

Students' religious self-identifications

Which religious labels do devout students at Christian colleges self-identify with?

The students were asked “do you think any of these phrases describe you?” and they were presented with a randomized list of 16 labels. They had the option to say yes, uncertain, or no

There were two labels they commonly embraced. Eighty eight percent self-identified with the label “Bible-believing” and 73 percent self-identified with the label “born again.”

There were two additional phrases that had a majority identify with them. Fifty seven percent self-identified with the label “evangelical” and 54 percent said yes to being contemplative.

Three more labels had roughly 40 percent of the students self-identify with each of them: seeker, traditional, and theologically conservative.

None of the other labels had more than about a quarter of the students self-identify with it.

There are a couple of particular findings worth noting within that general pattern. First, if there is a group of people out there who adopt the popularly discussed phrase “spiritual but not religious” it is not the devout students at Christian colleges. While it has been suggested that young adults today are unwilling to self-identify with being religious or organizationally connected to religion, the over 4000 traditional aged full-time students at Christian colleges who took the survey clearly are willing to say they are religious.

Second, these students are also not willing to self-identify with either the “religious right” or religious left” labels. Common media references to the “religious right” as a political entity in the United States may effectively describe some group, but it is not the students who are attending Christian colleges. In fact, if we also consider these students' consideration of the phrases “theologically liberal” and “theologically conservative,” we see that the only phrase that has a notable percentage of the students self-identify with it is “theologically conservative.” Even then, only 38 percent accept the label theologically conservative, 36 percent are ambivalent about it, and 25 percent do not accept that label for themselves.

In sum then, students at Christian colleges in the United States embrace the self-identifications “Bible-believing” and “born again” and do not accept the phrase “spiritual but not religious” as an accurate description of themselves. They also do have some willingness to indicate that they are theologically conservative but they do not identify themselves as part of the “religious right.”

Data Collection

In the spring of 2013, students at 13 Christian universities from across the United States were invited to complete a half-hour on-line survey that asked about their spiritual background, spiritual lifestyles, scripture engagement, love of and relation to God, love of others, and their Christian identity.

4,210 traditional-age full-time students participated. Responses to the survey were weighted for proportional representativity of gender and year in school.

Christian College Students' Religious Self-Identifications (percentages)

