



Nominal Christianity and Contemporary Europe

NOMINAL CHRISTIANITY — A TYPICAL EUROPEAN PHENOMENON
EVERT VAN DE POLL

One of the most striking aspects of the socioreligious context of Europe is the high proportion of so-called nominal Christians. These are people who are affiliated to a Church and/or identifying as 'Christian' in surveys. They only occasionally, or never, attend a Church service, and many of them do not believe in a personal God, let alone in Jesus Christ as the unique Saviour of mankind.

Despite the declining influence of the Church in society and increasing secularisation, many people across Europe still maintain some sort of link with the Church as an institution, or with the Christian religion. In most countries this is more than fifty percent of the population.

From the point of view of Gospel communication and church development this is an extremely important aspect of the European context. For all the missiological

emphasis on reaching out to the completely secularised and creating churches for the unaffiliated or unchurched, we easily overlook the fact that the majority of the European public has not severed all links with the Christian faith.

The idea of nominality

To begin with, the term 'nominalism' can be misleading, since it also refers to a philosophical school of thought. With respect to religious identity and practice, it might be better to use the term 'nominality' instead.

Alternative terms are 'cultural', 'notional', 'de-churched' and 'unchurched' Christians. In French-speaking countries, the standard term is *chrétiens sociologiques* (sociological Christians) which has the same connotations as 'cultural Christians' in English. Similarly, the Spanish speak of *cristianismo sociológico* or *cultural*. Germans speak of *Namenschristen* ('Christians in name') or *Kirchenferne*

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EDITORIAL

Growing Up Nominal

Of course I didn't realise it at the time, but I was raised as a "nominal Christian".

My mother was a disillusioned and non-practising Irish Catholic; my father was "C of E" but rarely showed his face at the local parish church. I was christened and went to the local Church of England Aided Primary School but there was no Christian practice at home: no prayers, no Bible-reading (in fact I am not even sure there was a Bible in the house) and no conversation about spiritual things.

When I finally met a believing Christian in my early teens I can distinctly remember thinking: "These guys talk about Jesus as if he was still alive, not like the dead Jesus they have taught us about in school". It was the start of my journey into faith in Christ and the turning point in my life.

This issue of Vista tackles the complex issue of Nominal Christianity. The lead article by Evert van de Poll provides a description of the phenomenon and traces its essential parameters. We then reproduce the Lausanne Statement on Nominal Christianity which resulted from a consultation in Rome 2018.

Darrell Jackson reviews the Pew Research Center's report "Being Christian in Western Europe" and René Breuel writes on the vital importance of visual metaphors for initiation into Christian faith. Lastly, an article by Jo Appleton draws on insights from three participants in the Rome Consultation who write about Nominal Christianity from Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox perspectives.

Jim Memory

which could be paraphrased as 'peripheral' or 'marginal Church members'. This is in fact the precise meaning of the Dutch equivalent *randkerkelijken*.

Whatever the terminology, there is always the idea behind it that something is lacking, that something is not as it should be. This is what we call the idea of nominality. It can be described as the discrepancy between a stated adherence to a faith and a committed application of that faith. This discrepancy can be observed in all religions, but it takes various forms. 'The' nominal Christian does not exist. In real life, there are *many* ways in which people can be at variance with the Christian identity they claim. 'Nominal' is a technical term, that is collectively used for a variety of phenomena.

While social scientists try to refrain from giving a value judgment when they analyse forms of nominal Christianity, mission researchers and theologians usually qualify these as deviations from normality, in opposition to another, perhaps truer or more authentic form of Christianity.

How to define nominal?

Where exactly do we draw the line between authentic and 'in name only'? It is virtually impossible to give one precise definition of 'a nominal Christian' that will satisfy everyone who uses this term. It all depends on the criteria that are being used. Social scientists usually look at the frequency of Church attendance, but things become complicated when they take in account other indicators such as beliefs or 'how much does your religion mean to you'.

In Church and mission circles, 'nominal' is often defined by way of negation, of something that is lacking. 'People who are called Christian, but...' Of course, everything depends on what comes after 'but'. Let me mention four negative definitions that are often used:

1. '...not affiliated.' Some statistics use the criterion of church membership. Nominal Christians, then, are those who identify as Christians in surveys or in conversations, without having a link with a Christian community or institution. While this approach makes us attentive to forms of Christian faith outside the institutional Church, it overlooks the possible discrepancies between Christian identity and commitment within the Church.

2. '...not regularly going to



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Church.' Socioreligious studies often use this criterion of attending a Church service, to distinguish between nominal and practising Christians. Usually the line between the two categories is drawn at once a month on average. Obviously, this approach is limited because commitment to the Christian faith implies much more than attending church services.

3. '...not converted (born again).'

In Evangelical circles, this is a classic criterion. Dramatically put, if a person has not entered the fold in the proper way, he really does not belong with the sheep, even though he might go to Church very often and behave very much as a Christian should. This approach leads to a 'true versus nominal' discourse that sometimes goes as far as implying that nominal Christians are not really Christians at all. When conversion is defined in an Evangelical way, this discourse creates the impression that 'true' equals Evangelical, leaving all the rest of the Christian population as nominals needing to be converted. There is also the risk of an exclusive attitude towards other expressions of Christian faith.

4. '...not committed to discipleship.' Some Evangelical authors describe nominality in terms of superficiality, of Christian confession and church membership without Christian discipleship. This approach leads to another kind of 'true versus nominal' discourse. Contrary to the preceding one, it does not deny that nominals can be real Christians who have obtained salvation. Its emphasis is instead on spiritual growth and a

commitment to living out one's Christian faith on a daily basis.

While it is understandable that church leaders are concerned about the quality of the Christian life among their membership, there is a risk of overemphasising the sanctification aspect of the Christian faith, at the expense of other aspects. Moreover, we do not think it is justified to disqualify everyone who does not meet the standards of discipleship as 'nominal', a Christian 'in name only'.

Parameters of being Christian

All negative definitions are problematic for two reasons: by concentrating on what is lacking they do not say much about the 'nominals' themselves. Moreover, they are too general because they focus one criterion, or perhaps two. But being a Christian implies more than going to Church, more than being born again, more than the practice of discipleship. It implies all that plus other aspects as well.

In social science as well as in practical theology, it has become customary to summarize all these aspects in the three Bs of believing – belonging – behaving. But even these are imprecise and insufficient. With respect to believing, we should make a distinction, as theologians have always done, between believing 'in' (having faith in God) from believing 'that' (having faith convictions). Belonging stands for belonging to a Church, but when it comes to that, we should distinguish affiliation or Church membership from actual participation in the life of a Church. Obviously, the two do not always go together.

Where do we draw the line between authentic and 'in name only'? It is impossible to give a precise definition

Behaving, finally, refers to religious practice. This can mean the spiritual life of a believer (prayer, inner life, spiritual development) as well as a believer's witness and conduct in the public sphere, in society. Not covered by the three Bs is yet another aspect, namely initiation, the technical term for becoming a Christian. This has to do with Christian education, conversion, baptism and so on.

On the basis of these considerations we would suggest the following seven aspects or parameters of being a Christian:

- 1) Initiation (how does a person become a Christian)
- 2) Faith (spiritual experience, meaning, believing in)
- 3) Beliefs (knowledge, believing that)
- 4) Church attachment
- 5) Church participation
- 6) Spiritual life (practice of piety)
- 7) Public practice (witness, Christian conduct in daily life in society)

Decisive parameters?

Do all these parameters have the same importance? The answer depends on whether we are talking about *becoming* or *being* a Christian. Theologically, in the so-called order of salvation, initiation comes first and the other aspects follow. In real life, we see that some people already participate in Church life, adopt a Christian behaviour, pray, read the Bible, and adhere to Biblical beliefs, before they actually come to the assurance of salvation and 'take position' as a Christian.

As for *becoming* a Christian, this is a deliberate life-orientation, an initial choice in the process of turning to God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. This can be sudden and

instantaneous, but it can also be progressive, spread over time; as the fruit of a thoughtful and assumed assimilation of a Christian education. The technical term is conversion, but language in which people express this can vary, as it depends very much on their Church context. It is accompanied by a public confession of faith, often linked with baptism, but not necessarily so.

When it comes to *being* a Christian, this is an intention, an orientation, a continual choosing with respect to all the aspects of the Christian life. Functioning as a member of a community of believers. Holding to the true doctrine of the faith, practising piety, having a personal relationship with God, the transformation of our life, our daily conduct, our discipleship. Didn't the apostle James say that faith without works is dead? In the final analysis, all aspects are important and decisive. So, we should consider them as parameters of being Christian, in a comprehensive way.

Ideally, all the aspects go together, but this is often not the case in real life. To be strong in one area of religiosity does not guarantee that a person will be strong in other areas. Inconsistency may be evident in any one of the parameters of being Christian.

Some believe that Jesus died for their sins without belonging to a Church, or without attending Church services. Others in turn are Church members but do not adhere to the major Christian doctrines. Or they will not abide with Biblical norms and values. And then, when it comes to belief, this can mean an affective relationship

with God for some, while for others it is more a matter of convictions, or of agreement with the teaching of the church.

Proposed description of 'nominality'

We would suggest that the qualification nominal, 'in name only', is appropriate when the discrepancy amounts to a more or less permanent contradiction with the name one bears. So here is our 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.*

This description takes up the parameters of being Christian that we have listed above. It can help us to measure nominality in specific areas, and help people move closer to Christ in that area.

A person could be called nominal in the area of becoming a Christian when there is no faith response to God's offer of salvation through Jesus Christ, no confession of the faith in God and the lordship of Jesus. Someone who holds views that contradict the clear teaching of the Bible, such as a denial of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, can be called nominal in the area of beliefs.

Are we saying, then, that someone who shows one or more contradictions is not a Christian? No, all we are saying is that such a person is a 'nominal' Christian.

Invitation

Definitions and characterisations of the various forms of nominal Christianity are helpful to better understand the people concerned, but we want to move beyond statistics and analyses and connect with them, meet them where they are – outside and inside the church communities – and encourage them to come closer to Christ in areas where they might be 'far off'. (See above for the parameters of being Christian). A keyword is *invitation*. God continually invites all people to a deeper faith in Christ and a growing commitment to follow him.

Evert Van de Poll is Professor of Religious Science and Missiology at Evangelical Theological Faculty, Leuven and a pastor with the French Baptist Federation.



Processions of images of Jesus, Mary or Christian Saints are common in many Mediterranean countries

The Lausanne Global Consultation on Nominal Christianity was held in Rome, Italy on 14-18 March 2018. What follows is the full text of the **Lausanne Rome 2018 Statement on Nominal Christianity**, issued after that consultation.



Lausanne Global Consultation
on Nominal Christianity

Something has gone terribly wrong. One third of the world call themselves 'Christians', but a significant proportion of them are missing. Many of them are missing from our churches. Many others are present, but are missing out on the joy of truly knowing and following Christ. Something has to change! Mission to nominal Christians is too often missing from the agenda of the global church and its leaders.

PART I

Responding to the biblical mandate to communicate and to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ, forty theologians, missiologists, social scientists, and mission practitioners from all regions of the world have come together in Rome for a renewed focus on the key topic of Christian witness among nominal Christians. We have done that in 'the Lausanne spirit' of prayer, study, partnership, hope, and humility, and with a renewed sense of the urgency to fulfil the task that the Risen Lord has given his church.

In approaching our task, we built on the rich evangelical heritage of the Lausanne Movement with *The Lausanne Covenant* (1974), *The Manila Manifesto* (1989), and *The Cape Town Commitment* (2011) as the three foundational documents. In previous documents and gatherings, the Lausanne Movement already reflected on the missional challenges of nominal Christianity as it relates to Roman

Catholics, Orthodox, and Protestants. We now take these reflections further with a view to the current situation, and by including nominal Christianity as it relates to evangelicals.

Being aware of the danger of superficiality and over-simplification, we have chosen a fresh approach from the three different, yet interrelated, perspectives of social science, theology, and missiology.

From a *sociological* point of view, the phenomenon of nominal Christianity is often described negatively in terms of Christians who are not affiliated, not practising, not converted, or not committed. The fundamental limit of these markers is that they are all defined by negation. The aspects of believing, belonging, and behaving suggest that the following dimensions might be used as parameters:

1. Initiation (becoming a Christian);
2. Faith (spiritual experience, believing *in*);
3. Beliefs (knowledge, believing *that*);
4. Church attachment (membership or other affiliation);
5. Church participation (attendance and ministry);
6. Spiritual life; and
7. Practice in daily life (personal and public). These parameters may then be used to evaluate orientation and direction of travel towards or away from maturity in Christ.

Pulling these threads together, nominal Christians can be described as follows: *People who identify with a Christian church or the Christian faith, but*

are in contradiction with basic Christian principles with respect to becoming a Christian, faith, beliefs, church involvement, and daily life.

Theologically speaking, while the name 'Christian' was already in use during New Testament times, it later became the self-designation of the followers of Jesus. Interweaving different biblical threads about the identity of being a Christian, *The Lausanne Covenant* refers to a person with the following characteristics:

1. Faith in the historical, biblical Christ as Saviour and Lord;
2. Repentance towards and reconciliation with God;
3. Commitment to discipleship in following Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit: denying self, and taking up the cross;
4. Incorporation into Christ's community, the local church; and
5. Engaging in responsible service in the world for Christ.

Conversion to Christ is fundamental to Christian faith. Without repentance and faith in him, turning from sin, trusting him alone for our salvation and transformation, and obeying him as Lord, there is no authentic Christianity. How to relate conversion to Christ to the ordinances (sacraments) and the participation in the church is a matter of ongoing discussion even amongst ourselves as evangelicals.

From a *missiological* standpoint, a fundamental observation is that nominal Christianity is more of a problem when Christianity finds itself

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in a dominant or a majority situation, especially when Christian faith so shapes culture that there is a confusion about the nature of one's identity. Nevertheless, the reality is that nominal Christians may be found in every congregation, every denominational tradition, every theological stream, every generation, every cultural context, and every diaspora people.

Furthermore, nominal Christianity may take different shapes in majority Protestant, Catholic, and Eastern and Oriental Orthodox contexts, and in places where Christians are a minority. It is also shaped by culture, race, and generation. We realize that the missiological challenges of reaching out to nominal Christians with the gospel of Jesus Christ also apply to situations and contexts where evangelical Christianity is a majority or a significant presence in society. This is true in the West as well as in the Global South, and in historic churches as well as in younger ones, including immigrant churches and people on the move. We also realize that nominal Christianity has contributed to a negative reputation of the Christian church, including such demanding realities as secularization, moral confusion, racism, colonialism, and prosperity theology.

Therefore, the task of 'bearing witness to Jesus Christ and all his teaching, in every nation, in every sphere of society, and in the realm of ideas' is no less urgent in nominal Christian contexts. The first point of the Lausanne fourfold vision—'the gospel for every person'—applies equally to those who carry the name 'Christian' but have never truly understood or welcomed 'the gospel of God's grace' (Acts 20:24). We renew our commitment before God to be humble witnesses to Christ and courageous agents for this task of bringing home the missing Christians for the global church and for the glory of God.

PART II

A CALL TO CONFESSION AND PRAYER

As individuals and as representatives of our church communities:

1. **We confess that, all too often, we have overlooked the nominal Christians in our midst,** both in the broader society and in many of our own evangelical churches.

2. **We confess our faltering witness, our defective discipleship, and our lack of concern** for those who bear the name of Christ but through ignorance, sin, or rejection are far from the way of Christ and his church.

3. **We confess that we have often been 'quick to judge and slow to listen' to the stories of nominal Christians,** especially when they come from another church tradition than our own.

4. **We confess that—at times—our actions, attitudes, and structures have weakened the credibility of the church of Christ.**

We call the churches we represent and all churches everywhere to:

1. **Pray for all those who are Christians in name only** that they might come to a saving faith in Jesus Christ.

2. **Pray for a spiritual awakening of nominal Christians,** a strengthening of the weary and struggling, and a renewal of our commitment to disciple all those who bear the Name.

A CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP AND WITNESS

Recognising the commandment of Jesus to make disciples of all peoples, we urge our church communities to:

1. **Prioritize a holistic discipleship** that brings all believers to maturity in Christ.

2. **Proclaim the biblical gospel with clarity and boldness** but always attending to the context so that the message of Christ is properly understood.

3. **Plant new churches and work for the renewal of existing churches;** churches that embody the joy of the gospel, that reflect the character of Christ in their community life, and display the power of the Spirit in transformed lives, to the glory of God.

A CALL TO REFLECTION AND ACTION

We also call for profound reflection and determined action to seek and save the missing millions, those who are missing from our churches and those who, whilst present, are missing out on salvation and the fullness of life in Christ.

This must involve:

1. **An honest and widespread reflection on why people have distanced themselves from various forms of Christianity** (Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant/Evangelical), coupled with further theological research as to the possible contribution of contemporary evangelical theology and practice to self-secularisation and nominality and how it might be prevented.

2. **A research initiative on historic and contemporary renewal and disciple-making movements** that might inspire a new generation of leaders that can be used by God to awaken dormant Christian faith.

3. **A thorough review of theological training** to ensure that it is faithful to Scripture, theologically sound, and centred on discipleship and mission, but also to ensure that it includes sociological tools to understand nominal Christianity and how literature, the arts, media, and technology can be used to build bridges for the gospel.

4. **A parallel review of leadership training** to ensure that leadership is focused on mobilising the young and empowering lay ministry, and to discern toxic leadership patterns that may be contributing to nominal Christianity.

5. **A renewed focus on authentic discipleship** on living holistic lives centred on Christ that demonstrate in word and deed the love of God in the midst of the contemporary challenges of our global world today.

6. **A commitment to creativity** in our evangelism, in our discipleship, and in how we go about forming new Christian communities, that the missing sheep might hear the call of the Good Shepherd and turn again to Christ.

The Steering Committee of the Lausanne Global Consultation on Nominal Christianity consisted of Jean-Paul Rempp, France (Chair); Leonardo De Chirico, Italy; Jaume Llenas, Spain; Argyris Petrou, Greece; and Lars Dahle, Norway.

For further information see www.lausanne.org/gatherings/global-consultation-nominal-christianity or email nominalism@lausanne.org

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 in May 2018.

The report introduces several new indices that measure New Age engagement, religious commitment, and attitudes regarding nationality, immigration, and religious minorities (indices that echo Vista's 'Nova Index of Secularisation in Europe', or *NISE*, featured in our October 2010 edition).

In describing Western Europeans, Pew's researchers distinguish between several population categories: the baseline 'Western Europeans' (or WEs), the 'religiously non-affiliated' (or 'nones'), non-practising or non-attending Christians, church-attending Christians (or the 'religiously observant'), and the religiously committed. It's important in

reading the report to make sure that these categories are understood correctly. At times they appear to be used interchangeably or in ways that do not make the distinctions very clear. With this minor caution noted, it's time to dip into the riches of the report.

What's known about the prevailing beliefs of Western Europeans?

According to the report, 71 percent of WEs identify as Christian, though only 16 percent attend church at least monthly. Christian identity remains a meaningful marker for the individual – even where it might not mean what an evangelical missionary means by it. The report demonstrates that WEs are predominantly 'non-practising Christians' with 80 percent saying they know about Christianity and its practices, a clear contrast with the two out of every three WEs who profess ignorance of Islam and Judaism.

Belief in God is claimed by 58 percent of WEs, although only 15 percent claim to do with absolute certainty and only 15 percent believe in a biblical God. Half of these, or 29 percent of WEs, understand God as primarily 'all-loving'. Notions of God as judge, all-knowing, or all-powerful, are

far less commonly held by WEs. However, two-thirds of WEs believe they have a soul and 40 percent believe in an afterlife.

Just over one in ten Europeans describes themselves as 'spiritual', although a quarter claim to be both religious and spiritual (among whom are doubtless many of the church-attending Christians). Of those who self-identify as spiritual, two-thirds believe in a higher power or force. Only 12 percent of these believe in God as described in the Bible. However, they are more likely to engage in New Age, Eastern, or folk religions, fear the 'evil eye', practise yoga as a spiritual practice, and believe in reincarnation, horoscopes, tarot cards, and the abilities of fortune tellers.

Western Europeans are predominantly non-practising Christians: 71% identify as Christian but only 16% attend church

Whilst only 8 percent of WEs try to persuade other people to adopt their religious views, a more significant 24 percent give money to their church. This

reflects their generally positive assessment of the role of religious institutions in society: helping the poor and needy, bringing people together, strengthening community, and, for some, strengthening morality in society.



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What do we know about the religiously unaffiliated (the 'nones')?

The 'nones' are typically younger, more highly educated, and disproportionately male. Two thirds of them say they were baptised and raised as Christians, gradually drifting away for various reasons, including the church's negative stance towards homosexuality, abortion, or scandals within the church. Consequently, very few of them ever attend a religious service. It is this population group that is of interest to scholars of nominal belief and practice in Europe, who are likely to describe this group using the alternative definition of 'nominal'.

Intriguingly, just under one third of the 'nones' say they believe in 'a higher power'. This slice of the atheist/agnostic pie interested the Pew researchers, who labelled them 'religiously unaffiliated believers'. They are highly likely to believe that they have a soul and less likely than other 'nones' to express anti-religious attitudes. They are also more likely than Christians to engage in alternative New Age or other spiritual practices.

'Nones' are much more likely to be found in Protestant countries than in Catholic countries and being raised as a 'none' makes it highly likely that one will die a 'none'. Encouragingly, some people raised as 'nones' do embrace religious identity and/or practice later in life. Across Europe, 17 percent of the former 'nones' have embraced some form of religious affiliation (identity, non-attending, or attending and believing).

Identifying non-practising (or 'non-attending') Christians?

For this report, Pew researchers defined the category of 'non-practising Christian' by identifying individuals who no longer attend church services ('non-practising') but who retain religious beliefs that were sufficiently orthodox to be described as

Intriguingly, a third of "nones" still believe in "a higher power" and are likely to believe they have a soul

'Christian'. Across Europe, non-practising Christians outnumber the 'nones' although a majority say they are neither religious nor spiritual! They tend to believe in God (or a higher power), to be more positively inclined towards religious institutions, and favour legal abortion and same-sex marriage. A majority say they are raising their children as Christians but insist that religion should be kept out of government policy.

The non-practising Christian is described by Pew researchers with reference to religious belief, views about the place of religion in society, and views about national identity, immigration, and religious minorities. (Vista's editors note with some measure of satisfaction, that these are themes that Vista has constantly kept in view from the first edition).

When can a Western European be considered a Church-attending Christian?

Perhaps frustratingly for an evangelical mission or church leader, church-attending Christians are predominantly to be found in the traditionally Roman Catholic countries of WE. Moreover, on the Pew measure of religious commitment (measuring frequency of

attendance, frequency of prayer, the degree of importance of religion, and personal belief in God), the most religiously committed, on this index are Portugal, Italy, Ireland, and Spain. The least observant are the UK, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Denmark and Sweden. A neutral observer with limited knowledge of Protestant evaluations of Roman Catholic Christianity might wonder why missionaries from the latter countries are being sent to the former(!).

When Pew measured for the highest level of religious commitment (by an individual scoring two from four of the following list: attending church at least monthly, praying daily, belief in God with certainty, and religion being very important to them), it's clear that most Christians in WE show only moderate to low levels of religious commitment. Despite this, they are more likely than others to report that God rewards, punishes, communicates, and interacts with them. At least half of these believe in a biblical God.

The Pew researchers highlight the very strong link between religious observance (not just identity) and civic participation. This results in highly committed Christians also being involved in charitable, voluntary, and community groups and activities. It's possible that this spills over into their increased likelihood of expressing nationalist views and saying that ancestry is key to national identity. It may also be connected to the fact that they are more likely to express negative views of Muslims, Jews and immigrants, than do the 'nones', and are more likely to describe immigrants from Africa and the Middle East as neither honest nor hardworking.

Only 11% of Western Europeans say religion is important to them

What questions does the Report raise for missionaries serving in, and sent from, the countries of Western Europe?

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 expectations when talking to people about faith and belief.

Even where a missionary, or church leader, might struggle with a non-practising Western European's claim to Christian identity, there remains the need to take



such claims seriously and to discern what meaning is attached to such self-descriptions. Being comfortable in working with such expressions of implicit faith is a necessary skill for the missionary in Western Europe. The report shows clearly that there are many WEs for whom Christianity serves as a religious, social, and cultural marker. Accepting this need not imply a negation of the evangelistic motivation, but it might require a revision of evangelistic assumptions.

Occasionally people ask how a missiologist can write about Europe from an office in Sydney. It's a fair question, but it's also fair to ask, 'How can a missionary from the irreligious Netherlands do mission in the highly religious context of Portugal?' Of course, my Australian context inevitably influences how I engage with Europe. Equally, a Dutch missionary, shaped by his or her Dutch irreligious context (if the Pew report is correct), will be deeply influenced by this and it will impact on how they do mission among the highly religious Portuguese, sometimes with negative consequences. In fact, 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!

An effective 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 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.

A final observation – Sport!

My co-editors will probably smile with me making this point! Although 36 percent of



Football and faith in action: 5-a-side tournament held inside Gloucester Cathedral, 2018

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 sporting 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 a constraint on regular involvement in sport or recreational activities for highly committed Christians. Even cross-cultural missionaries are prone to making similar mistakes. Pew's researchers note the tendency for friendship circles to largely include people with a similar religious identity: 'nones' hang out with 'nones'; church-attending Christians with other church-attending Christians, for example.

Making social connections no doubt contributes to the report's observation that, for example, in France, 8 percent of those who have been raised religiously unaffiliated say that they are now Christian. This is encouraging. Across Europe, the number of former 'nones' who have embraced Christianity sits in the region of 10 to 12 percent.

Darrell Jackson is Associate Professor of missiology, Morling College, Sydney. Responses are welcome at darrellj@morling.edu.au

EMERGING INTO ADULT FAITH

RENÉ BREUEL

The sun shines. The lake glimmers. This summer, like summers past, a new kind of faith will emerge from the waters. Personal faith, wet and fresh. To me, the Christian practice of baptism assumes a special resonance it marks a transition into an adult kind of faith.

In our context in Rome, Italy, believer's baptism has a counter-cultural ring. Most people here are baptized when they are infants. They are born into the faith, a family faith that incorporates them also into the faith of a large segment of society. Each person's faith is of course expected to

mature through catechism and confirmation. Yet by baptizing infants, the sacrament works like a rite of passage into family, into society, into life. Things change when a forty-year-old emerges from the waters. It's personal. It's confessional. It's sensitive and awkward, in a beautiful sense. To me, at least, it feels different to infant baptism: a rite of passage emerging from that person's own volition. He or she owns the faith. "I believe," they say. "I embrace this God and all the consequences of this path for myself." Actually, each person articulates their story and confession of faith with remarkable eloquence. Baptism becomes an act that ushers that person to

deliberate faith — a rite of passage into the faith itself.

Adult or personal faith is, of course, a product of more than a rite of passage. It blossoms also when people are encouraged to read the Bible and think for themselves. But in my experience, baptizing people as confessing believers makes a large difference. It crystallizes something that can feel abstract into a moment embedded in nature and surrounded by the community. It grants a visible, public starting point for the journey of faith.

Jesus himself, when talking about being born again, recognized how the experience of conversion needs pictures.

It can be airy and enigmatic; it's hard to get a handle on it. Sometimes it feels like it's coming from nowhere, like the wind that rustles a pile of paper. *Precisely*, implies Jesus. The experience of faith can startle like a breeze's unexpected touch:

The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit. (John 3:8 TNIV)

That's how it feels when someone comes to know God: like the wind you can't see or explain but which still touches you. Even Jesus had to reach for metaphors: to awake to God is like being born, it's like the wind, it's like dying and rising again. We need a visual for that: it's like submerging the old self in the waters and rising anew to a life with Christ.

At our community, we make it a point to take this visual aspect seriously. Many churches hold baptisms indoors using a tub or baptistry. We prefer to embed it in early summer splendour. We drive to a lake outside of Rome every June. We sing songs, each person shares their story, and is baptized in the lake. Then we celebrate with a picnic — and popping champagne bottles — that lasts until late in the afternoon.

Watching an adult get baptized was so touching, many started to wonder about their own lives too



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Part of me feels like downplaying this rite of passage. I can begin to think all that matters is the day-to-day journey. Or I remember that the outer ritual is meaningless without inner faith.

But every year those who will get baptized remind me of the importance of the rite of passage too. Many tell of how their faith journey started one year before, precisely when they came for the first time for a friend's baptism.

To watch an adult get baptized was so vivid, so touching, that they started to wonder about their own lives too, and lo and behold, one year later here they are being baptized. Each generation transmits that image of faith to the next. Each generation shows to the next what an adult, or personal, path of faith can look like.

René Breuel is the author of The Paradox of Happiness: Discovering Jesus' Call to Fullness of Life (2013), editor of wonderingfair.com and founding pastor of a church in Rome.

NOMINALISM IN PRACTICE

JOANNE APPLETON

The history and identity of Europe has been shaped by three very different expressions of the Christian faith, all of which experience the challenges of nominalism.

This article brings together contributions on the topic from three attendees at the Lausanne Rome consultation, each with experience within a different context: Tim Grass (Orthodox); Jaume Llenas (Catholic) and Olof Edsinger (Protestant).

Defining nominalism in each context

All three contributors would define Christian Nominalism as 'non-practising', although this definition has changed with increasing secularism. Thirty years ago, people may have

attended church services as initiated nominals who at least understand the basis of the faith, even if they did not believe. Today however, they may identify in name only, with only a 'vague understanding of the Christian faith'. In highly secularised Sweden, says Edsinger, the picture is more complicated:

'most Swedes do not profess any religion at all (often still being members of the Church of Sweden). Moreover many of those who still belong would say that they have chosen their membership specifically because of its somewhat cooler relationship with the Bible in general and the Christian fellowship in particular. They do not want to be as challenged or involved as one would expect in a more Evangelical or Pentecostal congregation.'

Causes of nominalism

When considering the causes of nominalism, the relationship between Church and the power of the State is a common theme. 'A major factor has to be the inculturation of Christianity in a way that results in its identification with social and governmental structures, and even with ethnic identity (although Orthodox themselves have sometimes condemned this as heresy)' explains Grass.

For Llenas, Catholicism in Spain has been closely related to power. 'Their way of expansion and expression has been controlling the public and private spaces, and rites of passage in society. This has not left much space to persuade or communicate a message of hope in Christ.'

CONTINUED OVERLEAF

In Sweden, 'between the years 1546 and 2000 the Church of Sweden served as the state church with the vast majority of Swedes as its members' explains Edsinger. The implication is that people belonged whether or not they believed, building a degree of nominalism into the very fabric of Swedish society.

However Edsinger also describes a spiritual dynamic to nominalism, where 'the church itself encourages secularisation by losing its own focus on Christ and its overall saltiness' and accommodating a sacred/secular divide where 'Sunday business' is not relevant to 'Monday to Saturday business'. 'You simply don't want to see, or fail to see, the links between the Gospel and what you are doing Monday to Saturday. This is often communicated indirectly to the next generation, as the children see that their parent's faith has little or no consequence for their everyday life'.

And where 'folk religion' has played a large part in the expression of faith, for example in the Catholic processions or cult of Mary in Spain, once these 'decay', there is not much true spirituality left. 'I remember in the 1970s and 1980s people would tell us they were Catholics because "this is what our fathers taught us, this is what the church taught us". But they refused to transmit it to the next generation' says Llenas.

Reaching nominals

But could it be considered that a nominal faith is better than no faith at all, and a good thing that people identify as 'Christian'? Maybe not explains Llenas: 'when a person calls himself a Christian and has not gone through an experience of being born again of the Spirit, the distance of what is expected of a son of God and the reality becomes a big gap. When society looks at the visible reality of the Church where people only have the name of believers, what they see is disturbing'.

Edsinger agrees. 'When the values and spirituality that are conveyed tend not to present the true Biblical way of discipleship, it could be seen as a vaccine against Christianity'.

“the church itself encourages secularisation by losing its focus on Christ”

How can those “vaccinated” against Christianity be reached? Renewal movements have often arisen within denominations rather than from outside

So how can those who have been “vaccinated” be reached?

One challenge from our contributors is that renewal movements have often previously arisen within the denomination, rather from outside. For example, 'Orthodox history is replete with saints who sought to do this' says Grass, 'for example what I can only describe as the revivalist preaching in St Petersburg of St John of Kronstadt (1829–1908). Some of the 20th Century renewal movements within the Orthodox Church owe much to Protestant/Evangelical influence and methodology, but have been adapted to work within a different context. ISTM said that

the best people to reach non-practising Orthodox are Orthodox, although a number in the West have been blessed through participation in evangelical student ministry, or people such as Billy Graham.'

Alpha has also had an effect, particularly within the Protestant and Catholic Churches. This is another example of being reached 'from within', in that courses are held within the Catholic or Protestant church. Llenas also mentions IFES in Spain who are reaching nominal students through gospel based Bible study groups called 'Uncover', as well as the Swedish Evangelical Alliance who are prioritising this issue.

Not just 'over there'

A word of warning however. It is easy to look 'over there' at nominalism, but not engage with similar issues within our own (evangelical) context. An example may be where we want our young people to come back to 'the church' and attend services. We may consider their drifting from Church as a pastoral, rather than evangelistic issue where they are invited into a living faith.

And are we truly aware of the extent of secularisation within our own churches, where we are caught in a web of humanism, consumerism and spiritual narcissism, and 'have let the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in

and choke the word, making it unfruitful' (Mark 4:19).

Research by Norwegian theologian Erling Birkedal identifies three dimensions that are required for people to be firmly rooted in faith: the cognitive (wrestling intellectually with Biblical truths), social (our experiences of Christian fellowship) and emotional (our personal experiences of God and his presence). These relate to Jesus' command to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind' (Matt 22:37), and all three are required, rather than a focus on one or two.

As Edsinger encourages us, the challenge of nominalism – in whatever expression of Christian faith – is met by 'true spiritual role models, Christian leaders and lay people who live genuinely attractive lives, integrating all three dimensions in their faith and practising a bold faith in their everyday life'.

Joanne Appleton, with contributions from Olof Edsinger (General Secretary of the Swedish Evangelical Alliance), Jaume Llenas (General Secretary of the Spanish Evangelical Alliance), and Dr Tim Grass (Facilitator of the Lausanne-Orthodox Initiative).



Editorial Team: Darrell Jackson, Jim Memory, Jo Appleton, Chris Ducker & Evert Van de Poll

europeanmission.redcliffe.ac.uk

redcliffecollege

Redcliffe College
College Green
Gloucester, GL1 2LX

Telephone: 01452 308097

www.redcliffe.ac.uk

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