

EFFECTS OF THE SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT ON SAINT AUGUSTINE'S THEOLOGY¹

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Abstract. The present study aims to explore the sociopolitical background of Augustine's theology by way of analysing three of his letters. Augustine's letters contain a number of elements that contribute to our understanding how changes in the social conditions influenced the bishop's views concerning issues such as free will, sin, or freedom. In addition, we can also observe that Augustine was preoccupied with social issues still relevant today such as migration, taking care of refugees, death sentence, or the relationship between state power and freedom.

Keywords: Augustine of Hippo, Donatism, Pelagianism, Numidia, Matron, Human Trafficking, Ethnic conflict, Migration, Council of Diospolis, Antonius of Fussala.

Introduction

Each of Saint Augustine's letters³ represent a window into the Church Father's time: the Bishop of Hippo does not only address the topical religious issues, but the historical age he lived in is also revealed to us. By reading the letters, we can see more clearly that his attention being focused on one or the other theological question was not incidental, but the practical issue to be resolved was intrinsically linked to the development of the religious subjects.

However, the letters make no reference whatsoever to these volumes rather, they focus on his *Confessions*. This paper is centred on three of his letters in an

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³ SAINT AUGUSTINE: Letters. Vol. VI. In: HALTON, Thomas P. (1989): *The Fathers of the Church*. Vol. 81. Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press. In Hungarian version: *Szent Ágoston levelei* (2004): Máriabesnyő – Gödöllő: Attraktor. Transl. by Hajnal Óbis [Original publication: *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin, Lettres 1–29* (1987). Paris: Études Augustiniennes].

attempt to present the social vision emerging from them and to look for connections between the social situation and Augustine's views. Throughout the selection process, the aim was to single out letters that are not limited to a few incidental remarks on Augustine's public role. Having this in mind, I have chosen the letters numbered 4, 10, and 20. Being absolutely unrelated, each of these will report on a different aspect of the first third of the 5th century.

Some Characteristics of Augustine's Age

History usually defines this age as a period of transition when the fall of the Western Roman Empire triggers a gradual transition in the Mediterranean area from antiquity into the early Middle Ages, the most prominent feature is Christianity taking up an increasingly powerful position in the social fabric, the constant movement of nomadic peoples, and the dissolution of conventional state/political structures. An emblematic event of the era took place just before writing his letters and his book *De Civitate Dei*: led by Alaric I, the Goths invaded and destroyed the city of Rome in the year 410. Byzantologist Ostrogorsky calls our attention to the fact that the root causes of this event are to be looked for in the Balkan region, where a general anti-Gothic stance becomes prevalent in the wake of the policy pursued by Constantinople, subsequent upon which the Goths migrate further away once having passed through Rome.⁴ I find this worth mentioning because more interethnic divisions will be unfolded as we move on with our story. As it is common knowledge that the concept of political nation in the present-day sense was inexistent in those times, we can most probably talk about differences patterned along linguistic and religious lines. The disaster that has befallen Rome made everyone wonder why it had happened. Non-Christians of the age and put the blame on Christianity for ushering in a new, dark age;⁵ but Augustine rejects this view and sees a natural course of the events, a God-ordained process: "Although the Roman empire is afflicted rather than changed,-a thing which has befallen it in other times also, before the name of Christ was heard, and it has been restored after such affliction,-a thing which even in these

⁴ OSTROGORSKY, Georg (2003): *A bizánci állam története. [Byzantinische Geschichte]* Budapest: Osiris. 66.

⁵ KLANICZAY GÁBOR (ed.) (2005): *Európa ezer éve: a középkor [A Thousand Years of Europe: The Middle Ages]*. Vol. I. Budapest: Osiris. 88.

times is not to be despaired of. For who knows the will of God concerning this matter?"⁶ The only question left for him is who would be reckoned among those who belong to the city of God. Many consider Augustine to be pessimistic in this regard thinking that there will be only a few finding salvation and the masses (*massa damnata*) will suffer eternal damnation. Nevertheless, the letters – e.g. the soon-to-be-discussed Letter No. 4 – indicate that he was of a much less radical mindset.

Letter No. 4: The Synod of Diospolis

This letter was sent in response to Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, who had inquired whether Augustine was the author of the book entitled *De gesti Pelagii*. The Bishop of Hippo confirms that he wrote the aforementioned work and goes on to narrate the developments of the debate with Pelagius, who, following their debate, left Carthage and headed for Palestine.

There, the Synod of Diospolis acquitted Pelagius in 415, as the monk, propagator of false doctrines, took advantage of the Greeks' modest knowledge of Latin and presented himself as a true Catholic.⁷ At this point, a brief analysis will follow of what we know about the Synod of Diospolis and the Greek–Latin differences.

The full name of the city was Colonia Lucia Septimia Severa Diospolis, named Lydda in Byzantine times and presently known as Lud. Its name reveals that it was founded and dedicated to the gods by Emperor Septimius Severus on the site of an earlier settlement. It became a Christian city relatively early in its existence, but it remains unclear as to who was the incumbent bishop at the time of writing the letter and during the synod held there, as the one mentioned by Saint Jerome, Dionysius, had already passed away.⁸ The synod took place at the end of July 415, with Iberian Orosius first conveying the African bishops' condemnatory position concerning Pelagius and then announcing the decisions of the 411 Conference of Carthage. Several participants quoted Jerome's anti-Pelagianist writings as well. Finally, Pelagius, having delivered a successful speech, convinced the majority

⁶ AUGUSTINE of Hippo (2004): *The City of God*. Transl. Marchs Dods, Edinburgh: T&T Clark. 254. [Original work: AUGUSTINUS: *De civitate Dei* IV. 7].

⁷ Saint AUGUSTINE: *Letters* (1989), 41.

⁸ ZELINGER, Y. – DI SEGNI, L. (2006). A Fourth-Century Church near Lod (Diospolis). In: *Liber Annuus*. 50/2006. 464.

of those present that he had been wrongfully convicted in Carthage, and consequently the synod would declare him a true Catholic.⁹

Bishop Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, did his best to stay away from this debate, considering it an internal matter of the Latin churches. In the aforementioned Letter No. 4, thus, Augustine briefly outlines the essential ideas of the debate: Pelagius takes the view that he who is good will find salvation right after his death, but who has even the slightest sin – at the time of his death – will be damned. By contrast, Augustine makes reference to 1 Cor 3:13–15 and speaks about purification, as everyone is sinful, but it is inconceivable that everyone will suffer eternal damnation. The fire of purification is a metaphor for the painfulness of repentance, and it occurs either before death or immediately following it. The other point of the debate is discussed in some of his further letters: according to Pelagius, unbaptized children who die at a young age have no need of redemption, which Augustine finds unacceptable as we all inherit Adam's –sinful – nature. As postulated by the Bishop of Hippo, this dispute is incomprehensible for the Greek bishops because they do not have a good command of the Latin language.¹⁰ We can gain a more accurate understanding of the prevailing cultural conditions if we consider to the fact that at the university founded in Constantinople in the 5th century by Emperor Theodosius II, there were ten Greek and three Latin as well as five Greek and three Latin professors teaching grammar and rhetoric respectively.¹¹ This indicates clear that Latin did not have a prestigious status in the eastern parts of the empire, and most scholars did not even speak the language.

Eastern theologians had difficulty understanding the debate that ensued between Augustine and Pelagius also because they see grace closely interlinked with the person of the Holy Spirit: good deeds are the manifestation of the Holy Spirit('s energy) in life.¹² Many tended to view the Greek/Orthodox position as semi-Pelagianism, as outwardly people of faith can do good and lead a sinless life without any external assistance, but when understood correctly, the Greek conception also takes the grace of the Holy Spirit as the essential source of all good

⁹ PIER FRANCO, Beatrice (2014): Chromatius and Jovinus at the Synod of Diospolis: A Prosopographical Inquiry. *Journal of Early Christian Studies*. 22. 3. 438.

¹⁰ SAINT AUGUSTINE: *Letters* (1989), 43.

¹¹ OSTROGORSKY (2003), 66.

¹² STĂNILOAE, Dumitru (1997): *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă* [Orthodox Dogmatic Theology], vol. II, Bucharest: Institutul Biblic și de Misiune. 144.

deeds.¹³ In any case, there is a perceptible difference in emphasis in this matter between the Orthodox and the Catholic position.

Letter No. 10: Migration and Human Trafficking

Let us now pass on to Letter No. 10, which Augustine addressed to his long-time friend and his fellow bishop from Thagaste, Alypius, around 422-423.¹⁴ He describes a phenomenon that has several aspects still relevant today: a major issue in the province of Numidia was human trafficking. Traffickers going by the name of mangos among the locals and identified as Galatians by Augustine enslaved people from outside the imperial borders as well as Numidians and packed them on ships to sell them as slaves. Even barbarians give a better treatment to slaves, recounts Augustine, since one can buy the slaves out from them, but human traffickers are only driven by profiteering. Emperor Honorius made efforts to put an end to it by enacting a law, but Augustine refrained from administrative procedures given that those convicted of human trafficking were practically sentenced to death, an act he did not agree with. The bishop himself and several members of the church have already freed hundreds of prisoners by way of buying them out, but this has exceeded the church's capabilities, and the human traffickers were threatening the latter with legal proceedings at that. It is not unlikely that these were the very events that urged Augustine in writing about enslavement to sin in his *De civitate Dei* to use expressions alluding to this sort of captivity: "Better, I say, is war with the hope of peace everlasting than captivity without any thought of deliverance."¹⁵ For Augustine, man's social dimension must always be inherent to ideal human existence and the value of human life, while active solidarity must be part of the path towards perfection.¹⁶

Who were the Galatian traffickers and barbarians mentioned by Augustine? It should be first noted that Augustine's description does not refer to classic slav-

¹³ ZĂGREAN, Ioan – TODORAN, Isidor (2009), *Dogmatica Ortodoxă* [Orthodox Dogmatics], Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea. 214–221.

¹⁴ SAINT AUGUSTINE: Letters. (1989), 88.

¹⁵ SZENT ÁGOSTON (2005), XXI/15. 408. „Melius est, inquam, bellum cum spe aeternae pacis, quam sine ulla liberationis cogitatione captivitas.” S. Aurelii AUGUSTINI, *De civitate Dei*. MPL 41. 729.

¹⁶ CORCORAN, Gervase (1990): Prayer and Solidarity in Saint Augustine. In: *The Downside Review*. 108. 372. 160.

ery. Slaves in the conventional sense were often seen as members of the owner family,¹⁷ whereas these captivated or sold people received no favourable treatment whatsoever, as Augustine describes it in detail in his letter. Although there were prisoners coming from other regions too, the report leads us to conclude that the vast majority of them were inhabitants of the Numidian province taken away or sold on some pretext or another. This is also corroborated by research claiming that no movement of African slaves could be traced from the sub-Saharan region towards Numidia.¹⁸ Accordingly, liberating them was not against the law, yet the injured party could initiate a lawsuit for having lost his property. These slaves were entitled to apply to Constantine's law under which anyone who could take refuge in a church would be given sanctuary.¹⁹ For Augustine, this is more than simply a matter of providing asylum – it should be rather proven to the world that slavery in Christian teaching is a consequence of sin: not the sin of the slave but that of the society; it is upsetting the order of creation and violating the laws of nature since man as the carrier of the image and likeness of God cannot possibly be the property of another creation.²⁰

As far as human traffickers are concerned, Augustine identifies them as Galatians from Phrygia. What is known about them is that they are the descendants of certain Celtic tribes that migrated from Gaul to the central parts of Anatolia in the 4th-3rd centuries BC, where they preserved their tribalism, military leadership, and warrior lifestyle. In the process of Hellenization, their language came under the influence of Greek, yet in the early 5th century AD Saint Jerome was still unable to demonstrate its relatedness to the Gallic dialect of the Trier region. The province of Phrygia came to be incorporated into the Roman Empire while retaining its characteristic features and high degree of independence. Providing

¹⁷ SALLER, Richard P. – SHAW, Brent D. (1984): Tombstone and Roman Family in the Principate: Civilians, Soldiers and Slaves. In: *The Journal of Roman Studies*. 74/1984. 124.

¹⁸ SCHEIDEL, Walter (ed.) (2008): *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 740.

¹⁹ BRADLEY, Keith R. (1994): *Slavery and Society at Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 158.

²⁰ DEANE, Herbert A. (1963): *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*. New York–London: Columbia University Press. 113–114.

mercenary troops for wars waged in foreign lands and slave trading accounted for a considerable part of their income.²¹

Augustine repeatedly notes that human traffickers do not belong to the group of barbarians, who often treat their slaves more humanely and are also present on the territory of Numidia. The Term Barbarian should be understood as a collective term used mostly for various Germanic tribes living on the territory of the empire already from the 4th-5th centuries, many of them even joining the Roman army. Looking at the situation on the ground in North Africa, the Vandals were of the greatest significance, while other Germanic tribes were also present in the region. In the light of relevant research, it appears probable that there were some Vandal groups in the Hippo Regius area of Carthage even prior to the great invasion of 429. Archaeological evidence linked to the Vandals suggest that their lifestyle was not too different from that of the Romans. Another notable group of barbarians were the Moors, who made a more significant contribution to transforming the image of North Africa.²²

Letter No. 20: The Issue of the Punic Christians

The final letter to be discussed herein features Augustine narrating a quite lengthy story to matron Fabiola. The way the story goes, through his intercession, Antonius, a barely 20-year-old monk whom Augustine had taken care of since he was a child, was appointed the Bishop of Fussala, a town near Hippo Regius. As time went on, however, the young man grew into an arrogant person and gathered around himself a gang formed of presbyters and deacons with whom he would go on regular looting expeditions against the neighbouring Punic villages. These were Donatist settlements whose inhabitants had come back into the folds of the Catholic Church as a result of Augustine's activities. Now they felt betrayed because of Antonius and blamed Augustine for the resulting situation. An increasing number of them began to leave the church in frustration. Aurelius, Primate of Numidia and Bishop of Macomades, and Augustine convened several councils to review this matter and listen to the complaints. Antonius was relieved

²¹ DARBYSHIRE, Gareth – MITCHEL, Stephen – VARDAR, Levent (2000): The Galatian Settlement in Asia Minor. In: *Anatolian Studies*. 50/2000. 94.

²² VON RUMMEL, Philip (2010): The Archaeology of the 5th-Century Barbarians in North Africa. In: Delogu, Paolo – Gaspari, Stefano (eds.), *Le trasformazioni del V secolo: L'Italia, i barbari e l'Occidente romani: Atti del Seminario di Poggibonsi*. Turnhout: Brepols. 157–181.

of his diocesan leadership duties in Fussala, but, by way of compensation, eight nearby villages were given into his care, where the young bishop had several estates, and Thogonoetum became his designated residence. However, neither the villagers nor the local matron was willing to accept Antonius as their bishop. The local people rightfully revolted against the decision considering that Antonius and his companions had repeatedly sacked their villages and acted violently towards them. The matron admitted, however, that she said no at Antonius's request because this was the way the young man wanted to have the Council of Tegulata reinstate him as Bishop of Fussala, where he had his largest estate. When both the Primate Aurelius and perhaps Augustine himself seemed inclined to fulfil the request, the Punic locals as well as the Latin settlers expressed their disappointment and threatened to leave the church and the region altogether. The council eventually rejected Antonius's request, who then planned to submit the case to the Holy See, to Pope Boniface. Antonius had written to the Pope before, and his letter indicated that he had good relations with Rome, one of the addressees being matron Fabiola. Augustine asks the matron to join forces in protecting the results of the struggle against the Donatists, as the region has already suffered from it, and now everything seems to be falling apart. In concrete terms, he asks Fabiola to dissuade Antonius from appealing to the pope when in Rome.²³

I find this a very intriguing letter that gives us a first-row view of the structure and functioning of the contemporary Numidian Church, improves our understanding of the local social conditions and the sociocultural background of Donatism, and, last but not least, provides insight into how some women had considerable ecclesiastical and political influence.

The institution of matrons was a reality throughout the Roman history. Its representatives were distinguished and learned women who lived as single ladies and disposed of a large fortune at a certain point in their lives. As a rule, they had a good command of several languages, knew their way around politics, and were generous supporters of artists.²⁴ Once Christianity was adopted by the Roman Empire, they became prominent supporters of the church, thus gaining an increased influence and getting to have a say in who should be holding the various ecclesiastical offices pertaining to the parish churches situated on the territory

²³ Saint AUGUSTINE: Letters. (1989) 134–149.

²⁴ HEMELRIJK, Emily A. (2004): *Matrona Docta. Educated Women in the Roman Élite from Cornelia to Julia Domna*. London–New York Routledge. 177.

of their estates. During the migration period, entire villages would voluntarily place themselves under the protection of a matron in their hope of better living conditions.²⁵

It becomes apparent from Augustine's letter that the aforementioned villages seeking protection from the matron were inhabited by Punic people who used to be Donatists and had only recently entered the Catholic Church. Henry Chadwick writes in his book, *The Early Church*, that there was no sociopolitical difference whatsoever between the Donatists and the Catholics, the only thing setting them apart being the colour of their churches and the atmosphere of their feast days. A difference can be spotted in the case of the Circumcellions, a fanatic, martyristic terrorist group.²⁶ Nevertheless, neither Augustine's letter nor other sources confirm Chadwick's position.

The reason for this division can be traced back to the Roman colonizations in North Africa and the church policy pursued by Constantine the Great. Roman colonization efforts involved a relatively small number of Latin-speaking population and affected in particular major cities such as Carthage, Hippo Regius, Thagaste, etc. The population of the villages remained entirely Punic, and even a large proportion of population of the earlier mentioned cities continued to be made up by native inhabitants. Apart from them, a significant Berber population also inhabited the area. The Romans deliberately oppressed the Punic population and systematically ousted them from the cultural, economic, and political life, which became a constant source of tension in the Numidian society.²⁷ In the beginning, Punic people willingly joined Christianity in large numbers, but the Constantinian shift made them change their position because the Catholic Church made common cause with the state starting from the year 313. Punic inhabitants could not accept this, as Rome for them was the embodiment of oppression, which is why they broke away from the Catholic Church and called them traitors (*traditores*)²⁸ for abandoning the martyristic attitude, as per their perception, and cooperating with Rome. By all appearances, the vast majority of the North African population sided with the Donatists, relevant data indicating that 55% of the bishops were Donatists during the 411 Conference of Carthage.

²⁵ KLANICZAY (2005), 90.

²⁶ CHADWICK, Henry (1973): *The Early Church*. Penguin Books. 219–220.

²⁷ BEAVER, R. Pierce (1935): The Donatist Circumcellions. In: *Church History*. 4. 2. 124.

²⁸ TILLEY, Maureen A. (1996): *Donatist Martyr Stories. The Church in Conflict in Roman North Africa*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. IX.

Numerically speaking, there were 331 Donatist and 273 Catholic bishops.²⁹ Changes in terms of proportions should not be attributed to Augustine's and other Catholic bishops' activities alone but to the often aggressive interventions of Emperor Honorius, justified by the actions of the Circumcellions.

The Circumcellions were a radical Donatist group named after their prayers performed by martyrs' graves, which is why Augustine had a moderate approach to the issue of paying respect to places of worship. Members of this group came from the southern parts of the province, from the desert lands and committed terrorist attacks against the Catholics, destroying several churches and parishes. Augustine himself came under threat from these extremists prior to the 411 Conference of Carthage. Further, the present letter reveals the bishop's reticence to enter the rebels' village. The document also shows that he probably did not speak the Punic language unlike Antonius, who had caused the problem, a fact that could be of great weight in the reluctance of the eight villages to join Fussala. There is also reason to believe that Antonius was of Punic origin. Albeit the upper echelons of the local church were Latin speaking, they paid careful attention to providing mother-tongue pastoral care for the Punic people – the Primate Aurelius held liturgies also in the Punic language. Thus, we can witness the local church going to great lengths to integrate the one-time Donatist Punic people, and Augustine saw the result of these efforts being compromised by the actions of Antonius and other inconsiderate clergymen. Research has also brought to light that following the 411 council, Donatists living in urban areas were the ones leading the way in joining the Catholic Church, while many of the rural inhabitants continued in their old faith, especially in those parts where the radical Circumcellions remained more influential.³⁰ For some researchers, this explains why Augustine raises the issue of having someone – even – forcefully join the church. At any rate, the Catholic Church was in great need of political support in order to put an end to the Donatist supremacy in the region. However, despite all efforts, the Donatist Church would survive – albeit on a much smaller scale – up until the 672 occupation of Carthage by the Arabs.

²⁹ WHITEHOUSE, John (2016): *The Scholarship of the Donatist Controversy*. In: Miles, Richard (ed.), *The Donatist Schism. Controversy and Context*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 17.

³⁰ FRIEND, W. H. C. (1952): *Donatist Church. A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 291.

Conclusions

Overall, it can be said that placing Augustine's letters in a socio-political context can help us better understand the great Church Father's theological frame of reference. We have provided herein but a small selection of examples with a view to offering a broad picture of the diverse society characterizing the golden age of the North African province of Numidia. In Augustine's era, the Hippo Regius area of Carthage played a determining role in the life of universal Christianity and made a significant contribution to clarifying fundamental questions such as the relationship between sin and free will or the church and the sacraments. Also, this is the period when an increasing importance is attached to the role of papacy in the wake of the highly esteemed Augustine's regular seeking the Holy See's approval for his decisions. This study demonstrated that when speaking about Latin Christianity we do not refer to a unified organization but to a "work in progress" taking place with the substantial contribution of the Greeks, the Celts, the Punic people, and others. On the other hand, we must also take cognizance of the impact of the tensions between the various social classes as reflected in the contemporary works of theology. For me, all these tend to confirm the fertile breeding ground of Christian theology.

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