

The 4th Century Circumcellion Movement...

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[0 : 00] Thanks so much for having me. I'm sure when you saw this title, everyone was, well, maybe we'll just introduce it with one of two questions. Intriguing or irrelevant? One of the two, perhaps.

And so I want to start by talking a little bit about why this topic. So something that's always intrigued me and also appalled me a little bit is religious and especially Christian violence.

And so I wanted to ask the question, how is it, you know, looking through history, how is it that Christendom perpetuated the Crusades?

How is it that a church that only a couple hundred years, a few hundred years after Luther, one of the most Lutheran churches in the nation became the Nazi church?

You know, how is it that one of the most Christian nations in Africa, Rwanda, is also the place where one of the worst genocides in history took place? So, I mean, these are just some of the questions that were going around in my mind.

[1 : 06] And so, of course, there are so many myriad factors in every single one of these cases. And we can't look at them as if they are as if they're all the same sort of incidents.

But they're all unique, isolated cases. But I wanted to this was for a history paper. And I wanted to kind of look at a particular moment in time, kind of ask the question, how is it that a people who claim to be Christian, to be shaped by the Prince of Peace, can perpetuate and condone such heinous acts?

And so, the Circumsellian movement, I was looking throughout history, and there was this group called the Circumsellians, who had popped up just in a random little bit in my history course.

And they were a group of kind of violent brigands from the 4th century. We call them the Circumsellians now, and I'll talk a little bit more about what that means.

But they liked to call themselves the Agnosticoi, which means the warriors for Christ. And so, the long title of this is the 4th century Circumsellian movement as a case study in how theological factors shape religious violence.

[2 : 28] So, the question I'm really trying to ask is, I want to look at the Circumsellian movement and say, was it economic? Was it social?

Was it political factors? Or how much can we actually look at the theology that the pulpit and the leaders within the particular movement that Circumsellians were a part of, how much did those theological factors actually shape the way in which this movement panned out and justified their religious violence?

So, my main question is, why did they clip that title for the bulletin? So, just to set it up, in the year 340, bands of peasants from Roman North African regions of Upper Numidia and Mauritania began to terrorize the countryside, violently thieving wealthy landlords, freeing slaves, and forcing the cancellation of debts.

Again, they called themselves the Agnosticoi, the warriors of Christ. But to their opponents, they were the Circumsellians. So, who were they? And what motivated them?

So now, I want to start by showing you guys a map of the Roman Empire, circa 300, around when this began. So, this was called the Tetrarchy.

[4 : 00] And the entire empire was split into four parts. And there were two Caesars who kind of reigned over half a bit, and then they had their own Augustuses who were basically in charge of a certain portion.

So, you've got the green here. This was the district of Maximilian. The yellow is the district of Constantius. The red is the district of Galerius.

And the purple is the district of Diocletian. And we're going to really be focusing on this area, especially North Africa, under Diocletian and Maximian, because this is where a large amount of persecution was taking place.

And so, the background is the persecution of Diocletian, which eventually led to what is called the Donatist Schism.

So, the persecution of Diocletian and Maximian took place primarily between 303 and 305. And the background to this was that Diocletian was an emperor who really wanted to reestablish the glory of Rome and the glory of what it meant to be Caesar.

[5 : 31] And so, in order to do this, he started to, he saw religion as a way in which to kind of bring this back. And so, he required all people throughout the region to burn a sacrifice to Caesar.

And anyone who wouldn't had a problem. So, of course, Christians were one of those groups. And so, Christian meetings were forbidden.

The scriptures were burned. And any refusal to deny the faith or to pass on the scriptures meant torture or death. So, in order to get a good glimpse of what this was like, I want to read from this book here.

This is called The Donatist Martyr Stories. So, let's listen to one of these stories to hear a little bit about what these persecutions were like. Therefore, since they were handed over by the local officials to the proconsul, and since it had been proposed that the Christians be sent by the officials of Abitina, for they celebrated the Lord's Supper against the prohibition of the emperors and the Caesars.

The proconsul first asked Dativius what his station in life was and whether he had come to the assembly. When he declared that he was a Christian and that he had come to the assembly, the proconsul demanded the name of the leader of his most holy assembly.

[7 : 05] Immediately, he ordered the official on duty to put Dativius on the rack and once he was stretched out to prepare the claws. The executioners carried out their cruel orders with dreadful speed and standing there filled with rage down to their fingertips, with the claws raised, they threatened the wounded sides of the martyr which were already stripped and exposed.

Next, Tazalita, the bravest martyr, in front of everyone, submitted himself to torments and exclaimed, We are Christians. He said, We do assemble.

Then the anger of the proconsul blazed hot, groaning and severely wounded by a spiritual sword. Notice that language. This is the proconsul wounded by a spiritual sword and there was a very spiritual dimension to the battle going on here.

and so the martyr in declaring his Christian faith wounded that proconsul with a spiritual sword. The executioner struck the martyr of Christ with heavy blows as he hung there on the rack.

He stretched him out and tore at him with a horrible grating claws. But in response, in the midst of the fury of the executioners, Tazalita, the most glorious martyr, poured out his prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord in this manner.

[8 : 29] Thanks be to God. In your name, O Christ, Son of God, free your servants. So that's just a glimpse of some of the torture that was going on, the claws and the executioner and then the ways in which they framed it as a spiritual battle and we'll be returning to that.

So, the worst persecution ended in 305 when Constantinus, not Constantine, but his father kind of took over this region and he wasn't quite as enthusiastic about the persecutions as Diocletian, Maximian had been.

But the persecution really doesn't end completely until the rise of Constantine when Constantine takes over the whole empire in 323. So, by the time this persecution ended, or at least the worst of it, there's this big question.

What do we do with the traditores, those who have lapsed from the faith, those who turned over the scriptures, those who recanted the faith and now want to come back?

And this is particularly a big question with the lapsed clergy. Now, this is a complicated subject because sometimes the clergy would hand over the literature in order, not just to protect themselves, but in order to protect their congregation so that they wouldn't have to reveal the names or maybe they were worried that in torch they would reveal the names of some of the other Christians who were part of their group.

[10 : 06] And so they thought to themselves, you know, it's better to hand over a little bit of theological literature, maybe even the scriptures, in order to protect the congregation and get the officials off their back.

But, this is obviously a big question and this is actually what led eventually to the schism because the Donatists refused to compromise.

Their hero was a man named Cyprian who was a martyr bishop and he had some pretty strong theology surrounding the issue of the traditores, those who had lapsed from the faith.

So he said that the sacraments of the clergy who had lapsed were invalid. The argument is that God required from the priests, from those who performed the sacraments of baptism and of the Eucharist, that God required unquestioning obedience and purity from those clergy.

And so this included baptism, ordination, was also seen as a sacrament. And then of course the Eucharist. So one of the big issues here was surrounding the issue of the sacrament.

[11 : 29] What was it that made it effective? Was it the obedience and the purity of the person who performed the act? Or was it the work of God despite the vessel, despite the person who is doing the act?

So Cyprian argued, the first, that God required priests to be perfect. And if they weren't, if they weren't in a state of perfect grace when they performed this act, that it didn't count.

So anybody who had been baptized by one of these priests or bishops was not actually a Christian. And any priest who had been ordained by one of them was not actually a priest.

So that was what was behind this idea. And also, to allow these traditores, these people who had betrayed the faith, back in dishonored the memory of the martyrs.

And I think that we can see the emotional impact here. How can we accept those? How could they accept those who had given in back into the faith? When your brother or sister, perhaps, had given up their life in defense of it?

[12 : 43] And we had seen people who had suffered and died. It's a good question. I think that we can understand this. So we see the emotional impact of allowing these people back into the faith.

And even more so, when we look at the election of the bishop Sicilian. So Sicilian was a bishop who was elected the bishop of Carthage in the year 311.

So what was the problem? First of all, he had been ordained by a traditore. So he was ordained by a man named Felix, who had given over some of the scriptures and was a traditore himself.

But I want to read another section from the Acts of the Martyrs in order to really give us a sense of why the election of this man was so offensive to the Donifists.

So let's see. Alright, so we're talking here about Sicilian.

[13 : 54] More ruthless than the tyrant, more bloody than the executioner. Another bishop chose Sicilian, his deacon, as a suitable minister of his misdeeds, and he stationed them before the doors of the prison.

And this is the prison where the martyrs were being held by the Roman authorities. Armed with whips and lashes, so that he might turn away from the entrance and exit all those who brought food and drink to the martyrs in prison, further harming those already wronged by grave injustice.

The people who came to nourish the martyrs were struck down right and left by Sicilian. The cups for the thirsty inside and chains were broken. At the entrance to the prison, food was scattered, only to be torn apart by the dogs.

Before the doors of prison, the fathers of the martyrs fell, and the most holy mothers. Shut out from the sight of their children, they kept their vigil day and night at the entrance of the prison.

There was the dreadful weeping and bitter lamentation by all who were there. To keep the pious from the embrace of the martyrs and to keep Christians from a duty of piety, Sicilian, was more ruthless than the tyrant, more bloody than the executioner.

[15 : 14] So what is this saying? It's saying that there was a time when there were a bunch of these martyrs in prison, and the Roman authorities had issued an edict that nobody could bring food to these martyrs in prison.

And so Sicilian, who was the man in charge of this, kept the people out, kept the people from bringing this food to the martyrs.

And so this was seen as a great betrayal. And the fact that somebody like this could be elected as the bishop of an important city, an important city like Carthage, was absolutely offensive to the Donatists, to these people who were, the memory of the martyrs was so fresh.

So what did the Donatists do? They elected a competing bishop in the same town, a man named Magirinus, and so that sealed the schism.

So there are now two camps. There's one camp which I'll call the Sicilians. Now we, from our vantage point, would call them the Orthodox.

[16:26] But in order to be fair to this historical moment, we've got to understand that both the Sicilians and the Donatists understood themselves as those who were keeping the pure faith. So the Sicilians included people like Augustine, who eventually wrote a lot against the Donatists, but we'll call them the Sicilianists for the rest of this lecture.

And then the other camp was the Donatists. So the Donatists are named after their most famous bishop, a man named Donatists, who was elected the bishop of Carthage after Magirinus. So the question, what separated the two? And there are two issues, martyrdom and purity. So what's my thesis? My thesis is that the circumcellium movement and its use of violence was an unavoidable, albeit extreme, product of the Donatist self-identification as the church of the martyrs and the church of the pure.

So the theological factors that I'm really going to be looking at is the ways in which the Donatists understood martyrdom and purity and how that actually led to this, these violent circumcellings. So let's first look at the first theological factor, which is martyr worship. So let's make this clear. There was no group who didn't revere the martyrs.

[17:59] Everybody thought that they had done a great act for Jesus Christ, and that included the Sicilianists. But the Donatists worshipped them. Martyr veneration was actually an important part of Donatist orthodoxy.

Donatist himself says that suppressing the praise of the martyrs out of envious silence is contrary to the obligations of religion and piety.

So churches were built around martyr shrines. I don't know if you guys know the name Tertullian, but he was also a famous theologian from around this time, before this time, and a hero of the Donatists.

And he had said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. And so they took this literally, building up actual physical churches in the places in which martyrs had been killed or persecuted.

And martyr stories were very popular. I've already read a couple bits from this, but there was tons and tons of martyr literature out there. And what was the purpose?

[19:17] The purpose of these martyr stories, and it's stated right there at the beginning, is to imitate the martyrs. Let me read just from the preface here. It says, Therefore, this is what the author says, I begin an account of celestial battles and struggles undertaken anew by the bravest soldiers of Christ.

I write with a specific two-fold resolve, that we might prepare our very selves for martyrdom by imitating them, and that when we have committed to writing the battles and victories of their confessions, we may entrust to everlasting memory those whom we believe to live forever and reign with Christ.

So we see that martyrdom is considered to be the apex of Christian experience. These people are the bravest soldiers of Christ, and what would be better than to imitate them?

So martyrdom is also seen as the reward of God. It's a quicker way to heaven, and a much more honorable way. So this is so much so that even voluntary martyrdom is celebrated.

One of the stories in this book is a martyrdom called The Passion of Maximia Donatilla and Secunda. And one of the characters, Secunda, is a 12-year-old girl who joins Maxima and Donatilla in their martyrdom.

[20:44] So let me read just a brief snippet from that as well. While they, Maximia and Donatilla, were getting up and going, there was in that place a certain girl by the name of Secunda, about 12 years old, who had been engaged many times and rejected them all because she loved God alone.

We have to remember that the age of 12 was essentially an adult at this time. When she saw them setting out, looking down through the balcony of her house so high, she threw herself down from there, having no consideration for her parents' wealth before her eyes.

She disdained all the squalor, as it were, of the world. She despised wealth, only one did she desire, the one she deserved to find in eternity.

Therefore, with Maxima and Donatilla on their way to Turbo, Secunda cried out, Sisters, do not abandon me. Maxima and Donatilla said to her, Go away, for you are the only child of your father.

To whom would you leave him? But Secunda said, It is better for me to defy my father according to the flesh, and love my spiritual father.

[21 : 59] And then again she says, The verdict of this world cannot determine, because I seek a spiritual spouse, Jesus Christ. So here we see this virgin, Secunda, and her desire for martyrdom, so that she might seek the spiritual spouse, Jesus Christ.

And we see the other big theme come up here, and that's the importance of purity as well, and the emphasis on Secunda's virginity. And so the second thing is that martyrdom is also seen as identification with Christ.

Donatist says that no one else appears as a servant of Christ as much as someone who has suffered the same thing. So, the first theological factor, martyr worship.

The second theological factor is the pure church. So the Donatists saw themselves as the only pure church. And how did they define purity? Purely was defined as absolute obedience to scripture.

And this included the Old Testament laws. They often applied the Old Testament laws literally without nuance. And they saw the Bible as a law book, continually talking about the commands of God.

[23 : 19] So, the problem is that the Sicilian sacraments had been polluted by the traditoris. So, therefore, the Donatists broke all ties with Sicilian churches.

In the Acts of the Martyrs, it says that if anyone communicates with the traditores, that person will not have a share with us in the heavenly kingdom.

And so they used metaphors like the church as Sodom. So that the large church itself was Sodom. And the Donatists saw themselves as Lot, the one pure character in the midst of all of this apostasy.

Another way in which they saw themselves were as Israel. The pure Israel in a group of Gentiles or infidels. So they believed that the whole church had become apostate.

So, there's the question of the pure versus the defiled. And when you create a separation between the pure and the defiled, the Donatists' church opened the door for hatred and violence because they no longer saw these people as human.

[24 : 31] And this is a door that the Circumsellians tore down. So, now probably all of you have been wondering, well, who are these Circumsellians after all?

So up to this point, we've been talking about Donatist theology. We've been looking at their emphasis on martyrdom as the apex of Christian life and then the belief that they alone were the pure church.

So now I want to look at the Circumsellian movement itself. First, I need to briefly recognize a caveat that there is a bias of sources. Most of the sources that we have surrounding the Circumsellians and the Donatists are those who are opponents, who have their own lens.

Augustine and Octatus, who are the primary sources that we have, both wrote treatises called Against the Donatists. So we can see kind of where they're at, where their emphasis lies.

So that's why it's been important for me to use their own literature, the martyr stories, and the few remaining sermons that we have left as the primary focus here. So it's difficult to recreate this because clearly to the victor goes the spoils and that includes the ability to write history.

[25 : 45] So it's hard to know if they exaggerated the violent nature of the Circumsellians. And the same question, were they demonizing their enemies in the same ways in which the Circumsellians demonized them?

So this is something just to keep in mind as we go through this and also when we study any history. So defining Circumsellium. The Circumselliums are listed in a particular document as an ordo, which means that they're a legally recognized social class.

You know, it was like you have a tax form and, you know, check here if you're a Circumsellian. So there's something about this that helps us to recognize that this is a tight-knit, fairly uniform class. And based on where they are in the quote-unquote tax bracket, it looks like they're a group of lower-class agricultural workers. So they're not slaves. They own a bit of their own land, but they're definitely not among the social elite.

And so there's kind of two words that form this word Circumsellium. The first word is Circum, which means around.

[26 : 58] And the second word, which is more interesting, is this word Sele. And so Augustine said that Circumselliums would often stop at Sele to collect food.

So the question is what are these Sele? And it seems that they are martyr's shrines on which the Donthus built their churches.

So archaeologists have dug up some of these Sele and they've seen that these shrines have a lot of space for relics, a place to sleep for pilgrims, and also silos for storing grain.

So there was food here available. So, we can't just see the Circumselliums as a social, ethnic, or economic class.

This is a group that is intrinsically related to religion, even in their very name, talking about these martyr shrines. So, this also makes sense of their self-referent term, right?

[27 : 56] They're the Agnosticoi, which means the Warriors of Christ. I don't think you'd call yourselves the Warriors of Christ if your primary purpose was to get together to have tea and play a little bridge, right?

Obviously, there's something more behind this. So, it makes it clear that they have religious connotations. Yes?

It's, the word itself is not agnostic as far as I understand it. Somebody might know Latin better than I do, but I don't actually know what the Latin word means.

Lamb? Oh, okay. Fighters of the Lamb. There you go. Right. Which is interesting, right? So, fighters of the Lamb. And not only was that term, they used the term Lamb, which is interesting because it's the Lamb who was slain.

Right? So, thanks for the helpful Latin lesson as well. So, let me, so let me define circumcised them, then.

[29 : 16] They're a wandering group of religious zealots, mostly peasants, who wander from one shrine to the next in order to receive spiritual and physical sustenance.

So, these were kind of pilgrims on the way, right? And they would stop at a martyr's shrine to, to get food, to sleep, and also to revere and worship and pray for the martyr who that shrine was, who the shrine was, was about.

So, and they are intrinsically this link to the Donatist movement. Augustine and several others, even the Donatists themselves, make it clear that the circumcellions are part of this movement.

So, there's an interesting question here. Why is it that Donatism appealed to the lower classes? We have no evidence of a similar kind of counter-movement, cropping up amongst the Sicilianists.

So, why didn't the Sicilianists, who apparently had so much trouble with the circumcellions, simply raise up their own army of peasant warriors for Christ, right?

[30 : 32] There was something about Donatism that attracted the lower classes. It was important for us to see that Donatism is not a monolithic movement. Just like any movement, there were a lot of different views.

Similar to the Anabaptists, there are some who were extremely pacifists in this movement, and then there are also some who were fiery holy war extremists. But one thing that was in common amongst the whole movement was this emphasis on the martyrs and on purity.

So, in Donatism also, just like in, I think, in any church, there's a tension between kind of the highly literate and educated clergy and the country populations with a local farm of priests.

So many of the bishops and those who were higher up in this movement condemned some of what the circumciliations were doing. But it's important to recognize that they never excommunicated them, never said, you know what, what you're doing is so wrong that you can't be a part of this church.

And this is coming from a church that was definitely not afraid of excommunication, right, and the ways in which they saw and understood purity. it didn't take much for them to say what you were doing was not part of what they were about.

[31 : 50] So in general, the circumciliation movement seems to have the support of the Donatist church. So, going back a little bit, Christianity spread quickly among the poor in North Africa.

It was seen as a form of dissent. The most common religion in North Africa before this time had been the worship of Saturn. But Saturn, the Roman god, had been taken over by the Roman state. And so, this very god who the peasants, the agricultural farmers, worshipped as their gods, had been Romanized and made respectable and official. Now, so if you're a poor peasant class, constantly under the weight and burden of the state, you probably don't want, you're probably not that interested in retaining a god.

That is state sanctioned. Right? It's not, it's not that exciting if you're worshipping the same god as those who are oppressing you. So, the time was ripe for a new god.

And I want to step back for just a second. I'm not underestimating the power of the Holy Spirit or the fact that God was working in incredible ways in the ways in which he brought about the conversion of the Christians.

[33 : 09] But we need to see also, you know, it even says in the Bible that the fullness of time had come. The time was ripe and it was the right time for the spread of Christianity socially and religiously as well.

time. So, the time was ripe here for the spread of the Christian faith. But because of their background, because of the fact that they had been worshipping Sabbath for so long, it led to a little bit of syncretism.

The god who, the god of Israel, became a little bit like the god, like the god Saturn. And who was Saturn? Saturn was, as you can tell from this picture, he is a god of vengeance and a god who is to be feared and appeased.

And so some of this stuff, even in the conversion of North Africa, right? So the North African church, and any of you guys who know about like Tertullian and that man Cyprian who we had talked about, it's always been a rigorous church.

a church that was about fulfilling the commandments of God and asceticism and, you know, worship like, what's the other way of putting it, just doing hard things for God, perhaps, you know, maybe to put it in.

[34 : 39] So, so the Donatist church was rigorous, and so it appealed to the masses for one reason, because it continued this emphasis, this was what they understood as religion, was this hard, sacrificial kind of life.

Of course, this was the lifestyle that they lived as peasant farmers in the desert. That's not an easy life, right? So probably well over half of the Christian population in this area were Donatists as opposed to Sicilian.

And also, we have to remember that eventually, especially by the time of the rise of the Circumcellians, the Sicilian church, the opponents, were under Roman support.

They were tied to the state. So it probably helped the Donatist church that it was not the official state sanctioned church. The Sicilian church had become tied up with the state.

And so the Donatists were able to, by being a part of the Donatist church, you were able to still be a Christian, and still be kind of dissenting against some of the abuses of the state.

[35 : 51] So Peter Brown says that one of the appeals of Christianity is its ability to enable people to participate in something different than their ordinary existence.

And this is kind of a sociologist's look at Christianity, right? But I think it gives us something helpful in understanding this movement.

Because Donatism offered something different. When the Sicilian church was tied up with the state, the Donatist church held the attention of the masses because it was a rigorous church, which was antagonistic towards the state and offered a different hope, the hope of martyrdom.

And so one of the ways for people to join into, to participate in something different, was to join in with the Donatists in what they called the Holy War.

So after persecution ended, where were the martyrs going to come from? The Donatists had to sort of create a new enemy. When they had such an emphasis on martyrdom as the key aspect of what it meant to be a Christian, the Donatists had to create a new enemy and that new enemy was the Sicilianists.

[37 : 10] So their enemies were not just seen as physical enemies but as spiritual enemies as well. Donatists talked about his battle not being so much against human beings as against the devil.

So again, they see themselves as the remnant, the one pure remnant in the sea of Gentiles. So the question is, who is going to fight God's battle against the devil?

Who's going to join in this holy war? And the first to sign up are the circumcellents. So the circumcellents see themselves as the warriors who fight against the devil and prevail.

So again, when you demonize your opponents, you're able to justify violence. So the way they saw it is that if you killed or tortured the Sicilians, you weren't killing or torturing a human, you were killing a demon, not a man.

Right? So what did the circumcellents do? What was their part in this holy war? So again, the goal is martyrdom.

[38 : 26] So, another result of seeing your opponents as demon, as evil, is that you're always the victim.

Right? You are the one being terrorized because demons are pure evil. So listen to how Donatus rallied the troops.

He says, to be slain in the battle line as an adversary of the Gentiles, this is victory. To be killed by the enemy in our combat is triumph.

So the goal wasn't necessarily to commit violence, but rather to be martyred for your faith. And this is the ultimate victory. But as you'll see, it's really easy to twist that idea around.

So the other things that they did was a ritualistic preparation for this final goal of martyrdom. They spent most of their time in preparation, taking vows of chastity, performing prayers and aesthetical acts.

[39 : 35] And again, they traveled between these martyr shrines, visiting and celebrating with people who they longed to imitate. And they took part in celebrations, kind of drunken dance parties, which were vestiges of paganism, their pagan religion, but where they were justified by the holy drunkenness of Noah after the ark, and all of this in memory of the martyrdom.

And so they're kind of like monks, a religious order. But their primary role was to defend the faith. So until martyrdom, until they received that apex of their life, their goal was to defend the pure Donatist faith.

But it didn't take them very long to realize, as many sports teams do, that the best defense is a good offense. So very quickly the circumcellions turned to initiating attacks against anybody who they deemed to be enemies of the faith.

So they were focusing their attacks on Sicilianists, converts, and pagans. So sometimes they were taking revenge on wealthy landowners, but even these actions they saw as bringing the kingdom of God, freeing slaves, and canceling deaths.

So there is a bit of a realized apocalyptic here, that they were reversing the earthly fortunes of people, and bringing the kingdom of God. So one of the things that they would do is they would do symbolic mutilations.

[41 : 30] They would perform acts that would be outward signs of the inner impurity that they saw. So they would cut out the tongue of a Sicilianist missionary to prevent the spread of lies, or they would blind a pagan with lime and vinegar to represent that person's inability to see the truth.

Or they would submerge a new convert to Sicilianism in dirty water, in mockery of what they saw as a false bad thing. So again, they're providing outward signs of that inner impurity.

And they also did forced re-baptism. And we have to understand the importance of baptism at this time. They actually saw it as a divine act.

So when you were re-baptized, it was like you were actually being changed, like, literally. and so the example of Patillion, who became a very prominent donatist theologian is a really interesting one, because he was somebody who was taken by these circumcellents, forced into re-baptism, and he said, you know what?

This must have, I'm a donatist now. This must have happened by divine intent. And so he became a great donatist theologian. So we see that in all of this violence, the primary purpose is religious.

[43 : 01] And again, martyrdom. Martyrdom seen as the summit of moral purity. This was the goal of every single one of these circumcellents. So the circumcellents became a walking result of Don's theology, the emphasis on purity and martyrdom.

But martyrdom became twisted so that all that mattered was the death in Christ's name. The means no longer mattered. So the circumcellents, their idea was that they had a vague sense that they had to hear, perhaps in a dream or a vision, that their time had come.

But once they heard that, it was up to them to make it happen. And they didn't delay to claim that prize. So some circumcellents would run into pagan rituals and offer themselves as human sacrifices.

Large groups of circumcellents would run off cliffs together or burn themselves alive, and then they would later be immortalized with white stones as heroes of the faith.

And most sadistically, an individual circumcellent would sometimes stop an unsuspecting traveler or offer them a choice. They'd give them a knife and say, kill me or be killed.

[44 : 21] And so this became martyrdom at any cost. Martyrdom at the cost of even another human life. But it was justified because that person, who was not a Donatist, was seen as impure or even demoralized.

So the term we developed was called synthetic martyrdom. It's a false martyrdom for its own sake. And martyrdom was an attractive option because of the theology behind it.

It offered the circumcellion who was a poor peasant upward mobility and rewards in the next life.

And it also granted the Donatist church a continued claim to be the martyred church.

And according to their theology, the church of the martyrs was the only legitimate church. So as such, the circumcellion movement became a necessary evil for Donatism.

And unfortunately, this has a bit of a sad ending for those of us who maybe see this as a problematic movement, but eventually the Sicilianists, the Orthodox, called on Constantine and the Roman authorities to put the Donatists to the sword.

[45 : 40] And so the decision was made to kill and martyr some of these Donatists because they were heretics.

Right? And so their very desire was fulfilled and the enemies proved themselves in one sense to be wrong.

So there was a council in 411, the Donatist movement was still going on, and there was a decision that was to be made whether the Sicilianists or the Donatists were the true church.

And the Donatists' argument was that the true church is the one that suffers persecution, not the one that inflicts it. And of course, this is a big question, as we think back to some of our own history, for example, the Anabaptist movement.

They were persecuted and killed during the Reformation. So this is an open question, I'm not making any claims here, but does the suffering church have a better claim? The ones, the persecuted, or the persecutor?

[46 : 53] So I think that it's sad that the Donatists who had so much Aberrant theology, that they kind of are the ones who ended up being murdered in this way.

So again, this isn't an isolated historical event, but I think there are some important lessons that we can learn from this movement. On both sides of the coin, some warnings from history, as I like to call them.

So the first is from the Sicilian movement. The question is, what happens when a church is too tied up with the state? And I think the story of the circumcellion movement warns us of the danger of the church becoming too closely linked.

Because in every government, no matter how just that government is, no matter how fair that government is, there will always be people who get the short end of the stick. And when the church and the state are seen as one and the same, it alienates the marginalized, it alienates the people who are oppressed in one way or the other by that state.

Those people don't see the church as the place where God is. They see it as a place of oppression. And so I think that we need to be careful. These are just open questions.

[48 : 21] I'm not making any theological treatises. Just looking at the circumcellion movement and asking some interesting questions that I think come up.

then from the Don's side, first of all, the dangers of defining purity. I want to look at Matthew 13, 24 through 30, and read the parable of the wheat and the tares in this context.

verse 13, 24, through 30. Starting in 36. Then he left the crowds, and wait, wait, this is not that.

13, 24, there we go. He put another parable before them saying, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away.

So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?

[49 : 40] He said to them, the enemy has done this. So the servants said to him, then do you want us to go and gather them? But he said, no, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them.

Let both grow together until the harvest. And at harvest time I will tell the reapers, gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles through burn, but gather the wheat into my barn.

So the church will always be a place in which co-exist wheat and tares. And it's not our responsibility, but God's responsibility to define who's in and who's out. And so I think we need to be very careful when we think that we can define the true church with any visible sign, and that includes something like ethnicity, something like social class, but also something like theology.

And we see what happened when the Donifus claimed to be the only pure church, and that they could say that those who had betrayed the faith, that those traditores did not deserve to be welcomed back into the church.

[50 : 42] second, I think we need to learn from this the dangers of a martyr complex. I think we're called as Christians to rejoice in suffering, but never to seek suffering for its own sake.

And one of the real dangers of martyr complex is the assumption that we're always the victim. Because when we're the victim, we can always define the other person as the oppressive. And as Christians, as a minority faith in one sense, in a society, I think that's something that we need to be careful about, not to see ourselves as the ones who are always the victims. And martyrdom doesn't just come in a physical way, but also in other ways as well. And a third warning is the dangers of a realized apocalyptic.

to assume that it's our job to bring the kingdom in our way. The Dauntists thought they knew what it meant to bring the kingdom and ended up perpetuating a lot of violence as a result.

[51 : 47] And the last thing is the importance of theological nuance. And as people who are, you know, this is especially important for me as somebody who's thinking about becoming clergy and becoming a leader in the church, it shows the importance of good theology.

But not only that, leadership is responsible to appropriately nuance their theology. Because something that you see is that when you state something strongly, often people will take that and run with it.

The Dauntists themselves, those who are at the highest level of clergy, probably had a bit more of a nuanced view. But these peasants and these local farmers, took it to its extreme, right?

You know, they saw martyrdom as, martyrdom at any cost and purity as the ability to pull somebody off the road and cut out their tongue because they weren't part of the same group.

So those who aren't as theologically sensitive tend to drive towards extremes. And that's why it's so important from the pulpit to be really careful about the way in which you say things.

[52 : 56] So those are just some of the warnings there. And I thought that that would be an interesting kind of conclusion. Because it shows some of the interesting lessons that we can learn from history.

So that we don't, right, those who don't know history are condemned to repeat it. So I think the circum101 movement is an interesting case study. And kind of how theological factors do shape the ways in which these types of movements happen.

So, thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you very much. Thank you very much.EMA darkness.
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