

From Christian militias to Christian drug gangs

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

July 2, 2010

I have mixed feelings about media-criticism blog [GetReligion](#). Its journalist-bloggers do fine work [hunting religion ghosts](#) in the mainstream media's work, and they provide much-needed [fact checking](#) in those articles that *do* get into faith. But some of their smaller-bore critiques get tiresome—fussing about headlines [here](#), copyediting published articles for style [there](#).

[Here](#),

however, I share Terry Mattingly's strong reaction to a style issue: "I have seen some wild religious labels in my decades on the Godbeat, but I have to say that 'Christian fundamentalist narco-gang' takes the cake." He's referring to a recent *Time* [article](#) on La Familia Michoacana. The infamous Mexican meth gang calls itself Christian. So should *Time* do so as well, without qualification? What's in a label?

To

move the question from the newsroom to the church: Just how big is your tent? When it comes to challenging someone's claim to the word "Christian," we mainliners are often as reticent as news journalists (though for different reasons). But if a gang of hyperviolent terrorist-thugs can be Christian, what's the word worth anymore?

The *Century* [editorialized](#) on this question in connection with the Hutaree militia story this spring. And, speaking of stylebook fussiness, see [my post](#) on scare-quoting "Christian."