INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
IJRF.ORG

Augustine and Luther on toleration and coercion

Peter Olsen[1]

Abstract

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) and Martin Luther (1483-1546) both argued in favor of toleration and freedom of religion in their younger years, but both changed their policy toward dissenters as they grew older. They also adjusted their reading of the Parable of the Weeds (Matt 13) to varying situations. The older Augustine and Luther both called on the secular authorities to suppress their theological opponents, using the sword that God has given them (Rom 13) to protect both tables of the law: religion and morals. This article describes and explains their similar development in this regard.

Keywords

Toleration, intolerance, blasphemy, coercion, dissenters, church and state, mirror for princes, the Parable of the Weeds.

1. Introduction

In his *Retractations*, Bishop Augustine of Hippo (354-430) revealed that he had changed his views on tolerance and coercion (Augustine 1968). This change has been examined frequently in research literature. The present article describes and tries to explain the changes. A comparable change in Martin Luther's (1483-1546) writings has been somewhat obscured (1) by the tendency in research to focus on the young reformer as the real Luther and (2) by neglecting the practical consequences of his change of attitude (Estes 2005:212). Due to the lack of agreement in Luther research, this article devotes more space to Luther than to Augustine. For Luther, next to the Bible, Augustine was the primary authority with whom he preferred to agree. A comparison of the changes in Augustine and Luther concerning toleration is long overdue. This article intends to fill the gap.

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1 Peter Olsen (born 1963) is an associate professor of systematic theology at the Fjellhaug International University College, Copenhagen, Denmark. He has published scholarly articles on the Reformation, Martin Luther (e.g., Luther's view of Anabaptists and Jews), and contemporary dogmatics. This article uses American English. Bible quotations are from the New International Version (NIV). Article submitted: 20 June 2023; accepted: 14 Nov 2023. Contact: po@dbi.edu.

2. Augustine

2.1. Augustine's change of view

Chris Berg (2012:36) concludes regarding Saint Augustine that he "developed the original theory of Christian persecution." In his younger days, though, Augustine spoke in support of toleration. In 396, he wrote to Eusebius (letter 34.1), "My desire is, not that any one should against his will be coerced into the Catholic communion, but that to all who are in error the truth may be openly declared, and being by God's help clearly exhibited through my ministry, may so commend itself as to make them embrace and follow it" (NPNF 1:262; MPL 33:132). In an early work, which has unfortunately been lost, Augustine said, "I am displeased that schismatics are violently coerced to communion by the force of any secular power" (quoted in 427 in his *Retractations* 2.5; Augustine 1968:129; MPL 32:632).

Writing to Vincentius in 408, however, Augustine explained why he had changed his view (letter 93.17). He stated, "Originally my opinion was, that no one should be coerced into the unity of Christ, that we must act only by words, fight only by arguments, and prevail by force of reason, lest we should have those whom we knew as avowed heretics feigning themselves to be Catholics" (NPNF 1:388; MPL 33:329-330). But now he has found reasons to see things differently. He reminded Vincentius of Luke 14:23: "Go out to the roads … and make them come in" (Vulgate: *conpelle intrare*). Augustine continued (letter 93.5):

> You are also of opinion that no coercion is to be used with any man in order to his deliverance from the fatal consequences of error; and yet you see that, in examples which cannot be disputed, this is done by God, who loves us with more real regard for our profit than any other can; and you hear Christ saying, No man can come to me except the Father draw him [John 6:44], which is done in the hearts of all those who, through fear of the wrath of God, betake themselves to Him. (NPNF 1:383; MPL 33:323; Hölzl 2014:165-166; Markus 1988:141-143; Wilken 2019:31-32)

In his sermon 62.8 on Luke 14, Augustine commented, "Let compulsion be found outside, the will will arise within" (NPNF 6:449; MPL 38:647-48). He explained that God threatens us with everlasting wrath in order that we may accept things of everlasting value. Therefore, he concluded, coercion has biblical warrant. So why not coerce heretics? In a letter 185.3.13 to tribune Boniface in 416, he called it a merciful severity to save schismatics from hell by coercion: "It appears that great mercy is shown toward them, when by the force of those very imperial laws

they are … rescued against their will."[2] If a doctor has an unwilling patient, it is a work of love to force the patient to take the necessary medicine. In the same way, God applies force when He turns an unwilling heart into a willing heart. Robert Markus (1988:143) explains that Augustine "considered freedom of choice less and less as something incompatible with constraint and fear. … The divine *disciplina* uses external pressure to bring about an internal moral development … Free choice and compulsion were not incompatible." With Perez Zagorin (2003:30), we could call it "the pedagogy of fear."

2.2. Confrontation with Donatism

In 409 or 410, Augustine wrote a letter to the Donatist bishop of Hippo, Macrobius, rebuking him for withdrawing from the Catholic Church (letter 108.11). The Donatists did so because of the mingling of sinners with true believers in the church. Augustine reminded Macrobius of the parable "concerning the toleration of the weeds up to the time of the harvest."[3] We should not seek to establish the pure church here on earth, he said, because the church is a mixed body (*corpus permixtum*).[4] In *The City of God* 1.35, Augustine wrote that in this world and even in the church the two cities are "intermixed until the last judgment effects their separation" (NPNF 2:21; MPL 41:46: *permixtæ, donec ultimo judicio dirimantur*).

Augustine's change of view on toleration and coercion was related to his confrontation with Donatism. A conference of Donatist and Catholic bishops assembled in Carthage in 411 at which the majority concluded that Donatism was a heresy within the Christian church and ought to be suppressed. Subsequently, converts from Donatist churches poured into the Catholic Church. Augustine concluded in his book *Contra Faustum* (22.21) that even though good theology and the best of morals are freely chosen, it does not follow that bad theology and bad morals should not be punished (NPNF 4:279; MPL 42:412). In the Old Testament, we learn how God uses sword, famine, and plague to discipline the Israelites. Psalm 107:12-13 says, "He subjected them to bitter labor. … Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble."[5] Using fear as a means, God leads a remnant into conversion. There is no reason why God should not apply the same pedagogy today.

Coercion displeased Augustine until experience showed him its efficacy. Some converts even expressed their gratitude: Had they not been coerced, they would

2 Letter 185 is not found in NPNF. It can be read at https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102185.htm. It can also be read in Ramsey (2004:187). Latin text in MPL 33:792-815, here col.798: *eripluntur inviti.*

3 Letter 108 is not found in NPNF. It can be read in Ramsey (2003:75). Latin text in MPL 33:411.

4 For Augustine's comments on wheat and weeds mixed in the church, see, e.g., *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed* 17.26; 19.31, in NPNF 3:301-303. Latin text in MPL 40:330-334.

5 Augustine comments on Psalm 107 (Vulgate 106) in his *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, in NPNF 8:533; Latin text in MPL 37:1421-1422. An English translation can be read at Augustine: "Exposition on Psalm 107." Available at: https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801107.htm.

never have converted (Butterfield 1977:575). Donatists called themselves martyrs, but according to Augustine they were "killers of souls." Referring to Romans 13, Augustine maintained that it is lawful for the emperor to punish idolatry, "for he does not bear the sword for nothing."[6] When the Donatists persecuted the Catholics, they did so out of hatred. The Catholics, on the other hand, persecuted the Donatists out of love (letter 185.2.11; MPL 33:797; Straw 1999:539).

2.3. The Parable of the Weeds

Jesus tells His disciples to leave the weeds in the field. Otherwise, they might root up the wheat also (Matt 13:29). Augustine commented on this passage that if the weeds are known and easily recognized, we can remove them without harming the wheat. Sects like the Donatists, he stated, have physically separated themselves from the church. Therefore, it is obvious who is who, and the more you destroy what is evil, the more love is preserved (Bainton 1932:69; Zagorin 2003:28-29).[7] The worst crime of the Donatists was not their dogmatic aberration but their separation from the church. Rebecca Lyman (2007:305) explains: "The Donatists were not heretics, but rather 'schismatics' since they were divided from the church not by doctrinal error, but by lack of charity or discipline." Because of this schismatic act, Augustine warned them in his letter 76.1, "You may die in a state of heretical separation" (NPNF 1:343; MPL 33:264).

In a letter to Donatus (173.3-9), Augustine described how Christ forced the apostle Paul to convert by striking him blind (Acts 9). Only after this forceful conversion did he learn and accept the content of the Christian faith. According to Augustine, the Catholic Church has learned from Jesus "the measures which out of love to you we are compelled to take" (NPNF 1:544-546; MPL 33:754-757). The Donatists are on a route to eternal damnation. Forceful methods against them, therefore, are acts of love.

H. A. Drake (1996:12) summarizes Augustine's biblical argument: "Did Christ turn the other cheek to the demons? … Did he not even persecute with bodily chastisement those whom he drove with scourges from the temple?" What began as church discipline in early Christianity continued as coercive measures in the Christian state of the late fourth and early fifth centuries.

2.4. The Christian state

After the accession to power of Emperor Constantine the Great (c. 288-337) and especially after the short reign of Emperor Julian the Apostate (331-363), "bishops expect-

6 *Contra epistolam Parmeniani* 1.8.14 and 1.10.16; in MPL 43:44-45. This work is not found in NPNF.
7 *Contra epistolam Parmeniani* 3.2.13; in MPL 43:92.

ed a Christian emperor not only to suppress violent disorders but also to uphold divine truth" (Chadwick 1998:563). The Christian emperor was vice-regent of God and keeper of both tables of the law (*custos utriusque tabulae*), i.e., doctrine and morals.

Augustine was no exception, defending "the exercise of coercive power by the secular authority in the religious sphere" (Markus 1988:149). In his *City of God* 5.24, Augustine expected of Christian emperors that "they make their power the handmaid of His [God's] majesty by using it for the greatest possible extension of His worship" (NPNF 2:105; MPL 41:171). Book 5, chapter 24 of this work has been called Augustine's "mirror for princes." In 416, Augustine led two African councils in convicting Pelagius (c. 354-c. 420) as a heretic. Rome's bishop (pope) Innocent I agreed. In the following year, however, his successor, Zosimus, declared that Pelagius was not a heretic. Augustine and the bishop of Thagaste, Alypius, appealed to Emperor Honorius (384-423), who in 418 "expelled all Pelagians from Rome as a threat to public order … Zosimus bowed to the emperor's will" (Chadwick 1998:591-592). Though the emperor did not decide on theological questions, he was used by Augustine and Alypius to gain a theological victory.

Augustine did not demand that the emperors should kill pagans. But in his letter 93.3.10 from 408, he asked, "Which of us … does not speak well of the laws issued by the emperors against heathen sacrifices?" (NPNF 1:385; MPL 33:326). In his letter 97.2, also from 408, written to Olympius (the highest-ranking officer at the imperial court in Ravenna), Augustine encouraged "laws concerning the demolition of idols and the correction of heretics" (NPNF 1:405; MPL 33:358).

Already at two councils in Carthage in 401, the African bishops had "asked the government for further legislation to extirpate 'the last remnants of idolatry'" (Markus 1988:136). Robert Markus (1988:139) says that Augustine "was probably in full agreement with coercing pagans in 401. … His 'conversion' to coercion against Donatists is no more than a delayed extension to their case of a policy already endorsed against the pagans."

2.5. Summary on Augustine

In the words of Robert Markus (1988:135), we should not seek "a simple, monolithic consistency" in such a "complex and subtle mind." Peter Brown (1964:108) calls Augustine "a man of mysterious discontinuities." In accordance with his *Retractations* from 427, it is probably best to accept that Augustine simply changed his mind on toleration and coercion. God's pedagogy in the Bible and contemporary experiences had taught him that coercion can lead to a real change of heart. Coercion and freedom, then, were compatible for Augustine.

3. Luther

3.1. Luther on the Parable of the Weeds

Martin Luther seems even more complex and subtle. Over the years, he too changed his views on toleration and coercion. Roland Bainton (1932:79-80) says about Luther, "One can almost trace the development of his attitude to religious liberty by merely observing what he makes of the tares."

In his *Explanations of the 95 Theses* in 1518, Luther stated ironically that even though St. Paul tells us that "there must be heresies" (1 Cor. 11:19), we answer: "Not at all; the heretics must be burned and thus the root must be torn out with the fruit, indeed the tares along with the wheat" (LW 31:245; WA 1:625). Likewise, in a sermon on Matthew 13:24-30 in his *Lent Postil* (1525), printed in 1540-1544 as *Church Postil*, Luther explained that this parable teaches us

> how we should act toward these heretics and false teachers. We are not to uproot or destroy them. He [Jesus] plainly says that we should "let both grow together" … whoever goes astray today can get on the right path tomorrow. … But if he is burned or otherwise slaughtered, then he has been prevented from getting on the right path … so that he who could otherwise have been saved must be lost. … Note how mad people we have been for such a long time! We wanted to force the Turks to believe with the sword, the heretics with fire, the Jews with killing, and so we rooted out the weeds by our own power … we murder the body for time and the soul for eternity. (LW 76:304; WA 17:2, 125)

However, Luther did not stick with this exegesis. In 1528, he wrote:

> The Lord tells his own servants not to uproot the weed … this does not apply to the servants of the world but to the servants of the kingdom of heaven. *They* should not use a sword, since God has not given it to *them.* … But the civil government has been given a sword with the command to suppress all offenses, that they may not spread and do harm. Now, there is certainly not a more dangerous and hideous offense than where false teaching and wrong worship gain a footing. Therefore, a Christian government should be anxious to prevent this kind of offenses more than anything else, since it always undermines the authorities and brings with it all kinds of evil and unhappiness, as the entire world history clearly shows (WA 52:134, 36-135, 6).[8]

8 My translation. This sermon is not found in LW. An English translation can be found in *Dr. Martin Lu-*

Jesus did not give the physical sword to pastors and bishops, but he did give it to the princes. Matthew 13 does *not* prevent the princes from suppressing blasphemy and idolatry. Whenever the civil authorities discover heresies

> by which the honor of the Lord Christ is blasphemed, or salvation is prevented, and where such false teachers will not be instructed and abstain from their preaching, there the civil government must know that it has been given the office of the sword and of all power, and that it must guard from destruction the pure dogma and the worship of God. (WA 52:135, 21-26)

Luther mentioned with approval Augustine's changed attitude to this question (WA 52:130, 9ff).

There is a more elaborate sermon on the same text in the *House Postil* (*Nachtrag* 1545). Here Luther added:

> Christ's kingdom does nothing with fist and sword. God has commanded the civil kingdom to bear the sword and root out the bad. … A prince or a town must see to it and not suffer more than one kind of preaching in the territory to avoid disunity and commotion. … The authorities should hear both sides and … the side which teaches correctly according to Scripture and God's Word should be allowed to remain. The other … should be dismissed, but there should be no extermination. (WA 52:836,4-6; 838:18-25: *aber ausrotten sol man nicht*)[9]

On 7 February 1546, 11 days before his death, Luther preached again on the Parable of the Weeds. Most of the sermon dealt with the sins that remain in a Christian. But Luther also talked about the church being a mixture of "the righteous and the wicked." Heretics like the Cathari, the Donatists, the Anabaptists, Thomas Müntzer "and the like" do not accept that. "The heretics want to have a church in which there is nothing evil." Therefore, they "would strike dead and uproot whatever they considered unholy" (LW 58:442-443; WA 51:174, 25-26: *die alles tod wolten schlahen und ausrotten, was nicht heilig were*). The Peasants' War and similar incidents gave Luther the impression – or an occasion to claim – that heresy leads to political rebellion. Just as we should root out the remaining sins in our

ther's House Postil: Sermons on the Gospels for the Sundays and Principal Festivals of the Church Year. Translated from the German by Matthias Loy, J. A. Schulze: Columbus, Ohio 1884, 208. Available at: https://bit.ly/3SYoGLF. This sermon was preached on 9 December 1528. It was printed in the *House Postil* in 1544 (WA 28:29).

9 This sermon is not found in LW. Quotations in English are taken from Bainton (1932:81-82).

body, we should root out heretics "and yet not strike them dead" (LW 58:454; WA 51:184, 4-5: *ausrotten, und doch nicht tod schlahen*).

To the older Luther, it was important that Christ had *not* spoken the Parable of the Weeds to the civil magistrates. It did not apply to them; therefore, they should see to it that false teaching and blasphemy did not spread in their territories. Now, an obvious question arises: What about Luther's well-known teaching on the two kingdoms – that is, the secular and the spiritual realms?[10]

3.2. Luther on secular authority

In his *Temporal Authority. To What Extent It Should be Obeyed* (1523), Luther argued in favor of an almost complete freedom of speech:

> As nobody else can go to heaven or hell for me, so nobody else can believe or disbelieve for me. … How he believes or disbelieves is a matter for the conscience of each individual, and since this takes nothing away from the temporal authority the latter should be content to attend to its own affairs and let men believe this or that as they are able and willing, and constrain no one by force. For faith is a free act, to which no one can be forced. Indeed, it is a work of God in the spirit, not something which outward authority should compel or create. Hence arises the common saying, found also in Augustine, "No one can or ought to be forced to believe." (LW 45:108; WA 11:264, 12-23)[11]

According to this argument, the prince and the magistrate should concentrate on worldly affairs. They should make laws regulating our bodies and our public lives in this world. But they should not regulate our consciences and our faith. Such internal affairs are none of their business.

The civil turmoil caused by Thomas Müntzer's (c. 1488-1525) preaching in 1524 gave Luther occasion to write a letter to the princes of Saxony:

> Let them preach as confidently and boldly as they are able and against whomever they wish. For, as I have said, there must be sects, and the Word of God must be under arms and fight. … But when they want to do more than fight with the Word, and begin to destroy and use force, then your Graces must intervene, whether it be ourselves or they who are guilty, and banish them from the country. (LW 40:57; WA 15:218, 19-219, 7)

10 For an introduction to the "two swords" and the "two kingdoms" in church history, see Johnson (2013:21-24).
11 The quotation from Augustine is found in *Contra litteras Petiliani* 83.184; in MPL 43,315. This work is not found in NPNF.

Words are to be countered by words and swords by swords, not the other way around! Luther was confident that the Word of God could convince and convert.

For the young Luther, this was a question of principle: "Let them preach as confidently and boldly as they are able and against whomever they wish." But it would prove increasingly difficult for Luther to uphold this principle. As a young reformer, he did not think much of princes. Most of them were inimical to the Reformation. In the latter half of the 1520s and during the 1530s, however, some of the princes became enthusiastic supporters of the Reformation, and during the visitations in Saxony in 1527-1529, Luther learned how little the Word of God had achieved among ordinary Christians. During the Peasants' War in 1525, Luther also experienced what enthusiastic (*schwärmerisch*) preaching could lead to. For the Reformation to be conducted in an orderly manner, Luther turned to the friendly princes to have them lead the process. James Estes mentions the challenge this action posed to Luther's principle: "The problem with Luther's sharply drawn distinction between secular authority and spiritual authority was that it applied not only to 'papist scoundrels' like Duke George but, once they had appeared on the scene, to princely supporters of the evangelical cause as well" (Estes 2003:209). It seems to contradict Luther's theory that he should now let friendly princes suppress his theological opponents.

3.3. From toleration to intolerance

Commenting on Psalm 82 in 1530 and on Psalm 101 in 1534, Luther wrote two "mirrors for princes" (*Fürstenspiegeln*). In the latter commentary, Luther claimed:

> Once an idolatrous man has killed God's Word in his heart through lies and idolatry, he is much less able to let people live. … If they cannot commit murder with their fists or help make it possible by advising or inciting someone else, they certainly do not lack the will to murder; and their greatest sorrow is that they cannot do enough wickedness. … False doctrine and murder will be together and must be together, as all Scripture, history, and daily experience attest. (LW 13:186; WA 51:232, 4-21)

Killers of souls will soon begin to kill bodies too. Therefore, the princes should prevent the killing of bodies by preventing false teaching. Until recently, unfortunately, this commentary on Psalm 101 by the old Luther "has been somewhat forgotten" among Luther scholars (Brecht 1993:3).

In his commentary on Psalm 82, Luther distinguished between two kinds of heresy. Some teach openly "that no Christian may occupy a position of rulership; that no one ought to have property of his own." Of these he stated, "They are not

heretics only but rebels." Others are not so conspicuous, but they are rebels nonetheless: "If some were to teach doctrines contradicting an article of faith clearly grounded in Scripture and believed throughout the world by all Christendom … as the Turks and the Anabaptists … such teachers should not be tolerated, but punished as blasphemers" (LW 13:61; WA 31,1:208). Referring to Leviticus 24:16, Luther warned, "We must not abolish or hide the commandment to stone false prophets" (LW 13:67; WA 31,1:213, 19-20).

In 1536, Luther signed a paper written by Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560) advising Landgrave Philip of Hesse (1504-1567) on how to treat obdurate Anabaptists (WA 50:9-15). In the words of Martin Brecht (1993:37), the "death penalty was fundamentally permissible as a sentence not only for political crimes, but also for religious offenses because of their significance." For Melanchthon, the prince was the keeper of both tables of the law (*custos utriusque tabulae*; Estes 1998:476). Luther preferred that Anabaptists should be expelled from the territory. But in a sermon in January 1538, he concluded that if an Anabaptist continued his seductive preaching, it should be considered a rebellion (*ein auffrhur*). That would call for severe measures: "I will not excuse you but let the sword speak" (WA 46:139, 12-13: *non excusabo te, sed wil die klingen lassen gehen*).[12]

Of course, Luther had to deal with the objection that he had abandoned his earlier distinction between the two kingdoms. Luther's replied, in effect, that the princes should not dictate what pastors should teach and preach. They should only support such preaching and suppress what is opposed to it (LW 13:195-197; WA 51:239-241). Luther would undoubtedly have defended his new emphases by saying that he had always had the conviction "that public blasphemy was a crime and that religious divisions threaten the peace and stability of a community" (Estes 2003:216). Also, even in his younger years, Luther would have wanted the princes to punish outright idolatry and blasphemy. Nevertheless, from around 1528 he abandoned the more tolerant policy of 1523-1524.

In the 1530s, Luther's position had become "essentially the same as Melanchthon's and succeeding generations of Lutheran theologians and court preachers would perceive it to be so" (Estes 1998:480). Estes's evaluation is correct regarding the first generations after the Reformation. However, since the beginning of the Luther renaissance in the 1880s, very often Luther scholars have concentrated on the young Luther as the *real* Luther, ignoring his later developments. For decades, some of his later works were "somewhat forgotten."

12 My translation. This sermon is not found in LW.

3.4. Summary on Luther

In 1524 Luther was quite tolerant: "Let them preach as confidently and boldly as they are able and against whomever they wish." In the 1530s, however, Luther had assumed a more Melanchthonian attitude to religious dissent. The result was, to quote James Estes, "an organized territorial church with an increasingly well-defined and government-imposed orthodoxy of faith and practice" (Estes 2003:216). Here, we see the European state church in the making.

David Whitford defends Luther: "The involvement of princes in religious affairs was always a matter of emergency" (Whitford 2004:62). Indeed, that is how Luther would defend himself. But it is also correct that for the old Luther, a wide range of theological dissent could be considered blasphemy calling for intervention. Secular control of ecclesiastical affairs became the rule more than an exception. James Estes's conclusion seems more appropriate: "Gone is … the limitation of princely intervention to emergencies" (Estes 2003:217). I agree with Estes that "Whitford's reasoning is essentially flawed" (Estes 2005:212).

There seem to be four explanations for Luther's change of policy: (1) his close collaboration with Melanchthon; (2) their experiences during the Peasants' War in 1525 and similar incidents e.g., in Münster in 1534-1535; (3) the disappointing visitations in Saxony during 1527-1529 and the willingness of some of the princes to lead the Reformation; and (4) Luther's lifelong belief that magistrates should punish blasphemy, a belief that gradually evolved into repression of almost all theological dissent.

4. Conclusion

At first, Augustine and Luther were supporters of toleration and freedom of speech. Having secured their own position, however, they began to sing a different tune. In late antiquity, pagans and dissenters found little protection. The history of the church from 250 to 450 AD could be called "From Martyrs to Inquisitors" (Hölzl 2014:159). Clifford Ando (1996:199) calls it a "matter of some irony … that the persecution of pagans forced them to act like Pliny's Christians and worship together in secret meetings." At the time of the Reformation, dissenters found themselves in a similar situation. Robert Louis Wilken's conclusion on the development from toleration to coercion in the ancient church applies to the Reformation as well: "Toleration is a loser's creed" (Wilken 2019:24). The powerful see no need for it.

References

For texts by Augustine, see Schaff (1977-1979; NPNF); Ramsey (2003); Ramsey (2004); Migne (1841-1855; MPL).

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Elias Munshya

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Religious Freedom Series Vol 8, VKW: Bonn, 2024. ISBN: 978-3-862269-284-2.

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