

Authoritarianism and Religion: Trump and White American Evangelicals in Cultural Perspective

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Abstract: *81% of white American Evangelicals voted for Trump, despite the fact that he embodied moral values they deem repugnant, a twice-divorced, foul-mouthed adulterer, compulsive liar, and unabashed materialist. White Evangelicals offer two reasons for their support: Trump’s alleged conversion to born-again Christianity and status as a “baby Christian”; and his “chosen-ness” as a messianic figure, akin to King David, supposedly anointed by God despite his immoral behavior. Neither of these answers is satisfying. This paper addresses the contradiction between “family values” voters and Trump by drawing on existing literature concerning the relationship of authoritarianism to religion, arguing that white American Evangelicals support Trump because they resonate with his authoritarian values. Over a period of some 70 years since the original publication of Adorno et al.’s *The Authoritarian Personality (TAP)*, social scientific research has identified key characteristics of authoritarianism. TAP was refined in the 1980s-1990s by Robert Altemeyer who developed a survey instrument on *Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA)* based on the key factors of conventionalism, authoritarian aggression, and authoritarian submission. An examination of Trump’s speeches and tweets confirms his use of authoritarian discourse and his endorsement of authoritarian values, most specifically his narcissistic performance as an alleged “strongman” who “alone” can fix democracy. Although there is no inherent relationship between authoritarianism and religion, researchers have identified links between authoritarian values and the practice of “conventional, unquestioned and unreflected religion” commonly found among Evangelicals. However, the single best predictor of authoritarian values according to social scientific research is a specific type of child-rearing which favors respect for elders over independence, good manners over curiosity, being well-behaved over being considerate, and obedience over self-reliance—a model of parenting widely*

embraced by white American Evangelicals. Hence, Trump embodies a hierarchical view of the world which typifies the authoritarian values of white American Evangelical family life.

Keywords: *Trump; Evangelicals; populism; authoritarianism; child-rearing*

The GCAS Review Journal is a Publication of GCAS College Dublin, Ltd.

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Introduction

On June 1, 2020, President Donald J. Trump ordered the removal of hundreds of peaceful demonstrators, protesting the murder of George Floyd and police brutality, from Lafayette Square opposite the White House. Using tear gas, rubber bullets, and flash bangs, U.S. Park police and military police pushed back Black Lives Matter marchers and cleared the way for Trump and his coterie of White House and Cabinet officers to stage a photo opportunity in front of historic St. John's Church, founded in 1815 as an Episcopal house of worship.¹ There the President proceeded awkwardly to hold up a copy of the Bible, initially upside down, provided by his daughter Ivanka Trump. When asked by a reporter whether the text was his own Bible, he replied that it was "a Bible." After photos were taken, he turned abruptly and marched back the way he came to the White House. Perhaps more shocking than clearing Lafayette Square of peaceful protestors, who were later labeled "terrorists" by Trump's attorney John Dowd in a letter retweeted by Trump himself,² was his failure to make any statement about the incident which had caused civil unrest and the outpouring of indignation over the treatment of African-Americans in hundreds of gatherings across the country. He neglected even to read any Biblical passage or offer a religiously inspired message of reconciliation. Appalled, Mariann Edgar Budde, Episcopal Bishop of the Washington, DC diocese, later stated in a *New York Times* editorial that "Mr. Trump used sacred symbols to cloak himself in the mantle of spiritual authority, while espousing positions antithetical to the Bible that he held in his hands."³

Although faced with a crisis involving racial justice, the ostensible motive for Trump's action had little to do with the protests themselves, but rather his slipping support among white American Evangelicals.⁴

¹ See "Welcome to St. John's Church," St. John's Church-Lafayette Square-Washington, DC. (2020) (<https://stjohns-dc.org/welcome-to-saint-johns-church/history/>).

² See Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "I thought this letter from respected retired Marine and Super Star lawyer, John Dowd, would be of interest to the American People. Read it!" *Twitter*. June 4, 2020. 6:44 p.m. (<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1268675068814659584>).

³ See Mariann Edgar Budde, "Bishop Budde: Trump's Visit to St. John's Church Outraged Me." *The New York Times*, June 4, 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/04/opinion/trump-st-johns-church-protests.html>).

⁴ Whereas most mainline Protestants believe that their relationship with God is mediated by ritual, e.g., infant baptism, Evangelicals teach that to be "saved" an individual must be "born again," a personal experience of God in which the believer accepts Jesus as his or her "personal savior." Evangelicals include, *inter alia*, Pentacostals who believe that "gifts of the spirit," e.g., speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues, are signs of God's election, and Fundamentalists, who believe that such gifts were limited to early Christian times and are no longer valid.

A PRRI poll taken in late April had shown that his backing among this key constituency of his base had declined by 11%, dropping to a 66% approval rating.⁵ The PRRI poll might have reflected the ongoing decline in support among white Evangelicals for Trump, since a Pew poll in March 2019 had found that only 69% approved of the President.⁶ David Brody, the leading political commentator on the Christian Broadcasting Network, an Evangelical media outlet, later warned, “Here’s the problem for Trump: He needs to be at 81 percent or north to win reelection. Any slippage and he doesn’t get a second term”⁷

Trump’s action at St. John’s Church followed his announcement a little over a week earlier that, if governors did not reopen houses of worship, closed due to the coronavirus, he would order their reopening (although he did not have the power to do so). “We want our churches and our places of faith and worship; we want them to open. . . We want our churches open. We want our places of faith, synagogues — we want them open. And that’s going to start happening.”⁸ The “photo op,” like his call to reopen houses of worship amidst a pandemic, was simply a ploy to advance his chances for re-election. His action produced the desired result among his most avid white Evangelical supporters. Johnnie Moore, President of the Congress of Christian Leaders, tweeted, “I will never forget seeing @POTUS @realDonaldTrump slowly & in-total-command walk from the @WhiteHouse across Lafayette Square to St. John's Church defying those

This article references, *inter alia*, polls taken by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), the Pew Research Center, and *Factank: News in the Numbers*, a publication of the Pew Research Center. In terms of the reliability of their polling, the Media Bias/Fact Check organization, the widely respected independent online media outlet, has rated PRRI and the Pew Research Center, as each “least biased” and “very high” in factual reporting (<https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/public-religion-research-institute-prri/>; <https://mediabiasfactcheck.com/pew-research/>).

⁵ See “President Trump’s Favorability Ratings Recede from March’s Peak.” Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI). April 30, 2020 (<https://www.prri.org/research/president-trumps-favorability-ratings-recede-from-marchs-peak/>).

⁶ See Philip Schwadel and Gregory A. Smith, “Evangelical Approval of Trump Remains High, but Other Religious Groups Are Less Supportive,” *Factank: News in the Numbers*, March 18, 2019 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/03/18/evangelical-approval-of-trump-remains-high-but-other-religious-groups-are-less-supportive/>).

⁷ See Gabby Orr, “Trump Allies See a Mounting Threat: Biden’s Rising Evangelical Support,” *Politico*. June 21, 2020 (<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/06/21/trump-allies-see-threat-biden-evangelical-support-330780>).

⁸ See Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump at Rolling to Remember Ceremony: Honoring Our Nation’s Veterans and POW/MIA.” News release, May 22, 2020 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-rolling-remember-ceremony-honoring-nations-veterans-pow-mia/>).

who aim to derail our national healing by spreading fear, hate & anarchy.”⁹ Ralph Reed, Chairman of the Faith and Freedom Coalition and author of *For God and Country: The Christian Case for Trump*, praised the President, exclaiming “Trump’s visit to St. John’s made clear that while addressing real grievances about discrimination and enacting sound public policy such as criminal justice reform are needed, the real answer to what ails America is the repentance, forgiveness, and redemption that can be found in faith in Christ.”¹⁰

Remarkably, 81% of white American Evangelicals voted for Donald Trump in 2016,¹¹ despite the fact that he embodied moral values they deem repugnant, a former casino operator, twice-divorced adulterer, compulsive liar, habitual womanizer, alleged rapist, and foul-mouthed, unabashed materialist. This article addresses this seemingly inexplicable conundrum by drawing on existing literature concerning the relationship of authoritarianism and religion, arguing that white American Evangelicals support Donald Trump because they resonate with his authoritarian values. Preachers and conservative Christian commentators have offered various reasons for Trump’s support among white American Evangelicals, including Trump’s alleged conversion to born-again Christianity and status as a “baby Christian” or his chosen-ness as a messianic figure like King David, supposedly anointed by God despite his immoral behavior of rape and murder. The article concludes that white American Evangelical support for Trump does not rest upon his alleged religious belief nor his role as a “Chosen One” of God but rather on his authoritarian political beliefs and style which echo the hierarchical worldview of white American Evangelical families.

Research has identified key characteristics of authoritarianism as well as general and specific cultural markers which cause its rise. Over a period of some 70 years since the original publication of Adorno et al.’s *The Authoritarian Personality*, social scientific research has developed a profile of authoritarianism.¹² Adorno et

⁹ See Johnnie Moore (@JohnnieM), "I will never forget seeing @POTUS @realDonaldTrump slowly & in-total-command walk from @WhiteHouse across Lafayette Square to St. John's Church," *Twitter*. June 1, 2020 (<https://twitter.com/JohnnieM/status/1267598242730192896>).

¹⁰ See Ralph Reed (@ralphreedjr), "Statement by Ralph Reed on President Trump's visit to St. John's Church," *Facebook*. June 3, 2020 (<https://www.facebook.com/ralphreedjr/>).

¹¹ See Jessica Martínez and Gregory A. Smith, "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis," *Factank: News in the Numbers*, November 9, 2016. (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/11/09/how-the-faithful-voted-a-preliminary-2016-analysis/>).

¹² See Theodor W. Adorno, Eugene Frenkel-Brunswick, Daniel. J. Levinson, and R. Nevitt Sanford, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper, 1950).

al.'s original work was refined by Robert Altemeyer in the 1980s and 1990s, who developed a survey instrument on Right-Wing Authoritarianism (RWA) based on the key factors of conventionalism, authoritarian aggression, and authoritarian submission.¹³ An examination of Trump's speeches and tweets confirms his use of authoritarian discourse and his endorsement of authoritarian values,¹⁴ most specifically his narcissistic performance as an alleged "strongman" who alone can fix the woes of democracy. Although there is no inherent relationship between authoritarianism and religion itself, researchers have identified links between authoritarian values and the practice of "conventional, unquestioned and unreflected religion,"¹⁵ commonly found among Evangelicals, including Pentacostals and Fundamentalists, who embrace the doctrines of Biblical inerrancy or Biblical literalism. Such types of religion are strongly associated with authoritarianism and ethnocentric prejudice.¹⁶ Authoritarianism increases with the advent of economic inequality, resonating with the Evangelical "Prosperity Gospel" of Trump's "spiritual advisor," megachurch pastor Paula White. Moreover, the single best predictor of authoritarian values is a style of child-rearing which favors respect for elders over independence, good manners over curiosity, being well-behaved over being considerate, and obedience over self-reliance—a model of parenting widely embraced by white American Evangelicals.

Trump's White Evangelical Constituency

As of the last Presidential election cycle, 41% of Americans are Evangelical Christians, a figure that has remained virtually unchanged since the early 1990s, when some 42% of Americans identified themselves as such.¹⁷ Evangelicals therefore represent the largest group of Christians in America, outstripping Catholics

¹³ See Bob Altemeyer, *The Authoritarian Spector* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1996), and Bob Altemeyer, *Right-wing Authoritarianism* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1981).

¹⁴ See James McBride, "The Wall, Semantic Desubstantiation, and Authoritarian Discourse: Why Trumpism Confounds Its Critics" (November 2019). Unpublished manuscript presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion, San Diego, CA.

¹⁵ See Gary K. Leak and Brandy A. Randall, "Clarification of the Link between Right-wing Authoritarianism and Religiousness: The Role of Religious Maturity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*.34, 2 (1995): 245-52, 251.

¹⁶ See Brian Laythe, Deborah Finkel, and Lee A. Kirkpatrick, "Predicting Prejudice from Religious Fundamentalism and Right-wing Authoritarianism: A Multiple-regression Approach," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*40, 1 (2001): 1-10.

¹⁷ See Frank Newport, "5 Things to Know about Evangelicals in America," *Gallup*, May 31, 2018 (<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/235208/things-know-evangelicals-america.aspx>).

who number between 21% and 25%.¹⁸ Of course, not all Evangelicals are white. 61% of non-Hispanic African-Americans are Evangelicals as are 44% of Hispanics.¹⁹ Accordingly, 76% of Evangelicals are non-Hispanic whites.²⁰ Although before the rise of the Christian New Right and the Moral Majority in the 1970s, Evangelicals, especially Fundamentalists, considered themselves “in” but not “of” the world and therefore did not vote,²¹ Evangelicals today represent 36% of registered voters, the largest block in the American body politic.²²

In addition to securing 81% of the white Evangelical vote in 2016, Donald Trump remained surprisingly popular among this constituency throughout his Presidency, despite incremental declines in support. In March 2018, 78% of white Evangelicals approved of Trump’s performance in office.²³ In the fall of 2019, at the outset of the impeachment proceedings, 99% of white American Evangelicals opposed impeachment,²⁴ although that support seemed to slip during the height of the impeachment when, in February, 2020, his favorability rating among white Evangelicals fell to 64%.²⁵

The Evangelical community was convulsed during the impeachment proceedings by an editorial in *Christianity Today*, a prominent and well-respected Evangelical magazine, founded in 1956 by the American Evangelist Billy Graham. Its outgoing editor Frank Galli had an influential platform to express his dismay at

¹⁸ See Frank Newport, "An Update on Catholics in the U.S." *Gallup*. August 21, 2018 (<https://news.gallup.com/opinion/polling-matters/241235/update-catholics.aspx>).

¹⁹ See Newport, “5 Things to Know about Evangelicals in America.”

²⁰ See "Demographic Profiles of Religious Groups," *Pew Research Center: Religion & Public Life*, May 12, 2015 (<https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/chapter-3-demographic-profiles-of-religious-groups/>).

²¹ See James McBride and Paul Schwartz, “The Moral Majority in the U.S.A. as a New Religious Movement” in *Of Gods and Men: New Religious Movements in the West*, ed. Eileen Barker (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985), pp. 127-145.

²² See David Masci and Gregory A. Smith, "Exit Polls and the Evangelical Vote: A Closer Look," *Factank: News in the Numbers*, March 14, 2016 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/14/exit-polls-and-the-evangelical-vote-a-closer-look/>).

²³ See Alec Tyson, "Disagreements about Trump Widely Seen as Reflecting Divides over 'Other Values and Goals.'" *Factank: News in the Numbers*, March 15, 2018

(<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/15/disagreements-about-trump-widely-seen-as-reflecting-divides-over-other-values-and-goals/>).

²⁴ See "Fractured Nation: Widening Partisan Polarization and Key Issues in 2020 Presidential Elections," *Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI)*, October 20, 2019

(<https://www.prii.org/research/fractured-nation-widening-partisan-polarization-and-key-issues-in-2020-presidential-elections/>).

²⁵ See "Despite Chaos and Controversy, Trump Favorability Stable throughout 2019," *Public Religious Research Institute (PRRI)*, February 26, 2020

(<https://www.prii.org/research/despite-chaos-and-controversy-trump-favorability-stable-throughout-2019/>).

and censure of the character and actions of Donald Trump. Reacting to Trump's *quid pro quo* with Ukraine for unsubstantiated political accusations against Joe Biden and his son Hunter in return for much-needed military assistance against Russian encroachment on Ukrainian sovereign territory, Galli concluded:

The reason many are not shocked about this is that this president has dumbed down the idea of morality in his administration. He has hired and fired a number of people who are now convicted criminals. He himself has admitted to immoral actions in business and his relationship with women, about which he remains proud. His Twitter feed alone—with its habitual string of mischaracterizations, lies, and slanders—is a near perfect example of a human being who is morally lost and confused.²⁶

Of course, it is not as if white Evangelicals had been ignorant of Trump's obnoxious and obscene behavior.

In a survey by the Billy Graham Center Institute taken in 2018 polling the most important reason for their vote in the 2016 Presidential election, only 6% of Evangelicals voted for Trump because of his personal character. (19% selected the candidate's ability to improve the economy; 13%, his position on immigration; 12%, maintaining national security; 10%, protecting religious liberty; 10%, appointing Supreme Court nominees; 7%, opposing abortion rights; and 3%, helping others).²⁷ For a constituency that allegedly promotes "family values," the reaction of Evangelicals to Donald Trump seems inexplicable. Yet, a 2013 study showed that followers of Christian Fundamentalism had reactions to certain taboo words which help to explain their lack of opposition to Trump.²⁸ The researchers asked subjects, who were identified according to

²⁶ See Mark Galli, "Trump Should Be Removed from Office," *Christianity Today*, December 19, 2019 (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/december-web-only/trump-should-be-removed-from-office.html>).

²⁷ See Jeremy Weber, "Billy Graham Center Explains Survey on Evangelical Trump Voters," *Christianity Today*, October 18, 2018 (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/october/evangelicals-trump-2016-election-billy-graham-center-survey.html>).

²⁸ See Larry W. Bates, Richard A. Hudiberg, Elizabeth P. Lauderdale, and Joseph R. Castillo, "Reactions of Religious Fundamentalists to Taboo Images and Words," *Psychological Reports* 113 (2013): 73-96.

the Religious Fundamentalism (RF) Scale-Revised, developed by Altemeyer and Hunsberger,²⁹ to rank words according to their level of discomfort. Unsurprisingly, abortion, orgy, atheist, and homosexual, topped the list in descending order. Breast, rap, lottery, liberal, whiskey, and sex sat at the bottom, in ascending order. Divorce appeared in the very center, below, nudist, but above marijuana. Although Trump is twice-divorced, white Evangelicals are far less disturbed by his marital status than abortion, which Trump condemned in the 2016 Presidential election as a latter-day convert to the “pro-life” movement. Indeed, according to a Pew poll, 28% of all divorced or separated Americans are white Evangelicals.³⁰

Not only did the overwhelming majority of white Evangelicals accept his divorces, Trump was allegedly converted to Evangelical Christianity by Paula White, the former pastor of the Apopka, Florida Evangelical megachurch, the New Destiny Christian Center (now renamed the City of Destiny). Trump supposedly called White after seeing her televangelist show in 2002 and invited her to Atlantic City. James Dobson credits White with converting Trump to Evangelical Christianity,³¹ and it was White who anointed Trump at Trump Tower in 2015 in the presence of other white televangelists.³² Trump thanked White and a host of other white Evangelical leaders in a special dinner at the White House on August 27, 2018, claiming that “[u]nlike some we are protecting your religious liberty,” although he could not curb his self-congratulatory comments.

The support you’ve given me has been incredible. But I really don’t feel guilty because I have given you a lot back, just about everything I promised. (Applause.) And as one of our great

²⁹ See Bob Altemeyer and Bruce E. Hunsberger, "A Revised Religious Fundamentalism Scale: The Short and Sweet of It," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 14 (2004): 77-89.

³⁰ See "Divorced or Separated Adults," *Pew Research Center Religion & Public Life*, 2020 (<https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/marital-status/divorcedseparated/>).

³¹ See "Dr. James Dobson on Donald Trump's Christian Faith," *Dr. James Dobson's Family Talk*, 2020 (<https://drjamesdobson.org/news/dr-james-dobson-on-trumps-christian-faith>).

³² See Kate Shellnut, "The Story behind Trump's Controversial Prayer Partner," *Christianity Today*, January 19, 2017 (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2017/january-web-only/paula-white-donald-trump-prayer-partner-inauguration.html>).

pastors just said, "Actually, you've given us much more, sir, than you promised." And I think that's true, in many respects.³³

White herself was divorced at age 18 before her conversion. She joined the White House staff in October 2019 as Trump's personal pastor and an advisor to the Trump Administration's Faith and Opportunity Initiative, which responds to Evangelical concerns about supposed attacks on religious liberty in the U.S. and abroad.³⁴ At the White House dinner, Paula White presented Donald and Melania Trump with a Bible, personally inscribed by hundreds of Evangelicals, including those present, adding "[w]e appreciate the price that you have paid to walk in the high calling. History will record the greatness that you have brought for generations."³⁵

Trump may find White sympatico for another reason: White is a purveyor of the "Prosperity Gospel." The Prosperity Gospel teaches that God rewards his own both spiritually and materially, *if* a church member tithes to Evangelical preachers, the so-called "first fruits" principle. "The first fruits principle gives you the power to get the wealth . . . you will see God's results and promises in your life."³⁶ It should be no surprise that Evangelicals who embrace the Prosperity Gospel have little problem with the gilded greed of the President.³⁷

The honeymoon between Trump and white Evangelicals was disrupted, however, by the *Christianity Today* editorial. Trump retaliated with a tweet: "A far left magazine, or very 'progressive,' as some would call it, which has been doing poorly and hasn't been involved with the Billy Graham family for many years"³⁸

³³ See Donald J. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at Dinner with Evangelical Leaders," News release. August 27, 2018 (<https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-dinner-evangelical-leaders/>).

³⁴ See Jeremy W. Peters and Maggie Haberman, "Paula White, Trump's Personal Pastor, Joins the White House," *The New York Times*, October 31, 2019 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/us/politics/paula-white-trump.html>).

³⁵ See Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at Dinner with Evangelical Leaders."

³⁶ See Paula White-Cain, "Putting First Fruits into Action-the Right Kind of Sacrifice Part 3." *Paula White Ministries* (blog). Entry posted January 16, 2020 (<https://blog.paulawhite.org/2020/01/puttingfirstfruitsintoaction3.html>).

³⁷ See Bob Smietana, "Prosperity Gospel Taught to 4 in 10 Evangelical Churchgoers," *Christianity Today*, July 31, 2018 (<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/july/prosperity-gospel-survey-churchgoers-prosper-tithe-blessing.html>).

³⁸ See Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump), "A far left magazine, or very 'progressive,' as some would call it, which has been doing poorly and hasn't been involved with the Billy Graham family for many years," *Twitter*. December 20, 2019. 7:12 a.m. (<https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1207997316424187905>).

Many white Evangelical pastors ran to his aid.³⁹ Issued within days of the editorial, 200 Evangelical leaders signed a letter, claiming that Galli "offensively questioned the spiritual integrity and Christian witness of tens-of-millions of believers who take seriously their civic and moral obligations . . . It not only targeted our president; it also targeted those of us who support him . . ." ⁴⁰ The separation between most white Evangelicals and Donald Trump collapsed and became one shared identity. As one of Trump's greatest defenders Ralph Reed stated, "There has never been anyone who has defended us and who has fought for us, who we have loved more than Donald J. Trump. No one!"⁴¹

Trump: "Baby Christian" or "Chosen One"?

These expressions of mutual affection do not explain why white Evangelical Christians are so enamored with a man who would otherwise earn their condemnation as a morally reprehensible figure. White Evangelicals themselves have struggled with articulating this somewhat mysterious bond. Some have argued that Donald Trump, allegedly converted to Evangelical Christianity by his personal pastor Paula White, is a so-called "baby Christian," who, although "born-again" in the "blood of the Lamb," does not yet fully understand his own transformation. Others have found his status as a "born-again" Christian irrelevant, grasping instead a depiction of Trump as a "Chosen One" of God, sent to defend Evangelical Christianity from destruction by "Satanic forces" identified with political liberalism and its values.

Dr. James Dobson, the founder of Focus on the Family and a longtime Fundamentalist leader in the Evangelical community, commented in a 2016 interview with Evangelical journalist Michael Anthony that Trump had reportedly been "born-again." "If true," remarked Anthony, "this could be a game-changer in

³⁹ See Elizabeth Dias and Jeremy W. Peters, "Evangelical Leaders Close Ranks with Trump after Scathing Editorial," *The New York Times*, June 4, 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/20/us/politics/christianity-today-trump-evangelicals.html>).

⁴⁰ See Jacob Knutson, "Nearly 200 Evangelical Leaders Rebuke Christianity Today for Anti-Trump Editorial," *Axios*, December 23, 2019 (<https://www.axios.com/trump-impeachment-evangelical-leaders-christianity-today-3d2301e8-8fbc-4d0a-8b65-08df0138b5a0.html>).

⁴¹ See Peter Wehner, "The Deepening Crisis in Evangelical Christianity Support for Trump Comes at a High Cost for Christian Witness," *The Atlantic*, July 5, 2019 (<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/07/evangelical-christians-face-deepening-crisis/593353/>).

how you pray for Mr. Trump and the United States.”⁴² Anthony compared Trump’s alleged acceptance of Jesus as his “personal Savior” to his own conversion, recalling that “I remember when I accepted Christ, it took me two years to begin to understand what God did in me. Two *years*”⁴³ [emphasis in the original]. Anthony claimed that Trump’s conversion is an answer to millions of Evangelicals who prayed for Trump’s transformation, and, now that it had supposedly happened, they should not doubt the power of God. Of course, the story of Trump’s conversion was a form of hearsay: Paula White told James Dobson who told Michael Anthony who spread the word. Dobson himself repeated the story in somewhat dubious terms, claiming that Trump “appears to be tender to things of the Spirit. I also hear that Paula White has known Trump for years and that she personally led him to Christ. Do I know that for sure? No. Do I know the details of that alleged conversion? I can’t say that I do . . . If anything, this man is a baby Christian who doesn’t have a clue about how believers think, talk and act.”⁴⁴ Trump’s status as a “baby Christian” permitted white Evangelicals room to excuse his ignorance of and gaffes about Christianity. Yet, for those Evangelical Christians, who still harbored doubts about the sincerity of Trump’s new-found religious conviction at the pivotal point (the *Access Hollywood* tape) in his 2016 campaign when he needed white Evangelical voters desperately, there was an alternative justification for supporting the candidate.

Rumor spread among white Evangelicals that Trump was the “Chosen One” of God, a messiah anointed by God to protect the people of God. The term messiah (Hebrew, *mashiah*) is not limited to the New Testament; it is commonly used in the Old Testament and includes kings, prophets, and priests.⁴⁵ Rick Perry, former Republican governor of Texas and appointed by Trump as Secretary of Energy, shared this rumor with Trump himself in October 2019 when he gave Trump “a little one-pager on those Old Testament

⁴² See Michael Anthony, “Exclusive Interview with Dr. James Dobson – Did Donald Trump Recently Accept Christ?” *Courage Matters: Ignite your Life*, June 24, 2016 (<https://couragematters.com/2016/06/exclusive-interview-with-dr-james-dobson-did-donald-trump-recently-accept-christ/>).

⁴³ See Anthony, “Exclusive Interview with Dr. James Dobson – Did Donald Trump Recently Accept Christ?”

⁴⁴ See “Dr. James Dobson on Donald Trump’s Christian Faith.”

⁴⁵ See Bernhard W. Anderson, “The Role of the Messiah,” *Bible Review*, October, 19, 1995 (<https://www.baslibrary.org/bible-review/11/5/9>).

kings."⁴⁶ Perry recalled telling Trump, "Mr. President, I know there are people that say you said you were the chosen one and I said, 'You were' . . . If you're a believing Christian, you understand God's plan for the people who rule and judge over us on this planet in our government."⁴⁷ Although Trump later claimed that he was joking when he referred to himself as the "Chosen One" in his trade negotiations with China,⁴⁸ a surprising number of white Evangelicals accept this claim at face value. Peter Hegseth, a Fox news commentator and former Republican candidate for the Senate from Minnesota, claimed that "God has used imperfect people forever" and that the belief that Trump is God's "Chosen One" is widespread.⁴⁹ The United Methodist Church, a mainline Protestant denomination, commissioned a poll to determine the extent of Protestant support for Trump's alleged anointed status. Surveying over 1,000 American Protestants, the poll found that 29% of white Evangelicals consider Trump a "Chosen One," but that figure climbs to 53% of the white Pentacostal Evangelical subset, of whom the most prominent personality is Paula White.⁵⁰ The survey also asked the participants' comfort with Trump, 100 being warm and positive and 0 being cold and negative. Of those who ranked their comfort with Trump at 100, 40% believed he was the "Chosen One," while only 10% believed all Presidents were divinely selected by God.⁵¹ Consequently, the support for Trump among these white Evangelicals is not a matter of office, but rather of his personal charisma.

The acceptance of Trump as God's "Chosen One," despite his immoral character, does not disturb these white Evangelicals. They commonly refer to God's "Chosen One" in the Old Testament, King David, who lusted after Bathsheba, having seen her naked from his balcony while she bathed, and arranged to have

⁴⁶ See Jessica Kwong, "Fox News Teases Interview with Rick Perry Saying Trump Was God's 'Chosen One' to Be President," *Newsweek*, November 24, 2019 (<https://www.newsweek.com/fox-news-rick-perry-trump-god-1473773>).

⁴⁷ See Kwong, "Fox News Teases Interview with Rick Perry Saying Trump Was God's 'Chosen One' to Be President."

⁴⁸ See Jesse Byrnes, "Trump on His 'Chosen One' Remark: 'It Was Sarcasm,'" *The Hill*, August 23, 2019 (<https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/458648-trump-on-his-chosen-one-remark-it-was-sarcasm>); see also "Trump Calls Himself the 'Chosen One' as He Defends Trade War with China," *CNBC*, 2019 (<https://www.cnbc.com/video/2019/08/21/trump-calls-himself-the-chosen-one-as-he-defends-trade-war-with-china.html>).

⁴⁹ See Courtney Hagle (@CourtneyHagle), "Fox & Friends preview an interview with Rick Perry, where he says that Trump is 'the chosen one,'" *Twitter*, November 24, 2019, 12:29 p.m. (<https://twitter.com/CourtneyHagle/status/1198654816928579584>).

⁵⁰ See Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe, "How Many Americans Believe Trump Is Anointed by God?" *United Methodist Insight: A Forum for Discerning God's Will for the United Methodist Church*, November 26, 2019 (<https://um-insight.net/perspectives/how-many-americans-believe-trump-is-anointed-by-god/>).

⁵¹ See Burge and Djupe, "How Many Americans Believe Trump Is Anointed by God?"

her husband Uriah the Hittite, one of his officers, killed in battle (2 Sam. 11: 2-15). From this point of view, Trump's marital infidelity, peeping-tom history at beauty pageants, alleged sexual assault of some 12 women, and affairs with a Playboy Playmate and a porn star are forgivable, since God has anointed him with a mission to defend his "sheep." Some of his defenders, however, have elided the difference between the Old Testament messiah King David and the New Testament Christ. Perhaps that conflation of King David and Christ is caused in part by the prominence of the Davidic line (to which Jesus was allegedly born (Mat. 1:1-25)) as the link between the covenant between God and David in the Old Testament (2 Sam. 7:11-16) and the New Covenant embodied by Christ (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Hebrews 9:15). Accordingly, since Trump is identified with David and David with Jesus, it should not be surprising that the emotion associated with Christ is irrationally linked to Trump. The impeachment proceedings are a case in point, for just as Jesus was tried by the state and crucified, so too was Trump in the minds of his most fervent Evangelical supporters. As Barry Loudermilk (R-Ga), an Evangelical Christian and author of the 2011 book *And Then They Prayed: Moments In American History Impacted By Prayer*, stated, "Pontius Pilate afforded more rights to Jesus than the Democrats have afforded this President in the process."⁵² Trump therefore is the victim, who must pay an unjust penalty for doing God's work. In this respect, Trump, as victim, is a reflection of the increasingly prevalent Evangelical belief in their own victimization. In 2016, 42% of Americans surveyed by Pew held that Evangelicals were subject to discrimination.⁵³

Although the majority of white Pentacostals seem to regard Trump as the "Chosen One" of God, the majority of white Evangelicals as a whole do not.⁵⁴ Trump's "anointing" therefore does not sufficiently explain his support by 81% of the white Evangelical electorate⁵⁵ nor the eight in ten white Evangelical

⁵² See Paul LeBlanc, "Republican Lawmaker Says Jesus Had 'More Rights' before Crucifixion than Trump in Impeachment Inquiry," *CNN Politics*, December 18, 2019 (<https://www.cnn.com/2019/12/18/politics/trump-impeachment-jesus/index.html>).

⁵³ See David Masci, "Many Americans See Religious Discrimination in U.S. – Especially against Muslims," *Factank: News in the Numbers*, May 17, 2019 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/17/many-americans-see-religious-discrimination-in-u-s-especially-aga-inst-muslims/>).

⁵⁴ See Burge and Djupe, "How Many Americans Believe Trump Is Anointed by God?"

⁵⁵ See Martínez and Smith, "How the Faithful Voted: A Preliminary 2016 Analysis."

habitual churchgoers in America.⁵⁶ The explanation for this cognitive dissonance of “family values” voters for a blatantly immoral individual must lie elsewhere. In this respect, the depiction of Trump as a “baby Christian” has more merit. The rumors about Paula White’s conversion of Trump to born-again Christianity suggest that the event happened no later than the 2015-2016 Presidential campaign. Although Trump claimed that he was a member of New York’s Marble Collegiate Church of Dr. Norman Vincent Peale at the 2016 Family Leadership Summit in Ames, Iowa⁵⁷ (which may have been the case in his childhood more than 60 years ago), there is no evidence that he frequented the church as an adult in recent years. David Lewicki, its pastor since the mid-2000s, claims that Trump never visited the church, “Not one time.”⁵⁸ Trump remained an infrequent churchgoer, for example, attending a service only once in his first year in office other than the prayer service at Washington’s National Cathedral the day following his inauguration.⁵⁹

At the 2016 Family Leadership Conference, he could not bring himself to ask God for forgiveness, a *sine qua non* of Evangelical faith. “I’m not sure [I have ever asked God for forgiveness]. I just try to do a better job from there. I don’t think so. If I do something wrong, I just try to make it right. I don’t bring God into that picture. I don’t.”⁶⁰ He continued by avowing that “I drink my little wine ... and hav[e] my little cracker” and “I do that as often as possible. I guess that’s a form of forgiveness, and I do that as often as possible because I feel cleansed.”⁶¹ A smatter of applause followed, but most of the white Evangelical crowd offered only a stony silence. Beyond the cavalier way he treated the Eucharist, he was evidently not aware that

⁵⁶ See Gregory A. Smith, "Among White Evangelicals, Regular Churchgoers Are the Most Supportive of Trump," *Factank: News in the Numbers*, April 26, 2017 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/26/among-white-evangelicals-regular-churchgoers-are-the-most-supportive-of-trump/>).

⁵⁷ See *User Clip: Trump Doesn't Ask God for Forgiveness* (Statement by Donald Trump at the 2016 Family Leadership Summit in Ames, Iowa), 2016, directed by Frank Luntz (<https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4585899/user-clip-trump-god-forgiveness>).

⁵⁸ See David Lewicki (@dlewicki), "I was @realDonaldTrump's pastor for 5 years @MarbleChurch. I assure you, he had the 'option' to come to Bible study. He never 'opted' in. Nor did he ever actually enter the church doors. Not one time," *Twitter*, January 29, 2019 (https://twitter.com/dlewicki/status/1090228039345147904?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwtterm%5E1090228039345147904&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.huffpost.com%2Fentry%2Fformer-marble-collegiate-pastor-says-he-never-saw-trump-at-church_n_5c51f51ee4b04f8645c728a8).

⁵⁹ See Annie Karni, "Trump Celebrates Easter His Way," *Politico*, April 16, 2017 (<https://www.politico.com/story/2017/04/donald-trump-easter-church-237268>).

⁶⁰ See *User Clip: Trump Doesn't Ask God for Forgiveness*.

⁶¹ See *User Clip: Trump Doesn't Ask God for Forgiveness*.

Evangelical Protestants rarely celebrate communion, perhaps at most once a month and in many cases perhaps twice annually. Evangelicals hold communion as merely a symbol of Christ's sacrifice.⁶² It was clear in his response that Trump was tone-deaf to Evangelical Christianity.

Evangelical Christianity engages in the desacralization of the relationship to God, which had been typified by the Catholic and Anglican sacramental traditions. Instead, most Evangelicals see their relationship to God mediated by the Bible,⁶³ which they read as inerrant. Accordingly, the Bible plays center stage in Evangelical worship, and anyone who claims Evangelical status would both know that fact and feel obliged to become intimately acquainted with Biblical texts. However, Trump's unfamiliarity with the Bible remains striking. He famously made the gaffe in an address at Liberty University, the largest Fundamentalist institution of higher education, of referring to Paul's 2 Corinthians as "Two Corinthians" (rather than "Second Corinthians") to the laughter of the audience.⁶⁴ Moreover, when asked in a Bloomberg interview in 2019 to cite his favorite Bible verse, he refused to name one on the grounds that it was "personal." The journalists pressed him on whether he preferred the Old or New Testament; he replied that he liked them both "equal."⁶⁵ For an Evangelical to refuse to prioritize the New Testament would simply be anathema.

Trump is no Evangelical, and if he were a "baby Christian" (as even James Dobson cannot confirm), he certainly has done nothing since his alleged conversion to make Evangelical belief a reality in his everyday life. A poll taken by Politico/Morning Consult in June 2020 found that only 40% of Evangelicals found Trump religious; 33% did not.⁶⁶ Even his strongest and most vocal Evangelical supporter admits he is not really an Evangelical. In a debate with journalist Peter Wehner on the Mike Gallagher talk-radio show, Robert

⁶² See Randall Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America*, 25th Anniversary ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁶³ See Alan Rathe, *Evangelicals, Worship and Participation: Taking a Twenty-First Century Reading* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

⁶⁴ See Eric Bradner, "Trump Blames Tony Perkins for '2 Corinthians,'" *CNN*, January 21, 2016 (<https://www.cnn.com/2016/01/20/politics/donald-trump-tony-perkins-sarah-palin/index.html>).

⁶⁵ See "Donald Trump Unable to Name One Verse from 'Favourite Book' the Bible," *Bloomberg Politics*, August 22, 2019 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ERUngQUCsxE&app=desktop>).

⁶⁶ See Orr, "Trump Allies See a Mounting Threat: Biden's Rising Evangelical Support."

Jeffress, pastor of the Evangelical First Baptist megachurch in Dallas, claimed that he did not really care about Trump's moral character or faith, but rather he needed a "strongman" to believe in.⁶⁷

Trump's Authoritarianism

Jeffress's admiration for Donald Trump as a "strongman" resonates with authoritarian values. The study of authoritarianism has a celebrated and controversial history in social psychology. Originally commissioned by the U.S. government to determine the susceptibility of the American population to fascist propaganda, *The Authoritarian Personality* appeared in 1950 and postulated certain definitive characteristics, which could be detected through the F (fascist)-scale and E (ethnocentric)-scale survey instruments. Published and distributed during the height of the McCarthy era, *The Authoritarian Personality* was criticized by a number of sociologists, most prominently Edward Shils, for its alleged Leninist orientation,⁶⁸ presumably based on the political views of one of its authors, Theodor Adorno. Adorno was a member of the so-called *Frankfurter Schule*, a loosely identified group of left-wing German intellectuals, many of whom had escaped the Nazis.⁶⁹ The accusation was somewhat ironic for two reasons. Although a Marxist, Adorno found the Leninist/Stalinist variety repugnant. Moreover, while a researcher at the Center for the Study of New Religious Movements in Berkeley, CA in the 1980s, I had asked Nevitt Sanford, one of the study's co-authors and a visiting scholar at the Center, whether there was any truth to the suggestion that *The Authoritarian Personality* was shaped by Marxism. He smiled and replied that he was a "life-long Republican from Georgia."

The Authoritarian Personality advanced a theory linking fascism and ethnocentrism based upon the experience of Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s and hypothesized that the more authoritarian an individual, the more he or she would see the world in terms of "us" and "them," leading to racial and religious prejudice. The F-scale and E-scale, however, were criticized for psychometric inaccuracies,⁷⁰ and consequently these

⁶⁷ See Wehner, "The Deepening Crisis in Evangelical Christianity Support for Trump Comes at a High Cost for Christian Witness."

⁶⁸ See Edward Shils, "Authoritarianism 'Right' and 'Left'" in *Studies in the Scope and Method of "The Authoritarian Personality,"* eds. Richard Christie and Marie Jahoda (New York: Free Press, 1954).

⁶⁹ See Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

⁷⁰ See Bob Altemeyer, *Right-wing Authoritarianism* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1981).

scales were reconfigured by Altemeyer into the RWA survey instrument which tested authoritarian aggression (intentional psychological or physical harm toward a group or an individual belonging to that group), authoritarian submission (a willingness to acquiesce to the views and actions of a hierarchical superior), and conventionalism (the acceptance of social conventions and customs).⁷¹

Trump displays at least two of the three indices of authoritarianism derived from Altemeyer's Right-Wing Authoritarianism theory. As I have argued elsewhere,⁷² Trumpian discourse is marked by attributes of authoritarian rhetoric, as described in Alain Goldschläger's classic 1982 essay, "Towards a Semiotics of Authoritarian Discourse." In particular, Trump's "Wall," a key element in his campaign speeches and White House pronouncements, serves as a *tekmerion*, subject to semantic desubstantiation.⁷³ In the pyramid which defines the Trump movement, with followers as his "base" and Trump himself at the top, the "Wall" has no linguistic meaning other than as a vague symbol marking the division in the body politic between "us" and "them." His egocentrism on display for his followers ("I am your voice"; "Only I can fix it") attracts the identification of the mass with a narcissistic, charismatic leader, described in Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* and typified by Mussolini, Franco, and Hitler.⁷⁴ Insofar as Trump relentlessly attacks his political opponents and members of "out-groups," e.g., Muslims, Mexicans, immigrants, liberals, journalists, LGBTQ individuals, feminists, Black Lives Matter protestors, and the disabled, he reflects authoritarian aggression, even suggesting that his supporters physically assault those who demonstrate against him. Likewise, he exhibits authoritarian submission in his obsequious behavior toward various dictators like Vladimir Putin, Kim Jung Un, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Although Trump is far from being an exemplar of conventionalism, he nonetheless feigns his belief in hard work and so-called family values, as he did at the 2016 Family Leadership Summit and on numerous occasions before white Evangelical leaders at the White House.

⁷¹ See Altemeyer, *The Authoritarian Specter*.

⁷² See McBride, "The Wall, Semantic Desubstantiation, and Authoritarian Discourse: Why Trumpism Confounds Its Critics."

⁷³ See Alain Goldschläger, "Towards a Semiotics of Authoritarian Discourse," *Poetics Today* 3, 1 (Winter 1982): 11-20.

⁷⁴ See Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976 [1921]).

Although he is no Evangelical, there seems to be little doubt that Trump himself is an authoritarian. This discursive analysis of Trump's rhetoric was confirmed in a 2016 sociological study of Trump voters, showing that authoritarianism was the only statistically significant variable to explain why they supported Trump rather than any other Republican Presidential candidate.⁷⁵

White American Evangelicals and Authoritarianism

Since Trump is neither a "baby Christian" nor the "Chosen One" in the eyes of most white Evangelicals, it is unclear why they would follow him, particularly in light of his unsavory character. Some sociologists have made the argument that authoritarian followers are derived from the unemployed and underemployed among the working class, and therefore "economic inequality stimulates authoritarianism."⁷⁶ However, if that were the case, it would not explain why Trump would attract the support of middle- and upper-class white Evangelicals, or indeed, why Trump, a reputed billionaire, would be attracted to authoritarian values. However, another study concluded that authoritarianism was caused in part by perceived threats to "a deteriorating *national* economy," and "threats to *personal* economic conditions [emphasis in the original]" had no necessary relationship to the rise of authoritarianism.⁷⁷

Sociologists have examined the relationship between authoritarianism and conservative Christian religion, variously referred to by researchers as Evangelicalism or Fundamentalism. Altemeyer himself noted in his studies that there seems to be a resonance between authoritarianism and "highly wound religious ideologies."⁷⁸ Two sociologists pursued Altemeyer's observation by conducting a study using the RWA scale

⁷⁵ See Matthew MacWilliams, "Who Decides When the Party Doesn't? Authoritarian Voters and the Rise of Donald Trump," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 49, 4 (2016): 716-21.

⁷⁶ See Frederick Solt, "The Social Origins of Authoritarianism," *Political Research Quarterly* 65, 4 (2012): 703-13, 710.

⁷⁷ See Stanley Feldman and Karen Stenner, "Perceived Threat and Authoritarianism," *Political Psychology* 18, 4 (1997): 741-70, 765.

⁷⁸ See Bob Altemeyer, *Enemies of Freedom: Understanding Right-wing Authoritarianism* (San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1988), pp. 230-231, cited in Gary K. Leak and Brandy A. Randall, "Clarification of the Link between Right-wing Authoritarianism and Religiousness: The Role of Religious Maturity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 34, 2 (1995): 245-52, 246.

and Christian Orthodoxy (CO) scale,⁷⁹ the latter based on the theories of Gordon Allport and James Fowler.⁸⁰ They concluded that RWA is “negatively associated with advanced faith development” and “positively associated with a religion that is conventional, unquestioned, and unreflected.”⁸¹ In 2006, four sociologists published a study confirming Altemeyer’s study on authoritarianism and “highly wound ideologies,” concluding that researchers should regard “fundamentalist literature as an outgrowth of [] authoritarian literature” and recognize “the high degree of conceptual overlap between fundamentalism and authoritarianism.”⁸²

The Linchpin of Authoritarianism and Evangelicalism: A Philosophy of Child-Rearing

The work of various sociologists, referenced above, show that there is a relationship between authoritarianism and Evangelicalism in America: however, they do not explain why Evangelicals are drawn to Trump’s authoritarianism. The answer may very well lie in an unexpected direction.

Child-rearing in the white American Evangelical community has been heavily influenced by two texts which articulate a philosophy adverse to modern parenting: *The Strong-Willed Child* by James Dobson, the same individual who testified to Trump’s alleged conversion to born-again Christianity and founded the Fundamentalist Focus on the Family, and Michael & Debi Pearl’s *To Train Up a Child*. First published in 1978 and republished in 2004, Dobson updated his text in 2017 as *The New Strong-Willed Child* without changing the substance of his parenting philosophy. Described by one scholar as the “most renowned evangelical family expert of his generation, perhaps even in American history,” Dobson was “[s]ought out by millions of families for advice, support, and family-friendly entertainment.”⁸³ The Pearl’s book first appeared in 1994 and was

⁷⁹ See Bruce E. Hunsberger, "A Short Version of the Christian Orthodoxy Scale," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28 (1989): 360-65.

⁸⁰ See Leak and Randall, "Clarification of the Link between Right-wing Authoritarianism and Religiousness: The Role of Religious Maturity."

⁸¹ See Leak and Randall, "Clarification of the Link between Right-wing Authoritarianism and Religiousness: The Role of Religious Maturity": 251.

⁸² See Stephen W. Kraus, Heinz Streib, Barbara Keller, and Christopher Silver, “The Distinction between Authoritarianism and Fundamentalism in Three Cultures: Factor Analysis and Personality Correlates,” *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 28, 1 (2006): 341-348, 347-348.

⁸³ See Hilde Lóvdal Stephens, *Family Matters: James Dobson and Focus on the Family’s Crusade for the Christian Home* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama, 2019), 2, 6.

reissued in 2015 as *To Train Up a Child: Child Training for the 21st Century*. (The title is derived from the King James Version of Proverbs 22:6: “Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.”) These texts have sold respectively 3 million and 1.2 million copies.

Central to this philosophy of child-rearing is physical punishment. While spanking is now proscribed in some 52 countries around the world,⁸⁴ it is not barred in the United States, even though, as the use of physical force, it is classified by the U.S. Government’s Center for Disease Control as physical abuse, one of the forms of child abuse.⁸⁵ A poll by the widely respected polling organization FiveThirtyEight reported in 2014 that nearly 80% of born-again Christians in the United States approve of spanking.⁸⁶

The advocacy of corporal punishment in the white American Evangelical community is derived from its theology. Referencing the behavior of a small child, James Dobson argues that “[t]he entire human race is afflicted with the same tendency toward willful defiance that this three-year old exhibited . . . Perhaps this tendency toward self-will is the essence of original sin that has infiltrated the human family.”⁸⁷ Although the Augustinian theology of original sin is shared by most Christian denominations and sects, the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican/Episcopal communion, and many mainline Protestant denominations embrace the idea of infant baptism as the way to unburden the child from the legacy of “original sin,” derived from the transgression of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Most white Evangelicals, however, identify with the Anabaptist tradition which prohibits baptism until the child reaches the age of intellectual maturity where he or she can knowingly accept Jesus as their “personal savior.”

To Evangelicals, children are regarded as “little bundles of sin.” White American Evangelicals fear that, left uncorrected, their children will lead “a lifetime of frustration,” becoming “unruly employees, inadequate spouses and parents, and rebellious citizens” and never learning to follow “duly-constituted

⁸⁴ See Rachel Rettner, “52 Countries Now Ban Spanking,” *Live Science*, 2017

(<https://www.livescience.com/57373-52-countries-ban-spanking-france.html>).

⁸⁵ See Center for Disease Control, “Preventing Child Abuse and Neglect: A Technical Package for Policy, Norm, and Programmatic Activities, 2016 (<https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/can-prevention-technical-package.pdf>).

⁸⁶ See Harry Enten, “Americans’ Opinions On Spanking Vary By Party, Race, Region And Religion,” *FiveThirtyEight*, September 15, 2014.

(<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/americans-opinions-on-spanking-vary-by-party-race-region-and-religion/>).

⁸⁷ See James Dobson, *The New Strong-Willed Child* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Momentum, 2017), p.5.

leaders.”⁸⁸ Accordingly, in light of the proverb that if one spares the rod, one spoils the child (Proverbs 13:24), white Evangelical parents are told that they must break the spirit of their children. Dobson literally compared this process to the way he treated his dog, Siggie the Dauchshund, who exhibited willful behavior upon his return home.

I returned to discover that Siggie had become boss of the house while I was gone . . . I had seen this defiant mood before and knew that I had to deal with it. The only way to make Siggie obey was to threaten him with destruction . . . I again held up the belt and told the angry dog to get into his bed. He stood his ground so I gave him a firm swat across the rear end . . . there is an important aspect of my story that is highly relevant to the world of children. Just as surely as a dog will occasionally challenge the authority of his leaders, a child is inclined to do the same thing, only more so.⁸⁹

The Pearls have a similar approach, comparing child rearing to equine training in which parents train the child in the same way that a buggy driver conditions a horse. Moreover, they analogize children to new recruits in the military, whose will must be broken to conform to its hierarchical command structure. “When headstrong young men join the military, the first thing they are taught is to stand still. The many hours of close-order drill are designed to teach and reinforce *submission of the will*. . . As in the military, all maneuvers in the home should begin with a call to attention.”⁹⁰ The Pearls, however, do not draw the line with children. Infants are subject to physical discipline as well. “Always keep in mind that the baby is not being punished, just conditioned. The thump is not a substitute spanking. It is reinforcing obedience training.”⁹¹

⁸⁸ See Christopher G. Ellison and Matt Bradshaw, "Religious Beliefs, Sociopolitical Ideology, and Attitudes toward Corporal Punishment," *Journal of Family Issues* 30, 3 (2009): 320-40, 324.

⁸⁹ See Dobson, *The New Strong-Willed Child*, pp.2-3.

⁹⁰ See Michael Pearl and Debi Pearl, *To Train up a Child: Child Training for the 21st Century* (N.p.: No Greater Joy Ministries, 2015), p.12.

⁹¹ See Pearl, *To Train up a Child: Child Training for the 21st Century*, p.12.

Evangelical sociologists who are apologists for these practices point out that, although such parents admittedly spank their children far more often than non-Evangelicals, they are encouraged to refrain from yelling at their kids. Consequently, they “may insulate children from the negative effects typically associated with physical discipline”⁹² and “might buffer the otherwise adverse effects of physical punishment in conservative Protestant homes.”⁹³ As one researcher, who interviewed 50 Fundamentalist families on child-rearing philosophy, noted, Dobson himself distinguishes between what he calls a “purifying” discipline and abuse, a line determined by the attitude of the parent rather than the experience of the child.⁹⁴ If corporal punishment is undertaken with love, then *ipso facto* it cannot be child abuse. However, one recent research article summarized the conclusions of hundreds of studies of corporal punishment and found that the practice “was associated with more aggression, more antisocial behavior, more externalizing problems, more internalizing problems, more mental health problems, and more negative relationships with parents . . . [as well as being] . . . significantly associated with lower moral internalization, lower cognitive ability, and lower self-esteem.”⁹⁵ In short, spanking can hardly be regarded as an act of love.

Privileging respect for elders, good manners, good behavior, and obedience over autonomy, intellectual curiosity, empathy, and self-reliance mimics the military model invoked by the Pearls and other white Evangelical parents. (Indeed, researchers have found that the more white Evangelical parents attend church, the more they discourage autonomy and encourage obedience.⁹⁶) These ideal Evangelical family values reflect a hierarchical worldview in which husbands are superior to wives, fathers superior to mothers, men superior to women, and parents superior to children. It should not be surprising that researchers have found these values replicated in right-wing political attitudes, where hierarchy plays a significant role in such

⁹² See John P. Bartowski, W. Bradford Wilcox, and Christopher G. Ellison, "Conservative Protestant Child Discipline: Authority and Affection in Evangelical Families," *Hartford Institute for Religion Research*, 2006 (<http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/parentingandevangelicals.html>).

⁹³ See John P. Bartowski and W. Bradford Wilcox, "The Conservative Protestant Child Discipline: The Case of Parental Yelling," *Social Forces* 79, 1 (2000): 265-90, 284.

⁹⁴ See Susan B. Ridgely, "When Pain Becomes Symbolic of Commitment: The Practice of Spanking among Adults and Children and 'Focus on the Family' Childrearing Literature," *Journal of Religion and Violence* 4, 3 (2016): 373-386, 381.

⁹⁵ See Elizabeth T. Gershoff and Andrew Grogan-Kaylor, "Spanking and child outcomes: Old controversies and new meta-analyses," *Journal of Family Psychology* 30, 4 (2016): 453-469, 463.

⁹⁶ See Brian Starks and Robert V. Robinson, "Who Values the Obedient Child Now? The Religious Factor in Adult Values for Children, 1986-2002," *Social Forces* 86, 1 (2005): 343-59.

issues as immigration, racial relations, crime, defense spending, guns, and the culture wars.⁹⁷ As one religious studies scholar has noted, “What matters, then, is not that the physical practice of spanking occurs, but that these families embrace a corporal punishment-based philosophy of discipline. Making this choice positions them in opposition to what they perceived to be an undisciplined liberal mainstream society in which the lack of submission to authority has led to the destruction of the family.”⁹⁸

One study summarized research on the hypothesis of a link between strict parenting and the aggression/submission/conventional values paradigm of the authoritarian personality, concluding that “childrearing values are the best indicator of authoritarianism.”⁹⁹ These studies confirm the “over 80 years old ideas of Fromm, Marcuse and Horkheimer, that authoritarian parenting leads to authoritarianism and right-wing attitudes.”¹⁰⁰ For example, using the RF scale in tandem with the RWA scale, sociologists found that Fundamentalists’ high RWA scores negatively correlated with the encouragement of childhood autonomy and positively correlated with an emphasis on children’s obedience.¹⁰¹ Moreover, high RWA scores also positively correlated with endorsement of corporal punishment.¹⁰² One psychoanalyst argues that children subjected to such treatment form “social alters (dissociated parts of the psyche organized into projective scenarios)” which unconsciously predispose them to political obeisance to authoritarian personalities as well as self-pity, believing themselves to be victims of various outgroups, e.g., immigrants, feminists, African-Americans, and more generally liberals.¹⁰³ Accordingly, it is not just that parents who endorse

⁹⁷ See David C. Barker and James D. Tinnick, III, “Competing Visions of Parental Roles and Ideological Constraint,” *The American Political Science Review* 100, 2 (2006): 249-63; see also Anne M. Cizmar, Geoffrey C. Layman, John McTague, Shanna Pearson-Merkowitz, and Michael Spivey, “Authoritarianism and American Political Behavior from 1952 to 2008,” *Political Research Quarterly* 67, 1 (2014): 71-83.

⁹⁸ See Susan B. Ridgely, “When Pain Becomes Symbolic of Commitment: The Practice of Spanking among Adults and Children and ‘Focus on the Family’ Childrearing Literature”: 374.

⁹⁹ See Solt, “The Social Origins of Authoritarianism”: 705.

¹⁰⁰ See Vera Clemens, Oliver Decker, Paul L. Plener, Andreas Witt, Cedric Sachser, Elmar Brähler, and Jörg M. Fegert, “Authoritarianism and the Transgenerational Transmission of Corporal Punishment,” *Child Abuse & Neglect* 106 (2020): 104537 (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104537>).

¹⁰¹ See Henry Danso, Bruce Hunsberger, and Michael Pratt, “The Role of Parental Religious Fundamentalism and Right-Wing Authoritarianism in Child-Rearing Goals and Practices,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 36, 4 (1997): 496-511.

¹⁰² See Danso, Hunsberger, and Pratt, “The Role of Parental Religious Fundamentalism and Right-Wing Authoritarianism in Child-Rearing Goals and Practices.”

¹⁰³ See Kenneth Alan Adams, “Traumatic Fundamentalist Childhood and Trump,” *Journal of Psychobiology* 46, 3 (2019): 158-178, 171.

spanking display authoritarian propensities and are therefore drawn to authoritarian leaders like Donald Trump but that children who are subjected to such treatment are also likely to adopt the same child-rearing philosophy.¹⁰⁴ Hence, oppressive parenting produces the transgenerational transmission of authoritarian political worldviews. As his niece has argued in her recent book, Trump was a victim of his own father's authoritarian aggression¹⁰⁵ and was sent off to a New York military school while an impressionable teenager where, in his own words, "they'd . . . smack the hell out of you."¹⁰⁶ Trump himself is a product of a child-rearing philosophy which has shaped his own character and that of so many of his followers.

Conclusion

This article suggests that the reasons for white American Evangelical support for Donald Trump, despite the sex scandals, his religious illiteracy, and crass materialism, are associated with a philosophy of child-rearing intimately linked to authoritarian political philosophy. Just as the paterfamilias uses force and intimidation to enforce obedience in the family, so too do authoritarian leaders employ the same to shape the body politic, whose will must be broken to serve their own ends. White American Evangelicals therefore follow Trump because they see themselves in him. His univocal claim to absolute power is one to which they are willing to accede, for in obeisance to him they are obeying what they believe to be the hierarchy of God's creation. They will not abandon him, even if he transgresses traditional Christian morality.

¹⁰⁴ See Clemens, Decker, Plener, Witt, Sachser, Brähler, and Fegert, "Authoritarianism and the Transgenerational Transmission of Corporal Punishment"; see also Shari Barkin, Benjamin Scheindlin, Edward H. Ip, Irma Richardson, and Stacia Finch, "Determinants of Parental Discipline Practices: A National Sample from Primary Care Practices," *Clinical Pediatrics* 46, 1 (2007): 64-69.

¹⁰⁵ See Mary L. Trump, *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020).

¹⁰⁶ See Michael D'Antonio, *The Truth about Trump* (New York: Griffin, 2016), p. xviii.

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