

BOOK REVIEW

**So Many Christians, So Few Lions:
Is There Christianophobia in the United States?**

by George Yancey and David A. Williamson

Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, 207 pages.

Even though, *So Many Christians, So Few Lions: Is There Christianophobia in the United States?* was published 6 years ago, if anything, its findings have become even more relevant today. Yancey and Williamson have done a great service by introducing the notion of Christianophobia, which they define as “an unreasonable hatred and fear of conservative Christians” (12), into the social science literature. Specifically, their meticulous research shows that Christianophobia is prevalent among the well-educated, political progressive segments of American society. This is worth highlighting, because it flies in the face of the generally held view about the tolerance of this group. But here a reminder needs to be stressed. According to Yancey and Williamson, Christianophobia should not be construed as being directed at all Christians, but only at fundamentalist Christians, because the qualitative part of their study showed that hostility toward non-fundamentalist Christians was negligible.

It is an understatement, then, to say that Christianophobia does not bode well for reconciling the cultural/religious and political polarization that characterizes the United States today. In fact, had this hostility (even though reported as mostly verbal) been directed at Blacks, Hispanics, Feminists, Native-Americans, (add your own group), it would have caused an uproar. Still, even without an outcry against it so far, Christianophobia can only add to polarization because of the effects prejudice and hostility have when aimed at conservative Christians, a large segment of the U.S. population.

What truly amazes me, though, as someone who is well-educated and firmly on the left politically, is that Yancey and Williamson found enough empirical evidence for a separate chapter on the presence of “dehumanization” (seeing an outgroup as nonhuman) toward fundamentalist Christians. Although fundamentalist Christians are not literally the targets of extermination or “religious cleansing,” still it is discomfiting, to say the least, that a group of people valuing social justice with whom I identify, would express such contempt for a group with whom they disagree. Indeed, some respondents in the authors’ sample found it inconceivable that someone with any intelligence could even hold Christian beliefs. “Indoctrination” and “brainwashing” were the terms most often used to describe fundamentalist Christians and by extension, all Christians.

What is clear from this work is just how much the hostility toward fundamentalist Christians is related to the fact that political progressives simply do not understand Christianity. We can blame this on the media, which has misinformed the public about Christianity (and this includes the right-wing media), but we also need to focus on the finding that those most prejudiced have had very little contact with fundamentalist Christians. Here, unfortunately, given the high education level of those sampled, the authors are correct in saying that more education, which has always been seen as a panacea for lessening prejudice and hostility, needs to be re-thought.

In this, I am reminded of my own experiences with prejudice and hostility toward a minority group or “other.” On the infamous 9/11 day, when the planes struck the twin towers in New York City, I was teaching, as I am today, at George Mason University. Mason has been known for the diversity of its student body and has been ranked in the top five in this category for decades, having some of the largest populations of Muslim students among universities in the United States. On the days and weeks following 9/11, student bodies at colleges and universities around the nation engaged in all sorts of anti-Muslim demonstrations. At George Mason, the largest public university in the Commonwealth of Virginia, which had over 30,000 students at the time, there were none. If anything, the students sought to help their Muslim brethren ward off the hostility they were encountering outside the university. Although it may be a simplistic analysis on my part, I cannot help but attribute this to the fact that our students did not see an “other,” but saw their fellow students as fellow human beings.

I want to reiterate that the introduction of the term “Christianophobia” in *So Many Christians, So Few Lions* was sorely needed, and the authors deserve immense credit for calling attention to this problem. The research in this book “illustrates the existence of anti-Christian hostility in a way that no previous academic work has done” (13). However, although I have always been critical of reviewers who want the author or authors of the work they are reviewing to write the book they would have written, I still have some minor reservations about the book. First, I feel that Yancey and Williamson should have written a book that is more accessible to the general public. This, I feel, is a major reason that Christianophobia is not discussed and condemned enough. There is a real need to show that there is hostility toward Christians. Second, I cannot help feeling that the authors, although they claim they are aware of the different views of Christianity (Christians are far from a monolithic or homogeneous group), by their use of the term Christian instead of conservative or fundamentalist Christian, add unnecessary confusion to the problem. For example, they point out that those who stereotype Christians “fail to comprehend the diversity among Christians and develop a tenuous stereotype” (4). But then they write: “It may be more accurate to talk about anti-conservative Christian hostility. But we see little value in ignoring the simpler term of anti-Christian as long as the reader remembers that, generally, the animosity documented in this work is more likely to be felt by conservative, as opposed to moderate or progressive Christians” (4-5). Because the

main audience for this work is other sociologists and other academics, this may very well be the case, but given the way general public discourse, as filtered by the popular media, tends to lump all Christians together, the distinction between fundamentalist Christians and non-fundamentalist Christians can easily be lost. Put simply, what is needed is an analysis of Christianophobia that does not inadvertently lump all Christians together.

The degree of “hatred” against conservative Christians is real, and Yancey and Williamson are to be acknowledged for pointing this out. But this is only a beginning. There is still much work to be done and this needs to be stated in terms that everyone can understand. It is time for sociologists to stop speaking just to sociologists and other specialists if we want to make a dent in the hostility toward Christians in America. We sociologists must now make our findings accessible to more than just our colleagues. As educators and Christians, we have an obligation to do just that. Yancey and Williamson have taken the first step. This step must now become part of a path to tolerance not only toward Christians, but also expanded to all those who are seen as the “other.” Too much is at stake to do otherwise, because it is no small statement to say that our democratic way of life hangs in the balance.

In conclusion, *So Many Christians, So Few Lions* clearly makes a strong and much needed contribution toward our understanding of what is going on today concerning the role of Christianity in the United States. In particular, I would call attention to how the national media (without any evidence whatsoever) has referred to the January 6, 2021 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol Building as Christian-based. This makes it even more obvious that the Christianophobia to which Yancey and Williamson have alerted us, is an ongoing aspect of our polarized nation. And this fact needs to be publicized at every opportunity if something is to be done to eradicate this prejudice. Any minor concerns I have expressed about the book should in no way detract from the needed message it presents.

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