Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion

JOURNAL FOR THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF RELIGION JSSR

RESEARCH NOTE OPEN ACCESS

Fellowship in the Fiery Furnace: A Research Note on How Christian Persecution Beliefs Transcend Racial Divides

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Received: 10 April 2024 | **Revised:** 8 April 2025 | **Accepted:** 9 May 2025

Keywords: anti-Christian bias | racial discrimination | religious persecution beliefs | religious threat

ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the relationship between Christian persecution beliefs (CPBs) and race. Existing CPB research has asserted that CPBs constitute a socially appropriate tool to signal White advocacy, but much of this research has centered on White respondents. Utilizing an original dataset with oversamples of Black and Latino Christians, we demonstrate that Black Christians are most likely to adopt CPBs (not White Christians); that the relationship between common measures of racial social identity and CPBs does not vary by the racial group; that the same underlying religion variables predict CPBs in similar ways across the racial group; that CPBs predict support for religious exemptions for all racial groups, even when those exemptions protect racial discrimination; and that CPBs are linked to greater perception of discrimination faced by racial others. We conclude that the relationship between CPBs and racial hierarchies is more complicated than previously understood.

1 | Introduction

> I have no doubt whatsoever that the churches will be persecuted. It's already started. Right now, we're only dealing with what I call "white-collar persecution"—lawsuit intimidation. But I think very soon, it's clear from the Book of Daniel, that spiritual powers will move among municipalities and governments … and our nation is in trouble.
>
> –Hibbs and Stewart 2020

The Book of Daniel tells the story of three men—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—held captive in the ancient kingdom of Babylon. The evil king Nebuchadnezzar demanded worship from his subjects, but these men refused, vowing to worship only the God of the Bible. For their act of faith, Babylonian government officials cast them into a fiery furnace to die. Long inculcated by religious movement elites (Boyer 1992; Smith 1998), fears that America has become a modern-day Babylon have taken root across the country. About half of Americans and three-quarters of White evangelicals feel that there's as much discrimination against Christians as there is against other groups (Jones et al. 2016). In fact, White evangelicals believe that they face even more discrimination than Muslims (Cox and Jones 2017) and gay or lesbian people (Cox 2023). The belief that Christians are under threat constitutes a Christian persecution belief (CPB), and these beliefs matter in a variety of consequential ways (Djupe et al. 2023; Perry 2023). In existing research, Christian nationalism is essentially only linked to extreme attitudes and behaviors when infused with belief in threats of Christian persecution (Djupe et al. 2023). Here we ask: Do CPBs vary by race in their adoption, constitution, and consequences?

Given the consequential effects of CPBs, some work has begun to explore their underlying structure. The most common academic description is that CPBs are a type of dog whistle that raises racialized considerations which then influence attitudes

(Al-Kire et al. 2024; Perry 2023). To date, this work has been either theoretical or experimental; we do not have a sense of how CPBs are operating in the general population or of their correlates (see Djupe et al. 2023; Armaly et al. 2022 use a similar construct—victimization). If CPBs are simply reinforcing racial boundaries, then theories like identity fusion that emphasize the consequences of overlapping identities are most appropriate as a theoretical base for future exploration of CPBs, but if CPBs in some way transcend racial boundaries, then theories that take identity management seriously, or the ways that people redefine and reinterpret their identities, are more appropriate. Moreover, the extent to which CPBs are racially structured is important to document because elite communication about CPBs has been widespread and we need to understand if they reinforce existing racial cleavages or whether CPBs are crosscutting and may help forge a new line of cleavage along religious lines.

Using an original dataset with oversamples of Christian racial minorities, we set out to explore the extent to which CPBs are racialized. We find that CPBs are commonly found among White, Black, and Latino Christians; that CPBs are minimally related to measures of racial social identity; that CPBs are similarly predicted by religious variables for all racial groups; and that CPBs predict support for religious exemptions of all types, even for scenarios that counteract a racial group's interests. Finally, we show that CPBs appear to have the potential to sensitize racial groups to the plights of racial others. Ultimately, we conclude that CPBs are more deeply rooted in beliefs about the religious social order than the racial one.

1.1 | Threat in American Society

One of the driving forces of American politics has been the changing balance of power between White and non-White Americans (Bai and Federico 2021; Craig and Richeson 2014). However, elites are unable to explicitly mobilize or even discuss these changes openly because explicit racialized appeals have traditionally been socially unacceptable (Mendelberg 2001). Instead of openly lamenting White status loss, ideas of Christianity are implicitly connected to Whiteness. Consequently,

> To the extent that White Christian audiences unconsciously connect language about threats to "Christian heritage" and "Christian values" and "Christianity" with whiteness, it is likely that [. . .] ostensibly religious rhetoric evokes perceptions that white Americans are under attack – without ever having to mention race or even raising awareness among white audiences that such connections are being made (Perry 2023, 72).

But we have reason to believe that religion itself matters. After all, other facets of American society have been shifting, too. Christians face declining demographic power as the percentage of Christians in the population is increasingly offset by religious nones (Burge 2023) and growing religious minorities. At the same time, many elements of public religious practice, like the reading of Christian scriptures in public schools, have been eliminated, signaling a shift away from symbolic Christian supremacy (FitzGerald 2017). Al-Kire et al. (2021) and Wilkins et al. (2022) establish that the decline of Christians evokes threat for Christian Americans, but neither accounts for race.

We have reason to suspect that CPBs are not as racialized as originally believed. First, the existing literature is not conclusive. CPBs thrive in Christian-dominant social contexts and CPBs can drive political mobilization for believers (Djupe 2022). Walker and Haider-Markel (2024) explicitly compare racial and religious demographic change and find that only religious demographic change (not racial change) elicits negative emotional reactions among White Christians. Moreover, other surveys have found that CPBs aren't significantly more likely among White respondents (Jones et al. 2016). Even studies that find Christian persecution narratives increase concerns about anti-White bias report substantially larger effect sizes for concerns about anti-Christian bias (Al-Kire et al. 2024). By raising considerations of group rights and by creating shared narratives of exclusion, CPBs may actually increase the likelihood that Christians will recognize racial discrimination experienced by racial out-groups (Lajevardi et al. 2020; Lewis and McDaniel 2023; Pérez et al. 2024).

Despite the trend of many analyses limiting their samples to White Christians (Davis and Perry 2020; Walker and Haider-Markel 2024), we suspect that CPBs are widely held by Black and Latino Christians as well. While American Christianity has a long history of racial segregation (Raboteau 1999), those racial boundaries show signs of relaxation. In general, racial diversity within congregations has increased significantly since 2000, including in evangelical congregations (Dougherty et al. 2020). As Black and Latino Christians increasingly enter historically-White or multiracial religious contexts, we anticipate that they will similarly be exposed to Christian persecution rhetoric and, consequently, adopt CPBs.

Moreover, it is hard to ignore the shifts in American politics and culture that have pushed disparate elements of Christianity together. The *Obergefell* decision legalizing same-sex marriage in 2015 prompted a harsh backlash, the continued hollowing out of American churches put Christians on their back feet, and, of course, many Christians perceived an anti-Christian bias toward congregational closures during the COVID pandemic. We would also point to the increasing prominence of charismatic Christianity (e.g., Taylor 2024), which is much more racially integrated than other religious groups and, notably, features rampant communication of Christian persecution narratives.[1]

2 | Data and Methods

To explore the extent to which CPBs are racialized, we turn to a dataset collected in the fall of 2022, fielded by Qualtrics Panels. The quota sample includes approximately 1600 White, Black, and Latino Christians,[2] for a total *N* of 4590. Our sample is ideal for testing hypotheses about the racialization of CPBs for several reasons. First, most samples contain too few Black and Latino respondents to generate reliable estimates; our racial oversamples ensure that our estimates of their opinions are as robust as our estimates of White respondents' opinions. Second, we hold Christian identification constant because all respondents identified as Christian to qualify for participation. Any differences we observe are therefore not due to various group rates of

Christian identification (see Al-Kire et al. 2021, 2024; Wilkins et al. 2022).

Our measure of CPBs asks respondents how much discrimination or unfair treatment Christians face in the United States, with respondents answering a lot, some, a little, or none. Higher values indicate stronger CPBs.

Respondents self-report the racial group with which they most closely identify: White, non-Hispanic; Hispanic/Latino; or Black/African-American. We measure racial identity in three ways. First, we ask how close people feel to their own racial/ethnic group in terms of their interests, ideas, and feelings (closeness). Second, we ask if what happens to other members of their racial or ethnic group has anything to do with what happens in the respondent's life (linked fate). Third, respondents assess whether it is important for people to work together to improve the position of their racial or ethnic group (collective action).

To assess the extent to which respondents believe Christians need religious protection, the survey asks whether business owners should receive religious exemptions if the service of either gay/lesbian people or people from another racial group would violate their religious beliefs.

Our models include a variety of controls, including political (partisanship, ideology, political interest), religious (religious service attendance, born-again identification, Christian nationalism, apocalypticism, religious freedom sermon content), and demographic variables. All models are estimated with OLS[3] and employ raking weights based on the 2022 Cooperative Election Study weighted estimates of partisanship, Catholic identity, gender, and education among Christians. Question wordings, descriptive statistics, and full model results are presented in Appendix S1.

3 | Results

Do CPBs vary by racial group? If CPBs are racialized, we would expect that White respondents would be more likely to believe that Christians are persecuted. But we find that this is not the case. Black Christians score the highest at 1.80, White Christians report a score of 1.61, and Latino Christians follow with 1.48 (weighted means). While these subgroup means are statistically distinguishable with our large sample size, substantively the differences are small—they all score between "some" and "a little."

Are indicators of racial identity related to CPBs? It's reasonable to challenge whether racial classification itself is sufficient to capture racialized attitudes. After all, there is considerable variation among racial groups in how they see the world through a racial group-centric lens (Kam and Burge 2018). If Christian nationalism is a dog whistle for White supremacy, then we should see Whites' CPBs varying with the extent to which they believe that their lives and interests are linked to those of other Whites. Conversely, as Black and Latino respondents increasingly believe that their interests lie with those of their racial group, they should be less likely to endorse CBPs if they are saturated with White supremacy.

But, again, we don't find strong evidence to support the idea that CPBs are linked to racial social identities in racialized ways. As shown in the left panel of Figure 1, feeling close to your own racial group is linked to depressed CPBs for all racial groups ($b = 0.066$, $p = 0.071$), including among White respondents. There aren't significant differences between the racial groups, either. The effect of racial group closeness does not differ for Black or Latino respondents compared to White respondents ($b = 0.020$, $p = 0.705$; $b = -0.055$, $p = 0.288$, respectively). In other words, no groups appear to connect racial group cohesion to their understanding of the status of Christians.

We also asked respondents whether they feel that their fates are linked to the fates of other members of their racial/ethnic group. Here, the results work as a racialized CPB argument might expect (see the center panel of Figure 1). White respondents who sense linked fate with other Whites are more likely to report Christian persecution, while Latino and Black respondents are less likely to do so ($b = -0.106$, $p = 0.004$; $b = -0.134$, $p = 0.000$, respectively). But linked fate as a whole has a positive relationship with CPBs ($b = 0.086$, $p = 0.002$) for all racial groups, indicating that it has common effects across racial groups. And, although the interaction term shows that White and Black/Latino respondents' linked fate have different relationships, the substantive difference is quite small—the predicted values for White, Black, and Latino respondents range by only about 0.3 on a 4-point scale.

A third way of thinking about racial group cohesion is through the lens of collective action—the extent to which people of a racial group need to work together to improve their status. There is virtually no relationship between CBPs and collective action support for White and Latino respondents ($b = 0.017$, $p = 0.694$) (see the right panel of Figure 1[4]). Black respondents are actually more likely to connect racial collective action to CPBs than White respondents are, though this difference is substantively small and not statistically significant ($b = 0.030$, $p = 0.504$).

In sum, we only find modest and inconsistent evidence that racial identity measures are linked to CPBs across racial groups in relationships that are, at best, modestly differentiable.[5]

Are CPBs predicted variously by racial group? Perhaps it's the case that White, Black, and Latino CPBs are differently constituted—that similar levels of support for CPBs across racial groups mask underlying differences in their predictors. To explore this possibility, we ran separate models for each racial/ethnic group, utilizing a large range of possible predictors of CPBs (see Figure 2 for results).

The religious variables are the most likely suspects due to the high degree of racial segregation when it comes to religious traditions and the divergent ways religion is applied to political beliefs by racial groups (Yukich and Edgell 2020). In general, born-again identification is linked to higher CPBs (at least for White [$b = 0.108$, $p = 0.043$] and especially Black respondents [$b = 0.256$, $p < 0.001$]), though overlapping error bars make clear that born-again identification does not predict CPBs differently for White, Black, and Latinos. Religious service attendance predicts CPBs for Black ($b = 0.043$, $p = 0.024$) and Latino ($b = 0.072$,

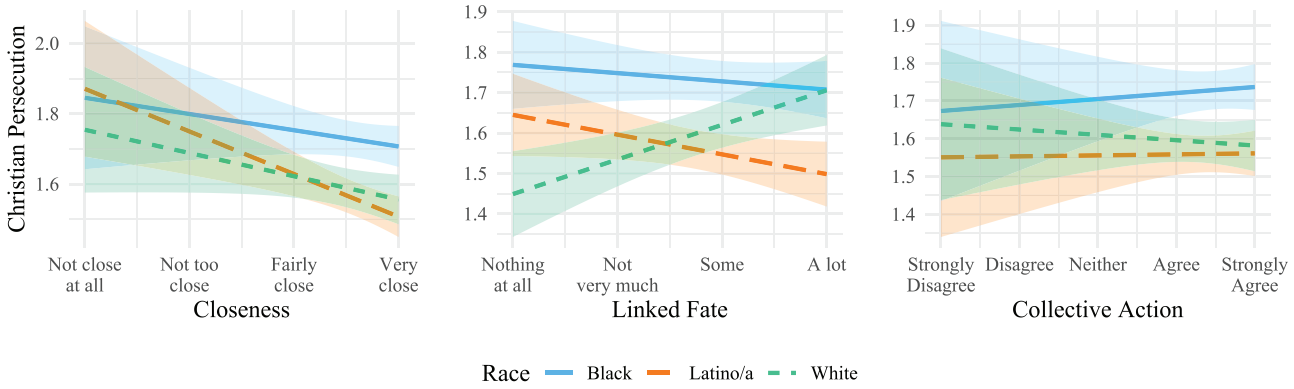

FIGURE 1 | Relationships of racial social identity with CPBs by racial group. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

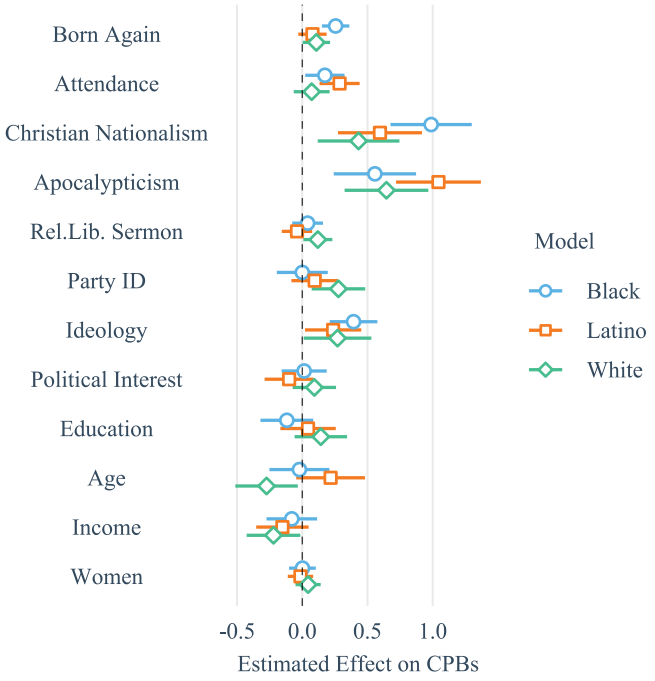

FIGURE 2 | Predictors of Christian persecution beliefs by racial group. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

$p < 0.001$) respondents, but again the effect sizes are virtually indistinguishable from each other; it's not significant for Whites.

There is somewhat more variation in the effects of religious worldviews. Christian nationalism and apocalypticism have the strongest relationships with CPBs in the model by far. While it's clear that Christian nationalism is linked to CPBs generally, those relationships are stronger for Latino ($b = 0.596$, $p < 0.001$) and Black respondents ($b = 0.988$, $p < 0.001$) than for White respondents ($b = 0.435$, $p = 0.007$). Apocalypticism likewise has a large effect, though in this case, it's Latino respondents who get the biggest bump in CPBs ($b = 1.044$, $p < 0.001$), with apocalypticism having a slightly smaller relationship among White ($b = 0.645$, $p < 0.001$) and Black ($b = 0.557$, $p = 0.001$) respondents (these differences by race are not distinguishable).

Finally, distinct religious contexts could contribute to CPBs. Local religious contexts can be important sites for information dissemination, and religious contexts are significantly segregated by race. Given the tight link between religious liberty claims and beliefs about Christian persecution, the survey asked respondents if they had heard their pastor address religious liberty or religious freedom within the past year, and there were some minor differences across racial groups—23.2% of White, 20.8% of Latino, and 18.3% of Black respondents said that their pastor had addressed religious liberty recently. For White respondents, these sermons are associated with slightly higher CPBs ($b = 0.119$, $p = 0.035$), but they have virtually no relationship with CPBs for Black or Latino respondents. Again, the effect sizes cannot be differentiated. Taken together, we find only quite modest evidence to conclude that CPBs are linked to different religious identities, practices, or contexts for White, Black, and Latino Americans.

Do CPBs predict race-based interests? Next, if CPBs are racialized, adherents should be applying them in ways that maximize the interests of their racial group. Christian persecution rhetoric has been linked to the idea that Christians need protection from governments threatening religious freedom (Lewis and McDaniel 2023), so we asked respondents about their support for religious exemptions from requirements to serve gay/lesbian people and to serve people from another racial group.[6] Respondents who believe Christians are being persecuted are significantly more likely to believe that religiously-inspired discrimination against gay/lesbian people should be protected ($b = 0.153$, $p < 0.001$) and that religiously-inspired discrimination against people from other racial groups should be protected ($b = 0.076$, $p = 0.025$). As Figure 3 demonstrates, these effects are nearly identical for our three racial groups. This isn't too surprising when it comes to LGBT service exemptions—opposition to same-sex marriage is present among Christians, regardless of race. What is surprising is that CPBs are linked to increased support for exemptions for denial of service based on race *in identical ways for Black and White respondents*. One other item of note—the range of these two variables on a 5-point scale is relatively similar. Given the strong norms against explicitly racist speech (Bhat and Klein 2020), it is possible that respondents are reacting to the religious liberty dimensions of these scenarios. Ultimately, Christian respondents are not providing evidence that their CPBs are shaped by racial considerations.

How are CPBs related to racial persecution beliefs? Finally, CPBs do not influence perceptions of racial persecution in racialized ways (see Figure 4). Instead, CPBs are linked to a higher

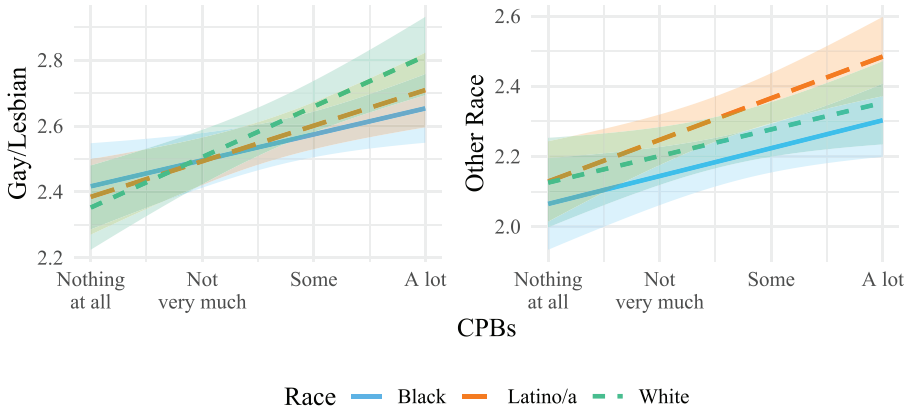

FIGURE 3 | Link of CPBs to support for religious exemptions to serving someone based on sexual orientation and racial differences. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

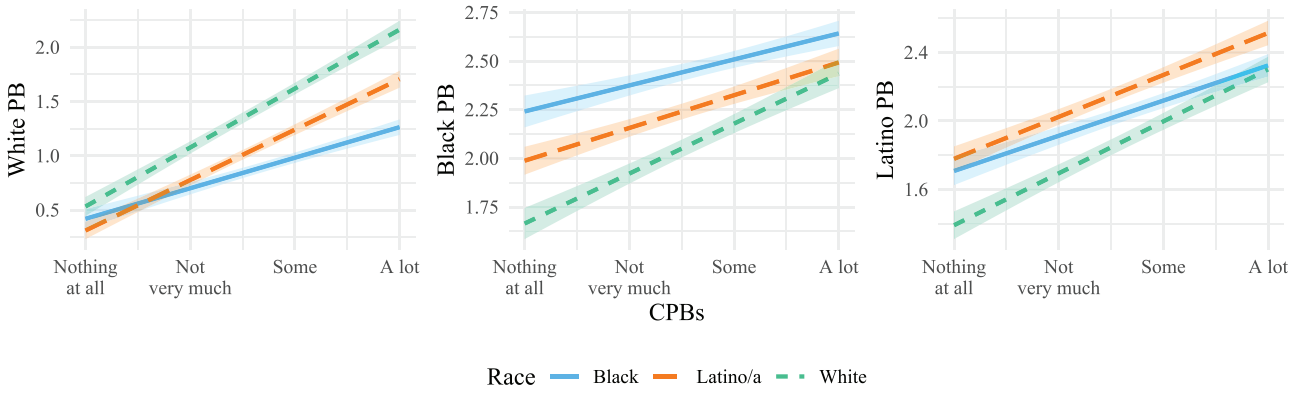

FIGURE 4 | CPBs are linked to racial persecution beliefs across racial groups. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

perceived discrimination against other racial groups ($b = 0.543$, $p = 0.000$ for White PBs; $b = 0.257$, $p < 0.001$ for Black PBs; $b = 0.303$, $p < 0.001$ for Latino PBs). Perhaps most noteworthy is that CPBs are linked to elevated threat perceptions most strongly for White Christians, and *White Christians high in CPBs (versus low) see more persecution of Black and Latino Americans*. Essentially, the language of rights—a sort of political Esperanto (Jelen 2005)—may be making White Christians sensitive to discrimination faced by racial others.

4 | Conclusion

Events and elites have conspired to elevate the idea that Christians are being persecuted and certainly will continue to be if they do not reestablish control. As a result, Christians feel persecuted, and this sense of persecution transcends racial boundaries. Instead of signaling White racial identity, we find that racial groups do not associate CPBs with closeness to their racial group, linked fate, or the need for racial collective action in ways strongly reflective of their racial group status. The same religious variables (born-again identification, attendance, Christian nationalism, and apocalypticism) are related to CPBs in roughly the same ways for Black, White, and Latino Christians. All Christians, regardless of racial group, appear to use CPBs to protect their religious group interests (even when doing so jeopardizes their racial group interests). They even appear to extend their sense of minority Christian status to greater reporting of persecution faced by other racial outgroups.

These findings are all starkly in contrast with what would be expected if CPBs were simply coded for White persecution (Al-Kire et al. 2024; Perry 2023). Moreover, they contribute to the new literature on decreased attitude distinctiveness across racial divides (Sides and Tesler 2024), including the ability of CPBs to bring select racial minorities into a conservative coalition (Brooks 2024). Ultimately, it is no longer wise to assume that racial group identities and interests alone drive attitudes—religion matters, too.

We acknowledge that these conclusions are based on a sample of Christians and therefore recommend future projects to assess the extent to which persecution beliefs operate in similar ways among non-Christians. We don't have measures of Christian social identity constructs (closeness, linked fate, collective action), but we strongly encourage the collection of this data alongside racial group identity measures. And though we find Black, Latino, and White respondents have only slightly different levels of exposure to the topic of religious liberty through sermons, we would recommend that future work dig into the content of sermons on religious liberty to explore *how* clergy are discussing religious persecution and religious liberty. Moreover, the extent to which individuals exhibit traits of group victimhood and therefore perceive high persecution levels of all groups is worth further

exploration. It is important to move beyond beliefs and attitudes to continue to examine responses to elites making CPB claims (see Al-Kire et al. 2024) that may be conditioned by CPB dispositions. That the perceived fiery furnace forges equivalent persecution beliefs across racial groups is notable, and future work should subset samples to one racial group only with great caution.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge our anonymous reviewers whose feedback improved this manuscript.

Endnotes

[1] Listen to the Charismatic Revival Fury podcast, linked here: https://icjs.org/charismatic-revival-fury/

[2] Christians were identified through a yes/no question that identified many other monikers for Christian religious families. See the Coding Appendix for complete details.

[3] Because our dependent variables are not continuous, we also ran them using ordered logit. The results are substantively similar so we reported the more parsimonious OLS results.

[4] Note for all figures: Source is the September 2022 Survey. Full results are available in Tables S2–S4. Confidence intervals are 95%.

[5] As additional evidence that our measures of closeness, linked fate, and collective action measures are valid, we also asked respondents how much discrimination there is against Whites, Blacks, and Latinos. All of these racial group identity variables are linked to perceptions of racial discrimination exactly as expected. See Figure S1 for more detail.

[6] These questions were asked next to each other and the group being discriminated against was bolded: "Allowing a small business owner in your state to refuse to provide products or services to [**people of another race/gay or lesbian people**], if doing so violates their religious beliefs."

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting Figure 1: Predicting the perceived persecution levels faced by racial groups using racial closeness, linked fate, and collective action. **Supporting Table 1**: Summary Statistics. **Supporting Table 2**: OLS Results of CPBs Behind Figure 1. **Supporting Table 3**: OLS Results of CPBs for Figure 2. **Supporting Table 4**: OLS Results of Service Refusals (Figure 3) and Other Racial Group Persecution Beliefs (Figure 4).