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From Augustine  
to Gregory the Great

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History and Christianity in Late Antiquity



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## Reflections on Religious Dissent in North Africa in the Byzantine Period

There are good reasons for historians' preferring to write history proceeding from the earlier in time to the later. Why, after all, should they ignore time's one-way arrow? On occasion, however, it is useful to reverse the normal procedure.

The history of North African Christianity, and especially the history of the tradition of dissent in it, is a case in point. The literature of the Donatist schism of the fourth and fifth centuries is comparatively rich. It is tempting, having crystallized an image of Donatism on the strength of it, to find the same image displayed again during the Vandal or the Byzantine period, periods for which our information is very much more fragmentary. The assumption that there is such a continuity may work in either or both of two ways. It may distort the real bearings of scanty material by the concern to fit it into the pattern; also, or alternatively, it may prevent the historian from noticing affinities with movements which seem at first sight to lack the features singled out as a qualification for entry into the pattern. I drew attention to an example of the first kind of distortion in a paper read two years ago to the Ecclesiastical History Society.<sup>1</sup> I argued that the image of the Donatist Church derived from the fourth and early fifth centuries is totally inappropriate to the alleged 'Donatist revival' of the late sixth century. In the present paper I wish to examine a phase of religious dissent in Africa some half a century earlier, during the controversies over the condemnation of the 'three chapters.' This controversy, the issues at stake and its course, do not in themselves concern us

<sup>1</sup> 'Donatism: the last phase,' *Studies in Church History*, I (1964).

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here. They have been traced by historians of the fifth Ecumenical Council, notably by Eduard Schwartz<sup>1</sup> and by Erich Caspar,<sup>2</sup> to name only the two most outstanding of the scholars who have dealt with this theme. The only specific examination of the African Church's part in this episode is a fine study by a pupil of Caspar's.<sup>3</sup> This does not, however, attempt to treat the theme in relation to the long history of African dissent; and so far as I know, the African opposition to Justinian's *Kirchenpolitik* has never been so treated, except by contemporaries, who were sometimes only too ready with the charge that it was a new Donatist schism. The purpose of this paper is to examine the African Church's part in this affair, not from the point of view of the historian of the Church under Justinian, nor considering it in relation to a span of papal history (over which it might in any case be preferable to pass in embarrassed silence), but specifically as a slice of the history of dissent in the North African Church. I want to ask, in particular, whether some of our recent preoccupations with Donatism have not, perhaps, been responsible for concealing from us links which may exist between this and other phases of dissent in African Christianity.

The African Church was not alone in opposing Justinian's attempt to reconcile some Monophysite groups by the expedient of condemning the 'three chapters.' The Western Church was, on the whole, united in protest against a move which it saw as a betrayal of Chalcedon. From the beginning, however, it was African churchmen who took the lead. It was Africans who worked out most carefully the theological case against Justinian; Africans stood by the vacillating Pope Vigilius in Constantinople, exerting themselves—along with Bishop Datius of Milan

<sup>1</sup> 'Zur Kirchenpolitik Justinians,' *SB. Bay. Akad. Wiss., phil.-hist. Abt.*, (1940), 32-81; reprinted in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Berlin 1960, IV, 276-328.

<sup>2</sup> *Geschichte des Papsttums*, Tübingen 1933, II, 234-305.

<sup>3</sup> W. Pewesin, 'Imperium, ecclesia universalis, Rom: der Kampf der afrikanischen Kirche um die Mitte des 6. Jahrhunderts,' *Geistige Grundlagen römischer Kirchenpolitik (Forschungen zur Kirchen- und Geistesgeschichte, XI)*, Stuttgart 1937. More briefly also discussed by A. Grillmeier, 'Vorbereitung des Mittelalters,' *Das Konzil von Chalkedon*, ed. A. Grillmeier & H. Bacht, Würzburg 1953, II, 791-839; on Africa, 807-814.

and the Roman deacon Pelagius—to strengthen the pope's will to resist; and it was Africans who felt the full weight of the imperial machinery of repression.<sup>1</sup> During the five years of negotiation which preceded the Council of 553, it seems to have become clear to the imperial government that the main centre of opposition to its policies was the African Church. Justinian's 'second edict' against the 'three chapters' is, in some of its sections, evidently conceived as a reply to arguments advanced by Facundus, bishop of Hermiane in Byzacena, in his great work devoted to their defence.<sup>2</sup> This curious piece of self-justification by the imperial theologian goes out of its way to strengthen its case by invoking specifically African material in its support.<sup>3</sup> In other ways, too, the government seems to have felt particularly concerned about Africa. No Western bishops could be got to attend the projected Council; but only in Africa did the administration go to the lengths of rounding up bishops whose support could be bought or extorted. The operation appears to have been conceived as involving an attack on the African Church: Italy, Gaul, and Illyricum could be allowed to ignore the Council, but Africa must be got to comply, whatever the cost. Why the imperial government should have singled out Africa for its attention is not clear. African churchmen had, of course, been in a leading and exposed position from an early stage in the proceedings; and in its Council in 550 at Carthage, the African Church had excommunicated the pope and had thus gone formally into schism. Resistance may have been widespread in the West; but we shall not be far wrong if we follow the lead of the imperial government in looking to Africa as the chief source of the intellectual vitality and of the moral strength behind it.

<sup>1</sup> For an account of the whole episode, cf. Caspar, *op. cit.*, L. Duchesne, *L'Église au sixième siècle*, Paris 1925, 156-218, and for the African Church, C. Diehl, *L'Afrique byzantine*, Paris 1896, II, 434-49.

<sup>2</sup> Compare Justinian's *ὁμολογία πίστεως* (Mansi IX, 537-82; also edited by E. Schwartz, *Abh. Bay. Akad. Wiss., Phil.-hist. Kl.*, NF, XVIII(1939), 72-111) at 576-7 (Mansi; = 106-8 in Schwartz) with Facundus, *Pro def. VII*. Cf. Pewesin, *op. cit.*, 140.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the quotation from Augustine's *Ep.* 185 and from the African canons at IX, 577D (Mansi; = 108, lines 26-34 in Schwartz).

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Contemporaries were quick with the charge that the African dissenters constituted a new Donatist schism.<sup>1</sup> Was there any substance in such charges? Or is the assimilation of the African Church in 550 to the Donatist Church no more than a cheap polemical device? To answer questions of this kind, we may look in two directions. First, we may try to compare the two movements of protest in respect of the social groupings from which each of them drew its strength. Secondly, we may compare the theological expression of their respective standpoints.

The first comparison is difficult for two reasons: we are still far from agreed about the social forces operative in the Donatist schism; further, the evidence for the sixth century is scarce in comparison with that for the fourth and fifth. It is particularly hazardous to estimate the volume of support behind the opposition put up by African churchmen to Justinian. Victor of Tonnenna, himself one of the dissenting bishops, supplies a handful of names of African bishops who were deposed and sent into exile<sup>2</sup>; others, like Facundus, went into hiding.<sup>3</sup> Liberatus, the Carthaginian deacon who also wrote a brief account of the affair, concludes his work with an allusion to the state of things in the African Church: it is too well known, he says,<sup>4</sup> to require description that the African episcopate now consisted entirely of men corrupted by imperial bribes, the rest having been sent into exile or having fled from persecution. We may infer that among the episcopate, at least, there was a wide measure of support for the protest formally made at the Council of 550. Notwithstanding all the efforts of the Prefect of Africa to round up bishops whose compliance could be bought or secured by threats, only eight Africans appear among the signatories of the decrees of Justinian's Council. Concerning popular resistance we know even less. In Carthage, we learn,<sup>5</sup> Bishop

<sup>1</sup> *C. Mor.*, Pl, LXVII, 857 B.

<sup>2</sup> *Chron.*, s.a. 550-556 (MGH, AA, XI, *Chronica minora*, ed. T. Mommsen, II).

<sup>3</sup> *C. Mor.*, 855 C.

<sup>4</sup> *Brev.* 24, Pl, LXVIII, 1049.

<sup>5</sup> Victor Tonn., *Chron.*, s.a. 552; cf. the letter of the Italian clerics in MGH, *Epp.*, III, 440.

Reparatus had been among the opposition bishops. He was tried in Constantinople on his arrival on a trumped-up charge and sent into exile. His successor, nominated by the emperor, had to be established in the see in the face of resistance by clergy and people, by the imperial army, with the shedding, as we are told, of much innocent blood. In the province of Byzacena, Justinian had won over Bishop Primasius by permitting him to succeed to the primacy of the province. He, too, found it necessary to establish himself with the aid of *validissimis persecutionibus*.<sup>1</sup> From such scraps of information we may say at any rate that there was some popular resistance. Whether it amounted to more than local loyalty to individual bishops, we cannot say. And in contrast with the mass-support behind the Donatist leaders of the fourth and fifth centuries, it is striking that we hear less about Numidia than about Carthage and the province of Byzacena, both of them provinces on the whole more Romanised than the interior of Numidia. This may, of course, be no more than an accident of the surviving evidence. After all, the writers for whom we depend for our information are bishops and deacons of the Church of Carthage and of Byzacena; there may have been a wider measure of popular protest than they allow us to guess, and in any case we must bear in mind the much weakened state of Christianity in Numidia.<sup>2</sup> But one cannot but be struck by the apparent ease with which so many bishops—the primate of Numidia among them—allowed imperial threats, bribes, or pressure to secure their compliance. On the whole the roots of dissent seem, in the main, to be theological rather than social. If the African Church again lives in the age of the martyrs, it is more in its theological formulation of the place occupied by the Church in secular society than in its readiness to accept martyrdom, or even to seek martyrdom with Donatist avidity. In this respect there is nothing in the evidence we have that suggests the existence of a mass-movement of protest with the sort of tenacity which was characteristic of the Donatist Church in its classical age.

<sup>1</sup> Victor Tonn., *Chron.*, s.a. 552.2.

<sup>2</sup> I owe this reminder to the Rev. Professor S. L. Greenslade.

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When we turn to our second question, and consider the theological expression of this dissenting movement in Justinian's *Reichskirche*, the links with Donatism, and beyond it, with a distinctively African tradition, stand out more sharply. Re-baptism, the central point at stake between Catholics and Donatists, is, of course, no longer a live issue now.<sup>1</sup> The whole range of sacramental theology bound up with the question about the validity and efficacy of sacramental action and of the sacramental ministry has now lost its relevance. We are in a new world with new problems. Donatism is a literary memory, and Augustine has become a name to conjure with—on both sides. But all the same, the debate is curiously reminiscent of the debates between Augustine and his Donatist opponents a century and a half ago. Some of the fundamental issues at stake, which Facundus's work against Mocianus allows us to glimpse, fall easily into the pattern of the earlier controversies. Mocianus, we gather,<sup>2</sup> had in the end got round to conceding that the condemnation of the 'three chapters' was wrong. But, he argued, their defenders should never have gone to the lengths of breaking communion with the 'enemies of the Church.' He appealed to Augustine's approach to the Donatists in support of his attitude: the cockle should be tolerated in the Church. Facundus's reply is substantially nothing more nor less than a defence against the charge of being party to a new Donatist schism. The arguments used by

<sup>1</sup> In my paper referred to in note 1 above, I considered the papal formularies which speak of rebaptism, and I argued that they cannot be used as evidence for the survival of Donatism. At that time I agreed with Dr Friend's view that the *rebaptizati* referred to in these formulae must mean Donatists. This, however, is mistaken. Since the formula occurs for the first time during the pontificate of Gelasius I in the 490's (cf. JK 675, PL LIX, 137-8), it is much more natural to read it in relation to the provisions made at the Roman Synod of 487 for the treatment of African *rebaptizati* (cf. JK 609, among the letters of Felix III, PL LVIII, 924). The *rebaptizati* here referred to are, of course, those who apostatized to Arianism during the persecution of 484 by Huneric. Victor of Vita gives plenty of examples of this rebaptism. I conclude that not only the survival, but the origin of the formula has nothing to do with Donatism. In general, the whole of the evidence for the survival of Donatism in the Vandal period and later requires reassessment.

<sup>2</sup> *C.Moc.*, 855 C.

Mocianus and his like were the classical Augustinian positions. Facundus spares no trouble to draw out the differences between his own situation and that of the Donatists attacked by Augustine<sup>1</sup> and to reject the identification with Donatism; but in spite of all his pains, the reader of his later work is left with the overwhelming impression that we are very close to a characteristically African stance of dissent—even though it is now dissent inspired by a sense of fidelity to conciliar decisions, especially to those of Chalcedon.

The arguments, and their relations to Augustine's and to those of the Donatist writers of his time, could do with a scrutiny which is beyond the limits of this paper. As a reminder of their place in a distinctively African tradition it is enough, for the present, to notice that the dissenters of the sixth century still saw themselves as the heirs of Cyprian, even though they rejected his views on rebaptism<sup>2</sup>; and that their dissent comes to a sharp focus at two points on which we may almost be tempted to speak of an African orthodoxy: the Emperor's place in the Church, and the autonomy of provincial churches in the face of Rome. I confine myself here to some remarks on each of these two points.

In regard to the first point, we can discern in Facundus's writings a gradually hardening attitude towards the emperor. The famous twelfth book of his *Pro defensione trium capitulorum* is a passionate, though moderately expressed plea to Justinian to keep out of meddling with what is the business of bishops; to show himself, unlike Zeno, a father of the commonwealth and a true son of the Church, as Marcian had shown himself, at that time *christianæ libertatis*, and not to coerce councils, not to harass the Church *spontaneis quaestionibus*.<sup>3</sup> The tone of the loyal subject is less to the fore in his work against Mocianus. Here the *Reichskirche* is likened to that 'way to hell' on which the Church had entered at Sirmium, Ariminum, and Seleucia, in

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 858 B.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. e.g. *Pro def.* X, 3; *C. Moc.*, 864 B-C; *Ep. fid. cath.*, 875.

<sup>3</sup> *Pro def.* XII, 3.

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its anxiety to comply with Constantius's will.<sup>1</sup> In his last work, written perhaps some fifteen years after the Council from his remote hide-out, the attack on the whole dispensation of the *Reichskirche* is sharper in tone. The heretics have accepted doctrines imposed *iussionibus palatinis*, against apostolic precept<sup>2</sup>; how can those who communicate with heretics escape the taint of heresy? The Catholic faith and the *pax christiana* are not to be found within the walls of 'manufactured churches—there is a marvellous ambiguity, fully exploited, in that *manufactas ecclesias*!—sustained by the support of the imperial palace, their Catholic bishops deposed.'<sup>3</sup> God alone is to judge the dead in the vale of Jehosaphat; and, asks Facundus, is Constantinople Jehosaphat?<sup>4</sup>

The rhetorical question is not the only reminder of Tertullian here. We can glimpse behind Facundus's words a vision of the secular world not so very far removed from that of Tertullian's. Facundus's are uncompromising words; but they contain no more than a development of the views he had expressed in more polite and more politic language at a time when there was still hope of reaching an understanding in Constantinople. The underlying image of the Church's place in the Empire has not changed. Old Facundus may have been, and ill (he was too weak, he tells us, to fast even till the third hour), and perhaps embittered by the isolation of a long exile. But bitterness and isolation apart, his thought stands in profound continuity with much that is typically African in early Christian ecclesiology. Here we find again that sense of independence, not only as against the secular authorities, but also *vis à vis* the papacy. In following the African contribution to the debate over the 'three chapters' one cannot help being struck by the fragility of the alliance between Carthage and Rome. Forged in the heat of the Pelagian controversy by Augustine and Aurelius, renewed on the morrow of the Byzantine liberation from Vandal rule,

<sup>1</sup> *C. Moc.*, 867.

<sup>2</sup> *Ep. fid. cath.*, 868 C.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 871 C.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 876 C. Cf. Donatu's famous *Quid est imperatori cum ecclesia?*, in Opt., *De schism.* III, 3.

the link was still real when Ferrandus, the Carthaginian deacon, wrote at an early stage of the 'three chapters' proceedings to the Roman deacons Pelagius and Anatolius. But already there is an ominous stress on the primacy of conciliar authority.<sup>1</sup> It is toned down by the qualification that the authority of a council is conditional on its reception by the Church. The papacy takes a quite subordinate place in this qualification;<sup>2</sup> but even this disappears in Facundus's more elaborate account of ecclesiastical authority, cast, as it is, in more uncompromisingly conciliar terms.<sup>3</sup> Facundus was very conscious of being the mouthpiece of a distinctively Latin theological tradition. In him what he once referred to<sup>4</sup> as the *pietas et constantia ecclesiae Latinorum* receives articulate expression. That this Latin tradition owed more to Africa than to Rome has been shown, perhaps with not quite sufficient emphasis, by Pewesin's fine study. The place occupied in it by Augustine, and the affinities between the two theologians' conceptions of authority in the Church, are of some interest. 'This adamantine man,' as Facundus once refers to Augustine, could inspire a somewhat different attitude to both the papal and the imperial authorities than that which he was himself, at one time or another, driven to adopt.<sup>5</sup>

There are clear affinities between the thought of African churchmen such as Ferrandus and Facundus, and a long tradition of thinking about the Church in relation to papal and to secular authority. The Donatist movement—whatever its social, cultural, economic or ethnic roots—had appropriated this tradition in its rejection of the Constantinian settlement. Now, the African Church drew on it again in its protest against Justinian's *Reichskirche*. Of the alleged Donatist revival at the end of the sixth century we know very little<sup>6</sup>; of its theology—if it had

<sup>1</sup> *Ep.* 6.2, PL, LXVII, 922.

<sup>2</sup> *Ep.* 6.7, and 6.9, *Ibid.*, cols. 926 B and 927.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Pro def.* XII, 2, etc. On this theme, see the excellent discussion by Pewesin, *op. cit.*, especially 23-38 and 84-5.

<sup>4</sup> *Pro def.* IX, 5, PL, LXVII, 766 B.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. especially *Ep. fid. cath.*, 877-8 for a fine example.

<sup>6</sup> I have scrutinized the evidence for this alleged revival in my paper referred to in note 1 above, and concluded that it will not bear the customary interpretation.

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any—nothing whatever. All that is clear about it is that the centre of dissent lay once again in the interior of Numidia, and that the papacy and the government agreed at least in disapproving of it. It had no theological occasion such as had provoked dissent over the condemnation of the 'three chapters,' and there is no evidence of its maintaining any special doctrine or practice incompatible with orthodoxy. All we may confidently say is that the Numidian Christians of whom Pope Gregory I spoke as 'Donatists' were men who set great store by the autonomy of the Church in their own province. Perhaps some of these communities were descendants of those who had seen, in the previous generation, the imposition of imperial nominees on their sees; or, more likely, the resurgence of dissent has to be related in some fashion to the revival of a non-Roman, Berber Christianity. Whatever the answer, the persistence and volume of dissent throughout the history of African Christianity is striking enough to prompt the historian to seek an underlying thread behind the changing forms. The Church of Tertullian and Cyprian, the Church of Donatus and Parmenian, the Church of Ferrandus and Facundus, are all stamped with a common character; and some of its features are to be discerned even in the Church of Augustine and Aurelius. It is a character with a vitality which made itself felt again in the seventh century, when the opposition to monothelitism, rallied around Maximus, had its mainstay in the African Church. But by then the days of imperial rule in Africa were numbered. Within half a century of the African rebellion against Constans II (645), a rebellion with wide popular support, especially among the Berber tribes, Africa was in Arab hands. With the silence which now descends on the African Church one great theme in the theology of ecclesiastical authority—a theme which diverged radically from both the Roman and the Constantinopolitan themes—is extinguished for something like seven hundred years.