

If only you were more educated, then you would agree with me

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I was sitting with a woman—a Mainline Christian woman—and we were chatting about my background. I explained to her that my family is politically and theologically conservative but that I had changed many of the views that I grew up with as a young adult. She shook her head, sighed, and said, “Well, people just need more education, that’s all.”

It’s a common mistake that progressives make, but I really wish we would stop it. More education did, indeed, make me become a more progressive Christian. But I always cringe when I hear progressives say, “Well, they just need more education” when it comes to political, sexual, or theological issues. Why?

•**We are assuming that conservatives are uneducated, and that is not true.**

We

are way past the point in our country when we can make those assumptions, and it’s naïve to do so. In D.C., there are plenty of conservative religious think tanks, with highly skilled and educated men and women who have been pumping out articles for decades. But I cannot think of many progressive religious think tanks. Only a few come to mind. Please correct me if I’m wrong about this...but religious progressives seem to be woefully inadequate in this area.

•**When we assume conservatives are uneducated, that makes us arrogant and unattractive.** I write for the [Huffington Post](#),

and often, when I put up a positive article about religion, inevitably a rash of atheists will break out to tell me how unintellectual I am. The logic is that if I were educated or if I were an intellectual, then I would think like they do.

Does this make me want to run out and join the Dawkins book group? No, it does not. It just makes me roll my eyes and think rather poorly of atheists. Which is too bad, because I rather like the atheists that I know in real life. I am not anti-intellectual, anti-science, or anti-education, and false assumptions that I am are annoying.

We do the same thing as progressives. Imagine a Midwesterner who went to work as a car mechanic instead of going to college, because he realized that he could make a whole lot more money as a mechanic in his town, and come out with a whole lot less debt. Would it be attractive to him if we said to him, “If you had an education, you would think like us”? No, it would not. We need to begin to accept people for who and what they are. We don’t need to go around imagining that if they would better themselves than they would look like us.

•If we really believed it then we would be better at resourcing education.
If you’re a church professional who has been to seminary, it’s easy to find wonderful, scholarly work on all sorts of areas that are important to progressive ideals.

If you want to hand something to your members, if you want to *educate* them, you’re out of luck. I often hear people on Twitter asking, “Does anyone know of a progressive resource for (fill in the blank—marriages, same-sex partners, parenting, finances, devotions)?” And then the only response is “if you find out anything, can you let me know?” When I bring this up to people who might provide the resources (scholars, publishers, etc.), they say that they don’t want to “dumb down” their material. They are providing resources for a scholarly audience.

The problem with this idea is that the people in our pews are not dumb, they are just not educated in the same things that we are. I could not pick up a biology textbook and get much out of it. Why do we expect that the biologist in our pews should have to pick up a theological text, written for a handful of people at AAR and expect to understand it? Why do we expect that mechanic—who can fix my car when I have a difficult time finding the dipstick—to understand it? Sometimes the books only seem to be written so that other scholars can check the index to find out if their names appear in it.

When I met a representative from our denominational publisher, the first thing he told me was, “We would never publish one of your books.” It was a strange thing for him to say, since I had never sent in a proposal or even made an inquiry. I mean, to get a rejection out-of-hand like that seemed odd.

I laughed and said, “Why?”

He answered, “Because we only publish scholarly work.”

On one hand, it felt like a personal rejection that I’m still reeling from a couple years later (I’ve told the story countless times to others who have received rejections). But on the other hand, it was a clear statement of strategy on behalf of our denomination and its publishing that had nothing to do with me, personally. And so it also made me wonder a deeper “why.”

If we believe so much in education, if we believe that it is transformative, why aren’t we providing education for anyone but those who are already highly educated?

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