

‘Nominal’ Christianity – definition, parameters and various types

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This presentation is a brief summary of the two extensive research papers that I presented during the Lausanne Global Consultation on Nominal Christianity, in March 2018 in Rome. A similar summary has been published in Vista, the e-magazine for research based information on Mission in Europe, published by All Nations Christian College – Issue 31, November 2018: <https://www.europeanmission.redcliffe.ac.uk/latest-articles/2018/11/15/nominal-christianity-in-contemporary-europe-2>

This article was also used as the lead article for the online conversation on nominal Christianity, in preparation of the Lausanne Europe 21 Conference. <https://www.lausanneeurope.org/conversation/february/>

The idea of nominality

One of the most striking aspects of the socioreligious context of Europe is the high proportion of so-called nominal Christians.¹ That is to say: people affiliated to a church or who identify as ‘Christian’ in surveys, but who only occasionally or never attend a church service.

‘Nominal’ is a typically English term. In ‘Latin’ Europe (France, Italy, Spain, Portugal), alternative terms are used, such as ‘cultural’, ‘sociological’ or ‘non practicing’ Christians. Germans speak of *Kirchenferne*, and the Dutch of *randkerkelijk* – the latter two terms can be translated as ‘marginal’ Christianity. Whatever the terminology, there is always the same basic idea behind it, namely a discrepancy between a stated adherence to the Christian faith and a committed application of that faith. This is the idea of nominality – being Christian in name but not in practice. Such a discrepancy can be observed in all religions.

While social scientists study this phenomenon without attaching a value judgement to it, mission leaders and theologians usually qualify nominality as a deviation from normality. From their perspective, these people are Christians ‘only’ in name (nominal), as opposed to a true or more authentic form of Christianity.

Notice however that ‘nominal Christians’ have NOT severed all links with the church as an institution, nor with the Christian faith, to which they attach at least some meaning. Therefore, one cannot just include them in the category of non-Christians and approach them as such.

More than half of the European population

In most countries ‘nominal’ or ‘non practicing’ Christians comprise more than fifty percent of the population. That is, more than one in two of your fellow Europeans!

Here are some diagrams of the report of the Pew Research Forum, *Being Christian in Western Europe*, published in 2018.

The first one shows the percentages per country of those who are registered as Christian or identify as such in surveys.

The second one shows the overall picture: 71% Christians, while only 22% attend a church service at least once a month. The remaining 29% are non-religious or adherents of other religions. In other words, 49% of the Western Europeans are ‘non attending’ or ‘non practicing’. In Eastern Europe the percentages of practicing and non-practicing Christians are even higher.

The third diagram shows the same categories per country. Notice the column in the middle, representing the large proportions of ‘non practicing’ Christians.

From the point of view of Gospel communication of the Gospel and church development this is an extremely important aspect of the European context. In evangelism and mission organisations there an emphasis on reaching out to the secularised and creating churches for the unaffiliated or the unchurched. As a result, we easily overlook the fact that the majority of the European are linked, somehow, to an existing church and/or the Christian faith.

How and where do we draw a line?

Is ‘non attending’ or ‘non practicing’ in these statistics the same as ‘nominal’? Where exactly do we draw the line between authentic and nominal Christianity? All depends on the criteria that are being used. Social scientists

¹ Some call it ‘nominalism’ but this term is misleading, since it also refers to a philosophical school of thought

often take the frequency of church attendance as a parameter, but being a Christian is more than going to church. We should also consider other aspects of being a religious person, such as beliefs, prayer, religious experience, and salience, i.e. 'how important is your religion for your conduct in daily life.

Parameters of being Christian

It has become customary to summarise these aspects in the three B's of believing – belonging – behaving. But a closer look at the life of religious people reveals that even these three B's are But even these are imprecise and insufficient. Our analysis leads us to suggest the following seven aspects or parameters of being a Christian:

- 1) Initiation (how a person becomes a Christian)
- 2) Faith (trust, believing 'in')
- 3) Beliefs (convictions, believing 'that')
- 4) Church membership (affiliation)
- 5) Church participation
- 6) Spiritual life (prayer, practice of piety, spiritual experience)
- 7) Daily life (sanctification, following Christian norms and values, public practice, witness)

These parameters help us to identify the different areas in which nominality can occur, and also to distinguish various typical forms that we meet when we encounter the people concerned.

The technical term for this initial choice is conversion. The language in which people express this 'conversion' can vary, as it depends very much on their church context and the tradition in which they have grown up. Moreover, 'conversion' can be sudden and instantaneous, but it can also be progressive, spread over time, as the outcome of a thoughtful and assumed assimilation of a Christian education. It is accompanied by a public confession of faith, often linked with baptism, or confirmation. Together they constitute the initiation to the Christian faith.

Decisive parameters?

Do all these parameters have the same importance, or is there one parameter that decides whether someone is an authentic or committed Christian? The answer depends on whether we are talking about becoming a Christian or being a Christian.

Becoming a Christian is not the same as being born in a church member family and baptised as a child. Although that can contribute to transmitting the faith, becoming a Christian is a deliberate life-orientation or conversion, an initial choice in the process of turning to God as He has revealed himself in Jesus Christ.

Being a Christian is a continual choosing with respect to all the aspects of the Christian life.

Definition of nominal or deficient Christianity

Ideally, all parameters go together, all the seven parameters go together in a comprehensive and complementary way, but in real life this is often not the case. All believers show deficiencies and discrepancies to a certain extent, and at certain times, but that does not necessarily call into question their Christian identity. However, when this discrepancy is more or less permanent it becomes a contradiction with the name 'Christian' that one bears or assumes. In such cases, we can speak of nominal Christianity. So here is our definition:

*'Nominal Christians are 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.'*²

From this rather descriptive definition two things become clear.

First, 'deficient' Christianity is perhaps a better term than 'nominal' Christianity.

Second, these are collective terms for a rather complex reality, covering a variety of phenomena. Clearly, 'the' nominal Christian does not exist. In real life, there are many ways in which people can be 'nominal' or show a deficiency of Christian practice. For instance, in the area of becoming a Christian when there has never been a faith response to God's offer of salvation through Jesus-Christ, no confession of the faith in God and the lordship

² I proposed this definition in my lectures during the Lausanne Global Consultation on Nominal Christianity in Rome, Italy, 14-18 March 2018, and it was taken over, with slight modifications, in the final document of the Consultation, *Statement on Nominal Christianity*, published in *Vista*, Issue 31, 2018/4, p. 4-5. This Consultation brought together Evangelical scholars and church leaders working in Catholic, Protestant as well as Orthodox countries, in Europe and other parts of the world.

of Jesus. Or in the area of beliefs, when a 'Christian' denies that Jesus-Christ is the unique and only Saviour of mankind.

Seven typical forms of nominality

When we study the outcomes of research and interviews with people called 'nominal' or 'non-practicing', we observe several forms of nominality, which we can summarise in seven typical forms.

1. Churchd yet deficient in belief and/or practice

The first form is being 'churchd' yet deficient in belief and practice. These persons are church members and regularly attend a worship service. They might sing in the choir, lead Sunday School for children, or a youth catechism. Some are elders or deacons, even pastors or priests.

Of course, all church members have shortcomings, and periods of lacking commitment. But at a certain point, the discrepancy between church participation and other parameters becomes such that the professed Christian identity, practiced on a 'churchy' level, stands in contradiction with the rest. Then we can speak of nominal Christianity.

Among this type we find people who go against the clear teaching of the Bible, who deny the resurrection of Jesus. There can be absence of personal faith, spiritual life. Daily practice can be indistinguishable from the lifestyle of secularised persons.

2. Marginal church membership

The second type is the marginal church member who hardly ever goes to church. To put it more precisely, this is 'formal belonging to a church without real belonging'.

When we look at the absence of church participation, we could quickly assume that these people are also Christian 'in name only' in other areas, such as faith, beliefs, spiritual life and daily obedience to Christ's commandments. However, this is not necessarily the case, so we should not jump to conclusions. We can only tell when we have met with them, listened to their story.

Evangelicals find marginal church membership puzzling and difficult to assess, because of a different conception of what the church means for believers. For Evangelicals, active church involvement is an essential part of an 'authentic' Christian identity.

Roman-Catholic, Orthodox and historic Protestant churches also encourage their members to be involved in the local parish, but they regard baptism a more important marker of belonging than church attendance. They consider marginal membership not necessarily as a rejection of the church, nor as a negation of a person's Christian identity.

Surely, many people at the margin of church life also have marginal knowledge of the Bible and Christian teaching, and little or no personal relationship with God. Many disagree with the moral teaching of the church, or they just don't follow it up without feeling guilty about that.

During the last decades there is an increasing trend among nominal members to leave the church. In Scandinavian countries the Lutheran Church has opened websites where people can deregister. A number of Belgian Catholics has demanded to be 'de-baptised', only to obtain an official attestation of their demand, given the official position of the Roman-Catholic Church that it cannot annul a sacrament.

Even so, many marginal church members do not sever all links with the institutional church. This should make us think. Although their daily life may be largely secularised, they wish to maintain at least an administrative link with organised religion.

3. Minimal church participation.

The third type is the church member who considers that it suffices to fulfil a minimum requirement in order to benefit from the services of the church in times of need, and to be sure that at the end of your earthly existence you will go to heaven and your family will have a church funeral. For instance, go to confession and mass at least once a year. For many Catholics and Orthodox, as well as members of 'mainline' Protestant churches it has become a custom to do the minimum thing and be comfortable.

It should be noted that they themselves do not consider themselves as marginal Christian, but rather as a good Catholic or a good Anglican, all the more so because they often try and behave as they think a good Christian should behave in daily life – without regularly going to a church. However, viewed from the angle of committed discipleship, such persons can be called 'nominal'.

We find this type of minimal church participation also among members of (Evangelicals) free churches, that traditionally emphasise the need of actively belonging to a local church.

4. *Parallel Christianity*

The fourth type is what we would call it *parallel* Christianity. This term refers to people who are actively involved in parallel structures besides local churches and parishes, where they are involved in all kinds of social action, humanitarian work, environmental care, and so on. Their motivation is related to their Christian identity, but they are largely or completely disconnected from local church life.

However, there is a real risk for social Christianity to evolve into nominality. The organisations in which they are involved generally do not provide spiritual edification or worship opportunities. While they might fight against injustice in the name of Christian values, their faith is not nourished, their thinking not challenged by Biblical preaching, and their spiritual life is left starving.

Some people belonging to this type could be called *parachurch* Christians, because they are active in Christian parachurch organisations, but they hardly ever show up in a local church. You will meet them in Christian NGO's, even in evangelistic and mission organisations.

5. *Internet Christians*

Closely related to parallel Christianity are what we collectively call Internet Christians; people connecting with television services, Christian websites and social media, rather than a visible local church community. This phenomenon is spreading for several decades now, and it is enhanced by the covid pandemic as churches propose online church services and Bible-studies. One can take part in worship services and benefit from Christian teaching and without ever leaving one's home. This can easily lead to a permanent disconnecting from actual church involvement.

While parallel Christianity and Internet Christians are deficient in terms of physical church participation, it is not necessarily 'nominal' or deficient with respect to other parameters. Many of these people take their Christian identity serious.

To date, this phenomenon has not received sufficient attention from missiologists and practical theologians. The question is how to evaluate involvement in parallel structures. Can this be an authentic form of Christian faith, a way of following Christ outside local church structures, in a society where online services and online personal exchanges take an ever more important place?

6. *Unaffiliated yet (culturally) 'Christian'*

We meet a sixth kind of nominality among people who are affiliated to a church but identify as 'Christian' when asked what their religious position is. This phenomenon is 'believing without belonging'. It makes us hesitant about the unqualified use of the term secularisation. It seems more accurate to say that West Europeans who no longer belong to a church remain, by and large, unchurched populations rather than becoming simply non-religious. For a marked falling-off in religious attendance (especially in North and West Europe) has not resulted, yet, in a parallel abdication of religious belief – in a broad definition of the term. Many unaffiliated Europeans have not abandoned, so far, either their deep-seated religious aspirations or a latent sense of belonging to the Christian tradition.³

However, the term 'believing without belonging' is misleading, because unchurched people have beliefs that are not always Christian, let alone a trusting faith in the God of the Bible. Some authors speak of 'notional Christianity', or 'fuzzy fidelity', or a 'casual loyalty to [Christian] tradition'.

Moreover, the unchurched who call themselves 'Christian' in surveys, are not so much attached to Christian beliefs as to social norms and values and cultural traditions associated with Christianity. There is often 'behaving without believing and belonging'. Some speak of 'cultural Christians', as opposed to 'church Christians' (people who regularly go to church and adhere to its basic beliefs).

Unaffiliated or cultural Christianity is the effect of more than a thousand years of Christianity that has left the European populations with a legacy of stories, words, images, and rites, and above all with values and a morality. The way we treat one another in a European culture – especially the sick, the aged, the poor, the stranger in our midst – owes a great deal to the Biblical notion that all people are created in God's image and deserving of care. Europeans have been shaped and continue to live by Christian values.

³ This paragraph is a summary of Grace DAVIE, *Europe: The Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith in the Modern World*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, first published 2002, second edition 2007, p. 7f.

7. Dechurched Christians

The last kind of nominality that we want to single out is *dechurched* Christianity. Generally speaking, ‘dechurched’ means that people have left the church for a variety of reasons. We are not talking here about church-leavers who have become totally secularised. Nor those who retain only certain beliefs, social norms and cultural traditions, as in the preceding type.

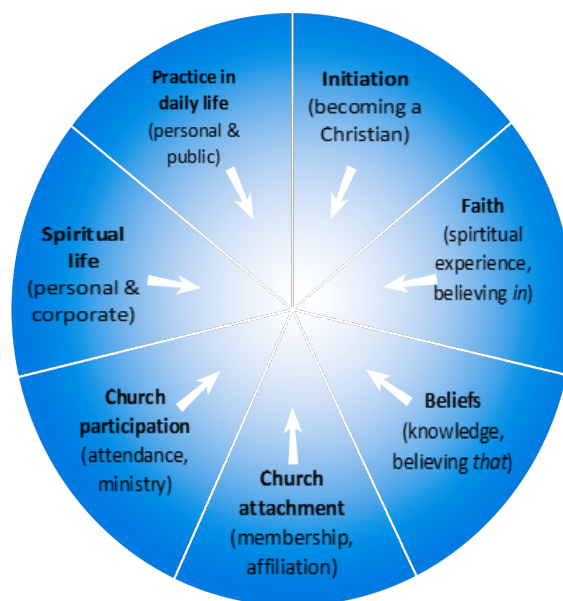
We are talking here about people who have left the church, or at least given up active church participation, *not* because the Christian faith is no longer meaningful for them, but because they are disillusioned in the *church*, put off by the style of church life or by problems such as poor leadership or inappropriate handling of church finances. Or because the church failed to provide the pastoral and moral support they expected in time of need. But they did not want to give up on the Christian faith altogether. Hence our term *dechurched Christians*.⁴ This phenomenon is also affecting Evangelical churches. Surveys among Evangelical church-leavers show that many of them could no longer cope with the strong demands of the church and found themselves no longer capable of giving themselves personally.⁴

While these people have given up on organised church life, they consider themselves definitely as Christians.

Meeting the people where they are

Our typology is by no means exhaustive, but it can serve as a tool to analyse and better understand the phenomena that are collectively called nominal or deficient Christianity. A common denominator of all the typical forms is that the church and the Christian faith still have some meaning for the people concerned. It is important to find out what exactly it means to them, and to value that. Therefore, we need to connect with them, meet them where they are – outside and inside the church communities.

The seven parameters of being Christian are a helpful tool in identifying the positive aspects as well as the deficiencies. We can visualise them in the following diagram,⁵ which is a combination of our seven parameters of being Christian, with the idea of the church as a centred group.



In a centred group, the members are bound together by a centre (a leader, a doctrine, a building, a central religious rite, etc.). There is no clear distinction between people who are ‘in’ or ‘outside the group, they are all related to a greater or lesser degree by the centre.

The opposite of a centred group is a bounded group, which has strong boundary markers between those who are ‘in’ and those who are ‘out’. These markers can be ethical conduct, social norms, doctrines, language, dress, etc.

The idea of centred versus bounded groups applies to churches as well as other social communities. We consider the church as a centred group with Jesus Christ in the centre, rather than a bounded group that is held together, not by a Person in the centre, but by dogmatic and ethical boundary markers.⁶

⁴ A recent Barna Research Report typifies these Evangelicals as follows: ‘they love Jesus, but not the church’.

⁵ The diagram was suggested by Jim Memory after my presentations during the Consultation on Nominality of the Lausanne Movement in Rome, 2018.

⁶ The idea of these two models was proposed and described by Hiebert, *Centred and Boundary Groups* (1978).

As you can see in the diagram, the challenge before us is both pastoral and evangelistic, namely, how to encourage people to come closer to Christ in areas where they are ‘far off’.

A keyword is invitation. ‘God continually invites all people, including nominals of all kinds, to a deeper faith in Christ and a growing commitment to follow Him.’⁷

The Invitation of Christ

The following part of the article is the reaction of Jim Memory on my presentation. In his reaction he takes up several points that we have discussed during the Lausanne Global Consultation on Nominal Christianity, in March 2018 in Rome.

Jim is a British mission leader living and working in Spain, with European Christian Mission. He is also part of the coordination team of the Lausanne Europe 21 Conference.

Evert has done a great job of summarising the challenge of understanding the multifaceted reality of nominal Christianity in Europe. There clearly are major differences between the kinds of nominal Christian that we might find in Europe today, but we need to be very careful.

When we put people in a box and assign a label or category, two things happen. Firstly, we lump people together, blurring the differences between them, when in reality each one has their own unique story. The reasons why someone may be “dechurched”, for example, are unique to that person. Yes, people may have common experiences of being disillusioned, or even damaged by their engagement with the church, but each person’s experience is unique, and so is their reaction to it. They are a person with a story, and until we have listened to that story, we should resist the temptation to generalise and put them in a box.

Yet there is a second, and even more serious danger of categorisation, and that is that we make them into an “other” person. We are like this. They are like that. We construct a barrier between our “authentic” Christian experience and theirs in a way that is uncomfortably close to the barrier that the Pharisees made between themselves and “the sinners and tax collectors”.

Christian identity

I am sure all of us know that the church in Corinth was a bit of a mess. It was full of what many of us would today call nominal Christians, with some dodgy theology and questionable sexual practices, and yet Paul addressed them like this.

“To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours.” (1 Corinthians 1:2)

Our Christian identity is grounded not in some process of categorisation based on a set of doctrinal or ethical criteria but in our calling to be God’s holy people. Our identity is established in Christ, who calls us to Him. Yes, he calls us to orthodoxy and orthopraxy, but it begins at the cross with a call to repentance and faith in Him, and continues throughout our whole life, with an invitation to a deeper relationship with Christ.

Parameters a helpful tool to respond to the invitation of Christ

And that is why it is helpful to conceive of Evert’s seven parameters of being a Christian, not only as descriptions, but as pathways in which people might respond to the invitation of Christ.

So how does that change things?

1. We would be less concerned about categories and more with orientation and direction of travel. A Christian is, at the end of the day, a follower of Christ. If they are not turned to him, not following Him, then they are not a Christian, however much they might “look” like a Christian. In that sense at least, the word nominal becomes redundant. The crucial thing is orientation to the centre, to Christ. Has the person turned to Christ and is their life now oriented to Christ?
2. We would hold firm to the essential distinction between those who truly know Christ and those who do not. Yet rather than thinking in terms of “authentic Christian” and “nominal Christian”, we would think more in terms of Christian and not-yet Christian. We would focus less on our identity markers which frequently only serve to exclude others and reinforce our identity in unhelpful ways, and rather, we would be concerned with

⁷ *Statement to the Churches on Nominality*, LCWE, 1998.

how we might speak prophetically to all, to the church and the world, that “all those everywhere” might turn to Christ, our living hope (1 Peter 1:3).

3. We would recast the “normal Christian life” as a journey to the centre, a story which begins in many different places, may sometimes go in one direction or another but ultimately leads us to Christ. As we think about the kinds of nominal Christianity that may predominate in our specific situation, our principal question should be: what signposts do we need to put up to help these people turn to Christ, or at the very least move one step closer to Him? And of course, to remember that we too are on that same journey into Christ. None of us has reached the centre yet and the realisation that we are fellow travellers gives us the opportunity to share the story of our journey of faith, for none of us have yet “arrived”.

Response and repentance

Being a Christian is about responding to the call of Christ to follow him. There is an initial turning to Christ, but it is a continual turning to Him, a lifetime of repentance, of daily reorientation to the centre.

And that note of repentance carried over into the formulation of the Lausanne Statement on Nominal Christianity which resulted from the Rome Consultation in March 2018 (mentioned in the introduction).

Part II of the statement begins with a Call to Confession and Prayer

To confess how we have often overlooked the nominal Christians in our midst, and in many of our evangelical churches.

To confess too our faltering witness, our defective discipleship and our lack of concern for them, as well as our own judgemental attitudes, and where we might have contributed to weakening the credibility of the church.

Far from judging those whose Christianity is not authentic as far as we are concerned, the statement challenges us all to consider the parts of our lives where we too may be “Christians in name only”, for that area is yet to be fully oriented to Him

The Statement then urges us to renew our discipleship and witness

To prioritise a whole-life discipleship, the bold proclamation of the gospel, and the planting of new churches and the renewal of existing churches.

Lastly, the Statement calls us to reflection and action

To honest consideration of why people have and are distancing themselves from the church, and how our theological training, leadership, discipleship, and evangelism may need to change if we are to reach “those who are missing from our churches”.

For as the preamble to the Statement puts it:

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.