



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Whose persecution? early Christianity as a metaphor in contemporary American political discourse

Janssen, K.P.S.

Citation

Janssen, K. P. S. (2020). Whose persecution?: early Christianity as a metaphor in contemporary American political discourse. *Conference On Classical Controversies*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3246818>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licensed under Article 25fa Copyright Act/Law \(Amendment Taverne\)](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3246818>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Whose persecution? Early Christianity as a metaphor in contemporary American political discourse

K.P.S. (Renske) Janssen

Throughout history, the perception of early Christianity as a religion under threat has been deeply influential. Whatever the historical character of Christians' legal treatment in the Roman Empire may have been, their position as a marginalized and persecuted group has become firmly entrenched in popular consciousness – both by the movement's foundational narrative about the life and crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, and by a vast collection of stories surrounding the martyrdom of the later Christians (see e.g. Holland 2019; Moss 2010 and 2013; Nixey 2017).

Despite, or perhaps because of, Christianity's rise to prominence in the centuries that followed, it is therefore hardly surprising that references to the movement's humble origins continue to appear in political discourse with some frequency. In this paper, I will demonstrate that references to early Christianity and its central figures hold metaphorical relevance across the American political spectrum, and that evocations of the persecution or marginalization of early Christians in particular are frequently used to support a variety of political arguments, ranging from the protection of refugees to so-called religious freedom bills.

It will be argued that such metaphors commonly serve to encourage resistance against perceived injustice, and likewise contain distinct assumptions about both the user's own relationship to Christian tradition and the religious beliefs of their political opponents. In particular, I will argue that the role of Christianity-based metaphors in political discourse is strongly influenced by the extent to which the speaker self-identifies with Christianity as a suppressed minority, or rather ascribes that position to another group, to which they themselves do not belong.

Selected bibliography

Holland, Tom, *Dominion* (London, 2019).

Moss, C.R., *The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom* (New York, 2013).

_____, *The Other Christs: Imitating Jesus in Ancient Christian Ideologies of Martyrdom* (Oxford, 2010).

Nixey, Catherine, *The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Classical World* (London, 2017).