*The Donatist schism: controversy and contexts*, ed. Richard Miles, Translated Texts for Historians, Contexts 2 (Liverpool: Liverpool U.P., 2016; pp. 394. £80).

The Donatist schism is a slippery beast. It began in the late 300s or early 310s with a contested election for the see of Carthage between two claimants, Caecilian and Maiorinus (replaced on his death by the eponymous Donatus). By the second decade of the fifth century, when the imperial state under Honorius sought to unify them once and for all, the rival churches had grown to over 300 bishops each, operating in communities across the Roman province of Africa (the modern-day Maghreb). This ecclesiastical dispute affected Christians at all levels of society in late Roman Africa. And yet observers elsewhere in the empire were hardly animated by the schism; few even seem to have noticed its existence.

Pinning the schism down—representative of broader trends in late-antique Christianity? The outcome of a peculiar Christian environment?—has been all the more difficult in the absence of a synthetic English-language account to replace W. H. C. Frend’s essential (but now rather outdated) *The Donatist Church* (Oxford, 1952), and to supplement Brent Shaw’s brilliant (but forbidding) *Sacred Violence: African Christians and Sectarian Hatred in the Age of Augustine* (Cambridge, 2011). This volume, stemming from a 2014 conference at Trinity Hall, Cambridge—full disclosure: I participated as a respondent—is not intended as that book: ‘the essays in this volume do not claim to offer the final word’ (p. 12). Instead, the contributors are given the space to display convivial disagreement on numerous key questions of interpretation. Nevertheless, by drawing on their previous work on parallel issues across the late-antique Mediterranean, these authors sets out with impressive clarity various ways we might understand the Donatist schism against the broader backdrop of the later Roman Empire.

After a short introduction by the editor (ch. 1) and useful narrative and historiographical summaries by John Whitehouse (chs 2-3), the volume proceeds through essays on specific themes. Candida Moss (ch. 4) and Alan Dearn (ch. 5) push against earlier views of a fundamental divide between Catholic and Donatist martyr cults, and the modern strategies of interpretation which have reified them. Moss flips the script of Catholic sermons and canons against particular forms of celebration of the martyrs, while Dearn unpacks the problematic arguments used to identify martyr acts as belonging to one side or the other. Both highlight how revered individuals, ritual practices and an undomesticated (cf. p. 60) idea of martyrdom as violent suffering were shared by both sets of communities (to the displeasure of some Catholic bishops). Anna Leone (ch. 14) isolates similar problems in her chapter on the (necessarily limited) ‘archaeology of Donatism’. Her patient survey of possible Donatist sites walks through the (often flimsy) rationales for such identifications—not coincidentally, frequently reliant on inscriptions for martyr shrines—while setting out stronger cases for some particularly significant churches.

Not the least merit of Leone’s paper is its clear demonstration that the Donatist Church was as much an urban as a rural phenomenon (pp. 319-28). Still, as the chapters by Cam Grey (ch. 7) and Bruno Pottier (ch. 8) evince, the impact of the schism on the North African countryside remains significant—and hotly debated. Like a number of late Roman social historians before him, Cam Grey uses accounts of specific African Christian episodes as a window onto agrarian society. Combining these textual anecdotes with survey archaeology and broader Mediterranean comparisons, Grey teases out a complex social model which belies the nakedly asymmetrical relations implicit in many accounts of the colonate. One oft-discussed feature of these rural landscapes is the infamous Circumcellions. Brent Shaw has portrayed these as seasonal agricultural workers spoiling for a (sectarian) fight (accepted by e.g. Lenski, p. 176); Bruno Pottier instead makes the case that they should be seen as wandering ascetics, usefully collecting references to both Catholic and Donatist *sanctimoniales*. Pottier offers a powerful challenge to Shaw, but one perhaps weakened by a tendency to ‘lump’ together various contexts, episodes and terminologies which Shaw (in particular) has been keen to ‘split’.

In reconstructing the Circumcellions, as with most aspects of the Donatist schism. historians are left at the mercy of Augustine of Hippo. The question of how much to trust Augustine—or, perhaps better, just how much to distrust him—is implicit throughout, and central to a number of papers. Jennifer Ebbeler’s reading of Augustine’s *Against Parmenian* (ch. 12) presents a nice worked example of the difficulties posed by the bishop of Hippo’s self-presentation, capturing the complexities of the arguments he made about ‘charitable correction’ of Donatists. Ebbeler walks a fine line: ‘Augustine could *claim*... a sustained effort in good faith’ (p. 296; emphasis mine). Mark Edwards’ account of the theological debates (ch. 6) gives Augustine and his polemical predecessor, Optatus of Milevis, rather more credit for superior argumentative consistency and coherence than many recent commentators, worried about their manipulation of opposing views. As Edwards himself rightly notes, Augustine’s version of Donatist ecclesiology was a ‘caricature’: one which conveniently fit his next opponents, the Pelagians (pp. 117-19). For Richard Miles (ch. 11), this elaborate defamation was crucial to Catholic campaigning against their Christian rivals, whose sense of their distinct ecclesial community was rooted in their separate ‘textual community’. In response, Augustine prodigiously refuted Donatist texts and insistently recast the Donatists as unwilling members of a unified Christian community. For Miles, as for Noel Lenski (p. 186), Augustine’s agency was ‘decisive’ (p. 282); Éric Rebillard (ch. 13) likewise portrays him as ‘the official writer of the African church’ (p. 316), noting the coincidence of his anti-Donatist literary output—and his systematic refutations in particular—with key moments of Catholic lobbying.

The fruits of that lobbying receive fascinatingly contrasting treatments in chapters by Noel Lenski (ch. 9) and Neil McLynn (ch. 10). Lenski provides a focused narrative of the petitions and legislative interventions which helped to shape the two churches (with a lengthy appendix [pp. 197-219] listing the relevant documents). McLynn, meanwhile, reassesses the Conference of Carthage of 411 from the perspective of the various interested parties in the Baths of Gargilius. His close reading of the transcript leads to conclusions which diverge profoundly from the interpretations of the same events by Lenski (pp. 184-86) and Miles (pp. 274-80): the imperial arbiter Marcellinus was much more even-handed, and the Catholics, much more divided, than has hitherto been recognized; it is the Donatist bishops who emerge from 411 as a coordinated and cohesive ecclesiastical party. Particularly significant here is McLynn’s portrayal of Augustine and his most prominent colleagues as a cosmopolitan Proconsular pressure group out of touch with the Numidian members of the Catholic ‘coalition’ they claimed to lead: a viewintriguingly compatible with the arguments of Moss and Dearn on everyday experience of the martyrs. If accepted, this version of the councils of the 390s and 400s would cast the bishop of Hippo’s interventions and historical agency in a rather different light.

Ongoing (perhaps irreconcilable?) debate is also obvious in various reflections on the aftermath of the conference, and occasional counter-factual speculation on what might have happened in Africa if the Vandal conquest had not intervened. A Donatist community already ‘broken’ by 420 (Miles, p. 266)? An increasingly ‘Orwellian’ legal pursuit of dissidents (Lenski, p. 196)? Or an ongoing stalemate between uninterested officials, disorganized Catholics, and the remaining Donatists (reading between the lines of McLynn, p. 248)? Of course, Geiseric *et al* did turn up in 429; Jonathan Conant (ch. 15) sets out what we can (and cannot) know about Donatist communities in Vandal and Byzantine Africa. Surprisingly little evidence of the Christians formerly known as Donatists survives after the 430s, partly because new Christian controversies drew the energies of polemicists. From fleeting references, Conant sketches out a convincingly textured picture. Donatists could either assimilate to the new Nicene and Homoian ecclesiastical factions, or remain distinct, as part of a process which was ‘piecemeal, highly contingent and deeply contextualised in local circumstances’ (p. 361).

This concluding statement could stand as a ‘take-home message’ from the volume as a whole. Whether they draw on polemical literature, imperial edicts or martyrial inscriptions, all of these studies suggest that how and how much the Donatist schism mattered varied greatly to different people, in different times, places and situations. These manifold cultural meanings are part of the reason why no overarching conclusion emerges on this intractable Christian dispute. Instead, by allowing frequent internal disagreements, this volume presents strong cases for most of the positions a modern student could take on important aspects of the schism. I use the word ‘student’ on purpose: through these clearly argued papers, *The Donatist Schism* opens up a set of complex debates on a gripping subject to an upper-level undergraduate audience. More than that, by bringing to bear the critical approaches of recent scholarship on the late-antique Mediterranean, this volume highlights the possibilities of new syntheses of Christianity in late Roman Africa: ones which might offer alternatives to the fundamental divide repeatedly invoked by the controversy’s most vocal protagonists.

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