In his provocative book *The Decline of the Secular University*, John Somerville urged scholars to engage in the critical study of secularism in the same way analysts of religion have studied (primarily) Christianity. When I wrote *The End of Secularism*, I responded specifically to Somerville’s call. What is secularism? What case would its advocates make for it? Does that case stand up? Can we say anything about secularists as a group? Can their program be seen as something more than simply a proposed service to humanity? In other words, are secularists working toward that which they find comfortable as much or more than they are working toward the betterment of mankind?

George Yancey and David A. Williamson take the project of studying secularists to a new level. Referring to their class of subjects as “cultural progressives,” the pair of sociologists gathered an impressive amount of qualitative research on the nature of individuals who ardently oppose the “Christian right.” By treating those who wish to confine and reduce Christian influence as subjects of analysis in the same way that has been done to Christian activists, the investigators break up some of the “gorillas in the mist” aura around religious conservatives. It turns out that everyone can be studied and have their motives carefully parsed.

The results of their study are interesting. In some ways the survey data reinforce what you always knew about cultural progressives. They see themselves as the guardians of reason over against the knuckle-dragging primitives who continue to arrange their lives around an arcane book. But there is much more to be said. For example, the authors noted that cultural progressives tended to be whiter, wealthier, better educated (in terms of academic degrees),
and more male than the populace at large. I found myself thinking of Hugh Hefner with a master’s degree.

Their feelings about members of the Christian right could be received largely as an indictment of Christians (as was the intention of the *UnChristian* book which looked at young people a few years ago), but their responses could also serve as grounds for criticism of the progressives. Certain themes in the comments aimed at members of the Christian right emerge. It turns out that some cultural progressives are so offended by the presence of Christian conservatives, they would likely move from a neighborhood where they were aware of their presence. The attitude bears a strange resemblance to that of whites who fled the presence of African-Americans in the neighborhood. In addition, many cultural progressives responded to questions about positive attributes about their opponents by saying that they could not risk saying anything good about them. The virtue of intellectual charity appears to be almost entirely absent. Of course, that is the nature of the dispute, is it not? If one feels that he is battling with benighted morons just a few clicks from burning witches, then it may be expected that the level of enmity would be so great.

The authors hasten to explain that they have not produced a probability study. In other words, the respondents were not sifted out from a massive random survey. Rather, the authors approached culturally progressive organizations with many members and asked for their help in finding participants for their written questionnaires. The questions were open-ended, which allowed those who replied to be highly specific about their thoughts and feelings. In order to distill the responses in a way that is manageable for readers, the authors chose the responses which were the most articulate and representative for direct presentation. However, they used all of the responses from over 3,500 survey takers in their work of classification. While one might complain that the answers are from self-selected individuals, the criticism can be blunted by the fact that the authors did not seek to take the temperature of Americans at large. Rather, the thrust of their effort was to gain information from those Americans who feel most strongly that the Christian
right must be stopped, contained, and marginalized. For that type of study, the methodology employed works well and, as the authors point out, is highly likely to be reinforced by further studies.

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