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

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WHOSE PERSECUTION?

Early Christianity as a Metaphor in Contemporary American Political Discourse

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Abstract

Throughout history, the perception of early Christianity as a religion under threat has been deeply influential, and its perceived position as a marginalized and persecuted group in the otherwise religiously tolerant Roman Empire 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. It is therefore hardly surprising that references to the movement's suppression during its foundational period continue to appear in political discourse with some frequency – particularly in the United States of America, where the idea of the country as a 'Christian nation' continues to be highly influential.

In this paper, the concept of historical metaphors will be used to explore the ways in which references to early Christianity and its central figures are used across the American political spectrum. It will be demonstrated 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. Such metaphors, it will be argued, commonly serve to encourage resistance against perceived injustice, and are strongly shaped both by the speaker's own relationship to Christian tradition, and by their perception of the religious beliefs of their political opponents. In particular, the use of these historical metaphors in political discourse is strongly influenced by the extent to which the speaker self-identifies with Christianity as a supressed minority, or rather ascribes that position to another group, to which they themselves do not belong.

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Introduction

In 2002, American director Chris Columbus gave an interview about his film adaptation of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*. When discussing his approach to the already highly popular franchise, Columbus explained his motivations for sticking as closely as possible to the source material, stating that 'people would have crucified [him] if [he] hadn't been faithful to the books."[1] But what exactly does it mean to be 'crucified' – or even 'persecuted'? In their literal sense, these terms evoke images of extreme violence, usually perpetrated by a powerful authority in order to suppress a particularly despised, but usually weaker, party.[2] In this context, however, it seems unlikely that a group of overly devoted Potter-fans would have literally taken hammer and nails to hand. Rather, Columbus' phrasing demonstrates that both verbs are more commonly used in a different way in everyday speech: terminology related to persecution is frequently used to indicate persistent harassment or annoyance, while the idea of crucifixion can similarly be evoked to describe a more general sense of torment.[3] Thus, while Columbus' use of the term still evokes the image of a violent response, it is also clear that the violence is, in this case, verbal rather than physical. In other words, the idea of crucifixion has become a metaphor.

While the example mentioned above is relatively benign, and may initially hardly register as a metaphor at all,[4] the power of metaphor as a rhetorical devise should not be underestimated. Especially in a political context, the specific comparisons drawn by metaphors are often essential in framing the issue under discussion, and can thus serve to guide the audience's train of thought in a specific direction.[5] For this process to be effective, it is important for the metaphor in question to be recognisable to the audience one wishes to address, and to evoke a set of shared ideas, values, and cultural touchstones.[6] When

1 As quoted in Hutcheon 2006, 123 – alterations are my own. In *ibidem* 2-3, Hutcheon furthermore remarks on the prevalence of moralistic metaphors like 'desecration', 'violation', 'betrayal' and 'infidelity' in discussions of film adaptations of beloved books.

2 Oxford English Dictionary Online n.d.: 'Persecute, def.:1' and 'Crucify, def.:1'.

3 For this metaphorical use, see Oxford English Dictionary Online n.d.: 'Crucify, defs.: 2b and 2c' and for a similar usage of the verb 'to persecute', see 'Persecute, def.: 2'.

4 Certain metaphors are so frequently used that they may be regarded as 'dead' or 'lexicalized' – which is to say that they are no longer recognized as metaphors. For more on this concept, see Gray 2008, 175 and Ritchie 2013, 13. The prevalence of metaphors has at times been explained by the argument that they are in fact an essential part of the human cognitive framework, and therefore conceptual understanding. For this cognitive linguistic approach, which plays an important role in the study of the metaphor as a concept, see *e.g.* Kovecses 2010, 4; Kovecses 2015, and especially Lakoff and Johnson 1980.

5 For the idea that metaphors serve to paint the subject in a particular light, see Delouis 2014, 2; Gibbs 2015, 264-265; Honohan 2008, 69; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 10; Perrez and Reuchamps 2015, 167; Ritchie 2013, 202-203. As an example of the potentially far-reaching effects of metaphors in a political setting, Donghue 2014, 7 references the 2010 ruling by the Supreme Court of the United States of America in the case Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, which held that independent expenditures for political communications, particularly election campaigns, counted as free speech and were as such protected by the First Amendment.

6 Kovecses 2010, 7 remarks that metaphors generally evoke a more concrete concept to elucidate something more abstract. For the idea that metaphors tend to appeal to common human experiences and/or cultural signifiers, see Chilton and Ilyin 1993; Honohan 2008; Kaufmann 2003; Maclean *et al.* 2017, 1221; Musolff 2016 4. Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 9 emphasize that metaphors are frequently culturally specific.

regarded as such, it is little wonder metaphors related to early Christianity in particular have become so prevalent in the English language.[7]

More than seventeen centuries after Constantine's Edict of Milan allowed Christians in the Roman Empire to practise their faith openly, the idea of Christianity as a marginalised, persecuted group is still very much alive in popular consciousness. The prevalence of this idea may be explained both by Christianity'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, which played an important role in shaping the church.[8] Christianity has, in turn, gone on to profoundly shape histories and cultures across the world, and has continued to do so. This is perhaps especially true in the United States of America, where – it has been argued – the idea of the US as a 'Christian nation' contributed strongly to shaping the country's national identity.[9] It is therefore hardly surprising that Christianity's early years are still evoked in an American political context with some regularity – and that such references appear on all points of the political spectrum.

While this observation in itself is hardly new, the workings of these early Christianity-related metaphors remain somewhat undertheorized. Most commonly, the terminology of 'persecution' and 'martyrdom' itself is placed at the centre of such discussions, and is subsequently characterised as polarising, as a mechanism through which, in the words of New Testament scholar and historian Candida Moss, 'all areas of modern society and politics are recast as a battle between God and Satan, good and evil, 'us' and 'them'.[10] However, comparatively little attention has been paid to more extensive metaphors related to early Christianity, namely those instances that reference either the life and crucifixion of Jesus Christ, who may be seen as a kind of proto-martyr, or stories of Christian martyrdom and persecution from the later years of the Roman Empire.[11] It is this set of political metaphors that will be the subject of this study.

I would like to emphasise that my goal in this endeavour is decidedly not to judge the historical accuracy of the references in question – in fact, this is not necessarily relevant to the way in which metaphors related to early Christianity, or in fact all historical metaphors, are received. Instead, this analysis will be primarily concerned with the particular ways in which these metaphors serve to shape and reflect the political narrative in which they are incorporated. After a brief methodological introduction, I will therefore discuss a number of striking instances in which metaphors related to early Christianity were used to discuss events from American politics within the last decade. This focus on sources that belong to the

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7 Similar metaphorical usages of terms like 'persecution', 'crucifixion' and 'martyrdom' or their derivatives likewise occur in some form in other languages spoken in countries whose histories were strongly influenced by Christianity, like Dutch, French and German. A more thorough analysis of this subject is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

8 See *e.g.* Holland 2019; Moss 2010 and 2013; Nixey 2017.

9 Straughn and Feld 2010; Green 2015. Particularly notable in this instance is the description of the US as 'one nation under God' in the pledge of allegiance, and the country's official motto 'in God we trust', which is also found on its currency.

10 Moss 2013, 13. For the similar role of martyrdom-discourse in discussions of war in modern US politics, though with a greater focus on internal unity rather than the creation of an external enemy, see Denton-Borhaug, 2020. The idea that the language of persecution finds particular favour with the US right-wing is brought forward by Castelli 2007.

11 For the idea of Jesus Christ as an example for later Christian Martyrs, see Moss 2010.

political landscape of the United States of America should not by default be taken to mean that such metaphors are not employed elsewhere in the world.[12] Instead, this angle has been chosen both because the aforementioned Christian roots of the USA make an analysis of this kind of particular interest, and because the (notable) corpus of material from this region is at this point in time most accessible and readily available online. At the same time, the broad strokes of the material's political context are likely to be at least somewhat familiar to most readers. While the cases under discussion may be placed at various points on the political spectrum, I have generally tried to limit myself to references that were either made by those who held public office, or otherwise appeared in more high-profile publications whose contents are at least partially focussed on political affairs. After all, metaphors that appeared in such a context are more likely to reflect views that have found at least some degree of 'main-stream' acceptance, and are in turn more likely to influence the wider political discourse.

1. Methodology

The question of how references to a particular conception of the past can be used as metaphors is more easily asked than answered. The exact definition of the concept of metaphor is the subject of some debate and involves many subtle variations.[13] In general terms, however, it may be argued that metaphors involve discussing (and potentially experiencing) one concept in terms of another, thereby usually making an abstract and/or opaque concept more concrete, or at least more understandable.[14] As such, it is for example quite common to see the more abstract struggles of 'argument' or 'politics' referred to as 'war' – for instance in the case of the by now somewhat infamous 'war on Christmas'.[15] The concept that is being described is commonly known as the tenor, while the conceptual frame that is being borrowed from is referred to as the vehicle.

History-based metaphors may be said to function in a similar way to the general framework established above: while the present is often messy, contradictory and difficult to understand, the version of the past that has entered into a particular society's or group's collective consciousness is often rather less complex. After all, the confusing muddle of contemporary events and opinions, of false reports and at the time unknown information is, with the benefit of hindsight, easier to shape into an altogether more streamlined,

12 See, for instance, the remarks of Scottish MP Wishart (Scottish National Party) during a debate about the EU withdrawal agreement on 9 December 2020, when he stated that 'Tonight, we are going to have the last supper – but we know it is the British people who will be crucified.' A transcript of the debate can be found online, Parallel Parliament 2020.

13 See Ritchie 2013, 7-9. Points of contention include, for instance, the possible overlap between metaphor and metonym, and whether the concept that is being described by a metaphor (the tenor, see below) is merely thought about in terms of something else, or actually experienced that way.

14 For various definitions of 'metaphor', see Donoghue 2014, 1; Gray 2008, 174; Kovecses 2010, 3-4; Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 5; Ritchie 2013, 8.

15 Kovecses 2010, 5; Musolff 2016, 7; Ritchie 2013, 181. The term 'war on Christmas' is used in an American context to denote the perceived suppression of the more religious aspects of the holiday, including its name (Christ-mas), in favour of more general, secular expressions, as for instance in the phrase 'happy holidays'. The term entered into mainstream usage from the early 2000s onwards, and was popularized by conservative commentators like Bill O'Reilly.

familiar, and likely simplified narrative.[16] As such, the use of historical metaphors that are based on this simplified collective sense of the past allows the speaker to frame the present in a specific light, while at the same time creating a sense of historical continuity that makes the argument that is reinforced by these metaphors seem, as Anne Delouis has put it, 'rational, perhaps even academic.'[17]

In order to better understand the history-based metaphors under discussion, we must therefore ask a number of questions. First and foremost, we must ask ourselves which groups are described as 'Christians' (or 'Christ') and 'persecutors' respectively. In other words: what are the implied modern-day tenors in these historical metaphors? In what follows, a distinction will be made between two main types that are most prevalent in political discourse. The first of these are metaphors in which the speaker and the social group with which they themselves identify (also known as the in-group) are compared to early Christians.[18] The second type consists of metaphors in which that qualification is attributed to a group to which the speaker does not belong. In both cases, it is important to understand what constitutes the connective tissue between tenor and vehicle: on what basis is the comparison drawn? Finally, we must investigate what the purpose of the metaphor in question is: who is the intended audience, and what view of the present are they supposed to adopt? In this context, we should also consider what assumptions about the background of the intended audience the metaphor contains.

2. We, Christians

It will likely come as no surprise that metaphors related to early Christianity, whenever they are evoked in a political context, frequently use the 'Christian' part of the equation to reference the author's own social in-group ('we, Christians'), while the political opposition is cast in the role of the Roman persecutor. The most obvious reason for this is perhaps the wider societal tendency to conflate 'Christian' and its related terms with 'good' and 'non-Christian' with 'bad' – as, for instance, in the phrase 'the Christian thing to do.'[19] As straightforward as this explanation may seem, however, in the case of history-based metaphors matters often appear to be rather more complicated. Instead of presenting a relatively straightforward attempt to put down a political opponent while simultaneously proclaiming the righteousness of one's own side of the argument, these references are often more intricately constructed, and display a distinct proximity between tenor and vehicle. In other words: rather than using references to

16 See Mukharji and Zeckhauser 2019 for the idea that everyone, including professional historians, is to some degree susceptible to what has been termed 'explanation bias', and therefore tends to underplay the degree of uncertainty experienced by people from the past in favour of a much clearer causal explanation of historical events constructed after the fact.

17 Delouis 2014, 12. For the idea that history-based metaphors create a sense of continuity between past and present, see Houchin Winfield, Friedman and Trisnadi 2002, 290. For the centrality of the popular perception of history, rather than an academic perspective, in this kind of metaphor, see Chilton and Ilyin 1993, 9; Kaufmann 2003, 113-114; Maclean *et al.* 2017, 1219; Musolff 2016, 22.

18 In sociology, the in-group is frequently contrasted with an out-group, with which an individual does not identify, and which can be regarded unfavourably, although this is not always the case. See Brewer 1999; Lindenberg 2015, 436.

19 This type of phrasing occurs not just in English, but in a great many other languages spoken in societies that have historically been influenced by Christianity. See for instance the Dutch phrase 'een christelijk tijdstip' to denote a time of day that is deemed appropriate for a specific activity.

early Christianity to describe a different conceptual field altogether, as is expected in metaphors, these examples tend to use Christians from the *past* to describe the speaker's idea of Christians from the *present* – which more often than not includes the assumption of conservative political beliefs.[20]

A prime example of this may be found in a sermon held on April 14, 2012 by bishop Daniel Jenky of the diocese of Peoria, Illinois. In his sermon, Jenky addressed what he called 'catholic men of faith', and drew a comparison between the persecution of Christians in the days of the Roman Empire, and the treatment of catholic conservatives under the Obama Administration.[21] As Jenky put it:

> *'Remember that, in past history, other governments have tried to force Christians to huddle and hide only within the confines of their churches* [...]. *President Obama, with his radical pro-abortion and extreme secularist agenda, now seems intent on following a similar path.'*[22]

It is notable that Jenky's sermon not only draws a comparison between Christian martyrs from the past and American Christians from the present, but that he also makes an effort to paint his political opponents in decidedly un-Christian terms.[23] As demonstrated above, he does so openly by describing then-president Obama as 'secularist' in his policies, which serves to distance him from Jenky's own religiously inspired agenda. The same motif, however, occurs throughout the sermon, for instance in a passage where Jenky explicitly links the perceived pressures faced by his own church to the 'centuries of terrible persecution during the days of the Roman Empire.' In the same speech, the bishop also likened catholic Democrats to Judas Iscariot, thus suggesting that they, while nominally being followers of Jesus Christ, were ultimately complicit in this modern-day persecution, as well as traitors to Christianity itself.[24]

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20 It should be noted that, while conservative viewpoints certainly are over-represented among those who seek to create a connection between early Christianity and their own in-group, this is not exclusively the case. See also: Howard 2020. In this piece, the author presents the appropriation of Roman monuments by early Christians as an example for the, in his view as a person of colour, correct way to deal with the legacy of the Confederacy. It should be noted, however, that both the vehicles and the primary tenors of this particular metaphor are historical: while it certainly presents those who suffered under slavery as analogous to persecuted Christians, and the Confederacy as comparable to the Roman authorities, the connection to contemporary groups is only drawn in the second instance. In fact, a modern-day equivalent for the role of the persecutor is entirely absent. Furthermore, while the modern 'we' are certainly encouraged to follow the early Christian example by sticking to a 'patient act of nonviolent radical defiance' and by committing to the transformation (rather than outright removal or uncritical veneration) of Confederate monuments, this 'we' does not appear refer to any particular group facing marginalisation, but rather to the American people in general.

21 For the purposes of this paper, I have opted to refer only to more specific Christian denominations when the speakers that will be cited below explicitly place themselves in that context. Overwhelmingly, however, these speakers seem to favour the more general terminology of 'Christian'.

22 A more extensive portion of Jenky's sermon, which among others also includes comparisons between former president Obama on the one hand and Hitler, Stalin and Otto von Bismarck on the other, can be found online, at Jenky 2012. The transcript is my own.

23 For the idea that the terminology of persecution in Jenky's sermon has a strongly polarising effect, see Moss 2013, 9-10.

24 While Jenky uses his reference to Judas to describe 'traitorous Christians' and describes the persecutors of early Christians as representatives of the Roman Empire, it is important to note that narratives about the crucifixion in particular have historically also been used in highly antisemitic contexts with notable

While Daniel Jenky's sermon is a particularly striking example, the type of comparison he draws is not unique. Both in the centre of power, on the political fringes, and everywhere in between, we can find metaphors in which the political opposition of a self-defined group of Christians, which is usually described as secular, progressive or both, is compared to Roman persecutors.[25] Although the precise nature of the perceived persecutions in these metaphorical comparisons varies, they frequently focus on national or local governmental action or legislation intended to expand the rights of minorities and marginalized communities. This in particular includes measures against hate speech, the right to abortion, the expansion of rights for members of the LGBTQ+ community, as well as moves to end prayer in public schools.[26] On 18 May 2020, for example, the publication *Public Square Magazine*, which has ties to the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, published a piece that discussed the possibility of 'our return to the persecution of the pre-Christian world' at some length. Throughout the piece, the author compares the resistance of contemporary Christians against the aforementioned causes to the refusal of ancient Christians to swear 'loyalty oaths' to the Roman emperor.[27] Only a few months earlier, the more well-known conservative online publication *The Federalist* argued against same-sex marriage by asking if 'Saint Valentine [would] be a Christian martyr for marriage again today?', and argued that 'as a Christian, Saint Valentine would have refused to bow down to false gods and the state'.[28] Speakers who use this type of analogy overwhelmingly present these measures as infringing on the religious liberties of their own community – and on a notable number of occasions fit this argument into the framework of the metaphor by referring to the common idea that the Roman Imperial state was both harsh and overly domineering. Additional examples of this may also be found in responses to the COVID-19 related lockdown later in the same year, when leadership of certain Christian communities

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frequency. The figure of Judas is often depicted with features that are considered to be stereotypically 'Jewish', and Jews have historically often been accused of being collectively responsible for the death of Jesus – a stance that was only officially renounced by the catholic church during the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. This potential undertone should be kept closely in mind when interpreting crucifixion-related metaphors. Given the historical persistence of these tropes, antisemitic interpretation of metaphors in which the role of the 'persecutor' is not otherwise defined cannot be excluded.

25 An interesting example of a self-defined conservative commentator rejecting this identification of more progressive politicians with the Roman authorities may be found in Wehner 2019. In his analysis, Wehner stated: 'To my fellow Christians, then, a friendly reminder from a conservative who shares many of your concerns: we are not living in Nero's Rome. In world history, there are very few nations that have been as accommodating to Christianity as the United States is today […].' It is notable that the common frame is still referenced, and is assumed to be familiar.

26 For an example of the latter, among many other perceived grievances, see the article 'Persecution of Christians in America reaches Levels not seen since Romans fed them to the Lions', published on the fringe publication *To the Death Media* on 7 March 2016. The website has since been taken down, but the article in question may be consulted via Wordsworth 2016. For another example, see recent comments by Steve Deace, host for the conservative-leaning tv-show *The Blaze*. After the storming of the US Capitol by supporters of Donald Trump on 6 January 2021, Deace and other Christian commentators expressed the fear that Christianity as a whole would be blamed for the attack, and that this would be used as a pretext to pass 'anti-Christian' legislation in the form of the Equality Act. As Deace argued: 'There's a long history of statists not letting a good crisis go to waste at the expense of the Christian church, way back to Nero blaming Christians for a fire he started.', see Bond 2021.

27 Herstein 2020.

28 Morabito 2020.

likened the temporary closing of churches to religious persecution.[29] Some went even further in their comparisons. North-Carolina newspaper *The Enterprise* published an opinion piece on the matter that opened with the words 'fearing persecution from the Roman Empire, early Christians huddled together in private homes to pray and study the Scriptures. Nearly two centuries [*sic*, the intended phrase is millennia] later, the coronavirus pandemic and its sweeping bans on public gatherings may force the modern church underground'.[30]

The association between early Christianity and mistreatment by the state is so pervasive that it even appears in cases where religious liberties are not directly at stake.[31] During then-president Donald Trump's 2019 impeachment hearings, for instance, Republican member of the House of Representatives Barry Loudermilk of Georgia complained that 'during that sham trial [the trial of Jesus that preceded the crucifixion], Pontius Pilate afforded more rights to Jesus than the Democrats have afforded this President in this process.'[32] During the 2013 shutdown of the United States government which centred on the financing of the Affordable Care Act, Republican Representative Ted Poe of Texas similarly claimed that 'when Nero fiddled while Rome burned, our President [Obama] played golf while the government shut down; Nero blamed the Christians while Obama blamed the Republicans'.[33] While neither of these cases at first glance seem to fit the pattern of equating early Christians to their perceived contemporary counterparts, it should be noted that in both cases, the object of the perceived mistreatment is a political entity which presents itself as a defender of conservative Christian values – namely president Trump and the Republican Party respectively. In this regard, it may also be telling that the issue of religious liberties played a large role in the debate surrounding the Affordable Care Act, and that the Obama-administration in particular was frequently accused by conservatives of holding less than Christian values.[34]

So, what are these comparisons between an 'early Christian' in-group and a 'Roman' out-group intended to achieve? In order to understand the workings of this type of metaphorical reference, the focus on the role of the persecutor alongside that of the persecuted is particularly important: it highlights not just the conviction that injustice is being perpetrated and that rights are being taken away, but also points to the cause of the perceived harm – usually 'the Government', or at least part thereof.

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29 As, for instance, Baton Rouge pastor Tony Spell, whose objections were reported on by *The Washington Post* on 20 March 2020, see Boorstein 2020.

30 Friedman 2020. The original article has since disappeared from the newspaper's website, but may be read in full via the reference indicated in the bibliography.

31 For a very recent related example, see Fox News-commentator Tucker Carlson's remarks that 'the media is basically Praetorian Guard for the ruling class'. It should be noted that Carlson has often accused the 'mainstream media' of having a liberal bias. Smith 2021.

32 The matter was reported on by CNN, which remarked that no such resemblance actually existed. See LeBlanc 2019.

33 The interview with Conservative outlet Newsmax TV can be found online: Poe 2013.

34 Blackman 2017; in this regard, the pervasive conspiracy theory that former president Obama was Muslim springs to mind. The issue also played an important role in election campaigns. During Obama's run for re-election, for instance, republican governor of Texas Rick Perry referenced 'Obama's war on religion' in a campaign ad. The connection to health care legislation is further expanded upon in Bradley Hagerty 2012.

This foregrounding of the so-called 'guilty party' in turn suggests to the audience that there is something to be done, and turns these analogies into a call to action for their intended audience of other, likeminded Christians. This is often explicit: in the sermon mentioned at the beginning of this section, for instance, Daniel Jenky insisted that his congregation should be 'ready to fight to defend [their] faith' in a display of what he called 'heroic Catholicism' – itself a reference to the tradition of martyrdom connected to early Christianity.[35] In many other cases as well, 'we, Christians' are called upon to remain steadfast, to 'not betray conscience', or to resist the authority of an 'ever more powerful and unforgiving state'.[36] In some cases, the call to action functions somewhat differently, and is at first glance less focussed on active resistance. In relation to Joe Biden's election as president of the US, prominent evangelical Donald Trump supporter pastor Robert Jeffress argued that Christians should accept Biden's presidency, in keeping with the apostle Paul's claims that Christians, too, should subject themselves to the governing authorities. He argues that this should be the case even if the ruler is not the preferred option, 'whether the emperor was the faith-friendly Constantine or the evil emperor Nero'.[37] Notably, the connection between the more progressive Biden and Nero is still made, and the idea of Christian persecution thus remains intact. Still, Jeffress' attitude initially seems to be one of acceptance, as he encourages his fellow Christians to pray for the new president. He adds, however: 'we should commend [Biden] for the things he does right. We should condemn the things he does wrong'. This phrasing leaves open the possibility that condemnation and resistance of at least the verbal variety could still be on the table at a later date. As such, we are still dealing with a call to action. In all these cases, then, early Christians are upheld as an example of resistance against perceived governmental overreach and injustice, while those who do not share the speaker's political and/or religious beliefs are left firmly on the outside.

3. They, Christians

This distinction between a 'we, Christians' in-group and a non-Christian out-group, however, does not always apply. In a second set of metaphors, the idea of early Christianity is not used to signify a designated in-group, but rather to describe a group to which speakers themselves do not belong, for instance because they differ in ethnicity, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs. In these cases, not 'we' but 'they' are metaphorically linked to early Christians. This does not necessarily mean, however, that references to early Christianity are therefore used to stand in for a group or set of behaviours the speaker perceives as negative. Such cases, while they do exist, are extremely rare.[38]

35 For Jenky's sermon, see Jenky 2012.

36 For the call to 'not betray conscience' see Morabito 2020; for the quote on the 'unforgiving state' see Herstein 2020.

37 Jeffress 2020.

38 See, for instance, The Economist 2012, where a number of historical references are used to contextualise the Occupy Wallstreet-movement's criticism of the banking world, while also warning against the implications (and possible anti-Semitic connotations) of anti-banker sentiments. The expulsion of moneychangers from the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem by Jesus of Nazareth is among the examples given in the piece. The episode may be found in all four of the canonical gospels – see Matthew 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-19; Luke 19-45-48 and John 2:13-16.

Overwhelmingly, then, the positive associations attached to the idea of Christianity within the context of US society persist, and the group that is being compared to early Christians continues to be painted in a sympathetic light. The idea of marginalisation likewise remains an essential component of the workings of this type of metaphor, although the precise way in which this idea is expressed is often noticeably different.

The first thing that stands out about these 'they, Christians' metaphors, is that the group that is presented as the equivalent of persecuted early Christians need not necessarily consist exclusively of people who themselves hold Christian beliefs. Instead, this type of metaphor, which is often expressed visually in the form of art, cartoons or graffiti, is more commonly applied to rather more diverse groups, of which refugees and homeless people are perhaps most prevalent. An example of this may be found in the famous statue of 'Homeless Jesus' by Timothy Schmalz, which depicts a figure lying on a park bench curled up beneath a blanket, on whose feet the *stigmata* (crucifixion wounds) are only visible on closer inspection.[39] As we shall see, however, the Black Lives Matter movement and the LGBTQ+ community are also referenced in this context.

Once again, we also frequently find an additional comparison between 'the government', or representatives thereof, and Roman persecutors – which results in a focus on perceived injustice perpetrated by the authorities that is similar to the in-group focussed metaphors described above. An example of this may be found in a 2019 depiction of the Holy Family as a migrant family separated at the border by representatives of the Trump administration, although similar sentiments have repeatedly been expressed by political cartoonists.[40] In the case of 'they, Christians'-metaphors, however, this focus on the persecutor is far from a hard-and-fast rule. Instead, the role of the Roman persecutors is frequently downplayed, or even left completely implicit. When then Democratic presidential candidate Pete Buttigieg stated that Jesus of Nazareth came into the world as a refugee in a 2019 Christmas tweet, he left out any reference to the cause of the so-called 'flight to Egypt'.[41] The omission is a common one – at least in part because the sentiment 'Jesus was a refugee' is frequently presented as a catchphrase even outside of the limited format of twitter, which leaves little room for elaboration or argument.[42]

It is also possible, however, that speakers who use this phrasing omit any mention of the 'persecutor' in order to prevent alienating (parts of) their intended audience. After all, whether the role of the persecutor is explicitly addressed or not, there is a clear

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39 The artwork was first erected at Regis College, University of Toronto, but casts have since been installed in various cities in the United States – and across the world. Notably, the installation of the statue in Davidson, North Carolina, prompted an inhabitant of the neighbourhood to call the police, because she had mistaken the statue for an actual homeless person. See Burnett 2014.

40 The nativity scene in question was displayed in California, and depicted Jesus, Mary and Joseph as refugees separated at the border. Although no figure referencing the persecuting authority is present, the reference to the Trump administration's border policy is obvious. The display is discussed in Thor Jensen 2019. See also Felten 2013.

41 For a discussion of the tweet in question, and the subsequent backlash, see Scott 2019.

42 A google trend search indicates that the online use of the phrase in the United States peaked in January 2017, possibly in relation to the inauguration of Donald Trump as president of the United States. Interestingly, the prevalence of the phrase exceeds even the notable spike in November 2015 – the height of the so-called European refugee crisis. Two additional peaks occurred in December 2018 and 2019. While these spikes seem to be at least partially connected to the Christmas-season, it seems likely that the policy of family separation, which began in the summer of 2018, also played a part.

common denominator in the intention behind these metaphors: they are generally meant to elicit support, and possibly sympathy, for a group that is perceived as marginalised or mistreated – in this case refugees. In this regard, it is important to consider that, while the group that is being described by these early Christianity-related metaphors need not necessarily be Christian, the intended audience is certainly implied to be. Even setting aside the continued prevalence of Christianity in US society, the use of Christianity-related metaphors in itself suggests an audience that is both familiar with and receptive to this mental framework, whether they are practising Christians or not. In fact, it may be argued that this is why 'they, Christians'-metaphors are believed to be politically effective in the first place: these metaphors are constructed to appeal to a sense of kinship, and to the idea that members of a marginalized group are in some way 'like us'. As such, these metaphors are meant to change the intended audience's perception of the group in question, and thereby to bring them within that audience's perceived in-group.

A number of notable attempts of this kind have been made by members of the clergy, who used their perceived authority to increase the inclusivity of their religious communities. An example of this may be found in a 2013 article for *The Huffington Post*, in which Reverend David M. Felten used the legend of St. Valentine (who defied the Roman emperor by performing marriages between legionaries and their sweethearts and converted them to Christianity in the process) to encourage Christians to be more open to the idea of same-sex marriage – and to follow the saint's example in bringing this about. Felten argued that 'on this Valentine's Day, it's good to remember that the Saint for whom the day is named was a martyr for marriage – even marriage that the government decreed as 'illegal''.[43] Although it was not St. Valentine himself who got married against imperial orders, his example is thus nonetheless evoked to encourage sympathy for modern-day 'martyrs for marriage' – that is: members of the LGBTQ+ community who are fighting for marriage equality, and like St. Valentine are resisting government authority in the process. The fact that a saint's behaviour is held up as an example to promote marriage equality once again shows that the intended audience is assumed to be Christian (or at least culturally Christian) itself, and is believed to be receptive to this type of argument, whether or not they were familiar with the details of the legend of St. Valentine before reading the article.

A final example of 'they, Christians'-metaphors may be found in an article by scholars of early Christianity Jeremiah Coogan and Candida Moss, which was notably published in the conservative-leaning publication *The National Interest*. In the article, the authors responded with indignation to President Trump's decision to pose in front of St. John's Episcopal Church with a Bible in the midst of the Black Lives Matter protests that took place during the summer of 2020.[44] After an elaborate explanation of the important role the suppression of biblical texts played in the persecution of Christians, the article concludes with 'there is a tragic irony to the fact that a mode of resistance developed by

43 Felten 2013.

44 Coogan and Moss 2020. For the argument that Trump's frequent use of religious language serves to cement the support of the American Religious Right, see Hughes 2020. Claims that the Trump administration's actions during this episode violated protestors' civil rights were dismissed in June 2021, right after the Interior Department Inspector General had found that the clearing of the road to St. John's was unrelated to the president's appearance.

disenfranchised and powerless North African Christians is now weaponised against black people by the most powerful man in the world' – thus encouraging the reader to consider the parallels between early Christians and modern-day African Americans.

What stands out about arguments that are supported by 'they, Christians'-metaphors, is that they generally appear to be aimed at those who might conceivably disagree, or are perceived as part of the political opposition, rather than being addressed to the author's political allies. Like 'we, Christians'-metaphors, these statements contain a call to action – only in this case, the action that is being encouraged is for the audience to change its mind. This idea may remain implicit in shorter statements like 'Jesus was a refugee', but is presented more clearly in the aforementioned article by Coogan and Moss, and especially in the piece by Reverend Felten, who calls upon his readers to stop misusing religious language by arguing that 'today, imperially minded politicians, egged on by religious conservatives, are denying American citizens their basic right to marriage. Although claiming to be informed by God, they are simply using God as a patsy to support their own agenda of discrimination and prejudice' before reminding his readers to take the saint's example into account.[45]

4. Conclusion

When analysing the use of early Christianity as a metaphor in contemporary American political discourse, a number of things stand out. First and foremost, it has become clear that this type of metaphor is overwhelmingly used to advocate against perceived injustice. The 'Christian' component of the metaphor is almost exclusively used to refer to a group with whom the speaker feels a certain affinity, and which is believed to have been unfairly marginalised. This is in keeping with both the important role of persecution in Christian tradition, and the continued perception of the United States as a 'Christian nation', which serves to paint Christianity in a positive light. By contrast, the role of the Roman authorities, or 'persecutors' is generally filled by a government, or representatives thereof, which is believed to be overly harsh and overbearing.

The precise workings of each individual metaphor, however, can differ in remarkably distinctive ways. As I have argued, the role of Christianity-based metaphors in political discourse is strongly influenced by the extent to which the speaker self-identifies with (early) Christianity as a suppressed minority. While some speakers connect this identification to their own in-group, others instead ascribe it to another group, to which they themselves do not belong, and whose members may in fact not be Christian at all. In the former case, users of these metaphors tend to assume a lack of religious beliefs, or 'traditional values' on the part of their political opponents, and primarily use references to early Christianity to encourage members of their own political and religious in-group to resist the aforementioned perceived oppression. By contrast, those who use the terminology of early Christianity to refer to a group to which they themselves do not belong generally appear to aim their arguments at their perceived political opponents, in order to foster a sense of understanding and support for a community for which such sentiments are believed to be lacking. As such, assumptions about both the speaker's own relationship to Christian tradition and the religious beliefs of their political opponents play an important role in the shaping and employing of this type of historical metaphor.

45 Felten 2013.

All this serves to demonstrate that historical metaphors, whether related to early Christianity or not, can play a significant role in the way in which we talk about modern-day political affairs. For this reason, they deserve to be carefully studied and analysed by historians, literary scholars, political scientists and others: after all, political metaphors carry with them assumptions about both the past and the present, that are potently present and can be highly influential – but are not always immediately visible. More thorough attention to this mechanism can therefore help us to better understand political arguments, as well as the societal values, beliefs and biases to which they appeal.

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