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The Peace of Babylon (and What it Censors): St Augustine of Hippo's *City of God*

Miles Hollingworth

After the city or town comes the world, which the philosophers identify as the third level of human society. They begin with the household, progress to the city, and come finally to the world. And the world, like a gathering of waters, is all the more full of perils by reason of its greater size. First of all, the diversity of tongues now divides man from man. For if two men, each ignorant of the other's language, meet, and are compelled by some necessity not to pass on but to remain with one another, it is easier for dumb animals, even of different kinds, to associate together than these men, even though both are human beings. For when men cannot communicate their thoughts to each another, they are completely unable to associate with one another despite the similarity of their natures; and this is simply because of the diversity of tongues. So true is this that a man would more readily hold conversation with his dog than with another man who is a foreigner. It is true that the Imperial City has imposed on subject nations not only her yoke [iugum] but also her language, as a bond of peace and society, so that there should be no lack of interpreters but a great abundance of them. But how many great wars, what slaughter of men, what outpourings of human blood have been necessary to bring this about.¹

In this essay I want to talk about the iconic 'censorship moment' involving Augustine and the late Christian Empire: namely, the well-known part he played in enlisting and combining the powers of Church and state in order to quell the Donatist schism in North Africa. Then I want to counterbalance some of its apparent features with my passage, above, from *City of God*, XIX, 7.

When Augustine succeeded Valerius to become Bishop of Hippo Regius, in 395 CE, the Roman North African Church was not as secure in its domains as one might have thought. It faced a formidable challenge from the schismatic

Donatist Church. In fact, the Donatist Church was the better represented, and certainly the more entrenched, in the rural dioceses that made up the largest part of the province of Africa Proconsularis. It considered itself to be the only Christian church worth that name, and employed radical means to keep itself apart from mainstream church life. Hippo was typical of the situation the Donatists inclined against, being a relatively prosperous harbour city, with a self-consciously Romanized outlook and a clergy which, as Peter Brown has shown, could constitute a 'new style of urban leadership'. In towns like Hippo, he notes,

Bishops and clergy received immunities from taxes and from compulsory public services. In each city, the Christian clergy became the only group which expanded rapidly, at a time when the strain of empire had brought other civic institutions to a standstill. Bound by oath to 'their' bishop, a whole hierarchy of priests, deacons, and minor clergy formed an *ordo* in miniature, as subtly graded as any town council, and as tenaciously attached to its privileges.²

Donatism took its name from its *de facto* founder, Bishop Donatus (d. ca 365). As a theology, it wished to walk alone, believing itself to be the right side of a historical wrong that had invalidated the saving graces of the traditional African Church. The origins of what conspired to put Donatus and his movement outside the mainstream African Church went back to the Diocletianic persecutions of 303 and 304. These were among the last official persecutions of Christians in the Roman Empire; the practice ending altogether with the issuing of the Edict of Milan in 313. In Africa, the decree '*non licet esse Christianos*' (it is not lawful to be a Christian) was enforced with particular severity by Imperial agents against a Christian community already well-adjusted to martyrdom. Augustine's own writings provide ample commentary on what he saw as the African propensity to veer from the universal solaces of Christianity into the age-old cabalisms of bloodline and magic, purity and reproach. Essentially, Augustine would accuse Donatism of portraying its bishops as ancestral figures – historically clean of stain, and on that basis, fit to be the appointed intercessors between their communities and God. So his point of view can be likened to the difference that a contemporary anthropologist might mark between a traditional religion and modern Christianity, which cannot support witchdoctors or theurgists because it operates at the level of the universal brotherhood of man – preaching the innovation of Christ as the one true intercessor for humanity-at-large, and abhorring the cultic elevation of any merely human priest.

Donatum donatistae pro Christo habent, 'The Donatists have it that Donatus is placed ahead of Christ.' This is how Augustine would sum up their schism in one of his sermons.³ Under the Diocletianic persecutions, as under the earlier Valerianic persecutions, Christians had been required on pain of torture and death to sacrifice publicly to the old gods of the civic religion. Priests and bishops had been required to go the further step of handing over the Christian Scriptures. The conditions of North African Christianity seem to have allowed the latter act of 'handing over' (*traditio*) to gain a special infamy. By 347, there was a bishop – Donatus – claiming to be the legitimate primate of Carthage, and commanding a church led by clergy proclaimed to be untainted by any relationship, direct or indirect, to the *traditores*. The central tenet of Donatism was simple, as well as proudly Cyprianic. The only true, valid and efficacious Church in Africa was the Donatist Church, because only it could say that it had taken stringent enough measures to ensure the purity of the Christian sacraments. The key here was rebaptism and reconsecration: the Donatists insisted on the rebaptism of those Christians wishing to enter their ranks from the Roman Church as well as the reconsecration of churches and altars associated with the act of *traditio*. Such codes soon allowed them to imagine the rest of the Church outside them as weak and inconsistent – in fact, as spiritually ruined by the *traditores*, and no better than an institution co-opted into the secular world-at-large.

Donatus was succeeded by Parmenian as Donatist primate of Carthage, with Donatism thriving on its emotional energy to become far and away the dominant Church in North Africa. Indeed, it was only around the time of Augustine actually becoming Bishop of Hippo that the situation started to show signs of turning back in the Roman Church's favour. Parmenian had died sometime in 391 or 392, and this would allow Augustine to start zeroing in on the serious fault of Donatist theology that could 'place Donatus ahead of Christ'.

The apostles had taught that the germ of human sinfulness is the heart: fallen, and deceitful to itself. And furthermore, they had taught that it was in order to strive to correspond to this information that the Church on earth should make no claim to be anything other than the appointed destination of Divine aid. Priests should honour the pre-eminence of Christian truth by observing the proper *decorum* in their customs, spirituality and words, while Church buildings, and the worship within them, should follow the same *decorum* by being as beautifully and as mysteriously adorned as possible. In everything there should be this effort, so that future evangelization would be able to utilize the achievements and models of historical Christianity. But

because of human pride (or the havoc that evil wreaks with self-love), these structural and symbolical features must not be allowed to assume any life of their own, lest they be abused. God works through them in Christ: and it is this through-working, impervious to nefarious meddling, which honours the good faith of believers, and guarantees the integrity of the sacraments they receive. Augustine would become particularly skilled at showing how it is the fact of predestination which gifts believers their final emancipation from the alternative, merely human contrivances for salvation, and their webs of envy and praise, suspicion and partiality.

St Peter put this instruction to the Church in his famous words: 'If any man speak, *let him speak* as the oracles of God; if any man minister, *let him do it* as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ.'⁴ Nearly 400 years after him, it would be Augustine's turn to issue the same instruction and warning – but this time in language adapted to a Church about to win the ascendancy in Western Europe:

The Church would never pray to persevere in the faith of Christ (not deceived nor overcome by the temptations of the world) unless it completely believed that the Lord has our heart in His power. And in His power in the sense that, whatever of good we are able to bring about, we bring about only because He has somehow worked in us the very will to do so. For if the Church were to ask these things from Him, but thinking that the same things are given to itself by itself, it would be praying prayers that were perfunctory rather than true – which be far from us!⁵

The serious fault of Donatism, to Augustine, was its cruel insistence on pitching the Christian back from this wide open assurance into the merely human 'webs'. One of the Donatist bishops, Petilian of Constantine (d. ca. 419), was unambiguous in mocking the value of the heartfelt petition, supplanting it wholesale with the caste of the thoroughbred Donatist priest:

If you pray to God, or utter supplication, it profits you absolutely nothing whatsoever. For while you have a blood-stained conscience, your feeble prayers are of no effect; because the Lord God regards purity of conscience more than the words of supplication, according to the saying of the Lord Christ, 'Not every one that says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven'. [Matt. 7.21].⁶

The question of *censorship* in relation to Augustine, Donatism and the history of political thought arises because the schism became something of a paradigm case for the recently Christianized empire. Emperor Constantine

quickly took a dim view of it: and long after him, when Catholicism had won the whole of North Africa, the 'Donatist' label would live on as a byword for disunity and dissent from the Holy Roman Church, and a target for censorship and repression. The letters of Pope Gregory the Great (c. 540–604) contain many examples of him applying the label in this way, and indiscriminately, to continuing tensions in the African Church. The same would apply to the general Italian view of African clergymen. The papal *Liber diurnus* even preserves a point-blank note to bishops that they should be wary of welcoming Africans into ecclesiastical orders: '... as they frequently turn out to be Manichaeans or *rebaptizati* [Donatists]'.⁷

Augustine's historical-political role was to be the active force and personality in appealing to the Roman see *and* the Roman state against the Donatists. The exclusionary theology of the Donatists was clearly in defiance of the Roman Church's magisterium, while the preference of certain Donatists to violently harass Catholics in Augustine's district and elsewhere raised the problem to a question of political and social order. The Donatist clergy could boast many intellectuals to whom Augustine was happy to pay the highest respect, but its martyr-logic could also be a wild and simple creed, perfectly suited to the type of man looking for an excuse to hit back against the Roman state, its taxes and its highbrow city culture.

A desperate problem for Augustine became the bands of *Circumcelliones*, as they were called, who roamed the countryside, attacking and murdering Catholics and pursuing hit-and-run tactics against representative targets of the Imperial authorities. By Augustine's time, they were being especially malicious towards Donatist converts to the state religion – bishops and clergy as well as lay people. One plan to murder Augustine backfired only because his travelling party happened to take a wrong turn, avoiding an ambush. The *Circumcelliones* lived like outlaws, lurking around the shrines of Donatist martyrs and fanatically intent on the same glory for themselves. Their precise relationship to Church Donatism was as loose and opportunistic as one might expect. What they did was in its name, certainly; but modern scholarship is increasingly inclined to read their activities as a kind of culture war – a militant attempt to reassert African ethnicity against overwhelming processes of Latin colonialism.⁸

In other words, Augustine and Donatism have become a tantalizing early prototype of how the project of the Christian West tends to be written about by historians. Augustine, after initially recommending rational and diplomatic methods against the Donatists (because you should not force belief), felt

constrained by the *Circumcelliones* in particular to call in the full force of the Imperial laws against heretics. This was from about 416 onwards. His reasoning for this became his controversial *Compelle intrare* argument.⁹ The niceties of toleration are one thing, he wrote, but in a situation as partisan as the African Church, the Christian state apparatus becomes morally obliged to enforce unity and save souls:

No one could deny that it is better for men to be led to the worship of God by teaching, rather than being driven to Him by fear of punishment or pain. But it is not automatic that because the former course produces the better men, those who cannot yield to it should be neglected. For many have been saved (as we have proven, and are daily proving by experience) by being first compelled by fear or pain: so that afterwards they have their chance to be influenced by teaching; and then at last to follow by action what they have learned through these words.¹⁰

So there is something of the knight crusader in Augustine's part, and something of Frantz Fanon in the Donatists' role. And I suspect that scholars will increasingly want to exploit this difference.

What I want to do here is no more than to turn to my quotation from *City of God*, XIX, 7, and suggest one or two ways in which it might give a worthwhile pause for thought. Augustine begins, as Aristotle does in the *Politics*, with a pathology of the polis – taken right down to the household, the 'first circle of human society'. This allows him to end, as Bernard Crick did in his classic work *In Defence of Politics* (also following Aristotle), with a justified politics of action. Crick said that it was differences between citizens within a sovereign territory, and a technologically advanced society, that produces politics as the response to those differences; in other words, to him, politics was ethical bargaining writ large. And freedom, the Western ideal of freedom, was its special discovery. He meant that politics should always be self-referencing the conditions which bring it into being. To forget these is to leave it vulnerable to the vanity that it can be about *ideas*: that is, ideas that hint of one true way of thinking and acting, or the modern menaces of ideology and dictatorship. A 'politics of action' always faces off against a politics of monism.¹¹

Augustine gets to this same place by using the rather more radical example of wars and bloodshed to denote the concept of difference in human affairs. Nations – if I may use an anachronism for late antiquity – wage wars; and if hostile foreigners cannot be found, then social and civil wars are soon

cooked up. Such is the way with human nature and the *libido dominandi*. Political theorists have often been delighted to discover this modern, almost postmodern, Augustine, whose vision of political justice can be so secular.

So what, then, of the Augustine of Donatism, and his Christian statesman who censors in the name of God and truth? Where do the two interact?

The answer comes in the middle bit of my quotation: that delightful image of the man more able to converse with his dog than with a stranger from another land, speaking a foreign tongue. Augustine is not being facetious with this; he is using all his rhetor's flair to say that the whole business of politics really can be so simple! We tend to think of the Christian Roman Empire, and Augustinianism, as representing one, theocratic version of truth in society – and then democracy and moral pluralism as a competing, more enlightened version. This explains why we can attribute such high virtue to the 'peace of Babylon', and the rational basis for securing temporal peace in the science and history of human behaviour; and then turn around and be appalled when its method produces a Machiavelli. Or when – as happens earlier in the *City of God* – Augustine uses the same science and history to make his notorious comparison between an empire and a robber band.¹²

Augustine appears to be freer than us. He is prepared to lampoon politics all the way to its ignoble beginnings in the fall of man, and pride. He doesn't need to take a side, or produce a theory of politics that is morally superior to all other such theories on all points. Politics is always *realpolitik* for him. Its only reasonable justification is peace. A Christian statesman is a bonus situation, and a free ball and a free hit. So the Church should make the most of it, and seize an opportunity to save more souls. This is what Augustine did in the end with the Donatists: *compelle intrare*.

As for the peace of Babylon, we should not be overly beguiled by it. For it is itself a form of censorship, though hardly noticed, as its proscriptions are the very conditions of life itself, from language on up. It is a yoke [*iugum*], beneath which we must all pass.¹³ All political theories worth their salt prove in some way to be true to this fact. Derived from this fact, also, is Augustine's conclusion that there is no superior political truth, to rule all the others. The most secular and scientific and peaceful politics possible will prove what the first three books of Genesis were saying all along. The truest and most just and happy politics possible will not really be politics at all but the City of God in Heaven – which of course is what a close reading of the *City of God* shows Augustine to have been arguing all along.