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Introduction

This is not a nice book. It begins with betrayal and ends with suicide. Set on this sad trajectory, the narrative suggests a mundane parallel to the city of God, a fallible human city. If the ideas created by its actors were transcendent, the story itself was enacted in an imperfect human way. The problem confronted in the following investigation is the meaning of religious violence. This story of violence happened in the age of Augustine in his native Africa, when its lands were provinces of the Roman empire. The events begin in the last decade of the fourth century and they end with the armed incursions of foreign Vandal invaders into Africa about the year 429. The spate of killing and destruction that accompanied the arrival of these "barbarian" outsiders put an end to the small story of sectarian violence that is our focus. The new Vandal lords of Africa swept away the cultural underpinnings of institutions and thought that had sustained the special hatreds of the generations that concern us here. There were now to be new dislikes, as one kind of violence decisively trumped another.

The diminutive tradition of sacred violence that I am considering served to create and to confirm intimate values and personal relationships in Africa. The war brought by the Vandals erased these rich meanings that had been created by sectarian conflict. Our attention is focussed on the earlier church struggles that were an integrating force of a social and religious world that disappeared in 430. Our interest is directed as much to the question of how acts of sectarian violence were thought about and represented in words as it is to the actual threats, beatings, burnings, and killings. In this light, it is perhaps disappointing that our narrative diminishes rather than exalts. Events claimed as peasant rebellions and revolutionary social struggles turn out, on closer inspection, to be smaller and meaner things. The principal actors were moved by the logical, if fulfilling, credulities of religious faith and by not much more. What I have encountered is a history of hate – a story of intimate dislike that was motivated by the profound love for one's own people, beliefs, communities, and traditions.

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The age concerned is the lifetime of Augustine of Hippo, the greatest churchman of western Christendom. So it is perhaps best to begin with a warning. There can be no concealing the plain fact that the great body of writings of the bishop of Hippo make this work possible. But this is *not* a book about Augustine. It is an investigation of what he, along with many others, persuaded, explained, demanded and cajoled, and concealed, and sometimes just reported. Of the mountain of these words, it is the sermons that were preached to the parishioners who crowded basilicas at Hippo Regius, to congregations in the great basilicas at Carthage, and to audiences gathered in the humble churches in smaller provincial towns that are especially significant. Improvised to connect with a wide range of persons who listened to the preacher, they were meant to persuade on that occasion. We should listen to them with care. The written letters that were communications with peers, with the literate elites of Augustine's world, provide information bound by time and place, and by person. And there are the acerbic and polemical writings composed by bishops and laymen on the opposing sides – bitter attacks on their enemies. It is these real-time writings, much more than the elevated, consciously and elaborately wrought world of the theological treatise, that are of special significance to our inquiry.

To repeat: this is not a study of an individual man and his ideas, whether that individual was an Augustine or a Petilian, an Optatus or a Tyconius. Augustine, it is true, was a marvelous creator and marshaler of ideas, and of men. The mountainous weight of his writings and, even more, the ways in which they have profoundly shaped basic ideas of ours, dominate our understanding of the time. Insofar as they pertain to the problems that confront us, however, matters such as the essence of a Trinitarian god, the nature of the mystical or real body of Christ, fine distinctions in the dispensation of grace, the idea of predestination, or the doctrine of original sin are *not* our direct concern here. The long-term impact of Augustine's ideas – not in north Africa where they have all but vanished, but in western Europe and its cultural heirs and legatees – is no concern of mine here. In this investigation, my interest in Augustine is limited to his participation in events in Africa in his own lifetime and not in the later history of his magnificently successful project of self-promotion.[1]

As a history, the analysis here is drawn in a direction contrary to the natural course of the progressive unraveling of events. It is attracted, instead,

[1] There are already a number of outstanding biographies, including Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, still the classic; Lancel, *Saint Augustin*, all the facts, and in order; and O'Donnell, *Augustine*, for the age.

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to the backwards rerunning of memory. My purpose is not to reconstruct events serially as they occurred from some point in time, beginning, say, with the first steps of the Great Persecution under the emperor Diocletian in the year 303 and working forward step-by-step to Augustine's death in his bed at Hippo Regius on 28 August 430. Our path will be the reverse of this. Attention will be focussed on the specific hatreds of Augustine's own generation. The majority of incidents of sectarian violence in Africa that can be studied in any coherent fashion occurred in his own lifetime, for the most part during his tenure as bishop of Hippo Regius from 395 to 430. The first problem is to understand the function of earlier quarrels and battles as part of the collected memories of the generation who lived in this later age. I am not especially interested in a blow-by-blow reconstruction of a grand narrative of the dissident Christian community in Africa, the so-called Donatist Church, from its inception to the final dissipation of Christian communities in the Maghrib. There already exist narratives, however imperfect, of this story.[2]

I am also less entangled in the struggle to determine precisely what happened during the state-directed persecution of Christians in Africa in 303–05, or the struggle to determine the facts of what happened in the bitter internecine struggles that emerged in its aftermath. I am more attracted to what each side remembered of this past. What men like Tyconius, Optatus, Augustine, Possidius, Petilian, Emeritus, Cresconius, and their peers and followers, could know is of direct relevance to why they were willing to encourage and engage in coercive and violent action. How the bishops and learned laymen construed the little that they knew of their past is one part of my problem. No matter how public or common this knowledge might seem, it was anything but given or natural. It was a matter of bishops, literary elites, imperial administrators, and teachers and pedagogues constructing this knowledge, and then educating and persuading the ignorant, as they called them. It is this constant rebuilding and replaying of the past by Augustine's peers that formed the context in which the violence was enacted in their present. The script was managed and manipulated. When the writers changed their minds, or disappeared, so did the peculiar acts of hate and harm that were tied to the script that they had made.

In this investigation, violence is understood not just as the specific acts of physical hostility – the threats, the beatings, the blindings, the cuttings,

[2] Frend, *Donatist Church*, the standard treatment in English, innovative and influential in its time; and Brisson, *Autonomisme et christianisme*, more perspicacious on the motivating issues (and more accurate on the facts), are exemplary.

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the mutilations, and the murders – but also the surrounding world of speech and writing of which these acts were a living part. The violent deeds were living extensions of the rhetoric in which their values and causes were formed. The acts of physical harm and material damage served specific tactical ends that must be understood. The investigation is difficult if only because, as many have already noted, violence is rarely seen as a thing in its own right and is radically under-theorized.[3] The interpretations and representations of violence fed on themselves and were seedbeds for novel and innovative acts of physical harm. But they were all part of a peculiar order of talking, thinking, and writing, at the center of which were new Christian narratives and discourses. The extent to which this new Christian story both displaced and substituted for all others is breathtaking. The power of this Christian talk was produced by many things, among them a remorseless hortatory pedagogy, a hectoring moralizing of the individual, and a ceaseless management of the minutiae of everyday life. Above all, it was a form of speech marked by an absence of humor. It was a morose and a deadly serious world. The joke, the humorous kick, the hilarious satire, the funny cut-them-down-to-size jibe, have vanished. What passes for a laugh is a ghastly gloss on your enemy's spiritual death, on your own coming demise, or on the misfortunes of the sinful and the stupid. Whatever it was, this violence was not funny.

This is also an experiment in time with its own bounds and closures. The contests and values, the affairs and the debates that mattered so intensely to the people that I describe were to become dead matters, things done and past in the generation after Augustine's death. In these later years, different and more pressing concerns were to consume public and personal agendas. In witnessing these ideas and actions at their most intense and meaningful, we are always close to an end when they were to become irrelevant. In the great age of transformation that engulfed the Maghrib at the end of the seventh century and through the remainder of the eighth, all these vitally significant beliefs and actions, the people involved in them, their writings and sermons, their emotional commitments and memories were to disappear forever from the valleys and fields, towns and villages in which they had been lived with such passion. Their only life now was in the memories and ideas borne on a refugee flotsam of Christian writings drifting to European shores. Although it is true that the people and their communities were not suddenly buried under layers of volcanic ash, what

[3] See Pandey (1992), esp. pp. 27, 41–42; Brubaker (2004), pp. 90–92; and Zizek, *Violence*, *passim*, for some of the cris-de-coeur, emphasizing the radical "under-theorizing" of violence, and its status as a phenomenon that has to be taken more seriously and understood as a thing in its own right.

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they valued was subverted and replaced by different languages and narratives. One might like to imagine a transhistorical world of behaviors and purposes that informed so much of Western history, to imagine that they were part of continuous connections of a grand metahistorical narrative. This is not so. In the end, everything these people did, every communal conflict and personal battle to which they committed themselves out of a belief in transcendent values, became meaningless and worthless. It is enough to give history a bad name.

But bad names are at the very heart of my problem, and from this fact stem even more problems for the historian. In those days, there were good social and political reasons for calling someone a Maximianist, a Donatist, a Rogatist, or a Caecilianist. Sometimes these labels cohered with an accepted reality, but in others they did not. My approach will be to avoid the name-calling as much as possible. More neutral terms can be found to designate each side, words that the participants themselves would have found more or less acceptable as names of their own communities. The more powerful Christian community – in the sense that it was approved by the church in Rome and also recognized by the imperial state – was the one headed by Aurelius, bishop of Carthage and Primate of Africa, but which is most identified in our own age with the dominant literary personality of Augustine. This religious community did succeed, at some level, in asserting a claim to an identity as Catholic. But their opponents, persons whom they labeled "Donatists," consistently, and insistently, claimed to be just as Catholic as the party of Aurelius and Augustine. They insisted with some reason, since even their Catholic opponents admitted that, apart from the division between them, both sides shared the same trinitarian god, the same churches, the same baptism, the same approved canon of sacred scriptures, the same rituals, and the same sacraments. What divided them so bitterly was something else that was rather difficult for them to name and to describe.

Although both parties were Catholic, I have called the Aurelian–Augustinian church "Catholic" because this was their success-in-power identification of themselves. Their opponents are more difficult to designate with any neutral term. The word "Donatist" should be avoided since it was nothing more than a pejorative label foisted on them by the Catholics. In their own self-identity these others thought of themselves as both Christian and Catholic, and that was that. I had once thought that the term "African" Christians would be good since this caught the sense of regionalism that defined a critical part of their identity. I now think that this name must be avoided. They themselves would have found it an odd

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distinction. More important, the label creates a fundamentally misleading impression that the Catholics in Africa did not share just as many African characteristics as did their opponents. I have therefore lapsed onto a general description of them as a dissident or dissenting party in a descriptive sense, since, even in their own terms, they saw themselves as a persecuted minority who fundamentally disagreed with the majoritarian party.[4] This means that I have committed myself to an imperial view of the situation since "the Donatists," although a minority in the empire, were a majority in their homeland. The imperial perspective is, I think, justified in part by the imperial stage on which Christians acted, and the critical role of the imperial state as a player in this drama. The signal warning, however, is that on their own home ground, in Africa, "the Donatists" were in the majority in numbers and could easily and quite legitimately see their own way as the right one.

As for those objects of our inquiry – the styles and modes of hatred – these are nothing new or unusual. Consider the following story of two chess venues in New York City at the end of the 1990s.[5]

In the Far East, where the game of chess was invented around 600 A.D., stones were supposed to be placed on each corner of the board to keep the evil of the match from spilling over into the world. But there are no stones on the boards in the rival chess shops on Thompson Street in Greenwich Village. And people here see evil all over the place.

The owners of the Chess Shop, at 230 Thompson Street, and the Chess Forum, at 219 Thompson Street, along with the patrons who will go to one shop and not the other, are bitter rivals. The two owners, former partners, have filed lawsuits, had their customers take loyalty oaths and accused each other of spying and theft. They have engaged in name-calling and what each side considers character assassination. One shop briefly debarred disloyal patrons. The shops unleashed price wars where each lost money. And all those involved, cursed with minds that often see life as an intricate battle between pieces on a board, have created whirlpools of intrigue.

The battle will probably not end until one of the shops goes into foreclosure.

"It does not make very good business sense," said Imad Khachan, 37, who owns the Chess Forum. "We would both make more money if we worked together . . . If I had to give him one book it would be King Lear," said Mr. Khachan of his former partner, George Frohlinde, at the Chess Shop. "He is the man who divided his kingdom. This did not need to happen."

[4] Georg Michels, facing an analogous problem with the labeling of the "Old Believers" in seventeenth-century Muscovy, has been compelled to this same solution: *At War with the Church*, pp. 16–18.

[5] Chris Hedges, "A Perpetual War Consumes Competing Chess Shop Owners," *The New York Times* (Monday, 23 December 2002), B 1 and 6.

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The two shops are similar. They are dominated by tables where players sit, their heads bent over chess boards, for a dollar an hour. There is soft background music, with the Chess Shop preferring classical and the Chess Forum light pop. The players rarely speak . . . The walls in each shop could use a coat of paint, the bathrooms are a bit grimy . . .

The [biblical] commandment against bearing false witness calls on people not to defame and slander their neighbors. On Thompson Street, though, defamation and slander have divided the rival shops as neatly as two lines of pawns.

The dispute began with an exiled Russian grandmaster, Nicholas Rossolimo, a cabdriver who ran a small chess shop on Sullivan Street in the 1950's. He hired Mr. Frohlinde to run it for him in 1963,and eventually left to live in Paris.

The two eventually had a falling out and Mr. Frohlinde opened the Chess Shop in 1972. Mr. Rossolimo, an aristocratic exile from communist Russia, came back to try to save his shop but fell down a flight of stairs in 1975 and died; his shop perished not long after he did.

Those who are set against Mr. Frohlinde seize on the story of how he began his life in America by betraying Mr. Rossolimo. The Russian grandmaster has assumed the role of the martyr in the narrative spun out by those who seek to demonize Mr. Frohlinde.

Mr. Frohlinde, however, said it was he who was betrayed . . . and once he opened his own shop, he said he never spoke to his former employer again.

Enter Mr. Khachan, a graduate student at New York University who was also fleeing war, in this case from Lebanon. He soon became the manager of the Chess Shop. He dropped out of graduate school because he was promised a partnership which, he says, was never delivered . . . Mr. Khachan walked out in 1995 and opened the Chess Forum.

Some of the patrons walked out with him. The newest game began. When asked what happens when he bumps into his former manager on the street, Mr. Frohlinde answered, "You don't see people you don't like."

He paused, seated under a fly strip with numerous dead bugs stuck to it and a bare neon light, and grimaced at the thought of his rival across the street.

"I have not seen him since," he said.

Those who defected to the Chess Forum began to refer to Mr. Frohlinde as "the Nazi." Those in the Chess Shop began to call Mr. Khachan, a Muslim, "Yasir Arafat" . . .

The vitriol does not at all surprise Mr. Khachan, who said that during the war in Beirut he noticed that the worst savagery was always between those of the same religious or ethnic group.

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"Former partners always tend to be worse than others when they go to war," he said. "People are meaner to their own people. Maybe this is human nature. You become more self-righteous with your own family. You feel the violence is more justified. You are the big brother who will whip everyone into shape, even if you have to kill them all."

Ernie Rosenberg said that he and his son were barred from entering the Chess Shop after they defected to the Chess Forum. "I printed up leaflets and told the owners of the Chess Shop I would distribute them on the sidewalk during the Christmas season unless they lifted the ban on my son," he said. "Why did they ban my son? Because he was my son. My son did not really want to go in there . . . I used to go in the shop just to annoy them. They would try and throw me out."

Mr. Khachan threw in that when he worked at the Chess Shop . . . "the place was crawling with cockroaches." "With all the fear and prosecution [sic] in the Chess Shop, it saves you from having to read Kafka," he said . . .

Mr. Khachan stood one evening in front of the plate glass window that displayed his chess sets. He watched a young man in a black fatigue jacket and a black wool hat pulled down to his ears linger at the door. The man carried a folded chess board under his arm.

"He's a spy," Mr. Khachan said in a whisper . . . Mr. Nash scoffed at the charge, calling Mr. Khachan paranoid . . .

"He's been doing this for years. He doesn't let some customers into his shop because he says they are spies, but they are just players who like to play in both shops. It is all very weird."

It *is* all very weird. A foundation, a betrayal, a split, a separation, martyrdom, bad names, traitors, libelous leaflets and pamphlets, banned sons who have inherited the stain of betrayal, claims to the truth, and sheer paranoia. It is all here in a smaller and neater scale. So mine is just another history, an attempt at understanding another specific instance.

In the late summer of 2005, a colleague at Princeton noted that I was busy re-reading Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*; with her usual acumen, she also noted that the reading was incited because "your heart is set on murder." It was. This is not a good mood in which to write history. But as my focus slowly but surely mutated from violence to lying, so did the avenues of approaching my problem. I now understood that it was no accident that Augustine had come to be so concerned with mendacity. His worry was not just the spinoff of a theological tiff with Jerome. It intimately involved himself and his own history. The special qualities of mendacity encompass another species of story telling, one that Professor Frankfurt at Princeton has formally labeled "bullshit," that is at the heart

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of my problem.[6] I would have preferred to title the book "All Men are Liars." The biblical verse – much quoted by the Christian protagonists in the course of their murderous conflicts in Augustine's Africa – would have raised dangerous questions about historians and the making of fictions. As Verkhovensky once remarked to his sly little friend, "She lied to me so very well – it was almost as good as the truth." My memory of *The Demons* is so thin that I have perhaps mistaken the gender. But the words speak just as well to the history of anything.

[6] See Frankfurt, *On Bullshit* – an analysis to which I shall have occasion to return.

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CHAPTER 1

This terrible custom

Under the burning midsummer sun of the year 418, Augustine, the Catholic bishop of Hippo Regius, already in his mid-sixties and increasingly burdened with the ailments of old age, undertook a journey of unusual length and direction. The long trek took him well outside the heartlands of Africa with which he was familiar. He travelled the roads to Caesarea, the capital of the imperial province of Mauretania Caesariensis, well over 350 miles to the west.[1] Given the deliberate pace of an average day's travel on mule or horseback, the journey would have taken him and his companions about two weeks to complete. What is more, Augustine suffered badly from hemorrhoids and anal fistulae, afflictions that would have made the ride all the more painful.[2] Quite apart from the arduous nature of the trek, the people who lived in Augustine's part of Africa thought of Caesariensis, the far western province of Rome's African empire, as a barbaric and dangerous frontier land.[3] To them, its hinterland did not really belong to the civilized regions of the east. The people of Mauretania knew that they were

[1] Augustine himself regarded the place as remote and far off the beaten paths of the Africa that he knew: see Aug. *Ep.* 190.1 (CSEL 57: 137–38); dating to later in 418, this must reflect his opinion after his visit to Caesarea. For his journeys, see Perler, *Voyages de saint Augustin*, pp. 17, 25–26, 41. In fact, Augustine hardly traveled at all outside the core area of "Africa" well known to him. He had a brief three-year stint in Italy in 384–87. Following his return to Africa in 387, and his ordination as priest and then bishop, Augustine's travels were almost all by land and made in connection with business that directly occupied him in the strategic area west of Carthage, north of Numidia, and east of Mauretania.

[2] For Augustine's sicknesses in old age, see Legewie (1931), 10–14; Lancel, *Saint Augustine*, 193–94; for the hemorrhoidal problems, see Aug. *Ep.* 38.1 (CCL 31: 156): "corpore autem ego in lectum sum, nec ambulare enim nec stare nec sedere possum rhagadis vel exochadis dolore et tumore." *Rhagades* were internal fistulae or haemorrhoids; *exochades* were external piles. His personal difficulties with these afflictions probably provoked his interest in recording the miraculous healing of the anal fistulae of one Innocentius, a former advocate in the office of the Vicar of Africa at Carthage – an event that he himself witnessed: Aug. *Civ. Dei*, 22.8 (CCL 48: 816).

[3] Perler (1958), p. 25, presumes that the journey was made by land, citing Aug. *Ep.* 122.1 (CSEL 34.2: 742) and *Ep.* 193.1 (CSEL 57: 167) in support. But the earlier letter, dating to 410, only speaks of long journeys made by sea *and* land from which Augustine had been exempted at that time for reasons of ill health. The latter letter does not give any indication of the mode of travel to Caesarea. Nor is it clear why the journey would have had have been made all the way directly from Carthage, as Perler

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