

# «History and Forgiveness: St. Augustine and the justification of coercion»

**Sermon by Allison Ralph, June 28, 2009**

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The Christian Church has condoned, encouraged or engaged in acts of violence for two thousand years. So how did this come to be this way? We'll be exploring one theologian's contribution to the theology of violence and how knowing this history helps us to make sense of our past.

Opening Words – Psalm 43:

Vindicate me, O God, and defend my cause against an ungodly people; from those who are deceitful and unjust deliver me!

For you are the God in whom I take refuge; why have you cast me off? Why must I walk about mournfully because of the oppression of the enemy?

O send out your light and your truth; let them lead me; let them bring me to your holy hill and to your dwelling.

Then I will go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy; and I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.

Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

So, how many of us here have a negative reaction to the words, 'The Church'? Maybe what comes to mind is an image of a greedy and hypocritical monolith seeking only the extension of its own temporal power and crushing anyone that gets in its way. We are all at least aware of the evils wrought in the name of the Christian God by the Christian Church against millions of individuals across time and place: including but not limited to; the overthrow of Greek logic and pagan religions in the early centuries, the institutional vilification of Jews and Judaism for two millennia, the infamous Spanish Inquisition, the Crusades, and finally, the systematic oppression of anyone not willing to subscribe to the carefully controlled collection of ideas known as orthodoxy. This is a fascinating array of violent crimes perpetrated in the name of a God professing love and salvation, isn't it?

So, how did this come to be this way, this theologically justified use of violence by the Church? The pursuance of this question drove me to complete a Master's Degree in Church History a few years ago. I'm sharing with you today what I learned from that experience. First let me say that the history of the early Church, the development of Doctrine and Theology out of the multifarious stories about the life and death of one man was riotously complex, emotional and literally revolutionary. The Church was not incubated in a vacuum but within and in response to the world and the politics of the late Roman Empire. By the time we get to our main storyline, there had already been three centuries of violence between and against different Christian groups and the Empire. The actual writing of an accepted theology on the subject didn't happen until after 400CE. This was an era of new challenges for the Church, having been suddenly accepted and promoted by the Emperor Constantine only decades after the last serious persecution, she was thrust into a position of civil authority and leadership and expected to bridge the gap between secular politics and the divine will while she herself was still struggling desperately even to define herself and her

basic theology. In a wrenching shift the once persecuted Church found herself in possession of the means of persecuting others.

That's the backdrop of the story, here's the scene for the writing of the justification of violence. After the last great anti-Christian persecution a fight broke out in the Roman province of Northern Africa over which bishops had kept the faith better than the others, either side claiming superiority in some regard. Regional Christians had once been joined in loving communion, but were now bitterly divided. One side became known as the Donatists (after one of their bishops), the other the Catholics (meaning universal and emphasizing their communion with rest of the Christians across the Empire). It had become a vicious civil war lasting decades and both sides committed atrocities.

Enter Augustine of Hippo around 360 CE, the man whose prolific mind shaped much of Christian doctrine, including the concept of original sin and the inheritance of guilt, and the justification of imperial coercion against schismatics. Some have even called him the father of the Inquisition. The region around his bishopric, Hippo, had been racked with this civil war, and the local population was largely Donatist. Augustine was of the Catholic variety. He was a true believer, an honest, careful and thoughtful man. He was fully aware of his own imperfections and joyful in his faith in Christ and His ability to forgive all faults and heal all wounds. However, Augustine was faced with a serious dilemma. He was not personally violent, and abhorred its practice, but, here was the majority of a population for which he felt responsible to God, going to hell in a hand-basket. He believed that the only path to salvation was through the Catholic Church, and the Donatists were missing out simply because of their obstinacy. All he really wanted was to bring those lost sheep back into the fold of God's true Church, so that they might be blessed with His Grace and receive eternal salvation. So Augustine, the consummate pragmatist, caught between his aversion to all violence, his belief in ultimate damnation, and a deadly situation on the ground, found a middle path.

Well, he came to one anyway, because the Empire got there before he did – and had instituted a law code which encouraged schismatics to return to the Catholic Church – given the situation of civil war between the sects, Christian unity and common communion across the Empire had become a matter of state security. The Theodosian Code set out a series of civil penalties against schismatics; such as restrictions against being able to enter into legal contracts or pass on inheritance to one's children, it did not include physical punishment. Although Augustine did not write these laws, perhaps more damaging, he wrote the justification for them into his theology, which became foundational to the Catholic Church and to many of the abusive practices she perpetrated. What he wrote was essentially an 'ends justify the means' argument, because to him, the stakes couldn't get higher, this wasn't about temporal things, the property you own or your daily happiness, this was about the welfare of your eternal soul, and what's a little displeasure now in exchange for salvation from eternal damnation? He explained it once like this: “[the Donatists] have been given three benefits: a life of bodily health; the means of staying alive; and the means with which to live badly. Let them keep the first two safe; in that way there will still be some potential penitents. ... If God wishes to excise the third of these, as if it were a gangrenous and poisonous growth, then certainly he will, in his mercy, inflict punishment.” Augustine used many such metaphors; like that of a parent disciplining a child who's playing with a deadly snake, or a

doctor having to cut, causing pain in order to heal— meaning always that civil penalties were preferable to damnation. After all, in his world, torture and death were everyday occurrences, and a loss civil status was a comparatively minor punishment.

The problem is that we know what his arguments led to – a hypocritical Church polity wielding terror and destruction with impunity. Hannah Arendt wrote that violence always carries the danger that the means will overwhelm the ends for which they were employed, and this is exactly what happened. Augustine’s essential argument, that temporal discipline could be administered by the Church with the aim of bringing the miscreant back into the fold, is a direct predecessor of Inquisitorial torture. Knowing the outcome, we can see the argument is mistaken. But, despite his brilliance, Augustine did not foresee that consequence. He saw the effective conversion of thousands of formerly lost souls to the true and healing Catholic faith, and that was reason enough for him.

It doesn’t do any good to be angry with a faith. The Church, despite her long institutional memory, is not a monolith, but a collection of individuals, who have each made their own choices, some for good, others not. There are plenty who deserve condemnation for their wilful sins. However, there are a great many more whose characters need not be judged by others’ deeds. Augustine wrote a theology with which I disagree in almost every aspect, but knowing the origins of that theology and the truth of his genuine conviction in it has changed my phrase from ‘I hate’ to ‘I disagree’. Now, when I look back on all the evils wrought by the force of this man’s mistaken arguments, I can say that Augustine of Hippo was a good man, compassionate, though wrong, honest, though powerful and in the end, fully human and therefore *understandable*. Augustine was caught between his longing for the divine and his duties to a violent population, and he did the best that he could. Though what he argued created so much evil, if I am painfully honest I don’t know what I would do if my place were exchanged with his. He made his erring arguments out of love; it is hard to fault him so severely for that. So I can forgive his mistakes, because they are human mistakes. And, having begun determined to be against him, I find hope in my forgiveness.

Not only am I no longer angry with Augustine of Hippo, whose essential goodness I now believe in, but the swell of my forgiveness has overtaken my anger against all those men over the centuries whose means overcame their ends, and whose seemingly hypocritical actions injured so many. Having forgiven one such man if not for all his deeds then at least for his fallibility, it is a challenge every day to forgive at least the fallibility of others. Even those who live so strongly by their religion that they need to attack me with it – can I forgive Jerry Falwell for his fallibility? Can I forgive George W. Bush for his hubris? Can I forgive Osama bin Laden for his imperfect humanity? I’m still working on that. At the very least, this journey to knowing ‘how this came to be this way’ has given me a different perspective on the history of religious violence and the Church, allowing me to see not a monolithic beast, but a group of human beings, who are not so different from myself. This has helped me learn to forgive their trespasses against me, in hopes that they can forgive mine.