

〈論文〉

Masochistic Witches? American Evangelical Perceptions of “Persecution” in the Age of Joe Biden¹

Satoru Kimura

Introduction

On October 27, 2019, the historian Tony Fels wrote, “The political slur ‘witch hunt’ is back.”² What made him state so was President Donald J. Trump’s furious reaction to the so-called “Mueller investigation” and the House Democrat’s impeachment inquiry, which could have put an end to Trump’s presidency. By using the phrase “witch hunt” on Twitter frequently during his presidency, Trump attempted to discredit his enemies who he thought were making unjust accusations against him. The following tweet on June 15, 2017, is just one among many tweets in which he employed the “witch hunt” rhetoric to attack the Mueller investigation: “You are witnessing the single greatest WITCH HUNT in American political history — led by some

1 The author would like to thank Professor Healan Gaston at Harvard Divinity School for her comments on an earlier version of this article.

2 Tony Fels, “The Return of the ‘Witch Hunt’ Analogy,” *Quillette*. October 27, 2019, Web.

URL=<https://quillette.com/2019/10/27/the-return-of-the-witch-hunt-analogy/> (accessed February 20, 2021)

very bad and conflicted people! #MAGA.”³ Trump’s personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani, used a similar “witch hunt” discourse on October 8, 2019. In his judgment, the impeachment inquiry was in fact “worse than a witch hunt,” because even the accused in the 1692 Salem witch trials had possessed “more rights” than Trump did.⁴

Though there is no doubt that Donald Trump has played a crucial role in the revival of the “witch hunt” discourse in contemporary politics in the United States, he is by no means the only person who has felt “hunted” or “persecuted” by progressives today.⁵ Whether using the word “witch hunt” explicitly or not, many American evangelical Christians have had a similar feeling of being persecuted or marginalized by the “left.”⁶ In spite of the

3 Quoted in Rebecca Savransky, “Trump: ‘You are witnessing the single greatest WITCH HUNT in American political history,’” *The Hill*. June 15, 2017, Web. URL=<https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/337901-trump-you-are-witnessing-the-single-greatest-witch-hunt-in-american?rl=1> (accessed February 20, 2021)

4 Josh Feldman, “Giuliani Goes off on ‘Stupid, Neanderthal’ Impeachment Inquiry: ‘I Went back to Read Two Books about the Salem Witch Trials...,’” *Mediaite*. October 8, 2019, Web. URL=<https://www.mediaite.com/tv/giuliani-goes-off-on-stupid-neanderthal-impeachment-inquiry-i-went-back-to-read-two-books-about-the-salem-witch-trials/> (accessed February 20, 2021)

5 Trump and present-day conservatives are not the first people in American history to employ the “witch hunt” rhetoric to rebuke their political opponents. For example, as Gretchen A. Adams argues, antebellum pro-slavery Southerners attacked Northern abolitionists by associating them with seventeenth-century witch hunters in Salem. In the eyes of these Southerners, abolitionism and the Salem witch trials had many things in common, such as intolerance, fanaticism, and bigotry. Gretchen A. Adams, *The Specter of Salem: Remembering the Witch Trials in Nineteenth Century America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 94-118.

6 For the history of modern conservative evangelicals and their confrontation with, or alienation from, American liberal culture, see for example: Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014); Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George M. Marsden (eds), *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019); Garth M. Rosell, *The Surprising Work of God:*

popular perception that evangelicals have been politically influential since the Reagan era, evangelicals have often described themselves as *aliens* in their own country. Historian Daniel Rodgers points out that while many evangelicals still believe that America is the “city on a hill” and that they are the God-chosen people, “profound pessimism runs just beneath this streak of pride” in recent years.⁷ In other words, American evangelicals are feeling threatened in the “pluralistic, humanistic, no-name, no-God, no-nothing nation” today.⁸ As the director of the National Christian Action Council puts it, “Christians are aliens in America”; “This world is not our home.”⁹

In this paper, I will explore the most recent “witch hunt” discourse among American evangelicals by analyzing two You Tube videos uploaded shortly after Joe Biden’s inauguration on January 20, 2021.¹⁰ These videos

Harold John Ockenga, Billy Graham, and the Rebirth of Evangelicalism (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008); Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2011); Markku Ruotsila, *Fighting Fundamentalism: Carl McIntire and the Politicization of American Fundamentalism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). However, not all “evangelicals” are politically conservative. For those who are known as “progressive evangelicals” or the “evangelical left” for their politically liberal positions, see David R. Swartz, *Moral Minority: The Evangelical Left in an Age of Conservatism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012); Brantley W. Gasaway, *Progressive Evangelicals and the Pursuit of Social Justice* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014).

7 Daniel T. Rodgers, *As a City on a Hill: The Story of America’s Most Famous Lay Sermon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 275.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 276.

9 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 276.

10 By analyzing You Tube videos in this paper, I also intend to contribute to the growing scholarship on American evangelicals and the “media.” For studies of American evangelicals’ usage of various types of media – such as periodicals, newsletters, books, radio, and television – in the modern era, see Tona J. Hangen, *Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, and Popular Culture in America* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Matthew Avery Sutton, *Aimee Semple McPherson and the Resurrection of Christian America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Mark Ward Sr.,

are: (1) a dialogue between Jack Hibbs (the senior pastor of Calvary Chapel in Chino, California) and Charlie Kirk (a Republican activist/ founder and president of Turning Point USA), which was hosted by Real Life with Jack Hibbs on January 24, 2021,¹¹ and (2) a sermon entitled “The Kingdom of Light Amidst the Kingdom of Darkness,” which was given by John F. MacArthur, Jr. (the pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, California) on January 31, 2021 (uploaded on You Tube on February 4, 2021).¹² Needless to say, not everything they say in these videos is entirely new – after all, evangelicals have expressed hostility toward Biden (and of course toward his party as well) for a very long time. However, these two videos offer an important glimpse into how American conservative Christians are feeling most recently – and how they will see the world surrounding them in the next four years. What exactly do the evangelicals mean when they say they are “persecuted” or “canceled” by liberals? How do they use the Bible in making sense of their marginalized status in modern-day America? In what ways is the modern evangelical experience of “persecution” similar with, and different from, the experience of the victims of real witch hunts, such as the 1692 Salem witch hunt?¹³

The Lord's Radio: Gospel Music Broadcasting and the Making of Evangelical Culture, 1920-1960 (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2017); Daniel Vaca, *Evangelicals Incorporated: Books and the Business of Religion in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

- 11 Real Life with Jack Hibbs, “Jack & Charlie: Unscripted” [Video]. January 24, 2021.
URL=https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R99E_U9SDo&t=150s (accessed February 20, 2021)
- 12 John MacArthur, “The Kingdom of Light Amidst the Kingdom of Darkness” [Video]. February 4, 2021, Grace to You.
URL=<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OEeiFIRrNXg&list=WL&index=22> (accessed February 20, 2021)
- 13 For studies of the Salem witch hunt itself, see for example, Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974); John Putnam Demos, *Entertaining Satan: Witchcraft and the Culture of Early New England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf,

My argument in this paper is twofold. On the one hand, modern evangelicals are feeling *anger* and *anxiety* about being accused by their enemies (the progressive media and culture in the United States), just like the accused “witches” in Salem in 1692 must have felt. All the three evangelical leaders are clearly frustrated with the arrival of Joe Biden, taking it as a sign of the beginning of a vicious era, in which Christian values and practices, including church-gatherings, Biblical norms of sexuality, and even the freedom of speech, would be suppressed (Section 1). Yet on the other hand, somewhat paradoxically, American evangelicals also *welcome* the persecution with a *joy*, claiming that it is a sign that they are the chosen people who will be rewarded by God in the future. By examining how and why Hibbs, Kirk, and MacArthur narrate their “persecution” in such a *joyful* and *hopeful* manner in these videos, I will conclude that they are *masochistic witches* in contrast to the 1692 Salem “witches” who must have had nothing to feel happy or hopeful about their situation (Section 2).¹⁴

1. Witches under Persecution: Anger and Anxiety

Two of the most easily discernible themes in these two videos are the evangelicals’ *anger* and *anxiety*. Feeling “persecuted” or “canceled” by the predominantly liberal American culture, these evangelical spokesmen – Jack Hibbs, Charlie Kirk, and John MacArthur – sigh, worry, and complain.

Ever since the outbreak of the COVID-19 in the spring of 2020,

2002); Benjamin C. Ray, *Satan and Salem: The Witch-Hunt Crisis of 1692* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015).

14 A note on sources and quotations: When I quote from Hibbs, Kirk, and MacArthur in this paper, I provide the approximate time in the videos, at which I get the quote – e.g., [ca. 08:20]. For MacArthur’s sermon, “The Kingdom of Light Amidst the Kingdom of Darkness,” a full transcript is available on his website. Grace to You, “The Kingdom of Light Amidst the Kingdom of Darkness,” January 31, 2021, Web.

URL=<https://www.gty.org/library/sermons-library/81-102/the-kingdom-of-light-amidst-the-kingdom-of-darkness> (accessed February 20, 2021.) However, as I find the transcript not completely accurate, I will get my quotes *directly* from the video of the sermon uploaded on You Tube on February 4, 2021.

American conservative evangelicals have criticized and resisted various kinds of governmental regulations on church gatherings, arguing that these are none other than violations of religious liberty, which are targeted at pious Christian worshippers. Now with Joe Biden as President, Jack Hibbs, a California-based evangelical pastor who founded Calvary Chapel Chino Hills, worries that the situation will only get worse. In his conversation with Charlie Kirk, a twenty-seven-year-old conservative activist who founded Turning Point USA, Hibbs angrily stresses that the government “will be visibly against us.” He says, “I hope I am wrong about this, but where we are right now in this political environment, the church is going to be the *target*, and the church is going to be the *tip of spear for attack*” (emphasis added) [ca. 09:10]. Although neither Hibbs nor Kirk uses the phrase “witch hunt” throughout the dialogue, it is clear that they identify themselves as *innocent victims* being unjustly targeted or hunted. Echoing with Hibbs, Kirk also emphasizes that the “current political power structure” is desperate to “get rid of the churches they do not like” [ca. 20:20]. While the government loves “obedient” churches – i.e. liberal churches that do not mind even closing their doors on Sunday, if that is what the government wants them to do – it hates and persecutes “disagreeable churches” that choose to follow the words of God instead of those of the government.

Later in the conversation, Hibbs and Kirk take a step further and compare the current regime of the United States with the former communist regimes in Romania, Poland and Russia that oppressed and censored churches so tyrannically. Although some churches, such as the Russian Orthodox Church, were tolerated under the communist regimes, they were still put under strict observations and regulations by the governments. Kirk says, Stalin’s government sent spies to the churches, who would report back to the government if they heard anything offensive to the government during the church services [ca. 21:45]. And that is “exactly” what is happening in the U.S. today, claims Kirk; in his view, the evangelical churches in the U.S. are under the analogous surveillance in the age of Joe Biden, a leader who prioritizes the “unity” at the cost of the “liberty” of citizens and churches. Kirk laments, “The left [in the contemporary U.S.] believes in

a Soviet definition of unity. You know what the definition is? The *absence of opposition!*” (emphasis added) [ca. 22:10]. His point is crystal clear: the American evangelical churches are being persecuted by the secular, progressive regime that aspires to eliminate every dissident force – just like the churches in the communist nations used to be.

In a sermon given just a week later, John MacArthur, one of the most well-known evangelical preachers in the United States, also lamented the plight of American evangelicals today. Aptly titled “The Kingdom of Light Amidst the Kingdom of Darkness,” the sermon presents a sharp dichotomy between the righteous churches (the “Kingdom of Light”) and the secular, immoral “Kingdom of Darkness” whose throne was recently taken by the Democratic President. The word “amidst” in the title is the key in the sermon – MacArthur’s point is that the evangelical churches are being surrounded and oppressed by the increasingly powerful Kingdom of Satan. MacArthur’s list of evils in America is so long, but he particularly focuses on problems related to *sexual immorality* – such as lust, pornography, AIDS, “sexual revolution,” “homosexual revolution,” and “lesbianism” [ca. 06:40].¹⁵ He says, “There is a kind of insanity. [...] I read yesterday that [...] there are hundreds of genders. That’s insanity!” [ca. 07:30]. And the arrival of Joe Biden, or the “new king [of evil],” will only promote – and worse, legalize – this “insanity.” In MacArthur’s judgment, “no previous ruler has been so consumed with LGBTQ transgender perversion [as Joe Biden is]” [ca. 17:40].

But what irritates MacArthur most is the fact that righteous Christians are being shut out or “canceled” by the progressive culture every time they speak up against it. In the world where morality and immorality are “upside-down,” MacArthur complains, those who follow the words of God and speak the truth are destined to be “silenced” or “terminated.”

“If you disagree with this [LGBTQ transgender perversion], you are a *domestic terrorist*. You are an *extremist*. If you disagree with this,

15 On how sex-related issues have divided American Christians in the modern era, see R. Marie Griffith, *Moral Combat: How Sex Divided American Christians and Fractured American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

you are a *danger*; you are breaking the law. You are homophobic, transphobic. You need to be *silenced*. You need to be *terminated*. You need to be *marginalized*. [...] Laws are being made to *criminalize* the righteousness. Laws are being made to *silence, terminate* truth-speakers. Half of the states in America have such laws” (emphasis added) [ca. 18:00].

MacArthur’s fury over the ways in which progressives treat evangelicals is nicely demonstrated in this passage. In his view, a nationwide hunt or persecution over the righteous is going on; Christians faithful to the biblical norms of sexuality have to stay silent, or they will be labelled “extremist[s]” or “terrorist[s]” that must be “silenced” by the mainstream society. Taking an example of an Air Force chaplain who was discharged in November 2020 because of his past sermon against “sexual immorality,” MacArthur laments that righteous Christians are no longer guaranteed even their freedom of speech. “The king and the kingdom of lies [i.e. the progressive political regime and culture] will not tolerate the truth. To speak the truth is the greatest threat” [ca. 19:20]. Echoing Hibbs and Kirk, MacArthur argues that the current American situation is so analogous with that of Soviet where the Christian churches suffered political oppression.

Furthermore, MacArthur also directs his anger at social media, especially Twitter, for assisting the vicious suppression of Christian values such as morality, prayer, the Bible, and God. Alluding to Donald Trump’s recent ban from Twitter on a charge that he agitated the Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021, MacArthur complains that “people are getting *canceled*, [...] their Twitter accounts are being *taken down*. And big tech is in cahoots with this paganism; and for the first time in human history they can *shut down* anybody they want” (emphasis added) [ca. 27:40].

Thus, it is evident that conservative evangelicals are *anxious* and *angry* over the political climate in the nation that imposes increasingly progressive cultural norms on its citizens and hence undermines traditional Christian values and life-styles. In their view, Joe Biden’s arrival will only make the situation worse for the faithful; they are to be canceled, persecuted, and

marginalized more severely during his presidency than ever before.

2. Witches under Persecution: Joy and Hope

However, *anger* and *anxiety* are not the only things these evangelicals are feeling in the midst of the “persecution.” Paradoxical as it may seem, they also emphasize a feeling of *joy* about being hunted by the liberal culture. And it is here, I would argue, that the so-called “witch hunt” phenomenon in the modern United States differs most markedly from real witch hunts in history, including the 1692 Salem case. Modern witches are, in other words, *masochistic*.

While being mad about the current political situation, Charlie Kirk argues that Christians should see it as a “joyful” situation: “This is the time to be *more joyful than ever before*. This is the moment we’re built for. [...] This is the moment of persecution, that *we are promised, trained for*, that will *test our faith*” (emphasis added) [ca. 03:20]. Drawing an analogy between evangelicals who are marginalized today and early Christians who were also persecuted, Kirk argues that the persecution is an essential and meaningful experience for believers. He finds the Letter of James in the New Testament particularly relevant to the churches today. James 1:2-4 goes as follows.

“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but *joy*, because you know that the testing of your faith produces *endurance*; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be *mature and complete*, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2-4, emphasis added)¹⁶

Summarizing the passage, Kirk says, “you should be thankful for your persecution,” because your faith will be “stronger” and “more fulfilled” after the persecution [ca. 03:50]. In other words, in Kirk’s view, the experience of

16 *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

persecution is so meaningful and healthy for the growth of Christian piety that it should be welcomed by all faithful evangelicals. Thus, contrary to the accused witches in seventeenth-century Salem who must have found their situation nothing but horrifying and hopeless, modern conservative evangelicals find *joy* in their persecution. Elsewhere in the dialogue, Kirk also says that the current situation will be either “the greatest stumbling block” or “the greatest blessing” for the American church [ca. 06:00]. A sense of *hope*, rather than despair, seems to be the dominant theme here; though the time for endurance may continue for a while, the faithful who survive it will be surely rewarded in the long run.

A similar sense of *joy* and *hope* appears in John MacArthur’s sermon, “The Kingdom of Light Amidst the Kingdom of Darkness,” too. Although the “kingdom of darkness,” or the anti-Christian American mainstream culture led by Joe Biden, is so powerful, MacArthur says, Christians should find solace or hope in the *true* king (God) and His kingdom. Drawing on a series of Old Testament passages that emphasize the sovereignty or kingship of God, such as Psalm 10:16, Psalm 45:6, Jeremiah 10:10, and Isaiah 33:22, MacArthur argues that God is the true king of all the earth, and that He will certainly come to save the righteous and to destroy the unrighteous in the future [ca. 30:50]. In other words, the current persecution is *temporary* in nature; Christians ought to stay hopeful even in the midst of the contempt by blasphemous unbelievers, because God will eventually solve all the problems for those who remain faithful to Him.

Like Charlie Kirk, MacArthur makes an analogy between persecuted Christians today and persecuted Christians in the early church. He says, Christians are “aliens” and “strangers” in the current United States; but as 1 Peter in the New Testament teaches, Christians should always keep in mind that “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9). MacArthur continues,

“Keep your behavior excellent, even when they *slander* you, even

when they *persecute* you. So I would suggest that this is what we do. And *blessed are you when you are persecuted*, for that's evidence you are in the kingdom." (emphasis added) [ca. 57:10]¹⁷

MacArthur's message for his audience is clear; you – righteous Christians – may suffer unjust persecutions in current American culture and political structures; but you shall endure it and behave righteously as God's chosen people, because after all, a persecution is a sign that God is blessing you and will reward you even more in the future. In MacArthur's sermon, the persecution is thus transformed from something deplorable to something *joyful*.

Concluding Thoughts

In this paper, by analyzing two videos uploaded within a few weeks after Joe Biden's inauguration, I explored contemporary American evangelicals' perceptions of the political and cultural environments surrounding them. On the one hand, Jack Hibbs, Charlie Kirk, and John MacArthur describe the situation in a negative manner. Feeling persecuted or canceled in their own country, they express *anger* and *anxiety* about the increasingly progressive political culture in the United States (Section 1). Nonetheless, all of the three evangelicals describe the situation in a surprisingly positive manner as well. As Kirk puts it, the persecution is a blessing from God, through which the faith of Christians will be in fact "stronger" and "more fulfilled." Likewise, MacArthur exhorts believers to find solace in the current situation, because the persecution they are facing today is none other than a sign that they are

17 The biblical passages alluded to here are: Matthew 5:10 ("Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"); 1 Peter 2:19-21 ("it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.")

chosen by God and will be further rewarded in the future. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, the sense of *joy* and *hope* is so pervasive in the two videos. Contrary to the Salem “witches” in 1692 who must have had nothing to feel happy about, there is something *masochistic* about the ways in which modern-day American evangelicals perceive the accusation or persecution against them (Section 2).

What I pointed out in this paper – the evangelicals’ emphasis on joy and hope in particular – may explain part of the reason why American politics has been more and more polarized in recent years. In the case of the 1692 Salem witch hunt, notwithstanding its complete brutality and horribleness, there was something surprisingly flexible about it, too. According to the historian Emerson Baker, many of the accused “witches” in Salem chose to confess (though they were often almost forced to do so) that they were witches, and in doing so, they could avoid an execution and get released from the jail. By Baker’s calculation, while almost all of the executed were people who had refused to make the confession, fifty-five of the accused (more than a third of the accused) made the confession and consequently escaped being executed.¹⁸ This shows, in my view, a surprisingly flexible and even tolerant dimension of the seventeenth-century witch trials. Despite the fact that witches were by definition those who had had some sort of intercourse (whether sexual, baptismal, or else) with Satan, which seems to be something irrevocable in the eyes of modern-day people, they still had a chance to get back to the normal society as long as they were willing to admit what they probably did not believe from the bottom of their heart. By contrast, as I discussed in this paper, the “accused” or “persecuted” in the so-called “witch hunt” in the modern U.S. tend to feel joy and hope, which means that they are too comfortable with their marginalized status to seek reconciliation with the mainstream society, let alone forgiveness from it. And this *masochistic* mindset on the side of the accused seems to be one of the reasons why it is getting harder and harder to heal divisions in American

18 Emerson W. Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft: The Salem Witch Trials and the American Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 155.

society today.