



The Christian Discourse of Persecution in Late Antiquity: An Introduction

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1 The Christian discourse of persecution in Late Antiquity

An introduction¹

Éric Fournier

At the end of 408, the North African schismatic group called “Donatists” by our Nicene Christian sources imagined that the recent imperial legislation, which had been directed against them, had been nullified following the death of the *magister militum* Stilicho in August 408. In response, North African Nicene bishops sent an embassy to Ravenna to ensure the continuing validity of past “anti-Donatist” laws (Aug. *Ep.* 97.2–3). The Nicene bishops were successful in their petition, and on January 15, 409, Honorius’ court issued the following statement: “The Donatists and the rest of the vain heretics and the others in error who cannot be converted to the worship of the Catholic communion, that is, the Jews and the gentiles, who are commonly called pagans, shall not suppose that the provisions of the laws previously issued against them have diminished in force.”² The text went on to stress the connivance of judges, whom it threatened with forfeiture of their social rank, their office staff with a fine of twenty pounds of gold, and deportation and loss of property for members of the municipal senate. Many more similar legal measures targeted Donatists increasingly severely under Honorius.³

Three-quarters of a century after the successful defense of Rome’s anti-Donatist legislation by the Nicene bishops of Africa, the Vandal king Huneric repromulgated these very same laws, only this time it was Nicene, not Donatists, who were targeted.⁴ What is interesting, for present purposes, is Victor of Vita’s perception of these measures and presentation of these events as a persecution.⁵ Indeed, invoking a scriptural citation to undermine the Vandal strategy as lacking intelligence, as he often does in his narrative, Victor writes:

‘without understanding what it said and the things it asserted’ (1 Tim 1:7), they [Vandals] did not blush for shame in deploying against us [Nicones] a law which our Christian emperors, seeking to do honour to the catholic church, had previously issued against them and other heretics, to which they added many things of their own, just as seemed good to their tyrannical power.⁶

This vignette taken from my own field of research, which could be easily multiplied to the numerous late antique instances of claimed persecution, illustrates the topic of the following contributions and its complexities.

The subject of this book is the discourse of persecution used by Christians in Late Antiquity (c. 300–700 CE). More specifically, through a series of detailed case studies, it investigates how the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity changed the way that Christians and para-Christians (Manichaeans) perceived the hostile treatments they received, either by fellow Christians or by people of other religions – “pagans” under Julian and Muslims during the Islamic conquest period at the beginning of the seventh century. Although it would be logical to assume that after Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in the fourth century and the increasing support for the faith by Rome’s emperors – with the notable exception of Julian (361–363) – Christian claims to be victims of persecution would cease, this was far from the case as even Augustine realized.⁷ In fact, late antique sources are filled with examples of Christians who claimed to be persecuted. How do we explain this phenomenon? In what ways were late antique persecutions different from those that occurred before the “little peace of the Church”? Is the traditional opposition posited between orthopraxy and orthodoxy – Romans persecuted early Christians by imposing a ritual (sacrifice), whereas Christians persecuted by imposing belief – valid when considering the difference between Roman persecutions of Christians and late antique claims to be persecuted?⁸

A closely related second goal of this volume is to encourage scholars to think more precisely about the terminological difficulties related to the study of Christian persecution. Three decades ago, in a study of Valens’ recall of the Nicene exiles, Rochelle Snee argued that “deposition and exile were primarily matters of politics under Valens, as was the case under Constantius, and were not true religious persecution.”⁹ Although this conclusion is to be welcomed for its political interpretation of Christian sources presenting a strong case for their own religious view of events, it implicitly assumes a universally accepted and stable definition of persecution. But what exactly constitutes a “true” persecution? And from whose perspective should we attempt to answer this question? Indeed, despite sustained interest in the subject, few scholars have sought to distinguish between such closely related concepts as punishment, coercion, physical violence, and persecution. Often, these terms are used interchangeably.¹⁰ Although there are no easy answers, an emphatic conclusion of the studies assembled in this volume is that “persecution” was a malleable rhetorical label in late antique discourse, whose meaning shifted depending on the viewpoint of the authors who used it. Persecution is therefore an emic term, because claims of persecution typically come from victims and are not objective phenomena. Like beauty, it resides in the eye of the beholder.

This leads to our third objective: to analyze the role and function played by rhetoric and polemic in late antique claims to be persecuted. Throughout the period under consideration, the Christian Roman state and its successor kingdoms attempted to impose the confession they considered orthodox upon their (sometimes reluctant) subjects using various levels of coercion. The authority to do this was based on the claims of a monopoly of truth made by partisan Christian ministers and the power to legislate faith inherited from the Roman Empire, in which rulers were responsible for maintaining the *pax deorum*. Moreover, the

newly Christian Roman Empire blended the traditional civil ideal of *concordia* with the biblical precept of neighborly love. Ironically neighborly love, expressed as a concern for fellow Christians, could become intolerance when coupled with the power of the state to coercively impose “truth” upon those perceived to be heterodox.¹¹ The reaction to coercion was the counterclaim to be victim of persecution, which constituted a discourse, a rhetorical tool of empowerment for dispossessed and disempowered Christian groups. This often took the form of invective and attacking Christian rulers as persecutors was part of this process.¹² From a political perspective, then, “persecution” became a claim used by dominated groups of Christians to attack the legitimacy of the dominant Christian faction. Disempowered Christians used “corrosive discourses,” such as the rhetoric of persecution, as a means of resistance, as a weapon against their ideological foes, in order to oppose their subjective claims to truth.¹³

The difficulties associated with the history of persecution after Constantine, the terminology used to describe it, and the rhetorical nature of the term itself, can clearly be seen in the example of the Vandals presented at the opening of this chapter. Both Honorius and Huneric used the same anti-heresy legislation, and yet it is only the Vandals who earn the label “persecutor” directly and indirectly in our Nicene sources.¹⁴ In response to Huneric, Victor of Vita presents Nicene bishops as declaring “We are Christians (*christiani sumus*), we are bishops, we hold the one, true apostolic faith!”¹⁵ *Christiani sumus* had by Victor’s time become a topos evoking martyrological literature of earlier centuries, in which Christian martyrs publicly proclaimed their faith to the point of their own deaths (“witness” is the original meaning of the Greek term μάρτυς). Victor’s use of this expression casts the Vandals as persecutors, associating them with their infamous Roman predecessors in the mind of the reader. This is a good example of rhetorical construction (the use of a topos evoking earlier persecutions) that conveys a polemical point of view, specifically that the present persecution of North African Nicenes stood in continuity with past persecutions of Christians by “pagan” Roman emperors. These claims also operate as a form of invective and of apology, depicting the target as the evil villain in a polarized world.

Even Constantine, who is typically heralded as a model to follow by Patristic sources, could in the right circumstances be cast as a persecutor.¹⁶ The highly tendentious Donatist *Passion of Donatus of Avioccala*, for example, transformed the first Christian emperor into a persecuting tyrant, just as Victor of Vita had done in the case of Huneric.¹⁷ The author of the *passio* ascribed to the Devil the emperor’s order that “Donatist” church buildings be seized and transferred to what councils of bishops decided was the Catholic faction in Africa.¹⁸ The result, according to the hagiographer, was a repeat of earlier pagan persecutions of Christians: soldiers enforcing the imperial decision ruthlessly, killing and raping in the process.¹⁹ This was certainly not the result that Constantine had in mind. But the emperor neglected one key factor in evaluating the African situation: the willingness of Christians to die for their faith (more later on voluntary martyrdom). The resilience, courage, and determination that Christians learned to muster through earlier persecutions, not least the persecution of Diocletian that had just

ended, taught them the power of what we might call civil disobedience.²⁰ But to simply accept the label “persecution” as an accurate description of any violence against those opposing the policy of unity without recognizing the polemical nature of this label has the effect of ascribing full, intentional, and exclusive responsibility for the violence to imperial officials. The example of the *Passion of Donatus* reminds us, as many of the chapters in this book do, that the situation was typically much more complicated and nuanced than our sources claiming to be victims of persecution would want us to believe.

Constantine never tried to enforce religious unity in Africa after this disaster.²¹ But the literary strategy deployed in the *Passion*, the rhetoric of persecution, would continue to be mustered time and again in Late Antiquity. The author of the *Passion of Donatus of Avioccala*, Victor of Vita, and countless other polemicists drew upon earlier martyr narratives in order to describe their own circumstances, a fact that gives the impression that fourth- and fifth-century persecutions were the sequel of pagan persecutions, and the emperors responsible for them the successors of Nero, Decius, and Diocletian. But the key difference was that this rhetoric of persecution was now invoked against fellow Christians; their resistance was now aimed at exposing what they considered as illegitimate claims to orthodoxy, which was often linked to the illegitimate use of secular power. Indeed, the discourse of persecution and martyrdom was particularly useful to resist political support for “unorthodoxy” and Christian rulers who were unfavorable to the faction of the writers of our sources.²² Because of the intertwined relationship of politics and religion in this period, the discourse of persecution could be wielded as a “political” weapon. This leads us to wonder whether there was a contradiction between the biblical precept to accept and respect secular authorities (1 Peter 2: 13–14) and the practice of Nicene Christians to undermine and reject secular authorities of a different Christian confession. We can even ask whether Christians could consider a secular ruler of another Christian confession as legitimate. Theoderic’s reign in Italy is an obvious example that it was, indeed, possible. But perhaps this is specifically what makes it stand out among its contemporaries.²³

On the other hand, we should not lose sight of the fact that most of our claims of persecution come after the fact and by the pens of a few “eloquent oddballs,” to borrow Jill Harries’ expression.²⁴ Indeed, by and large, late antique bishops were not rebels. The majority were eager to obtain imperial support and many sent multiple embassies to lobby the court in their favor.²⁵ Numerous examples attest to episcopal willingness to accept creedal statements against their own theological views, although often under duress or coercion. Or at least this is how Nicene sources explained why some bishops who ought to have remained firm in their support of the “true faith” sometimes failed to resist.²⁶ These episodes of coercion (or simply of capitulation) could later be recast as instances of martyrdom and persecution. The larger point is that the rhetoric deployed by our “oddball” authors has a function and a context, and more important that these writers were not normative in any way. To the contrary, they were exceptional individuals who stand out from the majority of late antique Christians.²⁷ We should not, therefore, think

of most late antique Christians as rebels or political opponents, despite the frequency with which such rhetoric is found in our texts. Rather, these writers were attempting to control the message and to (re)fashion the history of their recent past. That we are still reading their texts suggest that they largely succeeded.

Thus, one challenge for the historian interested in the subject of persecution is to adequately walk the line between taking our ancient sources seriously and accepting our texts at face value. To put it slightly differently, our emphasis on the rhetorical nature of many claims of persecution should not tempt us to distinguish between the false binary of “real” or “false” persecution. We are in general less concerned with whether claims of persecution “really happened” or how severe they “really were” – this is in most cases impossible to determine in any event. Rather, a more fruitful approach – and one adopted here – is to analyze the claims themselves in order to better understand how they functioned discursively. But emphasizing the rhetorical aspects of claims of persecution and the political context in which they appear must not diminish the basic point that, for our authors claiming to be persecuted, this was their perceived reality. For them, they were indeed being persecuted unjustly. That is because they firmly believed in the truth of their cause and their faith, and because of the essence of their monotheistic faith, all other groups had to be wrong. This is where, in some instances, the claims to be persecuted spill over into the political realm, i.e., if other groups are wrong, then rulers supporting them cannot be legitimate and their measures to support their faith amount to a persecution of the righteous (us). For late antique men and women who held such beliefs, and particularly for those who wrote the texts that tell us about it, they truly lived through periods of persecution. What we call rhetorical deployment of *topoi* from earlier martyrological literature served to represent their reality.

Such a viewpoint, no matter how much sympathy we might have for it, had serious consequences in late antique society. Seeing the world divided between “us,” who are right, and “them,” who are wrong (“othering”) led to an increasing polarization in a situation not unlike the current climate of US politics, which also has significant overlap with religious beliefs and profound social repercussions (e.g., the debate on abortion). Averil Cameron, in her seminal book *Christianity and the Rhetoric of Empire*, aptly described the kinds of rhetorical strategies considered thus far and, indeed, the ambition of Christian writers to make truth claims with universal meaning and validity, as a “totalizing discourse.”²⁸ The twofold aim of her book was “to show that a large part of Christianity’s effectiveness in the Roman Empire lay in its capacity to create its own intellectual and imaginative universe, and to show how its own literary devices and techniques in turn related to changing contemporary circumstances.”²⁹ Our analysis of the changing discourse of persecution dovetails perfectly well this insight. Indeed, rhetoric – the art of persuasion – must be understood in the context of Cameron’s work, and especially in conjunction with the notion of a Christian totalizing discourse. “Working through the familiar” was a technique, Cameron argued, that helped Christian discourse attain recognition in the Roman world.³⁰ Here, by framing late antique persecutions as repetitions of earlier, Roman persecutions of Christians, in

working through a familiar Christian scheme (such as Victor's *christiani sumus*), late antique Christian authors were clearly using this persuasion technique.³¹

Persecutions of and between Christians: Changing definitions of a phenomenon

In his paper "Lessons from Diocletian's Persecution," Hal Drake concluded that "the biggest lesson of the early fourth century [...] was that a policy such as Diocletian's which relied on coercion to achieve consensus simply did not work. As the century progressed," Drake remarked, "Christians forgot this lesson."³² Elsewhere, Drake argued that the cause of this amnesia was twofold: the emperor Julian and bishops. For Drake, Julian's reversal of the pro-Christian religious policy of the Constantinian dynasty, which scared the Christian establishment by raising the prospect of a reversal of their recently acquired good fortune, and the zeal of Christian bishops to speed up the pace of Roman society's Christianization, worked together to create a climate of intolerance which led to increased religious violence.³³ While the reign of Julian has mainly been studied in the context of Christian-pagan interactions, Drake's insights, together with the important contributions of other scholars, also point to the connections between intolerance, religious violence, and the role of Roman bishops during Julian's reign. This, in turn, has important implications for our understanding of the semantic field of persecution.³⁴ Jean Bouffartigue, for instance, noted that Julian's religious policies were described as a persecution by Christian authors because there was no ancient concept akin to our notion of intolerance.³⁵ And paradoxically, Christians resented Julian precisely for his reluctance to openly persecute them, as Nathaniel Morehouse argues in the present volume. The author of the Donatist *Passio* mentioned earlier also alluded to the "hidden trickery" of the Constantinian persecution they had endured, in contrast to the open hostility of previous persecutions.³⁶ This motif of deceitful or surreptitious "persecution" betrays a sense of the novelty perceived by the dispossessed Christians who felt victimized.

Looking back at Julian's religious policies from the perspective of the fifth century, Socrates of Constantinople presented his own definition of persecution: "Abstaining therefore from the excessive cruelties which had been practiced under Diocletian, he [Julian] did not however altogether abstain from persecution – I call persecution the stirring/troubling [tarattein] of those who keep quiet [‘esuxazontas].”³⁷ This expansive, malleable definition permits almost anything to be constructed as persecutory.³⁸ And considering that Socrates wrote in privileged hindsight, it is tempting to take his definition as representative of the late antique Christian mindset on the much wider phenomenon of persecution. Augustine presented a similar viewpoint a few years earlier, when he wrote about Donatists in his *Ad Donatistas post collationem*: "beaten on all fronts, here is therefore what was left for them to confuse the ignorant: to present itself as the true Church, because it suffers persecution without inflicting it."³⁹ Similar to Socrates, Augustine underlines the Donatist use of persecution as a strategy deployed by the dispossessed. This was a strategy that Augustine had to challenge. Elsewhere, he claims that we

should not reserve the name persecutor for “whoever wants to inflict torture on others.”⁴⁰ He continues: “Scripture said ‘Then the just will stand with a perfect steadiness in front of those who oppressed them’ (*Wisd.* 5:1) [...]. It did not say: ‘All those who endured harm will stand.’”⁴¹

Augustine’s presentation is fundamentally subjective. In his writings, the Bishop of Hippo constantly invoked, as a refrain, Matthew 5:10, “blessed are those who suffer persecution on account of justice.”⁴² His last words, *propter iustitiam* (on account of justice), are the key. Obviously, one person’s justice will be another’s injustice. Augustine himself admits as much as he attempted to justify the application of coercion to impose Nicene orthodoxy. Elsewhere, he turns the statement from Matthew around: suffering persecution was not enough to earn God’s blessing; it had to be *propter iustitiam*. Once you apply the concept of justice, Augustine claims, “you will set aside bandits, magicians, adulterous, impious, sacrilegious, and heretics; such people suffer persecution, but not for justice.”⁴³ Of course, Augustine’s implicit claim here is that he is able to define what constitutes *iustitia* and thus to parse legitimate and illegitimate claims of persecution.

But how are we to interpret the often violent and intolerant language of the dominant discourse, of the laws in particular? While they are often taken literally as expressions of the emperor’s will, and thus as examples of intolerance and persecution, it is possible that such language was mainly intended as a deterrent.⁴⁴ Sozomen presents two such examples: the first in his discussion of putative anti-heretical laws that Constantine would have issued at the end of his reign, and the second about Theodosius. In both cases, Sozomen posits that the rulers only wished to frighten their subjects to obey their laws. As he writes about Theodosius: “he prescribed severe penalties in the laws, but did not impose them, for he was anxious not to punish but to frighten his subjects, so that they would come to agree with him in religious matters.”⁴⁵ If this is so and the harsh penalties of the laws were only seldom applied, how should this nuance our views of claims to be persecuted? Conversely, where are we to draw the line between legal pressures, coercion, and persecution? Ultimately, is the new style of late antique persecutions to be explained by a sociopolitical realignment that accompanied larger transformations of the Roman world in the wake of Christianity’s emergence as a dominant religion? What were the implications from the imperial connection to a single divinity and its corollary, the attempt to impose its belief to all its citizens, collided with a new kind of citizenship whose duty to their god and their willingness to die for their faith was stronger than their devotion to the empire?

The present volume

The contributions assembled in this volume build on an important body of recent scholarship on religious violence, persecution, Christian identity, and the literary nature of our sources. Early Christian martyrological literature has recently been submitted to intense critical analysis.⁴⁶ The first, obvious insight of relevance here is the elaborate literary character of early Christian martyr accounts that numerous

scholars have underlined, most recently Candida Moss in successive books.⁴⁷ It should give us at least a good reason to pause and reflect upon our Patristic sources, as many of the volume's contributions do, knowing that the very texts that they alluded to, paraphrased, echoed, and copied, were themselves elaborate rhetorical constructions.⁴⁸ Brent Shaw has recently argued that the Neronian persecution of 64 CE, the first of the traditional persecutions of Christians by the Roman government, was a myth that "should be excised from histories of the early Church."⁴⁹ Similarly, numerous studies have now underlined Eusebius' role in emphasizing the importance of persecutions, even to the point of creating some, notably under Septimius Severus.⁵⁰ A related debate has erupted around the existence and significance of so-called voluntary martyrdom.⁵¹ This is important not only for the obvious implications of this phenomenon for our understanding of what Christian authors might describe as persecution involving volunteerism, but also if, with Philip Tite, we read such cases as "a mode of attack within intra-Christian conflicts for the sake of policing social boundaries, to which writings about suffering and death played an important role."⁵²

The influence of the "linguistic turn" has drawn the attention of late antique scholars toward the literary aspects of their texts, and the role of rhetoric has frequently been underlined in recent years.⁵³ The rhetoric of the late Roman legal texts in particular has been a fruitful area of study.⁵⁴ In a Monty Pythonesque way, scholars have also highlighted "the violence inherent in the [Roman legal] system" as well as in late antique daily life.⁵⁵ Elsewhere, Peter Van Nuffelen has underlined the continuing importance of the rhetorical education and its role in late antique historiography.⁵⁶ And a recent collection of essays on late antique rhetorical strategies

confirm what has repeatedly been argued in the past years, viz. that rhetoric remained fully alive in Late Antiquity: not only did rhetoric continue to be actively practiced and publicly performed, it was also creatively adapted to ever changing religious and political circumstances.⁵⁷

Strongly related to these subjects, the topic of identity has been one of the most important ones in recent decades.⁵⁸ Other scholars have focused attention on late antique religious violence. Michael Gaddis wrote a fundamental book that highlighted numerous important points about inter-Christian violence, and particularly the use of the twin discourse of martyrdom and persecution.⁵⁹ Gaddis, however, did not pay as much attention to the rhetorical construction of persecution.⁶⁰

The studies assembled in this book contribute to apply and discuss Gaddis' insight, while going further in their analysis of the rhetorical aspects of our texts. In doing so, we also followed the lead of Daniel Washburn and Richard Flower, who both showed how Nicene bishops such as Lucifer of Cagliari, Hilary of Poitiers, and Athanasius used invective to cast Constantius into a tyrannical persecutor and the discourse of martyrdom to present their exile as persecution.⁶¹ Washburn and Flower are also part of a larger renewal of interest in the relationship between exile, episcopal banishment, coercion, imprisonment, and

persecution.⁶² By extending our scope to the seventh century, moreover, we will also cast a much wider net than a recent collection of essays in French on a similar topic, *Chrétien persécuteurs*, which stopped around 415.⁶³ Similarly, our study fills an important gap in current scholarship by focusing on inter-Christian persecution, as many of the recent studies focus on violence between Christians and other faiths.⁶⁴

The present book should also be situated within a wide array of recent studies on tolerance/intolerance, coercion, and religious violence in Late Antiquity.⁶⁵ In a trio of important recent contributions, Wendy Mayer presented a series of observations on these topics, specifically how they bear on our interpretation of religious conflicts, as well as new theoretical approaches.⁶⁶ In “Theorising Religious Conflict: Early Christianity to Late Antiquity and Beyond,” Mayer identifies four important approaches to the topic of religious conflict. First, scholars have tended to understand pre-Constantinian polytheism as intrinsically tolerant, whereas monotheism is seen as the cause of a rise of intolerance in the Christian empire. Second, she identifies competition and “the religious marketplace” as an important approach to religious conflict.⁶⁷ Third, Mayer underlines the current view that focuses on religious violence (both physical and rhetorical) as the most important aspect of religious conflict, to the near-exclusion of other facets. And fourth, she points to the importance of identity formation as a core element of religious conflict. As a way forward, she proposes to draw on the insights of neuroscience and the “cognitive turn.”⁶⁸ Considering the importance of what Mayer identified as the fourth current approach in the following chapters, it seems justified to address it in more details here.

In their introduction to a recent volume on *Religion, Tolerance, and Intolerance: Views from Across the Disciplines*, Russell Powell and Steve Clarke present what they call the “in-group/out-group (IG/OG) bias”:

This is the tendency of individuals to esteem members of the in-group while exhibiting prejudice attitudes toward members of the out-groups, and to discriminate in favour of members of the former and against those of the latter. [...] [R]eligious affiliation can trigger intergroup psychological dynamics that generate stereotypes, negative affects, and anti-social attitudes and behaviors toward out-group members. Groups in general, and religious groups in particular, provide their members (to varying degrees) with shared norms, values, traditions, and metaphysics, which in turn helps to mobilize, coordinate, and justify collective action [...]. Religion is an important mode of social identification. It provides individuals with a comprehensive social identity, including cosmic and terrestrial worldviews than can anchor the individual, in a self-affirming and existential anxiety-reducing social consensus [...]. It is for this reason that epistemic challenges to religious worldviews can generate extreme IG/OG responses, which protect – and in some contexts strengthen – religious identity. [...] IG/OG effects may be exacerbated when groups are perceived to be in conflict with one another over scarce resources, political power, or access to the marketplace of ideas.⁶⁹

This very insightful overview of the in-group/out-group dynamic dovetails perfectly with the topic under study, particularly in its analysis of the dynamics at play between the prejudice against members of the out-groups (heretics), the production of “anti-social attitudes and behaviors toward out-group members” (perceived as persecution), and the self-reinforcement of identity based on faith in order to protect oneself from the challenge posed by the out-group, particularly in times of conflict. As the authors add, “the threat to worldview that is posed by the deviant ‘other’ can be mitigated not only by reaffirming the in-group [...], but also by derogating, scapegoating, or acting aggressively toward the out-group.”⁷⁰ They further explain religious violence through “existential fears that the evil ‘other’ threatens to destroy the divinely anointed in-group, and that the best way to stop this is by recourse to extreme violence and other counter-attitudinal behaviors.”⁷¹ They conclude this section by writing that

the desire for purification, often associated with religious ritual and morality [...], tends to play an integral role in the motivations and justifications of intergroup violence, and is reflected in the medicalized or public health-oriented vocabulary often used to describe attacks on out-groups.⁷²

Indeed, these comments would apply to numerous late antique cases, from the Donatist obsession on purity, to the pervasive medical terminology deployed in late antique sources, and particularly in imperial constitutions of the *Theodosian Code*.⁷³

The chapters that follow are divided into three loosely conceived chronological parts that correspond with different late antique “moments”: the later Roman Empire of the fourth and fifth centuries, when the Roman state still controlled the whole Mediterranean; post-Roman kingdoms of the Western Mediterranean (fifth to the seventh centuries); and Eastern Mediterranean in the fifth and seventh centuries, the latter two in order to address the increasingly diverging paths that East and West took during this crucial period. In Chapter 2, “Breaking the apocalyptic frame: Persecution and the rise of Constantine,” Elizabeth DePalma Digeser presents an important new argument about the rise of Constantine (r. 306–337), which she sees as more uncertain than the traditional narrative would lead us to believe. When Constantine is situated in an apocalyptic framework, as the savior of Christians harshly persecuted, the tenuous situation that he found himself in at the beginning of his reign is glossed over. In this chapter, the discourse of persecution operates as propaganda from the court (mainly Lactantius) and hides the fact that Christians had gained prominence in the empire’s cities since the “little peace of Church” ushered in by Gallienus’ edict of tolerance in 260, which had in effect legalized Christianity. Conversely, Nathaniel Morehouse argues, in Chapter 3, “Begrudging the honor: Julian and Christian martyrdom,” that the trauma of the Apostate’s reign (361–363) occasioned Christians to reshape the definition of what persecution meant. Morehouse underlines Julian’s refusal to make martyrs the particular cause of this trauma, for Christians accustomed to having recourse to a discourse of martyrdom and persecution even under the Christian rulers Constantine and Constantius II (r. 337–361).

Moving away from the last “pagan” Roman emperor, in Chapter 4, “The misunderstood emperor? Valens as a persecuting ruler in late antique literature,” Maijastina Kahlos traces the origins of Valens’ (364–378) double persona as a heretic (Valens is typically labeled as an “Arian”) and a persecutor. The fact that Valens also had the misfortune to die on the battlefield at Adrianople only served to validate his critics, who could safely criticize him in the aftermath of this disappearance, in another example of what could be called a Christian *damnatio memoriae*. Kahlos shows Valens performing a delicate political balancing act in the difficult context of ecclesiastical rivalries among his eastern bishops and his desire to obtain religious unity. Pursuing the traditional policy established by Constantine in the way to deal with episcopal disputes, Valens confiscated properties and banished troublesome bishops, which led our sources to label him a persecutor. The discourse of persecution therefore blended the political and the religious in this case. In the similar theological context of pre-Theodosian Constantinople, Byron MacDougall analyzes Gregory of Nazianzus’ theological orations (*Or.* 27–31) as examples of texts competing for an audience that positioned itself as persecuted, in Chapter 5, “Theologies under persecution: Gregory of Nazianzus and the *Syntagmation* of Aetius.” Since Aetius had appropriated the central position of the persecuted theologian in the eastern capital and Gregory himself was on the margins of what the court favored in the theological sphere, MacDougall argues that Gregory aimed to respond to Aetius’ work in order to win over the audience of what we might call the theological “opposition” in late fourth-century Constantinople before Theodosius tipped the scale permanently. Adam Ployd’s “For their own good: Augustine and the rhetoric of beneficial persecution” (Chapter 6) is a clear exposition of the use of forensic rhetoric by Augustine to justify the coercion and persecution that Donatists suffered. Augustine’s case is one of the few examples of a Christian in a situation of power reflecting on how to deal with Christian “others.” In the last chapter of Part I, “In the footsteps of the Apostles of Light: Persecution and the Manichaean discourse of suffering,” Mattias Brand looks at the way that Manichaean texts use an ideology of suffering that bears strong similarities with the Christian discourse of persecution. While we expect Manichaeans to be persecuted, as a para-Christian group routinely targeted by late antique antiheretical legislation, Brand argues from the papyri of the fourth-century Egyptian village of Kellis that this was not necessarily the case. Rather, he shows that the discourse of persecution dovetailed the Manichaean ideology of suffering that Mani embodied and served to cement their identity.

To open Part II, my chapter, “‘To collect gold from hidden caves’: Victor of Vita and the vandal ‘persecution’ of heretical barbarians in late antique North Africa,” analyzes the different rhetorical devices and literary techniques used by Victor to convey his vision of the past. The chapter argues that Victor based his overall view of the Vandal period that he covers (429–484) on the harshest form of coercion he witnessed in 484 and applied it retroactively to the whole period. It thus depicts a process similar to what Kahlos showed for Valens, a political opposition based on religious motives by Nicene writers, despite traditional measures to impose their orthodoxy used by Vandals. Theoderic “the Great” (r. 493–526) is not known as a persecutor, despite his reputation as an “Arian” in

Nicene sources, which did not preclude Gelasius, bishop of Rome from 492 to 496, to claim to be a victim of persecution. In Chapter 9, ““You have made common cause with their persecutors”: Gelasius, the language of persecution, and the Acacian schism,” Samuel Cohen shows that Gelasius used the discourse of persecution to defend the Council of Chalcedon (451) against the *Henotikon* (482) that the Eastern emperor Zeno (r. 476–491) attempted to impose. In a similar way to MacDougall’s chapter, we have here another theologian claiming the status of victim of persecution as a defense in a theological conflict.

In my Chapter 10, “Everyone but the kings: The rhetoric of (non-)persecution in Gregory of Tours’ *Histories*,” we find a stark contrast with Vandal Africa. Indeed, whereas Victor of Vita used all the rhetorical devices at his disposal to vilify the Vandals, Gregory of Tours’ (c. 538–593/4) support of the Merovingians leads him to exonerate the rulers in violent episodes involving bishops, what could have been described as persecution by a hostile author. Whereas Victor’s discourse of persecution served to attack the legitimacy of Vandal rulers, because of their heterodoxy, the orthodoxy of the Franks after Clovis (r. 481–c. 509) led Gregory to accept the legitimacy of Merovingian kings and therefore to also accept their treatment of bishops as beyond reproach. The same theme of legitimacy is prominent in Molly Lester’s Chapter 11, “*Persecutio, seductio*, and the limits of rhetorical intolerance in visigothic Iberia.” In this case, the delicate conversion process, from the “Arian” Leovigild (r. 569–586) to the Nicene Reccared (r. 586–601), over which Nicene bishops presided, led them to downplay the rhetoric of persecution because it was not in their advantage to do so. Instead, Nicene sources of the 580s–590s preferred the softer discourse of seduction, depicting Leovigild as attempting to convert Nicenes rather than persecute them.

Part III opens with Rebecca S. Falcasantos’ analysis of the fifth-century ecclesiastical historians Socrates’ and Sozomen’s narratives about the fourth-century conflict between “Arians” and Nicenes, in Chapter 12, “The city a palimpsest: Rewriting Arian violence in fifth-century historiography.” She argues that their texts were violent discourses that established persecution as a habit that served to cement the binary identities with which these historians wished to memorialize the past in order to justify their present. In this case, the discourse of persecution serves as a justification for the continual use of coercion against past foes who “persecuted us” in the past under the Theodosian dynasty (379–457). As with the examples of Constantine, Constantius II, Valens, and the *Henotikon*, the case of Emperor Basiliscus (r. 475–476), who attempted to cancel the Council of Chalcedon through his own document, the *Encyclicon*, provoked debates amongst ecclesiastical writers about the proper role of a Christian ruler in determining theological beliefs and enforcing them through his secular powers. In Chapter 13, “The name of ill-omen: Basiliscus and the church in Constantinople,” Jason Osequeda shows how both sides of the controversy used the discourse of persecution to describe the emperor. For those in favor of Basiliscus’ *Encyclicon*, he was persecuted, whereas for those against his theological decree, he was a persecutor! This is perhaps the best example of the malleability of the discourse

of persecution, as well as the polarization that such discourse created, between in-groups and out-groups.

In John of Ephesus' texts about the persecution of anti-Chalcedonian eastern saints, Christine Shepardson finds evidence of exile and property confiscation. Yet, in Chapter 14, "Martyrs of exile: John of Ephesus and religious persecution," she argues that John did not see these reduced means of coercion as less persecutory than pre-Constantinian forms of coercion against Christians. Here, as in Victor of Vita's depiction of Vandal Africa, John of Ephesus' discourse of persecution serves to convey his reality that the coercion that anti-Chalcedonians suffered threatened their salvation, a form of martyrdom every bit as serious as in earlier persecutions. In Chapter 15, "Persecution and apostasy: Christian identity during the crises of the seventh century," Ryan Strickler looks at the fraught context of the seventh century when eastern Christians faced three potential forms of persecution: by Persians during the wars against Heraclius (602–628), by fellow Christians of a different theological leaning, and by Muslims following the Islamic conquests of the 640s–690s. Using the sociologist Margaret Somers' theories of narrativity and emplotment to analyze the sources' numerous claims to be persecuted during these trying decades, Strickler argues that, in the end, the measures perceived as persecutory by our sources must be situated in the context of the time, dominated by warfare, and were mainly aimed at securing control over cities and communities of newly conquered areas. Here, the discourse of persecution functions to express the identity of communities under siege, threatened by significant and profound changes happening around them, who viewed the religious component of their identity as essential, and who consequently considered any concession as "a threat to their very identity," in the words of the author. This conclusion also underlines a point made earlier, which applies to several of the following chapters, that the viewpoint of the authors who deployed the discourse of persecution was of individuals on the extreme end of the spectrum of beliefs. For these zealous believers, divine concerns were paramount and trumped all earthly matters that the majority of their fellow Christians who did compromise with the "other" enjoyed with too much abandon. Finally, Wendy Mayer presents important concluding reflections to the volume in Chapter 16 "Heirs of Roman persecution: Common threads in the discursive strategies across Late Antiquity," which draws insights from recent work by social scientists on religious violence and points the way forward in analyzing the late antique discourse of persecution.

Notes

- 1 I wish to thank Sam Cohen for generously taking the time to edit my tortuous English prose and suggesting important ways to improve this introduction. All remaining literary blemishes are, of course, my own. I also thank Wendy Mayer, Tina Shepardson, and Erika Hermanowicz, who read and commented on earlier drafts, and suggested numerous crucial improvements to the argument. None of them are responsible for the point of view expressed here.
- 2 *CTh.* 16.5.46 (SC 497, 298; tr. Pharr, 458).
- 3 See Lenski (2016b), for a detailed overview.

- 4 *Vict. Vit. Hist. pers.* 3.8–11. The argument presented here summarizes Fournier (2016–2017), esp. 171–3.
- 5 See, further, Fournier, Chapter 8, in this volume.
- 6 *Hist. pers.* 3.2 (Lancel, 174; tr. Moorhead, 64).
- 7 *Aug. civ. Dei* 18.52, dispelling the notion that the tenth persecution of Diocletian was the last one before the Antichrist's that was to come at the end of times. See, further, Van Nuffelen (2012), 159. It is an intriguing possibility that Augustine's argument relied on his own knowledge of contemporary Christian claims of persecution.
- 8 See, e.g., Rives (2012); Bremmer (2014), 21.
- 9 Snee (1985), 419.
- 10 McDonough (2006) is a good example. Following an otherwise excellent analysis of how the religious policy of Yazdgard II intersected with political factors that explain most measures against Christians depicted in martyrological texts, key concepts such as "coercion" and "persecution" are used interchangeably: "most non-Magians were not the targets of any form of coercion in these persecutions" (at 80). Cf. Baudy (2006); and Noethlichs (2006).
- 11 In this context, the coercive imposition of "orthodoxy" could even be understood as a form of charity. Augustine developed this idea at length in his anti-Donatist writings. The bishop of Hippo claimed that by committing suicide to avoid coercion, Donatists were persecuting themselves, and that what Catholics want more than anything is to bring them into the true Church of God, into orthodoxy, and to show them the error of their ways. Cf. Baslez (2007), 377.
- 12 Astutely noted by Sizgorich (2009), 102: "Within this evolving Christian discourse, for example, the Roman emperor – even a Christian emperor – was always already a persecutor." See also Flower (2013a), for the case of invectives against Constantius II; with Flower (2016) for convenient translations of key sources.
- 13 See Gaddis (2005), 10, citing Lincoln (1994), 74–89.
- 14 See further Fournier (forthcoming 2019).
- 15 *Hist. pers.* 3.17 (Lancel, 183; tr. Moorhead, 70).
- 16 *Passio Sancti Donati*. Cf. Frend (1952), 155–61; Shaw (2011), 187–93. See further Fournier (2017–2018) for the interpretation presented here. Contrast Gibbon (1946 [1776–1789]), 1.589, for whom Constantine was a persecutor: "The edict of Milan, the great charter of toleration, had confirmed to each individual of the Roman world the privilege of choosing and professing his own religion. But this inestimable privilege was soon violated: with the knowledge of truth, the emperor imbibed the maxims of persecution; and the sects which dissented from the Catholic church were afflicted and oppressed by the triumph of Christianity."
- 17 Cf. *Vict. Vit. Hist. pers.* 2.2: "tyrannus," 3.47: "violentia tyrannorum," and 63: "Mezentius." See further, Fournier, Chapter 8, in this volume.
- 18 *P. Don.* 3. For the importance of the Devil in Donatist literature, see Frend (1961), esp. 14; cf. Castelli (2004), 49: "almost a cliché." See Lenski (2016a, 2016b), for recent critical accounts.
- 19 *P. Don.* 4–6. Gaddis (2005), 54–5 and 79–88, already emphasized the rhetorical nature of such passages depicting soldiers penetrating the sacred precinct of churches, which serve to highlight the horror that the community who listened to this *Sermon* was intended to feel.
- 20 Despite Constantine's attempts at unity, "Donatists" could assemble 270 bishops at a council in 336. See Maier (1987), 253f.; Barnes (1981), 60. Cf. Frend (1959).
- 21 *Opt. App.* 10; Fournier (2017–2018).
- 22 Cf. Flower (2013a), 78–126.
- 23 See Arnold, Bjornlie, and Sessa, ed. (2016).
- 24 Harries (2011b), 568.
- 25 Hermanowicz (2004).
- 26 The case of Liberius of Rome, pressured to assent to the creed decided at Sirmium, in 357, is a good example. See further Flower (2013a), 105, 151.

- 27 See Sessa (2018), 198–226, for a recent overview of “religion in daily life.”
- 28 Cameron (1991), 5 (quote), 2 and 58; based on Foucault (1984). See further Cameron (1986).
- 29 Cameron (1991), 6.
- 30 Cameron (1991), 25 and 40; 16 and 20 for definitions of rhetoric.
- 31 Cf. Castelli (2004), esp. chap. 1.
- 32 Drake (2009), 60.
- 33 Drake (2000), esp. 431–7.
- 34 Cf. Penella (1993); Buenacasa Pérez (2000); Teitler (2014, 2017); Marcos (2009).
- 35 Bouffartigue (2003), esp. 11.
- 36 *P. Donatus Av.* 2: “Primo etenim, ut inueterato draconi mos est insitus, quasi non ipse iam dudum persecutione manifesta christiani nominis impugnator exstiterit, eos quos aperta persecutione superare non potuit callida fraude circumuenire molitus est ut eos facilius deceptio proderet quo deceptionis auctor latuisset.” Cf. *ibid.* 1: “Magis enim necessaria instructio illic est ubi professa hostilitas non est, quia hostilis societas ad decipiendum facilis et proxima est.”
- 37 Soc. *HE* 3.12.6 (SC 493: 298).
- 38 Following critical theorists, we can say that persecution is a social construct. Cf. Marcos (2015), 169, for the similar notion that “Sanctity is in many ways a social construct.”
- 39 Aug. *Ad donat. p. coll.* 17.21 (BA 32: 300): “Hos eis remansit omni ex parte superatis, unde adhuc nebulas faciant imperitis, hic se quasi ostendentes esse ecclesiam ueritatis, quia persecutionem patitur, non facit.”
- 40 Aug. *c. Gaud.* 1.21.25 (BA 32: 560): “non tibi uideatur excruciator cordis leuior esse quam corporis.”
- 41 Aug. *c. Gaud.* 1.36.46 (BA 32: 616): “Scriptura dixit: ‘tunc stabunt iusti in magna constantia aduersus eos, qui se angustiauerunt et qui abstulerunt labores eorum.’ Non dixit: ‘stabunt omnes qui mala passi sunt,’ sed: stabunt iusti.”
- 42 E.g. Aug. *c. Gaud.* 1.20.23 (BA 32: 556): “Nam hoc paulo superius dixerat: ‘beati qui persecutionem patiuntur propter iustitiam, quia ipsorum est regnum caelorum’”; cf. 1.22.25 (BA 32: 562): “Discite ergo, quid sit quod apostolus ait: ‘omnes qui uolunt in Christo pie uiuere persecutionem patientur’ [2 Tim. 3:12].”
- 43 Aug. *S. ad Caes. Eccl. Pleb.* 7 (BA 32: 440): “‘Beati,’ ait dominus, ‘qui persecutionem patiuntur.’ Adde: ‘propter iustitiam [Matt. 5:10],’ et separasti latrones, separasti maleficos, separasti adulteros, separasti impios, separasti sacrilegos, separasti haereticos. Tales persecutionem patiuntur, sed non propter iustitiam.” Cf. *c. Gaud.* 1.28.32 (BA 32: 580): “Nam et latrones et quilibet homines rei criminum capitalium, cum iustis legibus puniuntur, non dicenti sunt persecutionem pati nisi ab ipsis factis suis.”
- 44 Cf. Marcos Sánchez (2015), for the argument that Constantine’s severe punishments were mainly used as deterrent.
- 45 Soz. *HE* 2.32.5 (SC 306: 374) and 7.12.12 (SC 516: 118–120), cited from Errington (2006), 231.
- 46 Shaw (2003); Ronsse (2006); Castelli (2004); Grig (2004); and Barnes (2010). See further Moss (2012c) and Staat (2018). Additional references at Tite (2015), 27–8, n. 1–2. For a later period, see Van Strydonck, Reyniers, and Van Cleven, ed. (2018).
- 47 Moss (2012a, 2013).
- 48 See further Moss (2013b), for a critical approach to intertextuality.
- 49 Shaw (2015), citation at 97. See the continuous discussion in Jones (2017) and Shaw (2018). Cf. Wendt (2015) for another critical examination of the notion of “persecution,” to be distinguished from prosecutions of individuals.
- 50 Daguet-Gagey (2001). Cf. O’Loughlin (2009). See further Staat (2018).
- 51 De Ste. Croix (2006); Gaddis (2005), 111–8; Birley (2006); Dearn (2006); Humphries and Twomey (2009), 17–18; Moss (2012b); Buck (2012); Middleton (2013); Tite (2015).
- 52 Tite (2015), 38.
- 53 Linguistic turn: Clark (2004). Bourdieu (1991) has been especially influential. Rhetoric: e.g., Spira (1989); Cameron (1991); Lyman (2000); Ronsse (2006); Kahlos

- (2009); Harries (2011a); Van Nuffelen (2012); Lössl (2013); Fournier (2016b); Van Hoof (2017); Berzon (2017).
- 54 Flower (2013b) and Berzon (2017), with earlier references.
- 55 See Ployd, in this volume, for the citation. See further Shaw (2011), *passim*; Bremmer (2014), 8–12; Sessa (2018), 78–81, 106, 134, 143–4.
- 56 Van Nuffelen (2012).
- 57 Van Hoof (2017), 5.
- 58 E.g., Neusner and Frerichs, ed. (1985); Lieu (2004); Boyarin and Burrus (2005); Leemans and Mettepenningen, ed. (2005); Sandwell (2007); Iricinschi and Zellentin, ed. (2008); Sizgorich (2009); Rebillard (2012); Rebillard and Rüpke (2015).
- 59 Gaddis (2005).
- 60 Cf. Lössl (2013); Lyman (2000); Cameron (1991); and Spira (1989).
- 61 Washburn (2009) and Flower (2013a).
- 62 Blaudeau (2008); Fournier (2008, 2016a); Washburn (2013); Hillner (2015); Hillner, Ulrich, and Engberg, ed. (2016); Barry (2016).
- 63 Baslez, ed. (2014).
- 64 E.g., Geljon and Roukema, ed. (2014).
- 65 E.g., Cameron (2002, 2008); Sizgorich (2009); Kahlos (2009); Marcos (2009, 2013, 2015); Athanassiadi (2010); Drake (2011); Shaw (2011); Lössl (2013); Bremmer (2014); Juergensmeyer (2014); and Van Nuffelen (2018).
- 66 Mayer (2013, 2018a, forthcoming). I thank Wendy Mayer for sharing her forthcoming chapter with me ahead of publication.
- 67 In Chapter 16, this volume, Mayer also identifies a recent trend aiming to circumvent “conflict” by instead using the notion of “competition.” See, e.g., Engels and Van Nuffelen (2014).
- 68 Mayer (2018a). Of more direct relevance to the current volume, Mayer (forthcoming) also writes that “Greater consciousness needs to be exercised when moving between exploration of religious violence as a real phenomenon (a thing that actually happened) and religious violence as a rhetorical and/or ideological construct. The line between the two is still frequently blurred in scholarship on the topic. Exploration of the subtleties of the relationship between the two, on the other hand, is a space in which some of the most fruitful research is likely to be produced in the future.” It is my hope that the contributions assembled here will contribute to this important area of research.
- 69 Powell and Clarke (2013), 19–20.
- 70 Powell and Clarke (2013), 20.
- 71 Powell and Clarke (2013), 21.
- 72 Powell and Clarke (2013), 22.
- 73 Donatists: e.g., *Gesta coll. Carth.* 3.75, 225, and 258; Brown (2000), 214–5. *CTh.*: Escribano (2007). On medical terminology, see further Blaudeau (2005); Flower (2013b, 2019); Fournier (2016b); and Mayer (2018b). Berzon (2017), 130, remains vague: “expansive polemical language.”

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