquisition.

Abbreviations:

ATTA= Allan Fitzgerald, ed., *Augustine Through The Ages: An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999)

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_____, "*Psalmus contra partem Donati*," *ATTA*, 688.

_____, "*Baptismo, De*," *ATTA*, 91-92.

_____, "*Litteras Petiliani, Contra*," *ATTA*, 504-505.

_____, "*Catholicos fratres, Ad: or De unitate ecclesiae*," *ATTA*, 150-151.

_____, "*Cresconium, Contra*," *ATTA*, 255-256.

_____, "*Unico baptismo contra Petilianum, De*," *ATTA*, 858-859.

_____, "*Donatistis post conlationem, Contra*," *ATTA*, 281.

_____, "*Gaudentium, Contra*," *ATTA*, 375-376.

_____, "*Sermo ad Caesariensis ecclesiae plebem*," *ATTA*, 770-771.

_____, "*Gesta cum Emerito*," *ATTA*, 381-382.