

Why I hate "hipster Christians"

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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I attended a fundamentalist Bible college when I wandered into the church down the street. They had the most engaging Sunday school teacher who was writing a book on being disappointed with God. I was full-on fed-up with God, so I joined the class.

He had just started contemplating another book on the life of Jesus. He showed us movie clips and compared them to different versions of the Bible. Right before he slipped in one video tape, he said, "The best thing about this video tape, is the hair." As soon as he hit play, the class burst out in laughter, because the clip was from *Godspell* and our teacher was [Philip Yancey](#). He was sporting a 'do that would make Malcolm Gladwell envious. It would have fit in well on [this](#) poster.

I tell this story to give you a bit of perspective on Yancey. He's funny. He's a man of particular style who doesn't take himself too seriously.

I didn't talk with him much but I introduced myself and told him where I was going to school. I did it with my usual embarrassment. He picked up on my discomfort immediately and said, "It's okay. It's a good place to start. Just keep going." The words became important, as an acknowledgement of the goodness of my past and a blessing for my journey.

So, I've kept up with Yancey's work over the years and I read [his post](#) about a new genre of Christian writing: "Christian Hip." I laughed because I've been called a Christian hipster many times. I have been told during conference planning, "We invited you so that you could represent the hipster crowd," and then I feel like I need to get some other clothes. I can't imagine why people would think I speak for the hipsters. I serve traditional Presbyterian Churches. I leave the house looking like Anne Taylor threw up on me just about every day. Is it because I love AT? No, I'm just that boring.

I wore a retro sort of dress one time and Lauren Winner complimented me by asking, "Do you have an 'in' at a thrift store?"

I embarrassingly muttered, “No... it’s new.” So not hipster.

I worry about the word. Why would I be described by a word that doesn’t fit? And now some people will be thinking, *hipsters never want to claim that they’re hipsters*.

But I hate the “hip Christian” genre because it feels like the term is subtly being used to dismiss fresh voices, as an eye-rolling othering of people who are younger. (Although most of us aren’t that young any more.) I’m not saying that Yancey is doing this. As I mentioned earlier, he doesn’t take his own appearance seriously. But I do hope that his genre suggestion stops with his post.

Hipster reflects a certain age group. When we speak of different generations, we use terms—geezer, hippie, slacker—as pejoratives. It can be a way of belittling people, putting them in another category so that they aren’t taken seriously. The “hipster” label feels like that.

Hipster points to a certain style. We know the style because we saw the white, golden-haired hipster Jesus, donning a snap-button plaid in Times Square on the [cover of Newsweek](#) a couple of years ago.

But we can use the hipster label to reject people before they can reject us. Like we may have shunned jocks and cheerleaders in high school before we ever got to know them.

Referring to age or style just isn’t helpful, any more than referring to a woman as “the one with the great legs” would be in a professional setting. It diminishes people. We have different identifiers for Christian authors—reformed, social-gospel, neo-orthodox, liberal, evangelical, progressive, social justice, etc. But none of them reflect Rauschenbush’s clothing or Barth’s haircut.

Yes, there is a new chorus of voices in Christian publishing, but can we refrain from assuming that they’re all Portlandia characters? Can we describe them in a way that reflects some theological depth or that we’re able to look past a person’s tattoos and actually understand what the book says?