Augustine on Religious Freedom and Religious Coercion

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Eminent philosopher and scholar of Augustine John Rist sympathetically reconstructs the influential views of St. Augustine on religious freedom and religious coercion, but also subjects them to a new internal critique that draws on Augustine’s own theological principles. First, Rist emphasizes that, as a bishop of the 5th century, Augustine believed that God expected him to facilitate the well being of human souls as much as possible, not least in view of their ultimate destiny in heaven or hell. This belief led Augustine to support the limited use of religious coercion, particularly to compel heretics to rejoin the Catholic Church. Second, however, Rist identifies Augustinian arguments against Augustine’s attitude to religious coercion. One argument is that if it is God’s will that human beings exist in his image, one feature of such a state must be their capacity and freedom to accept or reject God’s grace. Therefore, religious coercion offends God’s will for human nature. Another objection is that Augustine (like virtually everyone else in antiquity) fails to recognize that religious coercion distorts and therefore endangers the nature and divine image of the coercer, however just his motives may be.