

Richard Miles (ed.): *The Donatist Schism. Controversy and Contexts*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press 2016 (Translated Texts for Historians. Contexts 2). VIII, 394 p., 7 maps, 3 tables. \$ 120.00/£ 85.00. ISBN 978-1-78138-281-3.

This collection of essays,¹ which stems, as the ‘Acknowledgements’ section notes, from a two-day colloquium in March 2014 sponsored by the Ancient North Africa Research Network, is unique in that it self-consciously presents itself as an overview of the various ‘contexts’ of the controversy (in Richard Miles’s words, “theological, ecclesiastical, political, socio-economic, legal and cultural” [1–2]). The volume is, in other words, intended as a handbook of sorts, a guide that offers interested parties a bird’s eye view of the *status quaestionis* of each topic.

The collection is rather loosely organized: while its beginning (an introductory essay by Miles) and end (an account of the fate of Donatism during the Vandal and Byzantine eras by Jonathan Conant) are certainly predictable, we must look more closely to find evidence of internal order. Here, to my knowledge, is the logic of the collection: after beginning with two essays by John Whitehouse that cover a) the historical course of the schism and b) modern scholarship of the controversy, we then move to questions of martyrdom: Candida Moss’s treatment of “Martyr Veneration in Late Antique North Africa” and Alan Dearn’s “Donatist Martyrs, Stories and Attitudes.” Mark Edwards’s article “The Donatist Schism and Theology” is *sui generis* in this volume, which indeed illustrates one of the main concerns in his essay: namely that “many historians of late antiquity [...] continue to be more interested in the reconstruction of the historical narrative” than its implications for “Catholic meditations on the nature of the church and the operation of the sacraments” (101–102). On the other hand, Cam Grey’s “Rural Society in North Africa” and Bruno Pottier’s “*Circumcelliones*, Rural Society and Communal Violence” are linked by the theme of rural populations and their relation to Donatism, while Noel Lenski’s “Imperial Legislation and the Donatist Controversy” and Neil McLynn’s “The Conference of Carthage Reconsidered” examine the legal aspects of the schism. The next three essays by Miles, Jennifer Ebbeler, and Éric Rebillard all have to do with what Miles calls the “textual communities” of both sides, while Anna

1 For the table of contents, readers are referred to the end of this review.

Leone's essay on the archaeological record of the Donatist controversy fits well, with its emphasis on what we can and cannot know about the dissident communion from the few physical vestiges that remain to us, with Conant's concluding essay on our limited ability to trace the history of the schism past the Vandal invasion.

In what follows, I will offer a brief assessment of each of the essays in the order in which they appear in the collection, grouping them according to the categories just articulated. We begin with Whitehouse's two essays, "The Course of the Donatist Schism in Late Roman North Africa" and "The Scholarship of the Donatist Controversy." In many ways, Whitehouse's contributions are the cornerstone of this volume. One might quibble with his defense of the traditional labels 'Catholic' and 'Donatist' as acceptable nomenclatures on pages 14–15 (I rather prefer the more neutral terms 'Caecilianist' and 'Donatist' myself, and will be using them in this review), but the essay as a whole is a nuanced and comprehensive overview of, in his words, the "nomenclature, sources, and the spatial distribution of Donatism and a narrative summary and chronology" (13). Particularly useful are two tables showing the geographical division of the Caecilianist and Donatist bishops present at the 411 Conference at Carthage (17) and a brief chronological chart of the main events of the schism on pages 18–20. In his second essay, Whitehouse examines how the Donatist controversy has been portrayed in academic scholarship. I would highly recommend this essay as an essential bibliography for newcomers to the controversy. Beyond merely listing relevant texts, Whitehouse also examines cultural currents and authors who have influenced the perception of Donatism in the modern era, including W. H. C. Frend, whose *The Donatist Church* offered a "nationalist and socio-economic explanation of ethnic and social conflict" (38) and Brent Shaw, whose 2011 work *Sacred Violence* moved the argument forward, in Whitehouse's view, by focusing instead on "differences in historical memory" that led to opposing confessional identities (48).² A final section lists key themes for future research.

In the next two essays, Moss and Dearn offer insight into the North African cult of martyrs. Moss reminds us in her article "Martyr Veneration in Late

2 W. H. C. Frend: *The Donatist Church. A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*. Oxford 1952; B. D. Shaw: *Sacred Violence. African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine*. Cambridge 2011.

Antique North Africa” that many of our stereotypes about how martyr veneration functioned throughout the Roman world in Late Antiquity are actually derived from North Africa in particular, which she portrays as a hotbed of martyrological appreciation, particularly within the Donatist communion (which after all could claim new martyrs under the Christian emperors). Moss’s overview of the material and textual evidence for practices such as *refrigeria* and the liturgical use of martyrological *acta* is helpful, albeit a little disorganized. Dearn’s essay, “Donatist Martyrs, Stories and Attitudes” functions as an important caution on the limits of our ability to tell whether a given martyrological text is ‘Donatist’ or not. Reacting against the over-confident classification of such texts by earlier scholars like Paul Monceaux or Maureen Tilley,³ Dearn’s central contention is that if a given text is not actively arguing for a Donatist position, it is a mistake to label it as a ‘Donatist’ text *per se*. This criterion would therefore exclude *acta* like the so-called ‘Donatist’ *passio* of Cyprian or the *Passio Crispinae*, which were classified as Donatist based on such flimsy evidence as the replacement of *deo gratias* with *deo laudes* (in the former) and Secunda’s throwing herself down from a balcony to join the confessors Maxima and Donatilla (in the latter). While Dearn may, in my opinion, be wielding his scalpel a little too harshly in minimizing the rhetorical significance of *deo laudes* to the dissident communion, at least by the end of the fourth century,⁴ his larger point is well taken. ‘Donatism is as Donatism does’: while the above *acta* were almost certainly *used* by the dissident communion, they were not inherently ‘Donatist’ texts in the sense that they advocated for an exclusively Donatist view of martyrdom or ecclesiology, unlike such genuinely Donatist *acta* as the *Passio Marculi* or *Passio Maximiani et Isaac*.

The subject-matter of Edwards’s essay “The Donatist Schism and Theology” is, he admits, not popular reading material among historians of the controversy. Nevertheless, since, as he states, such debates had the effect of creating “a forcing-ground for Catholic meditations on the nature of the church and the operation of the sacraments” (102), a reconsideration of the theological implications of the Donatist controversy is warranted. What Edwards’s essay does, and does well, is remind us that the schism had a last-

3 P. Monceaux: *Histoire littéraire de l’Afrique chrétienne depuis les origines jusqu’à l’invasion arabe*. Vol. 4: *Le donatisme*. Paris 1912; M. Tilley: *The Bible in Christian North Africa. The Donatist World*. Minneapolis 1997.

4 See Shaw (note 2) 469–475 for a counter-argument.

ing effect on future Catholic thought. The ‘unity of the church’ and the nature of the sacraments in particular received substantial theological reflection due to the pressures of the schism that pushed them well beyond previous assumptions. Edwards concludes with the tantalizing claim that Augustine’s theological response to the Pelagian controversy was deeply shaped by his prior interactions with the Donatists: here, rather than Donatism proper, lies the full bloom of Augustine’s theological ruminations on the nature of purity and ecclesial unity. It is a pity that this fascinating possibility is only briefly mentioned in the epilogue.

The next two essays cover various aspects of the North African countryside during the controversy. At first glance, Grey’s “Rural Society in North Africa” seems like an odd choice for inclusion in this volume, given that his essay only tangentially intersects with the Donatist controversy proper. However, given the importance of the North African socio-economic background to the schism to many academic reconstructions of the controversy,⁵ Grey’s detailed examination of the risk management strategies employed by peasant communities vis-à-vis the large landowners who owned their lands is extremely useful. Among the observations Grey makes is that such communities often seem to have exploited the divisions wrought by the schism in order to gain more protection and patronage, particularly through the strategy of gaining a local bishop. Pottier’s essay “*Circumcelliones*, Rural Society and Communal Violence in Late Antique North Africa,” on the other hand, is an extended response to Shaw’s depiction of the Circumcellions as itinerant laborers whose close association with Donatism is largely the result of Augustinian polemic. Pottier instead resurrects Frend’s argument that the Circumcellions were Donatist ascetics.⁶ Personally, I am sympathetic to the author’s case: on balance, it appears to me that the evidence does seem to fit better with an ascetic model than itinerant labor. However, Pottier’s essay contains several damaging mistakes that undermine his claims. He parrots Frend, for instance, in arguing that “Tyconius denounced the habit of the

5 For an excellent overview of this tendency among twentieth-century historiographers of the schism, see R. A. Markus: *Christianity and Dissent in Roman North Africa: Changing Perspectives in Recent Work*. In: D. Baker (ed.): *Schism, Heresy, and Religious Protest. Papers Read at the Tenth Summer Meeting and the Eleventh Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society*. Cambridge 1972 (*Studies in Church History* 9), 21–36.

6 See W.H.C. Frend: *The Cellae of the African Circumcellions*. In: *JThS* 3, 1952, 87–89; and Frend: *Circumcellions and Monks*. In: *JThS* 20, 1969, 542–549.

circumcelliones of wandering around saints' shrines" (143) referring in footnote 5 to "Tyconius, *Commentarius in Apocalypsin*, 26.3." Unfortunately, there is no such passage: Pottier seems to have simply misinterpreted a statement from Frend's 1969 article "Circumcellions and Monks",⁷ in which Frend argues that a passage in Beatus of Liébana's *Commentarius in Apocalypsin* condemning 'Circumcellions' contains Tyconian material. Moreover, the claim that the passage is Tyconian has already been thoroughly debunked by Shaw in his article "Who Were the Circumcellions?"⁸, an essay that Pottier does not interact with. Mistakes like this mar what is otherwise an intriguing rebuttal to Shaw's depiction of the Circumcellions.

The next two essays are, in my opinion, among the highlights of the collection. Lenski's "Imperial Legislation and the Donatist Controversy" is simply a detailed overview of all extant imperial legislation (edicts, mandates, decreta, rescripts, and letters) related to the Donatist controversy, including an immensely useful appendix spanning from p. 197–219 that lists them in chronological order.⁹ McLynn's "The Conference of Carthage Reconsidered," on the other hand, makes a significant new contribution to our understanding of the 411 Conference and its significance. McLynn argues that rather than seeing the Conference as a binary division between 'Catholics' and 'Donatists,' we ought instead to view it through the eyes of at least four actors: Marcellinus, the Augustinian-Aurelian debating team, the mass of Caecilianist bishops, and the Donatist bishops. Two of McLynn's points are of particular interest: first, his persuasive argument that the Caecilianist bishops, particularly the Numidian contingent, were not in lock-step with Augustine and Aurelius and actively pursued their own agenda during the first day of the conference, and second, that for the Donatist bishops in general, who after all would only have been present on its first day, the Conference was perceived more as a display of their numerical power than as a defeat.

7 See Frend: *Circumcellions and Monks* (note 6), 544.

8 See B.D. Shaw: *Who Were the Circumcellions?* In: A.H. Merrills (ed.): *Vandals, Romans and Berbers. New Perspectives on Late Antique North Africa*. Aldershot 2004, 227–258, here 251–254. The passage is not included in R. Gryson's reconstruction of Tyconius's *Apocalypse* commentary in CCSL 107A.

9 But note the concerns raised by P. Riedlberger: *Prolegomena zu den spätantiken Konstitutionen. Nebst einer Analyse der erbrechtlichen und verwandten Sanktionen gegen Heterodoxe*. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 2020, 495 n. 1.

They may have technically ‘lost’ the debate, but such was not their impression on their trek home.

As mentioned earlier, the next three essays are related by their focus on ‘textual communities’. Miles’s “Textual Communities and the Donatist Controversy” is a decent overview of those Donatist texts that survive and Augustine’s successful assault on them by employing dialogic responses, though it is marred by sometimes superficial interaction with these writings. Relying on Maureen Tilley’s confident identification,¹⁰ for instance, Miles uncritically describes the anonymous text *De singularitate clericorum* as a Donatist text, though this is a minority view in modern scholarship; he also states that a Donatist dossier dated to 427 was composed “roughly concurrent” (258) with the Donatist *Liber genealogus*, though in fact the *Liber genealogus* is the first document *in* this dossier and its date of 427 is the reason that the dossier as a whole is dated to that year. Ebbeler’s “Charitable Correction and Ecclesiastical Unity in Augustine’s *Contra epistolam Parmenianam?*” is an able exploration of Augustine’s treatise against Parmenian which argues that Augustine “writes himself into the persona of Tyconius” in order to respond to Parmenian’s 25-year-old corrective letter (287). Finally, Rebillard offers a thorough analysis of Augustine’s pre-Conference polemics against the Donatists, including a discussion of what we can (and cannot) know of those writings, such as *Against a letter of Donatus the heretic* or *Against what Centurius brought from the Donatists*, that have not survived. Rebillard also notes that the evolution of Augustine’s writings against the Donatists has more to do with changes in polemical strategy (i.e., lobbying the imperial court to declare Donatism a heresy) than increased awareness or knowledge of his opponents, an important observation.

Finally, Leone and Conant focus on the faint echoes of the Donatist church that survived the Conference of 411. Leone’s article, entitled “Tracing the Donatist Presence in North Africa: an Archaeological Perspective,” provides a welcome synopsis of the very few material remains of the dissident communion that still survive. Her work overturns several misconceptions often encountered in portrayals of the dissident communion, such as the idea (per Frend) that Donatist ritual practices had affinities with the cult of Saturn¹¹ or that Donatism was over-represented in rural areas (instead, as she notes,

10 Tilley (note 3) 82–86.

11 Frend: Donatist Church (note 2), 97–102.

“Donatist bishoprics were in fact everywhere, in urban and rural contexts” [328]). Her further observation that *all* of the known Donatist churches that appear in the archaeological record went through a process of reappropriation by the Catholics is an important caveat: whatever scraps of information about the dissident communion we can glean from them are dependent on what their opponents allowed to remain. Conant’s essay regarding “Donatism in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries” forms a fitting conclusion to the volume: a survey and analysis of all known traces of the Donatist church through the Vandal and Byzantine periods. Given that our last literary witness from the dissident communion itself falls silent ca. 438, this is no easy task. Conant’s tangential observation that the 463 recension of the *Liber genealogus* is quite possibly Homoian in orientation rather than Nicene, as is usually assumed, is also worth mentioning, as is his conclusion that Gallic and Italian fears of ‘Donatist’ refugees fleeing the Vandal regime negatively affected the perception of African orthodoxy as a whole during the early medieval era.

I mentioned at the beginning of this review that the contributors to this volume appear to have intended it as a companion text: a guide to the *status quaestionis* of the various “contexts” encountered in these essays. I would like to conclude by noting that, considered as a whole, *The Donatist Schism: Controversy and Contexts* largely succeeds in this endeavor. Indeed, I have personally benefitted from several of these essays in the course of my own research prior to being asked to write this review. With a few exceptions, the essays contained in this volume will prove crucial to researchers of the schism for years to come.

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