

Q&A: Researchers discuss how claims of anti-Christian bias can serve as racial dog whistles

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In a speech to a group of religious broadcasters in February, Donald Trump promised to create a task force to counter "anti-Christian bias," which he said would investigate the "discrimination, harassment and

persecution against Christians in America."

It's not the first time Trump has claimed that Christians are being persecuted, and he's not alone. As more politicians repeat these statements, researchers from the University of Washington have investigated whether anti-Christian [bias](#) claims can also be used as a racial dog whistle to signal allyship with white Christian Americans.

A dog whistle is coded language used in political messaging to garner support from a particular group by indirectly communicating about race. For example, the phrase "welfare queens" was popularized during Ronald Reagan's first presidential campaign to refer to individuals perceived as abusing the welfare system. The term was disproportionately associated with Black, single mothers, allowing politicians to disparage a marginalized group without directly mentioning race.

The UW study, [published](#) in *Psychological Science*, showed that white and Black Christians perceived a politician concerned about anti-Christian bias as caring more about anti-white bias, being more willing to fight for white people and as less offensive than one concerned about anti-white bias. Black Christians—but not white Christians—saw a politician distressed by anti-Christian bias as less likely to fight for Black people.

The researchers also found that reading about anti-Christian bias led white Christians—but not Black Christians—to perceive more anti-white bias. Together, these results suggest that talking about anti-Christian bias can provide a more palatable way for politicians to signal allegiance to white people.

To learn more, UW News spoke with corresponding authors Clara Wilkins, a UW associate professor of psychology and Rosemary (Marah)

Al-Kire, a UW postdoctoral research fellow of psychology, about their work.

What interested you about this area of research?

Marah Al-Kire: Most previous research on racial dog whistles has focused on dog whistles that communicate Blackness, but there's not much that looks at indirect language that can communicate whiteness. One line of Clara's research focuses on how and why [high-status, majority groups claim discrimination](#), like men who claim bias against men and white people who report anti-white bias. Especially in the current political climate, we were interested in whether these bias claims, such as talking about anti-Christian bias, were inadvertently communicating something about race.

For example, we saw Donald Trump use Christian symbolism during the George Floyd protests when he had a photo op holding a Bible, which was a signal of Christian nationalism. We know that Christian nationalism—the belief that the United States is and should be a Christian nation—is highly associated with racialized attitudes, even though the items we use to measure it make no direct mention of race. The connection between white and Christian in the United States is pervasive. If I was talking about anti-Christian bias, it also triggers perceptions of anti-white bias because people make an automatic connection between "white" and "Christian."

Clara Wilkins: If you look at which group most strongly endorses the ideas of Christian nationalism, [it's white evangelical Christians](#). It's not a thing among all Christians; it's a subset. For example, [Marah and co-author Michael Pasek have research](#) showing that people who endorse Christian nationalism have negative attitudes toward immigrants and refugees, and our colleague Sam Perry finds a similar association with [anti-Black attitudes](#). So clearly, there is a connection between race and

religion that hasn't been explicitly studied.

One of the things that causes Christians to see themselves as victimized is perceived social change. We know that perceptions of bias against Christians have [been increasing over time](#), and so have politicians' claims of the need to protect religious freedom. There seems to be an implicit racialization of religion, where politicians are using claims of religious persecution as racial dog whistles.

Why does anti-Christian bias work particularly well as a racial dog whistle?

MA: One reason is how perceptions of Americanness are tied to race. [Past research has shown](#) that white people are seen as more American. But we're also currently finding evidence to suggest that "Christian" is operating in the same way that "white" is. If you think about the Christian symbols that you see, Jesus is portrayed as white even though realistically, that's not what Jesus would look like. At a cultural level and with historical iconography, there is a tight connection between whiteness and Christianity. In the United States, there is also a deeply rooted history of white supremacy within Christianity.

CW: There are many examples of [historic racialization of Christianity in the US](#). For example, slave Bibles—Bibles created specifically for enslaved populations—excluded portions that talked about liberation, books like Exodus, and instead focused on submission to authority. Many Confederate generals were ministers. Christianity has played a central role in the rationalization of racial subjugation in the American context.

One thing we write about in the paper is the fact that the United States was founded on the premise of religious freedom. Protecting a core

value sounds great, right? It's a lot more acceptable than a politician saying that they're really looking out for white people, but our research suggests that is what people hear.

The paper features several quotes from Donald Trump. Can you explain how politicians like Trump use anti-Christian bias claims to appeal to their base? What can voters watch for as we approach the 2024 elections?

MA: People should pause and think about what politicians are saying, like bias against Christians and Christian-related issues, and what people are actually hearing. We couldn't demonstrate intent in the paper. We were just focusing on what people hear. Someone like former vice president Mike Pence, who is obviously very religious, is probably actually trying to talk about anti-Christian bias. But inadvertently, especially among white voters, he's signaling a commitment to them as well. Our study shows that when you describe anti-Christian bias, white people perceive anti-white bias. Black people do not do that. But Black people still recognize that it's a dog whistle.

So even though Black people aren't saying that anti-Christian bias means anti-white bias, they still assume that politicians are using it strategically. From a politician's standpoint, if you're trying to appeal to communities of color—and a lot of Black communities are highly Christian—you're still inadvertently signaling a lower commitment to Black communities.

CW: We've been working on this research for years, and the original draft of the paper didn't open with Trump quotes. This is a pattern of increasing claims of anti-Christian bias that has been going on for a while and Trump just jumped on the bandwagon. That said, our research doesn't speak to whether Trump understands these patterns, but I

imagine one thing he does know is that white evangelical Christians are among his most fervent supporters, which I think is likely due to appointing three conservative Christians to the Supreme Court and overturning *Roe v. Wade*.

Trump says he's not racist, but he uses a lot of racist language. In our society, being called racist is basically one of the worst things you could be called, right? So how does a politician create a racial appeal without saying something like "White people need to band together?" That's the extreme. Far right politicians can do that, but mainstream candidates can't. Our paper shows that a politician can communicate racial concern by claiming anti-Christian bias.

Other co-authors were Chad Miller, UW doctoral student of psychology; Samuel Perry of the University of Oklahoma; and Michael Pasek of the University of Illinois Chicago.

More information: Rosemary L. Al-Kire et al, *White by Another Name? Can Anti-Christian Bias Claims Serve as a Racial Dog Whistle?*, *Psychological Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/09567976241236162](https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976241236162)

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