

REVIEW ARTICLE

Donatism of History: Recent Questions

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The Donatist schism. Controversy and contexts. Edited by Richard Miles. (Translated Texts for Historians, Contexts, 2.) Pp. xii + 394 incl. 7 maps and 3 tables. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016. £80. 978 1 78138 281 3

Two roads diverged in Roman Africa. One led to the movement that came to be known as Donatism, and the other to the so-called Catholic party. The controversy emerged soon after the Diocletian persecution, one side selecting Caecilius as the bishop of Carthage, the other eventually selecting Donatus (and therefore dubbed ‘Donatist’). The schism widened when Constantine supported the former and attempted to enforce his party’s status. Violence sporadically erupted between these two parties for the next century, around which time Augustine led the charge to bring about unity, ultimately through legal and coercive means. The success of this unification, however, and the ultimate fate of the Donatists is open to debate, along with virtually every other datum from this controversy. The debated nature of the controversy, therefore, needs to be closely examined, for just what paradigm one takes from the outset could make all the difference.

A recent collection of essays entitled *The Donatist schism* covers this challenging history. Given the difficulties with non-extant, partial, biased and anonymous sources, studying this controversy is no easy task. One could easily get lost in this forest. But fear not, for there is now a guidebook. This volume, edited by Richard Miles, differs from many collections of essays in that – instead of various papers representing idiosyncratic

scholarly forays into technical minutiae – it consists of a cogent and comprehensive study of the history, theology and topics associated with this segment of ancient African Christianity. Originally presented at Trinity Hall, Cambridge, in March of 2014 for a colloquium sponsored by the North Africa Research Network (which is based at the University of Sydney), the essays cover important aspects of Donatism. Richard Miles introduces the complexities involved in studying this movement, and then John Whitehouse offers two essays, one on the general sources, history and development of the controversy, and then one on the modern scholarship devoted to this subject. Candida Moss discusses several themes from ancient martyrdom, showing that the ‘general’ themes from ancient Christian martyrdom belong especially and acutely to the North African sources. Alan Dearn reconsiders the category of ‘authenticity’ and reviews the cases from North African martyr accounts, offering several important arguments about these texts. Mark Edwards identifies how the Donatist controversy shaped the ecclesiology, hamartiology and soteriology of Augustine and his party. Cam Grey reviews the archaeological studies of rural North Africa to show the diversity of experiences from this era, including the rising influence of ‘peasant’ farmers, which substantiates some of the literary sources from the Donatist controversy. Bruno Pottier revisits the debate over the Circumcellions, siding with the view that these were ascetic monks who had attained ‘confessor’ status and sought martyrdom. Noel Lenski reviews the primary sources on imperial laws applied and enacted against the Donatists at this time, and he adds a helpful appendix listing all relevant laws and sources. Neil McLynn reconsiders the consensus understanding of the Conference of Carthage 411, revisiting the evidence to show that the Catholic victory was not so readily apparent at the time nor was unity so definitively enforced. Miles surveys the two distinct ‘textual communities’ and the way in which Augustine was able to force his opponents into creating new, public texts which effectively transcended the divide and simultaneously silenced the Donatists. Jennifer Ebbeler traces Augustine’s ‘charitable correction’ of the Donatists, as one which saw compulsion as necessary to salvation, but which first hoped for Donatists to self-correct before legal enforcement would be invoked. Éric Rebillard revisits the standard chronology of Augustine’s anti-Donatist works (prior to 411) to find that his knowledge of Donatism changed less than his tactics. Anna Leone surveys the relatively small amount of surviving material evidence for Donatism, showing how often the difficulties of the discipline require cautious judgement in this area. Finally, Conant assesses the potential sources for and scholarly interpretations of Donatism in the Vandal and Byzantine periods of North African history. Although there are differing opinions represented by this array of scholars, the book as a whole provides a coherent and helpful topical overview that both could serve as a textbook on Donatism

and will serve to further debates among specialists in the field. A veritable one-stop shop for Donatist studies.

Of course, no one book can do it all (John xxi.25). There are areas where further work is needed when it comes to the history of Donatism. First, a cluster of subtopics could be considered under the category of the African context. In their introductory essays, both Miles (p. 11) and Whitehouse (pp. 36–41) revisit the hypothesis of W. H. C. Frend (*The Donatist Church*, Oxford 1952), who argued that Donatism consisted largely of rural and indigenous Berbers. While Frend's methodology has been shown to be flawed, his underlying questions have never completely gone away (see Éric Rebillard's 'William Hugh Clifford Frend [1916–2005]: the legacy of the Donatist Church', *Studia Patristica* liii [2013], 55–7, and David E. Wilhite's 'Were the "Donatists" a national or social movement in disguise? Reframing the question', *Studia Patristica* xcvi [2017], 191–220); Frend is read sympathetically by both Miles and Whitehouse. This question in part led to Brent Shaw rejecting the label of 'Donatist' altogether and instead referring to the 'African' and 'Catholic' parties ('African Christianity: disputes, definitions, and "Donatists"', in M. R. Greenshields and T. A. Robinson [eds], *Orthodoxy and heresy in religious movements: discipline and dissent*, Lampeter 1992, 5–34). However, Shaw later retracted the label 'African' and replaced it with 'dissident' (*Sacred violence*, Cambridge 2011). Contributors to *The Donatist schism* vary in their use of the terms Donatist or dissident – some even use both, which should confuse a few newcomers to the discussion. Alternatively, many scholars now opt for the categories of Donatists and Caecilians (Caecilius was the bishop of Carthage at the outbreak of the schism). These are labels that no 'Donatist' or 'Caecilian' would have used or accepted for themselves, but using both at least has the advantage of misrepresenting both sides equally. The fact that scholars cannot even reach a consensus about what to call this schism indicates that the field still has much work needing to be done, as Miles readily admits (p. 2). Also related to the African context is the centrality of the African theological tradition going back to Cyprian. Cyprian's role is briefly introduced by Whitehouse and discussed by Edwards, and references to him then pepper the volume; given the fact that Jean-Paul Brisson wanted to call Donatism 'Cyprianism', it is somewhat surprising that more scholarly works in this field do not devote more attention to the Cyprianic theology in this schism (see Brisson, *Autonomisme et christianisme dans l'Afrique romaine*, Paris 1958, 33–122; cf. Robert A. Markus, 'Christianity and dissent in Roman North Africa: changing perspectives in recent work', in Derek Baker [ed.], *Schism, heresy, and religious protest*, Cambridge 1972, 28–9). Another unique phenomenon from the local context of this controversy is the group known as the Circumcellions. Modern scholars have long struggled over how to understand this group, with opinions ranging from

Marxist subalterns to suicidal monks. Even in this volume, Pottier leans toward the latter view, but many in the volume side with the former (especially as articulated by Brent Shaw in his *Sacred violence*). All admit that the evidence is confusing, but how to adjudicate the contradictory sources remains contested. In sum, this field of study displays how much remains to be done when it comes to understanding the context of the Donatist schism.

On the bright side, this field is ready for additional research (Matthew ix.37). There is much work to be done when it comes to the primary sources for this schism, and some recent works have shown how much promise there is for future endeavours in Donatist studies. In the area of material sources, Anna Leone's essay is helpfully detailed and rightly cautious in its approach, and then several of the other contributors draw on archaeological data. Apparently, the monumental book by Patout Burns and Robin Jensen (with others), *Christianity in Roman Africa* (Grand Rapids 2014) was not available in time for this volume's contributors. Interesting insights are also being drawn from studies of ancient funeral rites and the practice of *refrigeria*, especially as it relates to the cult of the martyrs – mentioned by Moss (pp. 54–69) and Leone (pp. 341). One can now add two new studies in this field: Stephen Potthoff, *The afterlife in early Christian Carthage* (London 2016), and Shira L. Lander, *Ritual sites and religious rivalries in late Roman North Africa* (Cambridge 2017). In terms of literary sources, there is yeoman's work to be done here as well. Numerous sources remain untranslated, and so not readily utilised by non-specialists. Fortunately, this problem is slowly being remedied: for example, the New City Press is now set to publish Augustine's anti-Donatist works in an edition by Alden Bass and Jesse Hoover. Similarly, much remains to be gleaned from the many 'inauthentic' sources that are now being reconsidered. McLynn's essay demonstrates how much room there is for interpretation of our primary sources, showing how additional scholarly scrutiny and debate is still needed. Along these same lines, many anonymous sermons have now been identified as Donatist, as mentioned by Conant (p. 350); these still need to be fully incorporated into the history of this field. Another collection of essays has recently been published that addresses these – and other – sermons: G. Partoens, A. Dupont and S. Hgg Boodts (eds), *Praedicatio patrum: studies on preaching in late antique North Africa* (Turnhout 2017). In short, additional work in this field's material and literary sources should prove fruitful.

At this point, it also needs to be stipulated that Donatism continues to produce saints (*Passion of Perpetua* 1.1). One can no longer speak of Donatism without speaking of Maureen Tilley, who tragically passed away in 2016. She is mentioned in the acknowledgements to *The Donatist schism*, and several of her works are cited throughout the essays in the volume. The full bibliography of her many works can be found in a

forthcoming *Festschrift*: Elizabeth A. Clark and Zachary B. Smith (eds), *Colorful lives and living in Roman North Africa*, Washington, DC). The essays in *The Donatist schism*, as well as the many other current studies being done, and the many that will be forthcoming all owe a debt to Tilley's work. It can confidently be said that St Maureen will continue to bless these studies in the generations to come.

Tilley is one of several important voices from recent decades that has championed the need to re-read the Catholic sources critically in order better to understand the Donatists on their own terms. In fact, scholarly giants like Peter Brown and Robert Markus have questioned whether or not the Donatists should even be seen as a party or movement (see the bibliography to David E. Willite, 'Donatus and Donatism', in Sanders Goldberg [ed.], *Oxford classical dictionary*, 4th edn, Oxford 2017), which again raises the question about the best labels for this controversy. In this way of reading the evidence, the Donatists were not a party or movement at all; they were merely portrayed as such by their opponents. In the new critical understanding, they formed the majority of Christians in Africa who simply held to their traditional beliefs. It is Augustine and his party who must begin a movement to assert their validity in Africa. The 'Catholics', according to this perspective, are the 'dissidents' and the 'schismatics'. The ramifications of such a revisionist view has yet to be fully embraced by most scholars in this field. Apparently, scholars must continue to call this group 'Donatists', or no one will know what they are talking about. Even so, the category itself commits said scholars to problematic assumptions. For example, if the 'Donatists' never identified themselves as such, and if the legal officials after 411 forced African Christians to unify with 'Catholics', how was this understood by 'Donatist' Christians who already understood themselves to be 'Catholic'? Furthermore, when 'Arian' Christians arrived in 430 *via* the Vandal invasion, what became of 'Donatists'? Furthermore, to return to the earlier period in the schism, while the existence of two opposing groups cannot be denied, the literature produced by the leaders of these two parties also betrays the fact that many members of each distinct group in fact crossed the imagined dividing lines in various ways, such as collaboration in common business, table fellowship and even marriage – making them not-so-distinct groups. (Are they even 'groups'? If so, what kind?) In his opening essay in *The Donatist schism*, Miles acknowledges this and argues that the paradigm of 'parallel histories' (p. 1) is insufficient to account for the complexities involved. It is as if the current scholarly debate is in the birth pangs of an altogether new paradigm. Whether or not a replacement category will be produced remains to be seen. Perhaps 'Donatism' itself will become a thing of history.