

[*MJTM* 17 (2015–2016)]

BOOK REVIEW

Anthony Dupont, Matthew Alan Gaumer, and Mathijs Lamberigts, eds. *The Uniquely African Controversy: Studies on Donatist Christianity*. Late Antique History and Religion 9. Leuven: Peeters, 2015. xvi + 388 pp. Hbk. ISBN 978-9-042-93155-8. \$119.00.

The papers in this edited volume are based on the International Donatist Studies Symposium, which was held in Leuven, Belgium, on May 17–18, 2012. This book is comprised of seventeen articles, with contributors ranging from seasoned experts, such as the late Maureen Tilley, to relative new comers, such as Alden Bass. It tackles a range of issues relevant to Donatist Christianity, such as martyrdom, patron-client relationships, pre-baptismal exsufflation, and critical readings of Augustine and Optatus. For the purpose of this review, I will provide a brief summary and analysis of a select number of articles.

To begin, Carles Buenacasa Pérez in “The Ecclesial Patrimony of the Donatist Church” discusses the often-neglected topic of patrimonial framework that the Donatists had in common with the Catholic Church. Although Donatist bishops may have made their grievances felt concerning the level of poverty that their priests lived in, this does not make it less significant that “during the time of the Constantinian dynasty the Donatist Church possessed a large patrimony” (102). The Donatist Church possessed properties that were equal to, if not exceeding, that of the Catholic Church. It is important to note that both Donatists and Catholics were guilty of using material wealth to signal power and social clout. Also, the Donatists relied more heavily on the personal donation of generous benefactors while the Catholics’ main benefactor was the state.

Maureen Tilley's article, "African Asceticism: The Donatist Heritage," is a follow-up study to a point she made in 2010 when she said that "studying Donatists and Donatism needs to be more sophisticated" (127). She proposes two avenues of approach to studying Donatism, that is, to examine it (1) as "a movement away from the merely political and economic to the religious combined with the political," and (2) with "an interest in developments within Donatism as the political and religious landscape changed between 303 and 420" (127). She notes the remarkable similarity between Catholics and Donatists in their ascetic practices. In fact, they were so similar that the Donatist sermons were misattributed to Catholics for many years. Asceticism in North Africa was so prevalent that it played a huge role in both Catholic and Donatist culture. In terms of observing these practices, it seems that "Donatists were stricter about distinctive garb than Catholics" (129). Both Donatists and Catholics may have similar ideologies even if they differ in their methodology.

Another practice that was closely linked to asceticism was the act of suicide. Especially in cases where an individual was forced to either commit suicide or commit a dishonorable act, suicide was the preferred option. For example, "Dido was held up as an example that it was better to burn oneself than submit to a second marriage" (135). The Donatists' claim was to present themselves as a part of a long line of righteous and valiant martyrs who preferred to stand courageously against evil rather than capitulate to it.

Perhaps it would be more proper to agree with Tilley's comments that, "rather than seeing Donatists as the outliers on suicide as an ascetic act, it would be proper to see Augustine as the innovator" (138). Both "Donatists and Catholics inherited from early Christians a valorization of martyrdom and the example of their common hero, blessed Cyprian" (136). With this in mind, it does seem that Tilley's argument that Augustine is the outlier when it comes to his views on suicide compared to the Donatists is worthy of consideration.

Jane E. Merdinger's article, "In League with the Devil? Donatist and Catholic Perspectives on Pre-baptismal

Exsufflation,” examines “Augustine’s early letters in which he castigates Donatists for subjecting former Catholics to exsufflation” (153). Typically, “exsufflation was a rite performed during the catechumenate process whereby an exorcist (or a bishop) hissed and spat at the catechumen to ‘blow out’ the Devil . . . and usually was accompanied by exorcism” (153). Merdinger points out the fact that a distinction is often not made between Optatus, who only spoke of exorcism, and Augustine, who only spoke about exsufflation. Most conflate the two rites. The reason for the Donatists’ exsufflation of Roman Catholics was to humiliate the Devil and to label the Catholics as apostates. The Donatists believed that Catholics were apostates because certain clergy members during the Diocletian persecution surrendered their Scriptures rather than submitting themselves to torture or execution. As a result, Catholics were deemed to be worse than pagans because they had rejected God by committing such a heinous act. Exsufflation became “the perfect vehicle” to not only humble, but also humiliate, the Catholic who wanted entrance to the “pure” church.

Stanisław Adamiak’s article tackles the issue of figuring out the end of Donatist Christianity, which is appropriately titled, “When Did Donatist Christianity End?” He begins by tracing the origins of the Donatist schism to the “contested election of Bishop Caecilian, whose elevation brought about a profound division that was to lacerate the body of the Church in Roman Northern Africa for a hundred years” (211). Adamiak comments that “the standard manuals usually end their general account of the Donatist controversy more or less with Augustine’s death” (212). However, “this takes no account of the subsequent strange appearance of ‘Donatists’ in the majority of the letters that Gregory the Great sent to Africa” (212). Trying to trace the timeline of when the Donatist movement died hinges on understanding whether this refers to the historical movement or the shibboleth it had become.

While the Donatist movement may have died in Africa, the word “Donatist” took on new meanings over the centuries. It was able to provoke images of a “pure” Church as much as it was able to elicit images of disunity and strife. The invocation of the

word “Donatist” was enough to create certain ideas of purity or heresy in an individual’s psyche depending on the individual’s religious and cultural milieu. Thus, in some ways, Donatism has never truly ended; it has managed to survive the ravages of time by adapting to the cultural zeitgeist of the time and becoming a shibboleth in the process.

Adamiak’s work is of great importance to any scholar who is interested in tracing Donatism’s beginning and end as a movement. He provides an important overview of Donatism’s history to those who may be interested in knowing more about Donatism but lack the time or resources to investigate it further. Not only does he provide a general overview of Donatism’s history as a movement, but he also offers further insights into how Donatism has managed to shape and capture the imagination of various Christian communities even after its end in Africa.

Matteo Dalvit examines the way in which Donatist figures have been constructed by the Catholics in his article, “The Catholic Construction of Donatist Key Figures: A Critical Reading of Augustine and Optatus.” Dalvit argues that the distorted lens by which Augustine and Optatus saw the Donatists have affected the very way in which we have seen the Donatists. Considering that whatever mental image we have of Donatists is heavily based on the writings of Augustine and Optatus, it is no wonder that their prevailing, dominant view of the Donatists have withstood the test of time. An example of this is how the death of bishop Marculus has been interpreted by both camps: “Donatists claim that their bishop has been murdered by Roman authorities with the collaboration of the *traditores*; Catholics, instead, say that Marculus had thrown himself off a cliff” (242). By calling his death an act of suicide, Augustine discredited him; by calling his death a murder, the Donatists could claim him to be their martyr. Dalvis rightly concludes that “it appears now that some central figures of the Donatist movement were re-depicted by the winners, in this case by Optatus and Augustine” (248). Such a conclusion challenges us to exhibit a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” when it comes to our understanding of the Donatist movement, especially when our primary means of understanding them is through the writings of their very biased

rivals.

Geert Van Reyn's amusingly titled article, "Hippo's Got Talent: Augustine's *Psalmus Contra Partem Donati* as a Pop(ular) Song," explores the way in which Augustine used his musical composition as a strategic way to teach his congregation and to cajole Donatists to return to the Catholic fold. The easy-to-use format of the psalm, along with its "catchiness," made it an extremely valuable apologetic tool to impart dense theological doctrines for mass consumption. It was mainly geared towards illiterates and heavily inspired by Ambrose's hymns. This article emphasizes Augustine's pastoral heart and humility; even though he is known for his heavily theological works, he was not averse to changing his tactics so as to resonate more effectively with his audience. In this, he embodied St. Paul's words: "I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor 9:22).

In "Augustine, Missionary to Heretics? An Appraisal of Augustine's Missional Engagement with the Donatists," Edward Smither explores how Augustine "regarded the schismatic group as a heretical mission field" (269). He divides the article into three major parts: (1) a working definition of Christian mission; (2) the manner Augustine branded the Donatists as heretics; and (3) Augustine's missional engagement with the Donatists between 391 and 419. One of the complexities in Augustine's thinking is his distinction between coercion and persuasion. He saw coercion as correction that must be done with love. As such, his interaction with the Donatists should be seen from a missiological perspective. Rather than framing it as a battle between two competing ideologies, Augustine's conviction that the Donatists' beliefs were drastically different from the orthodox Catholic beliefs enabled him to see the Donatists not as equals that needed to be persuaded, but as deviants who needed to be corrected. As Smithers notes, "For Augustine, forcing the Donatists to unite with the Church simply put them in an environment where they could be persuaded" (288). In the same way that God compelled him to turn away from his heretical Manichean ways, he strongly believed that compelling the Donatists back to the Catholic Church would garner the same

results: a return to the Truth.

Due to space restrictions, I do not have the luxury to provide a summary of each article in this edited volume. As an overall comment, I was incredibly impressed at the breadth and depth of the works included in this volume. The articles are well-written and well-argued. The authors' ability to provide a thorough analysis while simultaneously giving the proper situational context is to be highly commended. Too often, some authors provide insightful and engaging arguments, yet they fail to provide the historical context that situates the issue within its proper timeframe. However, this was not the case with this edited volume. Moreover, the editors, Anthony Dupont, Matthew Alan Gaumer, and Mathijs Lamberigts, have managed to accomplish what seems to be a growing rarity when it comes to edited volumes: this volume actually reads like a book. Too often, edited volumes may seem like disparate articles hastily cobbled together. This is not the case for this particular edited volume. There is a sense of flow, of coherence, and of a growing understanding of a topic that is both interesting and relevant. As David G. Hunter notes in the preface, this work managed to assemble "a wide range of experts from a variety of disciplinary and cross-disciplinary perspectives" (vii). He notes the "rich and remarkably diverse set of approaches to the central problem of 'Donatist' Christianity: legal, paleographical, biblical, literary, socio-economic, and, of course, historical-theological" (vii). The breadth and depth of this volume is quite remarkable. Each article provides a fresh, new lens by which we are invited to examine the Donatist movement. It seems that every century is tasked with figuring out what Donatism means in light of its own social context. This book is no different in tasking us with that same assignment. Not only is Donatism a historical event that happened in the past, it is also a historical event that continues to interact with our present with the potential to shape our future.

Sid D. Sudiagal
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON