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## Augustine's Argumentation against Religious Freedom

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## Augustine's Argumentation against Religious Freedom

**Keywords:** Augustine, religious freedom, original sin, state authorities, Donatism

### Freedom and religion

We will begin with a few comments on the very notion of religious freedom, as it is an entirely modern concept. In the teaching of the Catholic Church, it was first recognised as a positive value in the Declaration on Religious Freedom *Dignitatis Humanae*.<sup>1</sup> Common perception regards it as an essential element of civil freedoms.

However, we need to raise a question whether the concept applies to the description of the reality and the rules of social life in ancient Rome. For the sake of diligence, the two elements of the phrase have to be considered separately.

Freedom. Roman culture and, consequently, legislation, cherished the notion of freedom; in the legislation, however, it was not expressed as an equality of citizens vis-à-vis the state, but on the contrary, as the differentiation of their rights and responsibilities depending on the social class they belonged to. The very idea of Roman law was based on the recognition that the power of the state was not absolute — the Romans, at least those who were free, were citizens, not subjects of an absolute ruler. Of great significance is a well-known rule of Roman law: *Cogita-*

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<sup>1</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae*, 2.

*tionis poenam naemo patitur* — “Nobody should be punished for their thoughts.” The rule set the limits for the application of law and kept the power of the state on the outside of the citizen — the state had no power over one’s inner part, the soul or human thoughts.

Religion. The statement that Christianity is a religion seems an obvious one today, but early Christians, especially before Constantine, were reluctant to apply this term to themselves. Apologists even opposed including Christianity to religions and defined it as either the true philosophy (Justin) or the perfect law (Tertullian); they firmly renounced any association with religions contemporary with them. And that is how Christians were perceived from the outside: one of the standard accusations appearing in anti-Christian texts of the first three centuries was that of atheism.

In fact, for ancient Rome religion meant first of all cult — external and, most of all, public worshipping of a god, gods, or deities. The question of doctrine, that is, orthodoxy — a concept that is fundamental for Christianity — was practically irrelevant for religions or cults practiced within the Roman Empire. Therefore, what we today describe as religious syncretism was an obvious phenomenon: mutual permeation of different cults, participation in ceremonies devoted to different gods depending on, for example, the place of stay — when someone arrived in a town where a local god was worshipped, they simply joined in and were never asked about the substance of their faith. The situation looked different for mystery religions. However, they do not fall within the scope of our subject.

Thus, Roman religions consisted of a set of rites and as such, they had an important place in public life. Anyone who refused to participate in those rites would automatically exclude themselves from public life.

The Roman authorities basically accepted and appreciated such a state of play, but simultaneously one has to notice an evolution which took place already in the era of the Empire. From the very beginning, Roman emperors defined themselves as *divus*, divine, yet, over the 1st and the 2nd centuries, they generally did not interfere in religious cults. Obviously, they exercised certain care, or rather control over them: starting with Augustus, emperors took over the title of *pontifex maximus* from Roman priests. In the 3rd century AD, however, the emperors realised what power the religious authority may have, and they began to look at the religious unity as an important binding element to provide for the unity of the enormous Empire. The construction of the official cult of the Empire was launched. It cannot be excluded that the Roman emperors followed the example of the eastern empires, mainly Persia, whose influence was growing and where the state religion (Zoroastrianism of the 3rd and the 4th centuries) played an essential role in the legitimisation and consolidation of power.

Such a transformation caused the rise of persecution of the Church in the 3rd century. On the one hand, emperors increasingly promoted the cult of the state and participation in rites was treated as a test of loyalty to the authority, and on the other hand, the Church became more and more powerful as an organization and a religious organization which for fundamental reasons could not accept participation of Christians in worship ceremonies of the state. There is no doubt that leaders of the Church, that is, bishops, were becoming more and more aware of the power they had.

## Edict of Milan

Following this introduction we will quote an important part of Constantine's Edict:

When you see that this has been granted to [Christians] by us, your Worship will know that we have also conceded to other religions the right of open and free observance of their worship for the sake of the peace of our times, that each one may have the free opportunity to worship as they please; this regulation is made that we may not seem to detract from any dignity of any religion.<sup>2</sup>

The Edict in this fragment clearly refers to the idea of freedom and recognises the right of citizens to free choice of religion or worship. In the light of what has just been referred to, it sounds revolutionary as well as very contemporarily. It seems that Constantine gave up entirely the logic that had driven activities of former emperors in the 3rd century and he no longer intended to use any religion for promotion of the imperial power. The text of the Edict refers to the Roman tradition from the times of the Republic, according to which all religions were good for the country and they were encompassed by the state's benevolent care. It was an element of Roman law alluded to by Justin and Tertullian in their apologias, in which the mentioned authors stated that Christians were good citizens just because they were Christians, and therefore, from the point of view of the stability of the state, it was beneficial to allow Christians practice their faith freely and not to force them to pursue acts that were contrary to their conscience.

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<sup>2</sup> *Edict of Milan*. In: LACTANTIUS: *On the Deaths of the Persecutors (De Mortibus Persecutorum)*, ch. 48. opera, ed. O. F. FRITZSCHE, II, pp. 288 ff. (*Bibl. Patr. Ecc. Lat.* XI).

However, it soon appeared that both the Emperor and the Church, interpreted the text in a different way: not as a departure from the logic of a single religion strengthening the power, but as adoption of Christianity as the only religion that would support the power instead of the previously promoted religion of the state.

What indicates such an understanding of the Edict by Constantine? We need to remember that he immediately got involved in intra-Christian disputes stating that preservation of the unity of the Church is a matter of national importance.

However, the fact that such an understanding of the Edict was dominant in the Church from the very beginning is far more interesting for us. We can only mention the introduction and the final part of *Ecclesiastical History* by Eusebius. From his point of view the Church was the winner and her history ends with a description of joyful life of the Church after years of persecution. Final pages of the history of the Church sound almost like a description of the advent of the messianic peace and the ultimate victory of Christ. Eusebius called Constantine *pontifex maximus* of Christianity.

More importantly, events which took place over the years 312—313 in Africa only confirm the thesis. At this time the Donatist schism flourished there. Both parties, that is, Donatus followers and Caecilian supporters, asked Constantine to settle the dispute. Thus, Constantine was regarded as the entitled adjudicator of intra-Church disputes and he did not refuse to intervene.

It is very interesting as Donatists, that is, the supporters of Donatus, are commonly regarded as anti-Roman. In the 4th century Donatist movement became increasingly a separatist movement against Roman rule in Africa. In 313, however, Donatists decided that it was the emperor that had the authority to settle the dispute and believed that as a defender of purity of the Church he would take their side.

The later history fully confirmed that both the Church and subsequent emperors had a specific understanding of the Edict. They interpreted it as the act which provided Christianity with the status of the state religion. The culmination of this process was Theodosius the Great's policy and his edict of 392 which formally raised Christianity to the rank of the state religion. Conflicts of Theodosius the Great with Ambrose of Milan fall within the scope of this article. They both recognised Christianity as the state religion and believed that it was the duty of the state to support it. Taking this approach state authorities increasingly fought against all other forms of worship. Theodosius stuck to the traditional understanding of *pontifex maximus* office (he did not call himself *Pontifex Maximus* of the Church) and in his opinion the emperor was above

the Church and its internal laws. Ambrose, on the other hand, effectively established a new kind of relationship between the Church and the state. He viewed the Church as a custodian and guardian of the universal God's commandments and thus the church exerted power over the emperor in this respect.

As a result, it became the foundation of relations between the state and the Church in Middle Ages that a bishop could anoint a ruler and a ruler could not appoint a bishop.

## Augustine's decisions in Donatist dispute

Augustine learned Christianity from Ambrose. Being a bishop in Africa, the latter had been involved in disputes between Catholics and Donatists. As it is commonly known, he advocated the Roman military intervention against Donatists and supported Catholics. In the light of what has been said so far, it is easy to explain Augustine's attitude. Augustine simply followed Ambrose as well as commonly accepted principles of those times.

Many scholars claim that only Donatist conflict forced sensitive Augustine, who after all had had a long history of displaying spiritual interest in Manichaeism and had experienced very personal conversion in the spirit of freedom and absence of any external coercion, to revise his beliefs. Briefly speaking, the view that Augustine's acceptance or even request of military aid from Rome against Donatists was purely practical and somewhat against his deepest beliefs about God's actions and the nature of man's relationship with God, is not uncommon among scholars of Augustine's thought.

In my opinion his approach was completely different. Augustine was convinced that being a bishop and a pastor it was his duty to use any means, including direct coercive measures to bring the people entrusted to him to the true Church. It was the result of his deepest religious beliefs. In other words, Augustine adopted *cogite intrare* principle due to his profound theological reasons, and not due to external political and social circumstances.

*Cogite intrare* means "compel them to enter" (see Luke 14:23). Augustine regarded the words of the Parable of the Great Banquet as a motto of his approach to the people who did not want to convert voluntarily from Donatism to the Catholic Church, but above all he adopted it as a universal principle of dealing with those who did not demonstrate good will to enter the Church.

## Augustine on Grace and Original Sin

I will try to present a theological basis for Augustine's approach.

Augustine viewed a man as created by God and as such a man was *capax Dei*. But at the same time a man was burdened with original sin. Augustine is a great theologian of original sin. He pointed out that this sin affects mainly the free will of man. Its result is lust which practically makes human freedom illusive. Thus a man living on earth is above all possessed by lust, separated from God, incapable to fulfill commandments and reach God. This is possible only by the grace of God. Therefore, it is justified to call Augustine *Doctor gratiae*.

But how does the grace of God work? Obviously, Augustine knows that God acts freely and it is impossible to control the grace of God. The *do ut des* principle which, in the context of religion, means offering gifts to deity to gain its favour constituted the basis of the entire religion of Rome and Augustine viewed it as the essence of paganism and a denial of the Christian faith. God is always first. You cannot "earn" anything or persuade God to be granted his grace as gratitude for sacrifice. God is love and he is always the first in giving. His gifts are for free. Augustine's dispute with Pelagius allowed for a comprehensive and clear presentation of the doctrine of the absolute gratuity of grace.

We can indirectly learn possible paths of the grace of God in *De civitate Dei* according to Augustine.

In the first twelve books he criticises pagan Rome. It is very interesting to see how Augustine, a Roman in his formation and culture, perceives various elements of this culture. Augustine makes an overview of the history of Rome and analyses it critically to show that it was Romans' sins and not conversion to Christianity that led to the fall of Rome.

The basis of this analysis is the following theological perspective: he perceived Rome as a community of people living in original sin, a theater of demons' acts that tempted, deceived, and led to perdition.

However, when you read it more carefully, it appears that, according to Augustine, demons act by different forces, depending on a sphere of life. They are most powerful with respect to various Roman cults, which is not surprising. Augustine also finds it obvious that any magic practices, divination or spells, are within demons' power. It is however interesting that Augustine has very critical attitude towards philosophers stating that they seek the truth, but, at the same time, are easily deceived by demons. For this reason one cannot trust their wisdom. The smallest influence of demons Augustine sees in the rights of Rome. In his opinion emperors are under influence of demons when they are incited to wage a war in order

to gain power and commit atrocities, but the Roman ruler as a guardian of rights, and law enforcement are perceived by Augustine as good. Despite all his criticism of the sins of Rome, Augustine is a Roman who appreciates everything that contributed to the power of Rome, that is, its legal structure and thus the structure of authority enforcing the law. There is no explicit mention of it, but this is the area which Augustine perceives as one of the paths of God's grace rather than the works of philosophers.

As we know, Augustine is convinced that a man after his death will be judged by Christ, and if he dies in sin he will be punished with eternal torments in hell. Augustine knew the eastern opinions derived from Origen and openly expressed by Gregory of Nyssa on the final universal salvation of all people, and firmly rejected and even combat them.

Augustine was aware that it is difficult to reconcile the doctrine of the absolute gratuity of grace with the doctrine of judgment and hell which assumes man's personal responsibility for sins, but he did not try to find any "golden mean" and stood by both statements. This tension is always present in his writings and provides new profound dimension of theological and philosophical reflection on human freedom. We can say that before Augustine freedom as an essential characteristic of the man did not constitute an important subject for philosophers. They would rather assume that the man is free and capable to make decisions. Only Augustine's juxtaposition of human freedom and absolute omnipotence of God and his primacy, raised this issue to a new level of discussion. It seems that it is only modern and contemporary thought that takes Augustine's question regarding existential dimension of human freedom seriously.

## Practical implications of Augustine's theology

Augustine as a shepherd regarded that his main task is to take care of salvation of the faithful entrusted to him. As he was convinced of the reality of hell, he knew that this was an immense responsibility. Also as a bishop he intervened in the Donatist dispute and it should be perceived as a form of his pastoral care namely his care for salvation. Any external elements such as political systems and relationship between the state and the church and everything that seems to explain quite well previously described situation is for Augustine of secondary importance. He is primarily a person who should care for salvation of the faithful and as a shepherd he does not want to interfere with the grace of God which is in the

service of God's love. Thus he follows God's love and cares for the faithful like a father caring for his children.

Father is primarily concerned with welfare of his children. Eternal salvation is the only ultimate good. Augustine adopts a Roman model of a father who is demanding and is not afraid to be hard on his son. This is the main manifestation of father's love. So it is not surprising that strict Roman law, including coercive measures applied in order to ensure justice and punish injustice constitutes for Augustine a model for understanding God's love as a Father.

Calling troops to compel the Donatists to return to the Catholic Church does not constitute a deviation from the principle of love, but its execution. Its underlying cause is not the lack of faith in the grace of God, but allowing it to take action.

In this light we should read the famous passage from Augustine's sermons on the First Epistle of St. John. Augustine's sermons are intended to be the anthem praising God's love. This letter includes St. Augustine's favourite phrase: "God is love" (1 John 4:16). It also contains the following passage:

This we have said in the case where the things done are similar. In the case where they are diverse, we find a man by charity made fierce; and by iniquity made winningly gentle. A father beats a boy, and a boy-stealer caresses. If thou name the two things, blows and caresses, who would not choose the caresses, and decline the blows? If thou mark the persons, it is charity that beats, iniquity that caresses. See what we are insisting upon; that the deeds of men are only discerned by the root of charity. For many things may be done that have a good appearance, and yet proceed not from the root of charity. For thorns also have flowers: some actions truly seem rough, seem savage; howbeit they are done for discipline at the bidding of charity. Once for all, then, a short precept is given thee: Love, and do what thou wilt: whether thou hold thy peace, through love hold thy peace; whether thou cry out, through love cry out; whether thou correct, through love correct; whether thou spare, through love do thou spare: let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, it is shepherd's negligence if he does not take any actions when he sees that people persistently go wrong. As a shepherd he cannot just hope that a man will learn the truth himself and should not leave him on his own when he can act. It is better for the sake of wrongdoer's salvation

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<sup>3</sup> AUGUSTIN: *Homily 7 on the First Epistle of John* 8. Translated by H. BROWNE. In: *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 7. Edited by Ph. SCHAFF. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888. Revised and edited for New Advent by K. KNIGHT.

to employ external coercion as long as it is in line with the law rather than fail to act.

Augustine could not accept religious freedom understood as programmed abstention from intervention by the state authority aimed at bringing people to the true Church, and thus enabling them to escape the clutches of wrongdoing as he perceived a man as a being whose free will has been thoroughly corrupted by original sin. The grace of God, which is the expression of God's love can come from the outside, by application of law or even coercion. The duty of the bishop is to allow for the work of the grace of God.

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## Augustine's Argumentation against Religious Freedom

### Summary

Augustine, the Bishop of Carthage participated in the Donatist conflict. In this dispute he was an advocate of involvement of Roman authorities, including their military and police forces, on the Catholic side and against the Donatists. On the basis of this decision he more broadly justified his view that the state had a duty to actively promote the true faith, that is, Catholicism. He believed that bringing a man on the path of truth and thus protecting him from perdition in hell is a great good. In his opinion a man without such a support from the state could easily get lost and could not learn the truth. His view was based on two pillars. On the one hand, Augustine was convinced that the original sin destroyed the free will of a man to such extent that it was no longer capable of choosing the good, and on the other hand, he saw the law of the Empire, the Christian state, as an important path of God's grace. Therefore, he believed that the adoption of the principle of religious freedom, that is, being neutral in religious issues by the state authorities would constitute a major betrayal of the duties of the authorities.

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## L'argumentation d'Augustin contre la liberté religieuse

### Résumé

En tant qu'évêque de Carthage, Augustin a participé au litige donatiste. Dans le cadre de ce litige, il s'est déclaré pour l'engagement du pouvoir romain, y compris la force militaire et policière ; il s'est rangé sous la bannière catholique et non celle des donatistes. Pour ce qui est de sa décision, il a justifié son point de vue en constatant que le pouvoir étatique est obligé de soutenir activement la vraie foi, c'est-à-dire le catholicisme. Il trouvait que le fait de remettre l'homme sur la voie de la vérité et, par là, le protéger contre son anéantissement aux enfers est un grand bien. L'homme, dépourvu d'un tel soutien de la part de l'État, erre trop facilement et n'arrive pas à connaître la vérité. Son point de vue se fondait sur deux piliers. D'une part, Augustin était convaincu que le péché originel a si considérablement détruit le libre arbitre de l'homme que celui-là n'est point capable de choisir le bien de lui-même. D'autre part, il considérait la loi de l'Empire, étant un État chrétien, comme une voie importante de l'activité de la grâce divine. Cela étant, il pensait que le fait d'avoir adopté par les pouvoirs publics le principe de la liberté religieuse, à savoir la neutralité dans les questions liées à la religion, serait un manquement significatif aux devoirs de ce pouvoir.

**Mots clés :** Augustin, liberté religieuse, péché originel, pouvoir étatique, donatisme

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## L'argomentazione di Agostino contro la libertà religiosa

### Sommario

Agostino in qualità di vescovo di Cartagine partecipò alla controversia donatista. Nell'ambito di tale controversia fu sostenitore dell'impegno dell'autorità romana, tra cui delle sue forze dell'esercito e della milizia, dalla parte cattolica contro i donatisti. Sul canovaccio di tale decisione motivò più ampiamente la sua opinione secondo la quale l'autorità dello stato ha il dovere di sostenere attivamente la fede autentica – il cattolicesimo. Riteneva infatti che condurre l'uomo sul cammino della verità, e quindi proteggerlo dalla perdizione dell'inferno, fosse un grande bene. L'uomo, lasciato senza quest'aiuto da parte dello stato, erra troppo facilmente e non giunge a conoscere la verità. Questa sua opinione poggiava su due pilastri. Da un lato Agostino era convinto che il peccato originale danneggiò così fortemente il libero arbitrio dell'uomo che da solo non è capace di scegliere il bene; dall'altro, scorgeva la legge dell'Impero, dello stato cristiano, come un cammino importante di azione della grazia di Dio. Per tale motivo sosteneva che l'accettazione da parte delle autorità dello stato del principio della libertà religiosa, e quindi della neutralità nelle questioni religiose, avrebbe rappresentato una sottrazione essenziale agli obblighi di tale autorità.

**Parole chiave:** Agostino, libertà religiosa, peccato originale, autorità dello stato, donatismo