NOMINAL, FUZZY, AND CULTURAL CHRISTIANITY IN EUROPE TODAY

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One of the most striking aspects of the socioreligious context of Europe is the high proportion of so-called nominal Christians—people who affiliate with a church and/or identify as "Christian" in surveys but only occasionally (or never) attend a church service and do not believe in a personal God, let alone in Jesus Christ as the unique Savior of humanity. This phenomenon is all over Europe, in most countries, the per-centage is more than fifty percent.

This article looks at "nominal" Christianity in a qualitative way: what does this mean for the people to whom this label is attached?[1] First, it will clarify what is meant by the idea of "nominality" and bring to light several forms this idea can take in actual practice. This leads to a distinguishing nominal Christianity from two closely related phenomena: "fuzzy" Christianity and "cultural" Christianity. In this respect, the important question of what it means to be a Christian, and how one becomes a Christian, will be asked. What parameters should be taken into consideration? Finally, it shall look at the phenomenon that the Christian faith functions as a "vicarious" religion in today's European societies, which leads to the question: is this perhaps the default religion for the seculars in Europe?

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1.   For a more elaborate treatment of the subject of this article and related subjects, see chapters 14, 15, and 16 in Van de Poll, *Christian Faith and the Making of Europe*.

The Phenomenon of "Non-Practicing Christians" in Statistical Terms

Before taking up the question of the idea of nominality, it is helpful to give a short impression of the size of this phenomenon. In recent years, many surveys have been conducted to describe the state of religious identity and religious practice in Europe in statistical terms. They bring to light the high percentage of what researchers call "non-practicing Christians" in virtually all European countries.

How does one measure Christian identity and religious practice? Usually, researchers use the following criteria: *Affiliation* (i.e., church membership or stated Christian identity in surveys) and *Regular Church Attendance* (i.e., at least once a month). Someone who meets the two criteria is then called a practicing Christian, a non-practicing Christian only meets the first criterion, while someone who only meets the second one might be called a seeker, interested in religion. This is a common method in surveys. It enables the researcher to give a first impression of the state of Christianity in each country. But it is clearly inadequate. Going to church regularly does say something about a person's commitment to the faith, but being a practicing Christian cannot be reduced to belonging to a church and going to a church service.

The recent reports of the Pew Research Forum have introduced two ways of refinement. The first one is to draw a general picture, based on the parameter of church attendance and then to ask specific questions about ethical issues, political choices, and so on. In so doing, they present a more precise picture of the practicing and the non-practicing Christians in each country. The second method is to use four parameters at the same time and see how they work out in the life of the respondents: Regular church attendance, Belief in God (answers range from certainty to uncertainty, do not know, and atheist), Prayer ("do you pray, how often?"), and Salience ("how important is your religion for you?"). In other words, "how much does your religion determine your identity and your daily conduct?" Combining the answers to these questions, the Pew researchers then distinguish three "levels of religious observance": low, medium, and high. *High* religious observance is de-

fined as saying religion is very important in one's life, attending religious services at least once a month, praying at least once a day, and believing in God with absolute certainty. *Medium* religious observance is defined as saying religion is somewhat important in one's life, attending religious services a few times a year, praying between a few times a week and a few times a month, and believing in God with less than absolute certainty. Respondents are also assigned a medium score on any questions they declined to answer. *Low* religious observance is defined as saying that religion is "not too" or "not at all" important in one's life, seldom or never attending religious services, seldom or never praying, and saying that one does not believe in God. The following table shows the outcomes for Western Europe (in percentages of the total population).[2]

Table 1: Levels of Religious Observance in the West

Country	Level of religious observance 100 percent = total population		
	Low	**Medium**	**High**
Portugal	30%	33%	37%
Italy	36	37	27
Ireland	41	34	24
Spain	55	24	21
Netherlands	64	19	18
Norway	61	22	17
Austria	49	38	14
Finland	62	26	13
France	58	29	12
Germany	53	36	12
Switzerland	52	37	12

2.   Pew Research Centre, "Being Christian in Western Europe."

Country	Level of religious observance 100 percent = total population		
United Kingdom	58	31	11
Belgium	68	22	10
Sweden	75	15	10
Denmark	69	23	8
MEDIAN	**58**	**29**	**13**

By using more parameters, these tables present a more realistic picture than statistics based on church attendance only. When reading and interpreting these figures, it should be kept in mind that they correspond to the whole population, including "nones" and adherents of other religions. The researchers have not split the percentages up for these categories. It can be assumed that the "nones" are included in the category of "low-level religious observants" (although some of them do have certain religious beliefs).

Another caveat is that the researchers did not distinguish between denominations, they just show the level of religious observance for Europeans in general. So, this is a general indication of how much Catholics, Protestants, evangelicals, and Orthodox Christians practice their faith, and how much Islam and Judaism means to Muslims and Jews.

Interestingly, the level of commitment to the Christian faith is generally significantly higher in Catholic countries than in Protestant countries. Notable exceptions are the Netherlands and Norway. These countries are not only high on the list of "nones" but also high on the list of "highly committed" Christians. The research reports also studied the level of religious observance in the eastern part of Europe, including the European part of the Russian Federation, using the same four parameters. Here are the outcomes for some countries:[3]

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3.   Evans and Baronavski, "How do European countries differ in religious commitment?" The research reports do not provide the same table for Western and Eastern countries. This table is designed using data provided by Pew's interactive map.

Table 2: "Highly Religious" in the East

Country		Country	
Greece	49%	Romania	55%
Bosnia-Herzegovina	46	Armenia	51
Croatia	44	Georgia	50
Poland	40	Moldova	47
Slovakia	29	Serbia	32
Lithuania	21	Ukraine	31
Hungary	17	Belarus	27
Czechia	8	Bulgaria	18
Estonia	7	Russian Federation	17

Note that the percentages of "highly religious" people in the eastern countries are considerably higher than in the west. But even in Western Europe, there is, as Philip Jenkins writes, a "solid minority of committed believing Christians." Writing some fourteen years ago, he estimated that "some sixty million to seventy million West European Christians assert that religion plays a very important role in their lives, and many of those attend church regularly."[4] This figure is not far from today's reality, as indicated by the Pew surveys, according to which an average of 11 to 12 percent of the Western European population are "highly observant Christians."

The same can be said of the eastern part of Europe. The surveys do not give a median percentage of "highly religious" in these countries but looking at the figures it can be assumed that it is at least 25 percent, i.e., more than 62 million (out of a total population of 295 million). In this part of Europe, they largely outnumber the non-religious. According to the same surveys, the latter represent 14 percent of the population, i.e., 40 million people.

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4.   Jenkins, *God's Continent*, 56.

Moreover, practicing Christians largely outnumber the overall Muslim population. According to the statistics of the Pew Forum, Muslims count for 5 percent of the population,[5] i.e., about 22 million in the western part of Europe and about 15 million in the eastern part, mainly concentrated in a few countries only. But then, not all of them are practicing Islam as a religion. For many people who identify as Muslims, Islam is a cultural reference or an ethnic and family background.

In summary: practicing or "committed" Christians are a minority among other minorities, the non-religious and the Muslim communities. In the western part of Europe, they are half the number of "nones," and in the eastern part, they are the largest. From a quantitative point of view, the Christian faith is still the major religion in Europe.

Nominal Christianity

Clearly, despite the decline of the influence of the Churches in society and despite secularisation, a large proportion of the population all over Europe still maintains some sort of link with the Church as an institution and/or with the Christian religion.

The Idea of Nominality
A closer look reveals that we are dealing with a complex reality. Consider the following, for example. People registered as church members who hardly ever attend church may (1) Believe that God exists, that Jesus is the Son of God, and that there is a heaven and a hell; (2) Read the Bible and pray regularly in private; (3) Watch a televised church service every Sunday; (4) Be actively involved in Christian humanitarian work; and/or (5) Donate money to a church. These are just some of the many possible configurations. However, there is a common thread, namely that something is lacking. People identify as Christian but somehow their practice is not coherent with the name they bear. This is the basic idea of nominal Christianity. It can be described as the discrepancy between a stated adherence to faith and a committed application of

5.   Pew Research Centre, "Europe's Growing Muslim Population."

that faith. This discrepancy can be observed in all religions, but we are particularly interested in the way in which it takes form in Christianity.

Sometimes this phenomenon is called "nominalism," but this term can be misleading since it also refers to a philosophical school of thought. With respect to religious identity and practice, it is better to use the term "nominality." 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* ("name Christians") or *Kirchenferne* which could be paraphrased as "peripheral" or "marginal church members." This is, in fact, the precise meaning of the Dutch equivalent *randkerkelijken*. The terminology can vary, but for this research the term nominal Christianity is used. Nominal Christianity can take 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 analyze 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. But then, the question is where exactly do we draw the line between authentic and "in name only"?

Parameters of Being/Becoming a Christian
To get a clearer picture of nominal Christianity, all the basic aspects of being a Christian must be examined. There are "B's" that are often used by social scientists to measure religious observance: believing, belonging, behaving. But 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) and believing "that" (having faith convictions or beliefs). *Belonging* stands for belonging to a church, but when it comes to that, we should distinguish affiliation or church member-

ship from actual participation in the life of a church. Obviously, the two do not always go together. *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, and in society.

Almost always left out in surveys is the aspect of initiation, the technical term for how to become a Christian. This has to do with Christian education, conversion, baptism, and so on. On the basis of these considerations, the following seven aspects or parameters of being a Christian are suggested: (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); and/or (7) Practice in daily life (witness, Christian conduct in spheres of society). All these parameters should be taken into consideration and that questions pertaining to all of them should be used in socioreligious surveys and studies, not just questions pertaining to a selection of them. Researchers rarely ask questions concerning initiation, even though this is a key aspect of being Christian. The parameter of daily life practice is usually just indicated by a general question of salience, "how important is your religion for you," sometimes questions are asked about opinions on societal and political issues, but researchers hardly ever ask questions about giving witness of the faith to others, involvement in evangelistic outreach, mission, social ministries, and so on. Including all the parameters in surveys will enhance the quality of the outcomes.

This list of seven aspects can also serve as a basis for the teaching ministry in the church, for pastors who prepare sermons, since it is an appropriate checklist to make sure that sufficient attention is paid to all aspects of the Christian life in a balanced way. These parameters are also helpful in designing the content of evangelistic material, aimed at explaining the Christian faith to unbelievers, such as Alpha Courses, to make sure that all the aspects are covered and not just some of them at the expense of others. This list helps pastors, teachers, and people involved in evangelism to discern areas in which there is a discrepancy between the name

"Christian" and the practice that this name implies. In other words, it makes us aware of different forms of nominality.

Do all the parameters have the same importance? The answer depends on whether one is 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 Christian behavior, pray, read the Bible, and adhere to Biblical beliefs before they actually come to the assurance of salvation and "take a 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 Christian education. The technical term is conversion, but the 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.

Being a Christian is an intention, an orientation, and 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, practicing piety, having a personal relationship with God, a transformation of our life, our daily conduct, and our discipleship. Did not 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.

When is Someone "Nominal"?
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. A discrepancy may be evident with respect to any of these 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 by 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. Some call themselves Christian, and are perhaps even active in their church, while they have never taken the step to become a follower of Christ.

The qualification nominal, "in name only," is appropriate when the discrepancy amounts to a contradiction with the name that someone bears. This is in line with the outcomes of the Consultation on Nominal Christianity of the (evangelical) Lausanne Movement in 2018. During the deliberations, the seven parameters mentioned above were used as a framework to get a clearer picture of the forms of nominal Christianity. The following definition was adopted: "Nominal Christians are 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."[6]

This descriptive definition takes into consideration all the parameters mentioned above. A person could be called nominal with respect to 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 with respect to basic Christian beliefs. Does that mean someone who shows one or more contradictions is not a Christian? No, all that is being said is that such a person is a "nominal" Christian.

Mapping Nominality
Nominal Christianity comes in many forms. Christian identity can mean different things for different people. Sociologists as well as theologians have proposed several classifications. This is called "mapping the field." Usually, these authors distinguish several types ranging from highly involved in the church to no involvement at all.

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6.   Lausanne Movement, "The Missing 'Christians.'"

Gerald Kretschmar for example, used this approach when he studied the religious practice of Protestantism in Germany (i.e., of the registered members of Lutheran and Reformed churches). But then, he combined the level of church involvement with the level of religious practice. This led him to distinguish five types of German Protestants, ranging from "highly religious and close to the church" to "non-religious and not involved," with various intermediate positions.[7] Luke Cawley also looks at levels of church involvement and combines that with people's beliefs. This leads him to distinguish four categories. He then draws portraits of four persons, who are typical examples of these categories.[8] The typologies proposed by these two authors are helpful, and what follows is a combination and modification of them.

Churched and Nominal

Taking church attendance as a parameter will not reveal the first category, namely regular churchgoers who are committed to their church and often actively involved but who are nominal in other aspects of the Christian life. Cawley calls them "churched" in the sense of "churchy."[9] Kretzschmar describes them as "not very religious people who reject key Christian beliefs but are strongly attached to the church."[10] For people in this category, the relationship with God is indirect, it is implicit in the relation with the church, it is confined to the worship service and its rituals. There is a lack of personal piety, interest in developing a spiritual life and witness. Even though such people have grown up in the church, it is not clear whether they have made the choice to be a follower of Christ.

Marginal Church Members

A second category are church members at the margin of the church. Cawley calls them the "casuals" who only occasionally go

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7.   An example of this is the classification proposed by Kretzschmar, *Kirchenbindung*, 85.

8.   Cawley, *The Myth of the Non-Christian*, 155–69.

9.   Cawley, *The Myth of the Non-Christian*, 163.

10.   Kretzschmar, *Kirchenbindung*, 58.

to a service, mainly during Christian holidays. Others use the term "unchurched," meaning "not very churchy." The preferred term is marginal church members. This is by far the largest group of nominals. Kretschmar distinguishes three types of registered church members who occasionally or hardly ever attend a church service: (1) Religious but not close to the church: strong approval for Christian religious experiences and beliefs, but little attachment to the church and little participation in their lives; (2) A bit religious and a bit involved in the church: median position in religiosity and churchliness; and/or (3) Non-religious and not involved: absence of Christian belief in God and Christian religious experience, little or no involvement in the church life. Many marginal church members disagree with the moral teaching of the church, or they just do not follow it up, without feeling too guilty about it.

Minimal Church Practice
What Cawley overlooks, however, is the category of people who are "casual" churchgoers, to use his expression, but who are persuaded that they are nonetheless good Christians. In many countries, there is a notion of minimal church practice. That means that there is a minimum requirement to fulfil 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, your family will have a church funeral. This notion is particularly widespread among Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox populations. In the past, the Roman Catholic Church has defined minimum requirements of church attendance: go to confession and mass at least once a year. The typical period of the year varies from country to country: Christmas, Easter, or Palm Sunday. If not, people run the risk of no longer benefiting from the grace of God as it is mediated by the church. Orthodox churches have similar guidelines.

Many church members opt for the minimum requirement to ensure a good conscience. Some years ago, I talked with Ronaldo Diprose, the late academic dean of the Italian Evangelical Bible Institute in Rome, about the place of Roman Catholicism in Italian society. I also asked him about the level of religious practice. Over ninety percent of Italians are baptised Catholics. He explained that this is even part of the national identity. However, the overwhelm-

ing majority hardly ever attend a mass, but that does not mean that the church is not important for them. "Almost all Italians consider themselves as good Catholics. They honestly believe that if you're baptised in the church, if you have done your First Communion, if you're married in church, and if you go to confessional and to mass once a year at Easter, then you're a good Catholic."[11]

Minimal church practice is based on the idea that when you are not interested in church life, you still want to keep on good terms with the church to be acceptable to God. Today, this notion is often subconscious. For many people, it has become automatic to do the minimum thing and be comfortable with that.

Unchurched and Observant
A fourth category has also gone unnoticed in any one of the above-mentioned surveys and classifications, namely people who are unchurched in terms of church attendance but at the same time observant. They practice their faith in parallel settings, besides the local church. For example, a large-scale survey among French Protestants in 2017 brought to light that only a 15 percent of those who are affiliated to the historic churches (Reformed, Lutheran) regularly attend church (at least once a month), as compared to 53 percent of those who identify as evangelical. At the same time 23 percent of those who identify as Protestants are involved in defending causes of social justice, environmental care, and humanitarian aid of all sorts such as foodbanks—against 15 percent of the national population as a whole.[12] Being active in humanitarian for social and environmental. This is, for them, a way of practicing the Christian faith or, as some would say, the moral principles taught by Jesus. We can safely assume that the same is also true for "unchurched" employees and volunteers of Christian NGOs.

As unexpected as it may seem, even in evangelical mission organizations, it happens that the mission workers have no connection with a local church, as their own organization provides sufficient spiritual care and worship opportunities. This category also

11. This conversation took place during my stay at the Italian Evangelical Bible Institute in Rome, 22 March 2010.
12. Zumsteeg and Gallard, "Enquête auprès des protestants," 14.

includes believers who watch a service on television or on the internet and who connect with other believers through social media rather than through a local community for prayer and spiritual support. Viewed from the angle of the parish church or the local evangelical assembly, they are "nominal" as far as their church practice is concerned, but with respect to other parameters, they are quite committed believers.

Dechurched

Then there are the "wanderers," as Cawley calls them, "those who have drifted away from involvement with a local church, even though many of them have not permanently abandoned the faith."[13] The term wandering might suggest that these people wander from one church to another. Some do, but most of them no longer go to any church. We call them dechurched. A study among "leavers" from evangelical churches in The Netherlands brought to light that there are three major reasons why they gave up on participating in church life. First, disagreement with the teaching of the church, they have doubts about God and the historicity of the Bible. Second, the church seems irrelevant, and they give priority to other things, the church silently disappears from their screen. Third, disappointment and negative experiences with church leaders. While some of them join another church, most of them seem to disconnect altogether from church involvement.[14] The Lausanne Statement on Nominality is particularly attentive to this group:

> In many countries, large numbers are leaving the churches. While some leave because faith is no longer meaningful, others are disillusioned. Some are put off by the style of church life, or problems such as poor leadership or inappropriate handling of church finances. Many of them leave because they feel burned out and no longer capable of giving of themselves personally.[15]

13.   Cawley, *The Myth of the Non-Christian*, 164.
14.   De Bruijne, *Ooit Evangelisch*, 85–90.
15.   Lausanne Movement, "Statement to the Churches on Nominality," § 2.2.1.

Some dechurched end up losing their faith and becoming non-religious, others retain their Christian identity. They might continue to pray, read the Bible, watch a televised church service, talk about the faith with unbelievers, and go to a Christian conference. This phenomenon has touched the historical churches for a long time, but during the last decades, it is also becoming widespread in evangelical circles.

Fuzzy Christianity

Cawley includes yet another type of nominals, whom he calls the "official Christians." The term "official" is misleading because the people in this category are not necessarily official members of a church institution. They are unaffiliated, yet they identify themselves as "Christian" when responding to questions in surveys about religion. According to Cawley, they are nominal by all accounts. They hardly ever go to a church (except for a marriage, a funeral, or when invited by a colleague or a relative). Moreover, "they have not had enough contact with the church to have ever developed an accurate understanding of Jesus or to have made any response to Him."[16]

Kretschmar does not include this category because he has limited his study to registered church members. Strictly speaking, nominal means that one's name appears on the list of members, the register of the church. But nominal can also mean that people identify themselves Christians, even though their name is not registered on the church's list of members. This is a form of Christian identity outside the church. It is quite a phenomenon, particularly in countries where church membership has diminished drastically. Sociologists have been puzzled by this and have come up with different analyses.

Believing without Belonging, or Notional Christianity
In a ground-breaking study, British sociologist Grace Davie called it "believing without belonging."[17] Looking at the data of the Eu-

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16. Cawley, *The Myth of the Non-Christian*, 163.
17. Davie, *Religion in Britain*.

ropean Values Studies, she noticed two things. There is an undeniable secularisation with respect to classic indicators of religious affiliation, such as church membership and participation in church rituals. But when it comes to other, less institutional indicators of religious practice, such as feelings, religious experience, and the more numinous beliefs, there is much less secularization. She writes:

> I am hesitant about the unqualified use of the term secularisation even in the European context. Indeed, it seems to me considerably more accurate to suggest that West Europeans remain, by and large, unchurched populations rather than simply secular. For a marked falling-off in religious attendance (especially in the Protestant North) has not resulted yet in a parallel abdication of religious belief—in a broad defintion of the term. In short, many Europeans have ceased to connect with their religious institutions in any active sense, but they have not abandoned, so far, either their deep-seated religious aspirations or (in many cases) a latent sense of belonging.[18]

Believing without belonging has quickly become a catchphrase that resonates with most people who study the religious situation in their country. It describes the phenomenon that Christian beliefs are widespread beyond church institutions.

However, this idea has not gone unchallenged. Some critics say that the term "believing" is misleading because unchurched people do not always have beliefs that are explicitly Christian, let alone a trusting faith in the God of the Bible. Field studies give the impression that they have notions instead of Christian beliefs. Peter Brierley speaks therefore of "notional Christianity."[19] David Voas calls this "fuzzy fidelity," and a "casual loyalty to tradition." He argues that "Europeans are still able to specify their religious background, just as they can name their birthplace, father's occupation, and secondary school, but whether these things make any difference to how they see themselves or the way they are perceived by others is not at all certain. Notoriously, many people who to all appearances are unreligious do choose an affiliation if

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18. Davie, *Europe*, 7–8.
19. Brierley Consultancy, *Where is the Church Going*, 2.

asked, depending on the wording and context of the question."[20] What these and other authors try to express is the vagueness of such peoples' beliefs and religiosity. "Fuzzy Christianity" is an appropriate term.

Behaving without Belonging—Cultural Christians
Another criticism is that the unchurched who call themselves "Christian" are not so much attached to Christian beliefs as to ethical values associated with the Christian tradition. This point is made, rather convincingly, by Allan Billings. Together with some colleagues, this British Anglican priest analyzed the religious situation in his region. According to the 2001 census in the UK, over 76 percent of people identified themselves with "a faith tradition" (answering this question was not compulsory). These faith traditions comprise not only Christianity but also other religions, as well as vague notions of "spirituality." Unsatisfied with the secularization theories, Billings and his team used the idea of believing without belonging as a tool to better understand these people, but what they discovered was "behaving without belonging." Most people who were not churchgoers appeared to be quite eclectic in what they believed: "They thought of Christianity more in terms of praxis, a way of living, than as a set of beliefs." Billings describes them further:

> They live Christian lives; they are Christians because their lives reflect the life and values of Jesus Christ. Like him they acknowledge that we live in a creation; that God cares for us, that we should care for one another, and so on. It is the religion of the golden rule: do unto others as you would have them do to you. Sometimes they feel the need to attend a Church on such occasions as a Christmas Carol Service or Midnight Mass. They want family weddings and funerals to be held at a Church. They watch and feel uplifted by Songs of Praise on Sunday-night television. Sometimes they might want to hear inspiring music at a cathedral Matins or Evensong. They see the Church, in other words, as a spiritual resource. But they do not want to belong. . . . They feel that they are doing what can be expected of any Christian. And God, if he exists, will certainly approve. He will accept them. It is lived Christian-

20.   Voas, "Fuzzy Fidelity," 1, 6.

> ity. It is hardly a matter of "believing without belonging," since most people are not much interested in beliefs; the attachment is more emotional and practical than intellectual.[21]

Billings calls these people "cultural Christians." As I talk with people in my French surroundings and look at their attitude to Christianity, I recognize this description. In this country, I meet many cultural Roman Catholics, as Billings meets many cultural Anglicans in Britain. I suspect that the reader could meet them in any European country.

This cultural Christianity is the effect of more than a thousand years of Christianity that has left behind a legacy of stories, words, images, and rites, through which Christian beliefs are transmitted. Think of the popular idea of Saint Peter at the gate of heaven, of a horned devil that tempts people to commit a deadly or "capital" sin. It has above all left the secularized people of Europe with values and morality. "The way we treat one another—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," writes Billings.[22] He goes on to say that many people want to abide by social values that have a biblical origin, and which they do not hesitate to call Christian values. With respect to the same British situation, Callum Brown writes: "What [once] made Britain Christian was the way in which Christianity infused public culture and was adopted by individuals, whether churchgoers or not, in forming their own identities."[23]

Abby Day concurs. She argues that unaffiliated people who identify as "Christians" do not so much believe in Christian propositional truths but rather express a sense of belonging to a society or a culture that is rooted in Christian traditions. She then distinguishes three categories: *Ethnic* nominalists express beliefs rooted in people and place, where "Christian" often means a specific nationality and culture, be that English, American, or Scandinavian. They claim to be Christians just because they are British, and because they see England as a Christian country, and so Christianity

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21. Billings, *Secular Lives*, 11, 18.
22. Billings, *Secular Lives*, 15.
23. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain*, 8.

is an ethnic marker of Englishness. *Natal* nominalists take their Christian identity from their parents or grandparents. These people perhaps used to go to church in their childhood but no longer do so today. Some do not believe in core Christian doctrines, for example, life after death. For *aspirational* nominalists, being "Christian" confers goodness, respectability, and a sense of belonging to those values. They affiliate themselves with the humane ideals of Christianity but are not churchgoers.[24]

What Billings, Callum, and Day write about Britain applies to all other countries that were Christianised in the past, notably in Europe. It would be interesting to compare this to countries where Christianity is a relatively "young" religion.

Cultural Christianity

The scope can be widened even more. What Billings, Brown, and Day say about "Christians" who are not affiliated with a church can also be said of many people who do not identify as Christian at all, but who indicate that the Christian religion is important for them. It serves not as a religious but as a cultural identity marker. Europe is becoming increasingly pluralist, yet only partly so, because the traditional culture of the country remains the dominant one. Sociologists call it the *Leitkultur,* to indicate that in a multicultural society, there is always one culture that takes the lead. This is invariably a European one. This implies that the religion that was (and still is) part of the *Leitkultur* also maintains a special position. In one country, it is the Lutheran Church, in another one the Anglican Church, the Reformed, the Roman Catholic, or the Orthodox Church, but in all cases, it is Christianity that remains the frame of reference with respect to religion.

Consequently, the position of Christianity remains special also for the non-religious population because this is the religion that shaped the general culture, the social traditions, the artistic heritage, and the folklore of Europe. That is the reason why people who call themselves atheist or non-religious can also say that "our country has a Christian culture." This culture rooted in the Chris-

24. Day, *Believing in Belonging*, 174–90.

tian tradition is the world in which they grew up, in which they feel at home, even though they are not practicing believers. They do not want to lose this in the multiculturalist, cosmopolitan, globalist world of today. Faced with immigrants, with a rising number of Muslims in their country, people emphasize that their culture is rooted in Christianity—the message being that the newcomers should adapt to "our" culture. Some even go as far as saying that Islam is incompatible with European culture because it is not Christianity.

This explains why the same non-religious people who are opposed to minarets, veiled Muslim women in the streets, have no problem with church bells and Christian monks and nuns wearing their religious dress in public. There was a popular outcry in Italy when some secularist action groups wanted to have the crucifixes removed from public schools because they found this a form of imposing the Christian religion on their children. At first, the Italian government gave in, but then other action groups took the affair to the European Court of Human Rights, which ruled in 2014 that the crucifixes had to be put back in place because they were a mark of the *cultural* identity of the large majority of Italians and that the anti-crucifix minority was not allowed to impose its views. All over the world, seculars and Christians donated money towards the restoration of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris after it was severely damaged by a fire in April 2019. In a similar fashion, non-religious people can be seen campaigning against the destruction of chapels in the countryside. Other examples are the Danish citizens who do not believe in God and never attend church but faithfully continue to pay the tax that goes to the Lutheran Church because they like to see religious buildings properly maintained. And the French citizens who are nostalgic for the beautiful church services of their childhood and complain about mosques being built in France while never entering a church until "the bell tolls" for them. For all these people, Christianity is seen as a normal part of the cultural landscape of Europe.

The long history of Christianity in Europe, and all the efforts of evangelization that have been going on for ages, have led to a paradoxical situation that can be summarized in two words: attachment and indifference. The Bible and its moral values and its

picture of God, the Gospel stories of Jesus and the cross, the names of the apostles, and countless traditions of the church have become part and parcel of European cultures. While many people feel attached to this heritage, they are often indifferent and ignorant with respect to what it means to be a Christian. This ambivalence can be observed at a wider scale in the whole society. Benedikt Schubert, a Reformed inner-city pastor in Basel, summarizes it as follows:

> In our country, there is an extraordinary inhibition to speak of faith in public. This leads to a particular ambivalence. To begin with, this reluctance does not mean that people want to do away with the visible signs of Christian presence that are everywhere around us: the crosses on the mountain tops, chapels beside the trail and churches in the village centre. On the contrary, people seem to be attached to them. In the debates on migration, there is much emphasis on the fact that we are a "Christian country". However, and this is the other side of this ambivalence, this does imply an openness to publicly discuss the meaning and the scope of such a statement. Asking someone what faith and religion mean to him, usually causes discomfort.[25]

Readers all over Europe will recognize this combination of cultural attachment to the heritage of Christianity and indifference to the message of this religion for today. The two phenomena are intertwined.

Vicarious Religion

There is another way in which secular Europe is attached to the Christian religion. The church embodies the collective religious memory of the whole nation, including people who do not practice the Christian religion. In this respect, the church has a function for society at large. People appreciate that there are churches, they find them useful. Moreover, the church is part of the national cultural heritage, so these people feel that the church should go on, even when they do not participate themselves. Danièle Hervieu-Léger calls this "belonging without believing." Belonging, not in the sense of going to church and participation in church life, but in the sense of belonging to the cultural heritage and the traditions

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25.   Schubert, "Témoigner."

of the church. According to Hervieu-Léger, this sense of belong-
ing entails a shared memory of the Christian faith, which, even
from a distance, still governs collective reflexes in terms of identi-
ty.[26] Grace Davie coined the term "vicarious religion." She ex-
plains:

> For particular historical reasons (notably the historic connections be-
> tween church and state), significant numbers of Europeans are content
> to let both churches and churchgoers enact a memory on their behalf
> (the essential meaning of vicarious), more than half aware that they
> might need to draw on the capital at crucial times in their individual or
> collective lives. The almost universal take up of religious ceremonies
> at the time of death is the most obvious expression of this tendency;
> so, too, the prominence of the historic churches in particular at times
> of national crisis or, more positively, of national celebrations.[27]

This term "vicarious religion" has caught on. Everywhere in Eu-
rope, people recognise it. In this respect, Italian author Roberto
Cipriani speaks of "the ambiguity of Western Europe." On the one
hand, there is a strong push towards breaking with the past, and
developing a secular society and secular lifestyles, on the other
hand, people are drawn in the opposite direction as they feel the
need to remain connected to the past: "The (anthropological) truth
is that the options of fundamental values, and of experiencing the
sacred that transform life, are limited, even in modern times. They
are all weakened by reciprocal pressures. Because of this, the push
towards the new does not always have the upper hand. There is
also pressure to remain in continuity with the past. Hence the en-
durance of traditional religious values and institutions, which of-
ten serve as a refuge in difficult times."[28] In other words, churches
are still valued as a refuge for some, and a reassuring sign for
others, especially in times of distress, mourning, or celebration.

Default Religion?
Despite the pluralist postmodern outlook according to which all
religions are of equal value, Christianity remains the most attract-

26.   Hervieu-Léger, *La Religion pour Mémoire*.
27.   Davie, *Europe*, 19.
28.   Cipriani, *Diffused Religion*, 55.

tive one when secularized Europeans are seeking spiritual meaning. Where do seculars in Europe turn to when they are thinking about spiritual matters, about God, prayer, life after death, the origin of man, and the meaning of life? Two options seem to be prevalent. Either a kind of non-religious spirituality made up of popular wellness psychology, elements of Asiatic religions and philosophies and/or originally Christian rites and symbols taken out of their context and given new meaning, and/or esoteric elements from pre-Christian pagan religions in Europe. For this option, one needs to have a more than average acquaintance with such traditions. One needs to be a deliberate seeker of spiritual meaning to follow this track. In computer terms, this is not a default setting, but a customization, based on personal configurations.

The other option is taking up Christian traditions that linger in the collective subconscious of European people. For this option, one does not have to make much effort. It is there, disseminated in culture, to be found in any church around the corner. If one is looking for spiritual meaning and does not customize, this is what one would get: a Christian image of God, a Christian image of humanity, a Christian idea of prayer, and so on.

The impression is that Christianity is the default religion of Europe. If someone is not religious but want something religious, Christianity is the religion most likely turned to. Seculars who wish a religious funeral for their deceased loved ones are unlikely to approach a rabbi or an imam—except when they have a Jewish or Muslim family background. Either they will ask a professional undertaker to organize an eclectic mix of texts and traditional rites with a more or less spiritual connotation, or they request the services of Christian clergy.

Many non-religious people in Europe have the idea that the appropriate religious practice in Europe for those who wish "to be religious" is Christianity. While they have no problem with churches continuing to function, considering that "they have always done so," they are often apprehensive about the presence of mosques. They tolerate them, as they think modern citizens should, but nevertheless, they often feel that Islam is foreign to "our country," "our way of life." In the eyes of a considerable percentage of the population, a mosque is considered to be a kind of

edifice that is not "at home" in Europe, representative of a way of life they would rather not like their children to adopt.

Conclusion

From the point of view of gospel communication and church development, the phenomenon of nominal Christianity is an extremely important aspect of the European context. For all the missiological emphasis on reaching out to the completely secularised population and creating new and new kinds of churches aimed at connecting with the unaffiliated or unchurched, what can easily be overlooked is the fact that the majority of Europeans have not severed all links with the Christian faith, nor with the institutional church.

My concluding remark is addressed to Christians committed to the faith. We can be grateful for the important role of the Christian faith in today's Europe. We are also challenged by the fact that so many Europeans who are familiar with elements of the Christian religion are ignorant of the real meaning of the Christian faith. May we find ways to explain it, and occasions to share our experiences. In the final analysis, all Christians are concerned, whether "committed," "highly observant," "nominal," "fuzzy," or "cultural." God continually invites all people to have faith in Christ and a growing commitment to follow him.

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