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Sanctuary from Soft Hands, Safe Spaces, and Sexuality: Moral Panic Rhetoric at the Rod of Iron
Ministry's 2024 Freedom Festival

The Rod of Iron Ministry's entire mission can be summarized into one quote, "Make America Godly Again." This quote can be found on the road sign of the ministry's recent expansion in Grainger County, Tennessee. Hyung Jin Moon, the leader of Rod of Iron, continually uses this idea of politics in combination with religious elements to describe the missionary's goals and purpose. "Make American Godly Again" which is a play on President Donald Trump's slogan "Make American Great Again" shows the intricate political backing that fuels Hyung Jin Moon's outreach, rhetoric, and morality. Whether it be at the Rod of Iron's Freedom Festival in Pennsylvania or at the "Garden of Eden" retreat center in Tennessee, appealing to morality in the American conservative Christian community fuels the efforts of Hyung Jin Moon's ministry.

Hyung Jin Moon is the son of the late Reverend Sun Myung Moon, who founded the South Korean Unification Church in 1920 (Chryssides). The Unification church's beliefs hold that Adam and Eve started the fall of mankind, requiring Jesus to come to Earth as man in order to restore what was broken (Chryssides). The church teaches that Jesus was unable to fulfill this mission, and that Reverend Sun Myung Moon was chosen by God to be the second coming of Jesus. In order to fight against Satan's lineage and ideology, Rev. Sun Myung Moon conducted "blessings," also known as mass marriages (Chryssides).

The Rod of Iron Ministries, whose official name is World Peace and Unification Sanctuary, upholds the traditional teachings of the Unification Church's ministry. Hyung Jin Moon states that he started the yearly Rod of Iron Freedom Festival as a way to honor his father's persecution. During the 2024 Freedom Festival, he stated "This festival started 6 years ago, honoring the day in 1950 that my father, the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, who our tradition honors as the returning Jesus, was free from a North Korean communist death camp by US armed forces" (News2Share). The Rod of Iron Ministry also upholds many of the same sexual morality and political views as the Unification church, including opposition to extra-marital sex and homosexuality, and adopting a right-wing political stance (Robertson).

Hyung Jin Moon and his brother Kook-jin Moon inherited a large amount of money from their father. Hyung Jin Moon used this inheritance to purchase a \$1 million home and land in Pennsylvania to start his "sanctuary" church, Rod of Iron Ministry (Fiorillo). His brother started a gun manufacturing company near the church and hosts the Rod of Iron Freedom Festival on its grounds. Rod of Iron ministries believes that AR-15s and similar firearms are used to carry out God's will (Fiorillo). They quote Revelations 2:27, which states "and he shall rule them with a rod of iron," to justify their forefacing use of firearms at Sunday services (Fiorillo), his brother's investment in firearms, and support of politicians who "favor" 2nd Amendment rights, especially Trump. The Freedom Festival hosts "patriot" speakers, facilitates activities that celebrate 2nd, and invites vendors to sell food, art, and political messaging to attendees (Frorillo).

The Freedom Festival's rhetoric can be analyzed through two different frameworks. The first is the perception of conservative religious persecution in conversation with religious freedom. The second is the threat of modern secular ideologies seeking to fulfill justice and equality without divine authority or biblical backing. Both persecution and secularization

rhetoric engage in a vicious feedback loop, heightening perceived threats of individual liberty, religious freedom, and money motives. This rhetoric shapes the moral panic that Hyung Jin Moon's ministry is fueled by.

In both the Unification Church and the Rod of Iron Ministry, the line that separates religious teaching, conservative appeal, and profit is hard to distinguish. Hyung Jin Moon states that his church follows many of the traditional teachings of the unification church (Chryssides), and seemingly has a similar money motive. This money motive is clearly illustrated by the Freedom Festival's operation. Hyung Jin Moon sets up the argument that conservative Christians are being persecuted, then states that being an armed citizen is a direct attack against those threats (News2Share). This messaging, combined with the convenience of the Freedom Festival taking place at his brother's firearm manufacturing, shows how a strategic effort across morality, rhetoric, and money motivates Rod of Iron ministry. Hyung Jin Moon justifies his ministry by fabricating a fear-culture of conservative christian persecution through moral panic rhetoric and offers sanctuary to those who stay sexually pure, buy guns, and ultimately uphold his conservative messaging.

CONTROVERSIAL PROFIT PROPHETS

The Unification Church is most widely known for its mass weddings, often marrying hundreds or thousands of couples at once to remove them from "sinful humanity" (Yoshihide 10). In the 1990s, the Unification Church arranged for over seven thousand Japanese women to be married to Korean men through dozens of international mass-marriage ceremonies (Yoshihide). The Unification Church developed aggressive recruitment strategies to convince this large number of young Japanese women to participate in these mass weddings. Women were convinced that in order for their children to live their lives as they would in Heaven, the

mass-marriage path was necessary (Yoshihide). The church also “concealed its name and used the threat of the curse of Japanese ancestor worship for gaining new members” (Yoshihide). This messaging was part of the strategic mission of the Japanese Unification Church to support the church’s Korean leadership and ideology and ultimately “fundraise” (Yoshihide).

The mass-weddings between Japanese women and Korean men served as a form of fundraising for the Unification Church. Many former members of the Japanese Unification Church, and other private citizens, have sued the ministry for its fraud recruitment and fund-raising practices. Japanese court cases state that the Unification Church’s “proselytizing has been found to be illegal, and its fund-raising activities (including the sales of spiritual goods) ruled fraudulent” (Yoshihide 3). Despite this, the Unification Church continued to utilize the illegal missionary activities and fund-raising (Yoshihide). The interest of the Unification Church is to “save humans from sinful humanity,” yet the church continues to operate via illegal recruitment strategies and fund-raising.

Hyung Jin Moon’s Rod of Iron Ministry praises his father’s actions as the “returning Jesus,” called by God to perform these mass-marriages to complete the work of Jesus Christ (Robertson). Hyung Jin Moon targets the American conservative Christian community, but contradicts one of the main Christian teachings. In the Kings James Version of the Bible, John 17:3-4 it states “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent. I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.” The Christian Bible clearly states that there is only one God, yet the Rod of Iron ministry believes that Reverend Sun Myung Moon was the “returning messiah.” This messaging is contradictory, which is why it’s imperative for Hyung Jin Moon to create morality appeals through threats of persecution and secularization. Due to the controversy surrounding

Hyung Jin Moon's family and ministry, he has utilized conservative Christian ideology via sexual purity and the persecution of Christians to moralize his following and simultaneously create profit.

Threats to Freedom

Conservative Christian persecution rhetoric frames the Rod of Iron's Freedom Festival's overall messaging that any anti-conservative ideology is a threat. A study on persecution perspectives finds that "while conservatives were generally more likely to perceive religious freedom as under threat than non-conservatives, they were especially likely to perceive threats to religious freedom if they were exposed to persecution discourse" (Herrington 20). This research shows how Hyung Jin Moon's approach of introducing past religious persecution, and eventually current, is effective in captivating the conservative Christian audience that attends the Rod of Iron Freedom Festival.

Hyung Jin Moon's presentation of religious persecution, "satanic" centralization, and "traditional" vs. "nontraditional" relationships in his 2024 Rod of Iron Freedom Festival speech aimed to challenge the morality of American conservative Christians, build legitimacy in their community, and offer his ministry as a sanctuary. During his speech he states that "satanic call to power and pedophilia, sex trafficking, infanticide, will have utter control over every aspect of society. And the most evil, vile, and wicked psychopaths will rule with despotism and cruelty and crushing of every freedom protected by the constitution and given to us by almighty God" (News2Share). Through this part of his speech, Hyung Jin Moon grounds his legitimacy in religious persecution and highlights sexual impurity as a reason to protect the 2nd Amendment right. He is establishing a threat to promote sustained firearm investment and political action that supports that right.

The Freedom Festival's secularization rhetoric creates an implication for a cultural us vs. them mindset that places progressive secular perspectives in opposition to Rod of Iron. Literature surrounding this tension identifies that radical right groups, like the Rod of Iron, frame their narratives using terms like "cultural Marxism," and "war on woke" in order to marginalize their perspectives (Batista). Hyung Jin Moon uses similar us vs. them wording during his 2024 Freedom Festival speech when he stated "There is a reason why satanic ideology of Marxism has created Socialist and Communist regime regimes all over the world that have had as their primary blackmailing apparatus, Jeff Epstein, and P Diddy like sex trafficking rings providing young boys and girls to the political elite" (News2Share). In this quote, Hyung Jin Moon is reinforcing the us vs. them rhetoric first, as America against the "Socialist and Communist regimes all over the world." (News2Share). Then, he frames the arguments between conservatives, that protect young people, against the political elite. Hyung Jin Moon pairs these two "us vs. them" narratives to frame secular perspectives not only in opposition to his ministry, but as "satanic ideology" against the whole world.



Fig. 1. Synder, Brian. “An attendee holds up a rifle and cheers at the Rod of Iron Freedom Festival.” 2024

Hyung Jin Moon’s 2024 Freedom Festival Speech illustrates a vivid example of how framing both persecution and secularization in a morality argument appeals to conservative christian morality. He states that “in America, the Communist forces funded ‘sexual liberation,’ LGBTQ rights, and sexualized drag queen shows in public schools, and a multi billion dollar gender utilization industry, openly promoting pedophiles as MAPS, as well as pushing pedophile sex scenes on HBO now. This is intended to destroy the American Christian family, marriage and the young people’s morals and world view where God, not self-pleasure, is at the center of the universe” (News2Share). He frames “sexual liberation” as a direct attack on American Christians and secularization as morally wrong. Hyung Jin Moon frames both conservative christian persecution and secularization as a much larger threat to society, family, and world conception.

Hyung Jin Moon then goes on to state that God appointed Trump to save America from “untraditional” relationships and sexual liberation that lead to blackmailing in government and tyranny (News2Share). He pushes audience members to believe that voting for the Trump administration is the “morally” correct thing to do in order to preserve traditional marriage, religious liberty, and democracy. This small excerpt walks through the exact framing used by the radical right to advance hidden motivations and frame oppositions as rooted in religious motivation (Batista).

Freedom is Not Free

Even though Hyung Jin Moon advocates for freedom through his ministry and “Freedom Festival,” many elements of this festival are not free. Many members of the Unification Church in South Korea make the trip to attend the freedom festival each year and “patriots” across the United States invest time and money into traveling for the festival (Fiorillo). The 2024 Freedom Festival’s schedule was full of activities for the family, starting with a viewing of conservative Michel Flynn’s film titled *Flynn: Deliver the Truth. Whatever the Cost*. Attendees definitely paid the cost to hear his “truth” due to the \$25 general fee and \$200 VIP fee to view the film (Fiorillo). While admission to the Freedom Festival was free, many activities throughout the schedule required fees like the one listed above, limiting access to those who can afford, and are willing to pay those fees and travel costs.



Fig. 2. Synder, Brian. “Eight-year-old Dean Seber fires a juvenile BB rifle at a target at the Rod of Iron Freedom Festival .” 2024

The event is also centered around supporting vendors and Hyung Jin Moon’s brother’s firearm manufacturing company, adding to the costs associated with attending the event. Famous conservative figures signed and sold copies of their books. Customizable political teddy-bear booths, AR-15 and Trump-as-God t-shirts, and Trump honey bottles are just a few examples of the consumerist culture of the festival (Fiorillo). Attendees accept the cost of travel, the cost of activities, hear Hyung Jin Moon’s arguments about morality, guns, and God and feel it's important to support that message. Vendors at the Freedom Festival draw in individuals who support and invest time and money into firearms, and conveniently brings that purchasing power to a family business that makes firearms.



Fig. 3. Fiorillo, Victor “Donald Trump honey for sale at Sean Moon’s Rod of Iron Freedom Festival in the Poconos” 2024 and Fig. 4. Fiorillo, Victor “Travel mugs at the Rod of Iron Freedom Festival in the Poconos ” 2024

FIND SANCTUARY IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

Rod of Iron Ministry's Tennessee location is the church’s retreat sanctuary, which is intentionally designed to resemble the “Garden of Eden.” Hyung Jin Moon uses the “Garden of Eden” to boost his messaging in two distinct ways. The first is through the story of Adam and Eve in relation to the responsibility of marriage. He states that “when we look at the story of Genesis in Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, God commands Adam and Eve, or humanity, to be fruitful, multiply and have dominion and subdue the Earth. We can see that God the Creator of the entire universe gave dominion the blessing of dominion to his children Adam and Eve” (News2Share). He uses Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to illustrate the importance of traditional marriage between men and women. This part of his speech most clearly connects him to conservative values. He is able to use a biblical reference to further villainize other types of marriage or relationships to boost his arguments and connection to the conservative community in attendance.

Hyung Jin Moon also uses the Garden of Eden to illustrate a physical sanctuary that his ministry can offer to those who seek it. Separate from the Rod of Iron Freedom Festival, Hyung Jin Moon has turned Rod of Iron's property in Grainger County, Tennessee into a retreat center, intended to resemble the Garden of Eden (WBIR). In an interview about the project, Hyung Jin Moon stated that the property would have raised beds, walking trails, gardens, and areas for reflection as part of the sanctuary. There is also a shooting range for members to practice their skills (WBIR). He also intends to create living spaces for people in the Garden of Eden. Men and women will be assigned to different cabins, but will be allowed to mingle in common areas. Certain flowers that represent purity and virginity will be planted (WBIR). There are symbolic figures of virginity and purity which contrast from the previous quote "God commands Adam and Eve, or humanity, to be fruitful, multiply..." (News2Share). This expression of the "Garden of Eden" contrasts greatly from the previous one. While the biblical reference finds power through rhetorical means, the sanctuary creates power through community and physical space. The Freedom Festival operates with both in mind.

CONCLUDING MORALITY AND MONEY

Hyung Jin Moon's ministry is made up of sustained belief in the traditional views of his father's Unification Church, politically and morally charged language, the pushing of persecution caused by progressive secular ideas. He frames his arguments in ways that create threat for the individual, children, conservative Christians, America, and lastly the world as a whole. During the 2024 Freedom Festival, Hyung Jin Moon stated "If the torch of liberty is snuffed out in America, the world will enter a kingdom of hell on Earth. Dystopian, 1984-like world that will enforce social credit scores, tracing and tracking of all citizens, centralized digital currency, climate change carbon taxes, and totalitarian governments ruling over the people as

evil gods who make laws for you but will not follow any of these laws for themselves” (News2Share). This quote represents the moral-panic and fear-mongering approach used to support Hyung Jin Moon’s support of 2nd Amendment rights, disapproval of "untraditional" relationships, and gain his followers trust in Trump.

Hyung Jin Moon started to end his Freedom Festival speech by saying “the end of civilization as we know it is being delivered to us on the altar of globalism as the great reset” (News2Share). This quote is summative of the “threat” that Rod of Iron ministry formulates and markets to make supporting his ministry feel imperative to the conservative christian community. He combats controversy in both Rod of Iron and the Unification Church by continuously pushing this threat as morality instead of opinion. Rod of Iron Ministry and its 2024 Freedom Festival work through persecution and moral panic to solidify Rod of Iron as a conservative sanctuary and ultimately boost his profits.

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