

## Donatism in North Africa (An Analytical Study)

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### Abstract

*This research examines Donatism as one of the most important Christian sects that emerged in North Africa during the Roman period. It seeks to analyze the circumstances of its emergence, the reasons for its appearance, its beliefs, and its areas of spread, while shedding light on the personality of its founder, Donatus, and his role in consolidating this movement. The study concludes that Donatism was not merely a doctrinal religious schism, but rather represented a religious-political protest movement that expressed the rejection by the local population of the alliance between the Catholic Church and Roman authority, as well as their aspiration for social justice and symbolic independence. The research also highlights that the spread of Donatism was closely linked to deteriorating social and economic conditions, which made it the dominant Christian sect in vast areas of North Africa. The study concludes by emphasizing the importance of studying Donatism to understand the nature of the interaction between religion and politics in the ancient history of the region.*

**Keywords:** *Donatism, Donatus, doctrinal conflict, church history, Christianity, Carthage.*

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### Introduction

Donatism occupies a central position in the history of Christianity in North Africa during the early centuries CE, as it represented a religious phenomenon with multiple dimensions that went beyond the narrow theological framework into the realms of politics, society, and economics. Roman Africa at that time was characterized by a complex reality marked by religious persecutions and by Roman political domination that relied on the Catholic Church as a tool to consolidate its influence and ensure the loyalty of the population. Amid these transformations, Donatism emerged as a reformist movement rejecting the legitimacy of the official Church and opposing its alliance with imperial authority. This led it to gain broad support among the indigenous population, who saw in it an expression of their religious and social identity, and even of their unspoken political aspirations.

From this perspective, Donatism cannot be studied in isolation from the historical context in which it arose, nor from the crises that afflicted ancient African society, especially those related to ecclesiastical legitimacy, the purity of the clergy, class disparity, and the exploitation of economic resources. Accordingly, this research aims to present a comprehensive study of Donatism in terms of its origins, reasons for emergence, beliefs, and areas of spread, while highlighting the personality of its founder, Donatus, and his role in shaping this movement, in an attempt to understand the true nature of this sect and whether it was a purely religious schism or a movement with deep political and social dimensions.

### Research Problem

This research is based on a central problem formulated as follows:

Can Donatism be considered a religious movement that split from the Catholic Church on doctrinal grounds, or does it in fact represent a religious current with political and social dimensions that expressed the rejection by the local population of Roman and ecclesiastical domination in North Africa?

From this main problem stem several subsidiary questions, the most important of which are:

- What historical, religious, and political circumstances paved the way for the emergence of Donatism in Africa?

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What is the nature of the conflict between the Donatists and the Catholic Church: is it a genuine doctrinal dispute or a struggle over legitimacy and ecclesiastical authority?

To what extent did social and economic factors contribute to the spread of Donatism among broad segments of African society?

What role did Donatus and his successors play in organizing the movement and ensuring its continuity?

How did the spread of this sect affect the relationship between the local population and Roman authority and the official Church?

By addressing these questions, the research seeks to reread Donatism through a historical and analytical lens that goes beyond traditional ecclesiastical judgments that labeled it as heresy, and to explore its deep backgrounds and true context.

#### *A. Its Emergence:*

Around the year 317 CE, a religious movement appeared that was attributed to its first leader, the priest Donatus <sup>(2)</sup>. It initially began as a rejection of the Church's decisions regarding the appointment of individuals as leaders over the Christian people. The latter strongly rejected them because of their betrayal of the Church during the period of persecution it had endured under pagan rule.

#### *B. Reasons for its emergence:*

The reasons for the emergence of the Donatist movement can be summarized as follows:

##### *The Political Reason :*

The eagerness of the inhabitants of the Maghreb to join the Donatist movement was a form of rebellion against Roman authority. The political power at that time gave very great consideration to the Roman community at the expense of the indigenous population, who were regarded as a second class despite sharing the same religion. This led the locals to adopt Donatism as a means of indirect separation from the Roman ruling authority, which had been a cause of their oppression.

##### *The Religious Reason:*

The religious reason is mainly represented in the Catholic Church's exercise of its spiritual authority over the Maghrebi congregations by employing the principle of social hierarchy between pastor and flock, and ruler and ruled <sup>(5)</sup>. This contradicted the teachings brought by Christ, which make people equal in all things. Consequently, the population adhered to the Donatist viewpoint, which held that it applied the true teachings of Christ in worship and conduct.

##### *The Social Reason:*

Large landowners seized everything, which led to the emergence of class stratification in society, and they attributed this to their ecclesiastical spiritual authority. This caused many people to affiliate themselves with Donatism and call themselves the Circellions <sup>(7)</sup>, whose mission was to seize the property of the arrogant class and distribute it justly among the segments of society in order to establish social balance.

##### *The Economic Reason*

The Church supported Roman authority, which resulted in the government's seizure of the revenues of the region in terms of savings and agricultural produce, without distributing them equitably among the people <sup>(8)</sup>. This led to an economic problem that compelled the poor to attack the rich in order to seize what they possessed, which they considered to be their rightful property with full freedom to dispose of it.

*Its Beliefs*

With regard to the beliefs adopted by the Donatist sect, they were generally similar to Catholic doctrines, to the extent that some historians consider Donatism to be merely a political movement rather than a religious sect <sup>(9)</sup>. Others, however, see a distinction between it and Catholicism, especially since the latter labeled it as heresy a term, as is well known, applied only to those who deviate from the established religious tenets of the Church <sup>(10)</sup>. This indicates several issues in which the sect differed from the Carthaginian Church.

Among the most important references that reveal the true nature of the doctrinal disagreement between Donatism and the Roman Church are the decisions of the councils convened in the region, whether joint or separate. Each group had its own council, and such councils provide two key insights <sup>(11)</sup>:

**First:** If they were separate, they allow us to determine the areas of influence of each sect, as each would generally hold its councils in the regions where it was present, with its followers coming from their respective areas, thereby enabling us to identify the real numerical strength of each group.

**Second:** The causes of disagreement between the two groups, especially after the conversion of Roman authority to Christianity and the adoption of Christianity as the religion of the state, when the latter sought to unify its outlook with that of its subjects, but ultimately encountered their categorical rejection, since those who returned to the authority of the Church were considered unbelievers <sup>(12)</sup>.

They were negligent regarding the sacred books, which they handed over to the pagans without consideration for the acts of sacrifice they were supposed to embody, given that they were responsible for a large segment of the Church's congregation.

Thus, from a doctrinal perspective, no real disagreement can be found between the Donatists and the mother Church in Carthage; rather, the conflict was essentially over entitlement to ecclesiastical authority in the first place, and what followed from this issue had no profound impact on doctrine.

*A. Areas of Spread:*

As is well known, the mother Church was based in Carthage, which today belongs to Tunisia, and its influence extended to the surrounding regions, particularly Algeria. One of the most important reasons for the spread of Donatism among the people was the phenomenon of tyranny exercised by Roman authority. In this context, Mubarak al-Mili states: "I have observed that the Donatist doctrine was the doctrine of the Christian majority in Algeria, because it was a doctrine religious in appearance and political in essence, supporting national sovereignty. Hence arose the hatred of its followers toward the Orthodox, who supported the Romans and endorsed foreign sovereignty" <sup>(13)</sup>.

The predominant settlement of Donatist adherents was therefore throughout North Africa, extending into rural areas and regions distant from the dominant Roman authority exercised through its Church.

*B. Death of the founder of the sect, Donatus:*

"Donatus died in exile in the year 355 CE. For forty years he was a source of inspiration for this movement. He was a great organizer, an eloquent preacher, a skilled writer, and an upright man proud and full of zeal, rejecting any compromise. He imposed upon himself and his followers a life at the highest Christian standards. Augustine always showed great respect and appreciation for his opponent Donatus, placing him on a level with Cyprian, viewing him as a rare and precious essence within the Church of Christ. He was succeeded in his position by the one called Parmenianus (Parménien), one of the most competent and capable supporters. Parmenianus was a foreigner, either from Spain or from Gaul, and he too was an eloquent preacher and a prolific writer of pamphlets addressing polemical issues. During his debates with one of the supporters of the Catholic Church, Optatus of Milevis (Mila in Algeria), we find that their

viewpoints were in agreement on many matters, yet neither of them managed to present a final conciliatory vision on such a fragile basis” (14).

## Conclusion

This research has reached a set of conclusions confirming that Donatism was not merely a transient religious schism within African Christianity, but rather a complex phenomenon formed through the interaction of religious, political, social, and economic factors. The analysis has shown that the dispute between the Donatists and the Catholic Church was not a fundamental disagreement over core doctrines, but rather centered mainly on the issue of clerical purity and ecclesiastical legitimacy, especially after the persecutions of Christians and the handing over of sacred books by some priests to pagan authorities.

The study also demonstrated that the close alliance between the Catholic Church and Roman authority contributed to strengthening the sense of injustice among the local population, pushing them to adopt Donatism as an expression of rejection of foreign domination and as an aspiration for social justice and symbolic independence. Deteriorating economic conditions and the dominance of large landowners played a decisive role in expanding the base of this sect, especially in rural areas and regions far from Roman centers of power.

As for the figure of Donatus, it proved to be a central element in consolidating this movement, due to his moral strictness and strong organizational capacity, which enabled the sect to endure for long decades despite persecutions and violent confrontations. In light of this, Donatism can be seen as an early model of religious movements with a protest dimension, revealing an advanced social and political awareness among North African Christians and contributing to shaping the religious and political trajectory of the region’s history.

Accordingly, the study of Donatism is not only of historical importance, but also opens horizons for a deeper understanding of the intertwining of religion and politics in ancient societies, and of the nature of cultural and religious resistance practiced by the peoples of North Africa in the face of imperial domination.

## Research Results

This research yielded several findings, the most important of which are:

1. Donatism is a locally originated sect in North Africa, more closely linked to the historical and social context of the region than to purely theological disputes.
2. The reasons for the emergence of Donatism were multiple political, religious, social, and economic which explains its wide spread among the indigenous population.
3. The conflict between the Donatists and the Catholic Church was essentially a struggle over ecclesiastical legitimacy and spiritual leadership, not over the fundamental doctrines of Christianity.
4. The alliance between the official Church and Roman authority contributed to the Church’s loss of a large part of its credibility among the populace, thereby strengthening the position of Donatism as a protest movement.
5. Donatism played an important role in shaping a religious-social consciousness among North African Christians and contributed to the emergence of an independent tendency away from the Roman center.

## Research Recommendations

Based on the findings reached, the research recommends the following:

The necessity of reexamining early African Christian sects away from traditional ecclesiastical judgments, and adopting a critical historical approach that takes local context into account.

Encouraging comparative studies between Donatism and other protest religious movements in the ancient world, in order to highlight common features among them.

Giving greater attention to local and African sources, rather than relying solely on Roman or Catholic narratives, which were often characterized by bias.

Expanding research on the social and economic dimensions of Donatism in order to understand its relationship with popular and rural movements in North Africa.

Incorporating the study of Donatism into curricula on the history of religions and the ancient history of North Africa, given its importance in understanding the roots of religious and political plurality in the region.

## References

- (However, the Donatist revolt did not appear in North Africa specifically in Numidia until the Roman Emperor Theodosius adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Roman state in 391 CE. Donatus then seized the opportunity and established an independent Amazigh Christian sect, namely Donatism. The Amazigh people turned to this new sect in order to rid themselves of the yoke of Roman colonization and to free themselves from oppression and injustice.) and slavery, humiliation, and disgrace. This is what led the Amazigh to give their Church a national character, so that it would defend the demands of the local population and protect them from the tyranny of Roman forces and the oppression of exploitative aristocrats and Roman Catholic clergy).
- (Donatus was born in North Africa during the third century CE and is considered one of the most important Berber leaders who confronted the Romans with all the strength and knowledge at his disposal. He was also one of the foremost defenders of the Christian doctrine among the Amazigh milieu. He was an African Berber priest, monk, and preacher, and later became a bishop and a major religious leader in North Africa. He had many followers who defended the sect he founded both theoretically and practically. He was also the author of a religious book entitled *The Holy Spirit*. In addition to being the leader of the Donatist religious sect that was formed amid the ecclesiastical conflict prevailing at the time, all those who rejected Roman domination rallied under this sect, including the Circellions movement, which raised the banner of rebellion and revolt and the slogan of defiance against the Roman government. Donatus died in 335 CE). (Jamil Hamdawi, *Religion among the Amazigh*, p. 12).
- (The inhabitants of the Maghreb hastened to join the Donatist movement as a form of rebellion against Roman authority and gave their local Church a clear national character, with no regard for the concept of catholicity, that is, universality, and rejecting every form of Christianity that had adapted itself to the reality of social inequality imposed upon them by Roman rulers. The Berbers raised the banner of revolt against the Romans, which was in reality a political, economic, and social revolution, and in appearance a religious one. The Church of Carthage attempted to eliminate Donatism, and the Donatist schism over the course of a century caused many bloody confrontations, spreading terror among large landowners because of the movement's revolutionary social aims. However, the ruling authority eventually succeeded in defeating the Donatist movement and subduing it) (Abdelraouf Ahmed Arsan Jarrar, *Christianity in the Maghreb before the Islamic Conquest*, *Journal of the College of Basic Education for Educational and Human Sciences, University of Babylon*, Issue 30, December 2016).
- (The Donatist–Catholic conflict was based on hostility toward authority and toward those who collaborated with it during previous persecutions, which turned it into a movement that attracted local populations who supported it and stood by it during times when it was subjected to harsh judgments by the authority, which constantly sought to strengthen the Catholic side composed of aristocratic classes loyal to the regime) (Abdelraouf Ahmed Arsan Jarrar, *Christianity in the Maghreb before the Islamic Conquest*, previous source).
- Its meaning is the preference given to Roman subjects and the Roman community over the indigenous inhabitants, the owners of the land.
- (Donatism was a religious reform movement in appearance, but in essence it was an expression of the rejection by the crushed social classes of the social injustice imposed upon them under a despotic state that used religion to preserve deteriorating conditions. Donatism, Carthaginian in origin and Numidian in its spread, was nothing but a rural social revolution against the prevailing deteriorated conditions, especially those resulting from the economic and judicial measures taken by the emperor concerning farmers. The revolutionary character of this movement is manifested in its alliance with the rebel movement known as the Circumcellions, through which Donatism turned into a general revolution that threatened the cities in which the aristocrats had taken refuge, including Hippo itself) (Muhammad Bashir Shinaiti, *Ancient Hippo*, *Al-Asala Journal*, Issue 34, Publications of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Endowments, pp. 35–36).

- Robin Daniel says in describing the group: “They surged rebelliously through villages and rural areas, armed with heavy clubs, claiming to be soldiers of Christ, chanting Donatist slogans, and spreading terror among the population. They burned Catholic places of worship, attacked their church leaders, killed at least one overseer, and also intervened in personal disputes: here they demanded the payment of a due debt, and there they threatened a landowner who had reprimanded his slave” (Robin Daniel, *Christian Heritage in North Africa: A Historical Study from the First Century to the Middle Ages*, previous source, p. 237).
- Professor Jarrar explains the reasons behind the unrest of the Maghreb’s population in general, represented by the Donatist movement and its military wing, the Circumcellions: “However, the true Donatists, most of whom were of Berber origin, remained steadfast in their strength and resilience, awaiting an opportunity to strike at the ruling authority. Their movement was political, aiming at liberation from Roman oppression, cloaked in the guise of a religious movement. The greatest cause of this tremendous unrest was the Roman colonial system, which granted land ownership to a group of beneficiaries loyal to the state while depriving the indigenous population of their lands” (Abdelraouf Ahmed Arsan Jarrar, *Christianity in the Maghreb before the Islamic Conquest*, previous source).
- (The dispute was not doctrinal in nature, but rather concerned the legitimacy of episcopal authority in Carthage. The Donatists considered themselves more entitled to administer the bishopric and to be the true representatives of Christians in the region. They did not confine themselves to debate and argument, but took concrete military steps, forming an army of the most zealous Donatists, who roamed the outskirts of the البلاد under the name of the “Circumcellions,” claiming to unite all Christians under their banner. The Donatists also regarded themselves as the most worthy successors of the Apostles.) (Abdelraouf Ahmed Arsan Jarrar, *Christianity in the Maghreb before the Islamic Conquest*, previous source).
- (The violence of the conflict between the factions supporting the two rival overseers intensified. The Donatists claimed that Caecilian and his predecessor Mensurius had shown contempt for the martyrs of the Church of Abitina, who were imprisoned in Carthage, and that they had prevented their companions from visiting them and supporting them in their suffering. They also repeatedly asserted that Caecilian, when he was still a deacon, had betrayed the Church by handing over the sacred books belonging to the Church of Carthage to the pagans.) (Robin Daniel, *Christian Heritage in North Africa: A Historical Study from the Early Centuries to the Middle Ages*, previous source, p. 234).
- (The records of the ecclesiastical councils that have reached us through Western writings, covering the period between 220 CE and 430 CE, introduced us to the earliest councils that discussed the issue of heretics and apostates. From these councils we also benefited in visualizing the geography of Christianity in the ancient Maghreb, especially during the third century CE, the problems faced by Christians of that period, and the reasons for Christian divisions after the Roman authority adopted Christianity at the beginning of the fourth century CE, as well as the most important rulings issued by the authority against the opposing Christian sect.) (Imran ‘Abd al-Hamid, *Christianity in the Ancient Maghreb: Origin and Development (180–430 CE)*, previous source, pp. 9–10).
- (Christianity in the Maghreb experienced sectarian deviations influenced by ideas coming from the distant East through Egypt, such as the doctrine of divine indwelling and the doctrine of dualism, among other doctrines far removed from the teachings of Christianity preached by the Lord Jesus, peace be upon him. Furthermore, the Maghrebi Church experienced a division unique to it, namely Donatism, attributed to its founder Donatus the Great, the bishop of the nationalists, who refused to recognize the legitimacy of the election of Caecilian as bishop of Carthage. Consequently, Donatus proclaimed a call for martyrdom, to which all those resentful of the state responded (The toiling classes. Constantine attempted to bring about a reconciliation between the two parties, but he did not succeed, and the schism between them intensified.) (Abdelraouf Ahmed Arsan Jarrar, *Christianity in the Maghreb before the Islamic Conquest*, previous source).
- Mubarak ibn Muhammad al-Mili, *The History of Algeria in Ancient and Modern Times*, previous source, vol. 1, p. 297.
- Robin Daniel, *Christian Heritage in North Africa: A Historical Study from the First Century to the Middle Ages*, previous source, p. 240.