

St. Augustine on “Righteous Persecution”

“No salvation outside the church.” (418 CE)

“[M]any must first be recalled to their Lord by the stripes of temporal scourging, like evil slaves, and in some degree like good-for-nothing fugitives.”

Augustine had defended toleration for most of life. Why the change of heart? In 397 CE:

“In the first of the books [*Contra partem Donati* and *Retractions*] I said that I was not in favor of schismatics being forcibly constrained to communion by the force of any secular power. And indeed at that time I did not favor that course, since I had not yet discovered the depths of evil to which their impunity would dare to venture, or how greatly a careful discipline would contribute to their emendation.”

How persecution works. If a man

“sees that it is unrighteousness for which he suffers, he may be induced, from the consideration that he is suffering and being tormented most fruitlessly, to change his purpose for the better, and may at the same time escape both the fruitless annoyance and the unrighteousness itself”

Our motive is Christian love. Since we love the sinner and are concerned for his salvation, we must not ignore any methods, however distasteful, when “seeking with a mother’s anxiety the salvation of them all”.

Also: “What then is the function of brotherly love? Does it, because it fears the short-lived fires of the furnace for a few, therefore abandon all to the eternal fires of hell?”

In 408 CE, a letter to Vincentius, Bishop of Cartenna and a Donatist:

“I have therefore yielded to the evidence afforded by these instances which my colleagues have laid before me. [For example,] there was set over against my opinion my own town, which, although it was once wholly on the side of Donatus, was brought over to the Catholic unity by fear of imperial edicts, but which we now see filled with such detestation of your ruinous perversity, that it would scarcely be believed that it had ever been involved in your error.”

Coercion is not intrinsically right or wrong; it depends on “the nature of that to which he is coerced, whether it be good or bad.” In the letter to Vincentius:

“Let us learn, my brother, in actions which are similar to distinguish the intentions of the agents In some cases both he that suffers persecution is in the wrong, and he that inflicts it is in the right. In all these cases, what is important to attend to but this: who were on the side of truth, and who on the side of iniquity; who acted from a desire to injure, and who from a desire to correct what was amiss?”

But not just anyone can use coercive force against another. Only the State may persecute. Individuals serve God by being faithful individuals, but kings serve God by “enforcing with suitable rigor such laws as ordain what is righteous, and punish what is the reverse.”

“Let the kings of the earth serve Christ by making laws for Him and for His cause.”