

Being 'Christian' in Western-Europe

A closer look into 'nominal', 'cultural' and 'committed' forms of Christian identity

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Introduction

According to the Pew Research report, *Being Christian in Western Europe* (2018), 49% of Western Europeans are non-practicing Christians (defined as 'rarely or never attending church services'), 22 percent are regular church attendees (minimum once a month), 24 percent are religiously unaffiliated, and 5 percent follow other faiths.

In many European countries the 'non-practicing' make up more than half of the population.

The Pew Report presents a picture of non-practicing Christians as compared to practicing Christians and seculars, in terms of beliefs, social values and political stance. In this lecture, I will present some findings, and comment on the method and the definitions used.

So-called non-practicing Christians are part of a wider and much more complex phenomenon called nominal Christianity. It can take several forms. The basic characteristic is a discrepancy between people's Christian identity and their commitment to that identity.

The Lausanne Consultation on Nominalism in Rome 2018 was devoted to the definition and the many forms of nominality, as well as to help Churches and mission take up the challenge of connecting with 'nominals'.

In the second part of my lecture, I will pay attention to this consultation, by focusing on the problem of definition and how to measure nominality. The subject-matter of this lecture issue dealt with in *Vista*, the e-magazine for *communicating research and innovation on mission in Europe*, published by Redcliffe College in Gloucester, Issue 31, 2018/4.

Vista is a highly valuable resource for anyone interested in the Europe as a context for Churches in mission. Information and subscription: <https://europeanmission.redcliffe.ac.uk/>

'Being Christian in Western-Europe'

Pew Research Center, April 2018

Contemporary Christian beliefs and behaviours in Western Europe are rarely researched beyond the national level. To address this knowledge gap, Pew Research conducted 24,599 telephone interviews in 15 countries between April and August 2017. Additionally, 12,000 'religiously unaffiliated' individuals (atheists, agnostics, and people with 'no particular view' - or 'nones') were interviewed and their attitudes and practices also recorded. A comprehensive 156-page report was published during May 2018.

The report introduces several new indices that measure New Age engagement, religious commitment, and attitudes regarding nationality, immigration, and religious minorities

Four religious categories

Definitions and criteria for 'mapping'

Definition of 'Christian': self-identification with Christian faith and/or Church

Pew Research

The researchers of Pew do not use the terms secular or secularized, nor the term nominal Christianity. Instead they distinguish four categories, using two parameters 'religious affiliation' and Church attendance

- Non practicing Christians
- Church attending Christians
- Other religions
- Religiously unaffiliated ('nones')

Research concentrates on two categories of Christians in comparison with 'nones'

More parameters

Section 3. Religious practice and belief

To provide a fuller picture of religious commitment across the region, researchers analyzed four standard measures of religious belief and practice together as an index:

- frequency of attendance at religious services,
- frequency of prayer,
- belief in God.
- degree of importance of religion in the respondent's life

Attendance:

Relatively few adults in Western Europe participate in religious activities. For example, across the 15 countries surveyed, a median of 22% say they attend religious services at least once a month. By comparison, regular religious service attendance is much more common in some other parts of the world with large Christian populations, including Africa, Latin America and the United States, and it is somewhat more common in Central and Eastern Europe.

Belief in God:

Despite these low levels of religious practice, most people in the region say they believe in God (58% median), although few say they believe in God with absolute certainty (15% median). Elsewhere around the world, considerably higher shares say they believe in God with absolute certainty, including in sub-Saharan Africa (median of 89%), the United States (63%) and Central and Eastern Europe (median of 40%).

Other parameters:

The survey also asked about several other religious practices, including praying, sharing religious beliefs with others and donating money to religious organizations. Another parameter is how important religion issue for daily life – e.g. in the moral choices that one makes.

These practices are also relatively rare across Western Europe.

Overall index of religious commitment

Overall index of religious commitment

These four standard measures of religious observance – worship attendance, prayer, belief in God and importance of religion in one's life – were combined into an overall index of religious commitment. Using this index, researchers categorized respondents into three groups: high, moderate and low levels of religious commitment.

To be counted as showing a high level of religious commitment, a respondent had to report at least two of four highly observant behaviors or beliefs – attending religious services at least monthly, praying at least daily, believing in God with absolute certainty or saying that religion is very important to them.

Those in the low commitment group, on the other hand, said at least two of the following: They seldom or never attend religious services, seldom or never pray, do not believe in God, or consider religion “not too” or “not at all” important in their life.

People with other combinations of responses – for example, those who say they attend religious services once or twice a year, pray once or twice a month, believe in God and are fairly certain, and consider religion somewhat important to them, or those who show mixed levels of observance across the measures (such as praying daily and attending religious services monthly but saying religion is not important in their lives and that they don’t believe in God) – were categorized as having a moderate level of religious commitment.

Three groups or levels of religious commitment

- High
- Moderate
- Low

Outcomes

On this index, Portugal is the most religiously observant country in Western Europe, with more than a third of Portuguese adults (37%) showing high levels of religious commitment. Some other predominantly Catholic countries, including Italy (27%), Ireland (24%) and Spain (21%), also have relatively large shares of highly observant people. At the other end of the spectrum, just 8% of adults in predominantly Protestant Denmark are highly religious, and three-quarters of Swedes show low levels of religious commitment.

Overall, women and people ages 55 and older are more likely than men and younger adults to display high levels of religious commitment.

Switching

Percentages of affiliation are not static!

- Continual ‘switching’ from practicing to non practicing ‘Christian’, and to ‘non religious’
- Also switching in the other direction

France: 8% of those who have been raised religiously unaffiliated say that they are now Christian.

Across Europe, the number of former ‘nones’ who have embraced Christianity varies from 10 to 12 percent.

My comments:

- The Report does not go into the similar phenomenon: non-practicing Christians becoming committed to the faith (in France: *les recommençants*)
- Interesting comparison with figures of switching from and to Islam.

Questions

Darrell Jackson, Vista, Issue 31, September 2018

Different conversations, in terms of ‘nominality’ (Lausanne), in terms of ‘secularisation’ and in terms of ‘religious affiliation and practice’ (Pew). How do they relate? Do they provide the same information?

The report makes important comparisons for missionaries bound for Europe from the USA. These are valuable, and, for example, Pew researchers note that 53 percent of Americans say that religion is important to them whilst for WEs the figure is a mere 11 percent. Missionaries from the USA must adjust assumptions and normal expectations when talking to people about faith and belief.

Even where we might struggle with a non-practicing Western European's claim to Christian identity, we need to take such claims seriously and discern what meaning is attached to such self-descriptions. Working with such expressions of implicit faith is a necessary skill for the missionary in Western Europe.

It is fair to ask: If the Pew report is correct, how can missionaries from the irreligious Netherlands do mission in the highly religious context of Portugal? This context will impact on how they do mission, sometimes with negative consequences.

One might suggest that because the Netherlands is the only Western European country where 'nones' (48%) outnumber 'Christians' (41%) and where 40% of people have a negative view of religion, it is time for missionaries to turn their attention to the Netherlands as a mission-receiving field rather than Portugal, Italy, Spain, or France!

A national or cross-cultural worker might wisely reflect on how to build connections to the 65% of WEs who believe they have a soul, particularly to those who say they are either religious and/or spiritual, for whom the level of belief in a soul increases to between 75-85 percent. Identifying the potential for such connections is a particular strength of this report and there are probably other leads that lie waiting to be discovered.

Although 36 percent of WEs are involved in a sports club, only 31 percent of highly committed Christians are similarly engaged. In contrast, 39 percent of the 'nones' are involved. If Christians want to meet non-believers, they will need to get a lot fitter and take up sorting activities to meet them! This is especially true for the soccer-mad (and Roman Catholic) European nations like Spain and Italy. Regular church attendance is almost certainly the constraint on regular involvement in sport or recreational activities for highly committed Christians. Even cross-cultural missionaries are prone to making similar mistakes.

Idea of nominality – descriptive or normative approach

Evangelical point of view: a 'non practicing Christian' is a contradiction in terms

Idea of nominality

Discrepancy between stated Christian identity and commitment to that identity

Terms

Nominal, unchurched, unaffiliated / chrétiens sociologiques / cristianismo sociológico, cultural / Namenschristen, Kirchenferne / niet meelevende of randkerkelijken.

Descriptive and sociological approach (e.g. Pew Research).

- Usually based on criteria of affiliation and Church attendance.
- Or three B's, believing – belonging – behaving
- Discussion between Grace Davie (believing without belonging)

et Danièle Leger-Hervieu (belonging without believing)

et Alain Bilings (behaving without belonging)

Normative approach (e.g. LCWE). 'Nominal' opposed to 'authentic'/'true'

Global Consultation on Nominalism

Of the Lausanne Movement, Rome, March 2018

Idea of nominality

Difference of terminology between Pew Research et al., and LCWE

Recall: idea of nominality

Discrepancy between stated Christian identity and commitment to that identity

Lausanne has a normative approach, 'nominal' opposed to 'authentic'/'true'

Question of definition and discerning different forms of nominality

Current negative definitions. A nominal “Christian” =

- Not affiliated
- Not practicing (in terms of Church attendance)
- Not converted
- Not committed (in terms of discipleship)

These definitions are insufficient (1+2) or too judgmental (3+4)

Parameters of being Christian

Three B’s give a more complete picture, but even they are not sufficient

- Initiation (how does a person become a Christian)
- Faith (spiritual experience, meaning, believing in)
- Beliefs (knowledge, believing that)
- Church attachment
- Church participation, celebration of festivals
- Spiritual life (practice of piety)
- Public practice (witness, Christian conduct in daily life in society)

What is/are the decisive parameter(s)?

- For becoming a Christian – the decisive factor is a personal choice
- For being a Christian – all seven parameters are important

Descriptive definition

The qualification nominal, ‘in name only’, is appropriate when the discrepancy amounts to a more or less permanent contradiction with the name one bears.

Proposed description of ‘nominality’:

Church members and unaffiliated people identifying themselves as ‘Christian’, who are in contradiction with basic principles of being Christian, with respect to becoming a Christian, faith, beliefs, church involvement and daily life.

See the Final Statement of the Rome Consultation on Nominalism, LCWE 2018

Several configurations

The myth of ‘the’ nominal Christian

Several possible configurations

- Churched and nominal
- Marginal church membership
- Parallel Christianity
- Unaffiliated yet identifying as Christian
- Dechurched (from historical and from Evangelical churches)

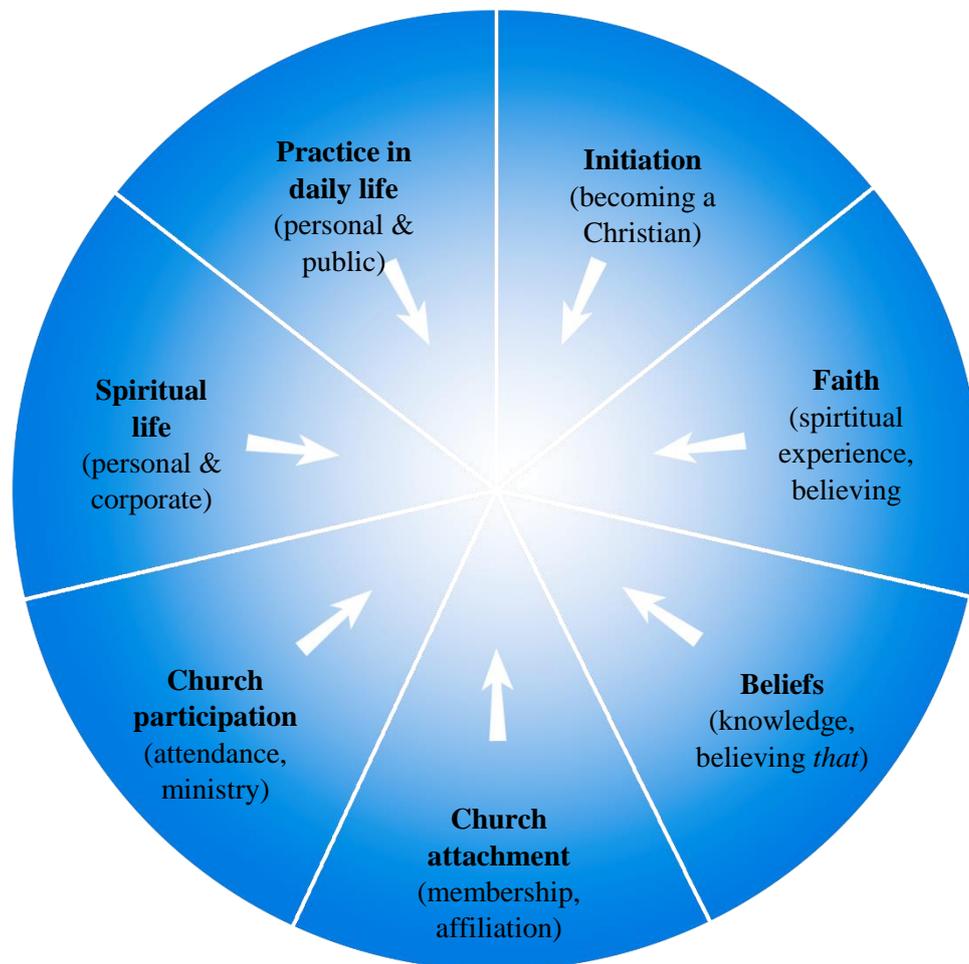
Connecting with Nominals (Lausanne Consultation)

‘Measuring Nominality’

Recognising that nominality is a complex phenomenon, the following diagram attempts to bring together the seven parameters of nominality that Evert van de Poll has proposed with the Centred-Set perspective of Hiebert and others. In this schema the outside of the circle corresponds with an engagement “in name only” whereas the centre in each and every case represents maturity in Christ, a commitment to full and deepening engagement in following Christ.

We might imagine a questionnaire (or even an app) that might enable a nominal Christian, or someone in conversation with them, to measure themselves in each of these dimensions. Likewise, we might consider what activities or processes contribute to moving towards the centre (the arrows) to counteract the nominalising forces which act in the opposite direction.

Rather than categorising nominals, this approach invites us to think how we might take advantage of whatever positive engagement a nominal Christian might already have and seek to encourage them to develop this further or in another parameter.



All of the above is an underdeveloped idea at this stage but it would provide a practical outcome from the consultation that goes beyond the statement and the call to action.

Jim Memory 22nd March 2018

Pastoral and evangelistic dimensions

Invitation

God continually invites all people to a deeper faith in Christ and a growing commitment to follow Him (*Statement to the Churches on Nominality*, LCWE, 1998).

Lausanne Rome Consultation Statement

The Missing 'Christians': A Global Call...

The Lausanne Rome 2018 Statement on Nominal Christianity

A CALL TO CONFESSION AND PRAYER

1. Overlooking nominal Christians, in society and in evangelical churches.
2. Faltering witness, defective discipleship, and lack of concern ...
3. 'Quick to judge and slow to listen' ...
4. Actions, attitudes, and structures that weaken the credibility of the Church

We call all churches everywhere to pray for nominal Christians

A CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP AND WITNESS

1. Prioritize a holistic discipleship...
2. Proclaim the biblical gospel with clarity, but always attending to the context...
3. Plant new churches and work for the renewal of existing churches

A CALL TO REFLECTION AND ACTION

1. Why people have distanced themselves from various forms of Christianity...
2. Historic and contemporary renewal and disciple-making movements with respect to awakening dormant Christian faith.
3. Thorough review of theological training, ...centered on discipleship and mission...
4. ...and leadership training...
5. Focus on authentic discipleship....
6. Creativity in evangelism, discipleship, and forming new Christian communities