

Mapping the ‘Nominals’

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Discussion Paper for the Global Consultation on Nominalism of the Lausanne Movement Rome, 14-18 March 2018

PRE-CONFERENCE DRAFT

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Introduction

Having looked in the preceding article at nominality and how to define it, our focus now shifts to the people called ‘nominals’.

There are many people in our society who came out of a church, but they didn’t come all the way out. They are disconnected—probably not being genuine Christian believers. These are nominal Christians.

‘Nominals’ were raised to appreciate (though not know) the Bible, a certain moral code and general Christian-ish principles. They may have had some experiences with God, but they do not have a vital walk with the Lord. They are not disciples being transformed by the indwelling of his Spirit.

A nominal knows about Christ, but doesn’t really know Christ, at least in the way evangelicals mean it. He or she considers himself to be ‘Christian’ because he isn’t Hindu, or because he or she said a meaningful prayer 40 years ago at a youth camp. He or she doesn’t hate God, but just doesn’t love him with all of his heart, mind, soul, and strength.

Nominals see God as the source of good things in life, but not necessarily as the only source of eternal life.

They have an appreciation for the things of God, even though they don’t have a thriving relationship with Him. They respond positively to the Bible, and they see value in the church. They even live according to some Christian-ish principles.¹

Ed Stetzer, the author of these lines, does not offer a definition of a socioreligious phenomenon but rather a description of people. This is an important step, because it brings out the variety of ways in which people are nominally Christian.

¹ Ed Stetzer, ‘How the Church Can Reach Nominals and Seculars’.

Aim of this article

As we shall see in this article, 'the nominal' does not exist, because there are quite different forms of nominality. Our aim is to take a closer look at the field and draw a map that brings out that variety in a systematic manner.

In recent literature, various classifications of 'nominals' are proposed, depending on the parameters that are used to analyse the relation between stated adherence and actual commitment to the Christian faith. We shall discuss some of these classifications, and then present ours, which consists of five categories: churchd but nominal, marginal Church membership, parallel Christianity, unaffiliated Christianity, and dechurchd (Evangelical) Christians.

Besides identifying categories, we should also bring out their characteristics and possible subdivisions. We shall propose a method to do this, in which all the parameters of becoming and being Christian are taken in consideration.

In the second part, we take a closer look at each category, in order to see where exactly nominality comes in.

Twofold approach

At this juncture, we should make an important distinction. We can look at nominality from a theological perspective, and from a socioreligious perspective. While the first is legitimate and necessary, it runs the risk of overlooking the various forms of what is collectively called nominal Christianity. This is where the second approach is needed.

From a theological point of view, we shall ask questions such as: What makes someone a member of the Body of Christ, the Church universal? Through what rite, or creed, or experience, or action does someone become a Christian? What are the visible marks of a true Christian? What is the difference between a nominal and a non-Christian with respect to God's grace and salvation in Jesus-Christ? This will lead to normative definitions. Consequently, *nominality* will be distinguished from *normality*. Whatever form it takes, it invariably falls short of the 'normal Christian life'.

However, this leads to negative definitions, to putting something behind the 'but' what these people are *not*, viz. authentic or committed or genuine or practicing Christians. Such definitions don't tell us a lot about who they are, what they believe, how they relate to the Church, and in what sense they consider themselves Christian. For that, we need a contextual approach, which is phenomenological. It provides information and analyses their views. This is basically what the socioreligious studies are trying to bring to light. Practical theology and mission studies can therefore use their methods and learn from their findings.

Being aware of this, the authors of the *Purpose Document* of our consultation offer a twofold description. First, a theological assessment of all nominal Christians: 'they lack experiential engagement and spiritual participation in the biblical definition of what it means to be a Christian'. At the same time, they recognise that:

Nominal Christianity takes different shades and nuances depending on the large religious narrative it is inserted into. Majority Roman Catholic culture will bring its unique ways of embodying it; the same is true with majority Eastern Orthodox or Protestant/Evangelical contexts. There is no such a thing as a broad category fitting all types of nominal Christianity, but there are several strands within its vast domain. Contextual analysis is required if one wants to go beyond sociological stereotypes.

In other words, we are faced with phenomena that cannot be described exclusively in terms of a theological understanding of being a Christian.

Moving beyond third-person language

This brings us to an important aspect of the idea of nominality. 'Nominal' is not a first-person term ('I am nominal'), but always a third-person term ('They are...'). Employed by those who do not reckon themselves to the group of people they refer to as nominal.

Certainly, we need terms to analyse practices, terms to qualify ideas, but these are abstractions, theoretical constructs, technical terms for the convenience of language and academic discussion. Nevertheless, speaking in the third person is not enough, we should also listen to what the people designated as 'nominal' themselves say in first-person language. What do they say about their beliefs, their faith, their spiritual experience, their relationship with the Church, and so on? So, let us move from third-person language of the study-room to the first-person language of people's stories. Canadian author Luc Cawley writes:

You meet nominal Christians every week... Perhaps your temptation has been to see them as frauds, hypocrites or backsliders, For many people, though, the 'Christian' aspect of their identity matters to them. They may even have experienced some aspects of Christian conversion. The Christian faith may be a source of pain as they recall the difficult relationships or unresolved doubts that pushed them from the church. Or, alternatively, Christianity could be something that has an impact on their lives... The best way to find out what, if anything, Christianity means to them is to ask them to tell their story.²

To put it in a nutshell; move from the concepts to the people, from nominality to the 'nominals'. In this respect is noteworthy that the Lausanne Consultation on Nominality in High Leigh, 1998, has precisely done this. During the meetings, several people who agreed to be identified as nominal Christians were interviewed. It became evident that many considered churches and their spokespersons as judgmental and lacking care and understanding, for example, in relation to sexuality. Churches were sometimes seen as insensitive to the complexity of life and as being simplistic, rigid, arrogant and exclusive. Churches which have no place for doubt made them suspicious.³

The Myth of the Nominal Christian

The quote of Luke Cawley in the preceding paragraph is taken from his book *The Myth of the Non-Christian*, published in 2016. It is perhaps because of this provocative title that it has caught much attention. His main premise is that there is no such thing as a non-Christian. Technically, someone who is not a Christian can accurately be described as a 'non-Christian', but Luke Cawley argues that this is an abstract term, a theoretical category so broad and vague that it is obsolete. Moreover, he points out this is not what people in real life call themselves.

Some people I know describe themselves in terms of their sporting allegiance ('Packer's fan), their political affiliation ('liberal'), their hobbies ('avid reader', 'snowboarder') or their relationships ('devoted husband', 'struggling parent'). Some might even employ religious themed labels like 'atheist', 'secular Jew', 'spiritual but not religious' or 'vaguely Hindu'. I've rarely met anybody, though, who calls himself a 'non-Christian'.⁴

In general, people outside the Christian faith identify themselves in terms of what they do believe, not in terms of what they don't believe. And when it comes to that, they are not at all the same. Luc Cawley goes on to say that a one size fits all approach to 'the' non-Christians does not work. Atheists, Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, nominal Christians, and the spiritual-but-not-religious crowd are very different from one another, after all. Unfortunately, our evangelistic programs and apologetic arguments often act as if they do. To effectively engage them with the Gospel, we need to take account of what they believe, how they act, what makes them tick. This requires that we be flexible in our outreach to them.

The reason why we quote this book at some length, is that we find its argument appropriate for our subject. What he writes about the 'non-Christian' is true for the 'nominal Christian' as well, it is not a self-designation, but a technical term, used by theologians, pastors, evangelists and mission practitioners, to indicate a certain category of people in need of Christian ministry. In real life these people themselves hardly ever identify as such.

2 Luke Cawley, *The Myth of the Non-Christian*, p. 168.

3 *Statement on Nominality*, § 3.

4 Luke Cawley, *The Myth of the Non-Christian*, p. 12.

As for me, I have never met anybody who called himself a 'nominal Christian'. When it comes to their religious position, I hear them describe themselves in a host of different ways. For example, 'Catholic but non-practicing' or 'coming from a Protestant culture'. Others tell me: 'I no longer go to Church, but I keep my personal relationship with the Lord'.

Four types of nominal Christianity

If there is a myth of the non-Christian, as Cawley puts it, then there surely is also a myth of the nominal Christian. Simply put, 'the' nominal Christian does not exist. There are only people who identify as 'Christian', while this can mean one thing for some, and quite something else for others. Nominals come in several modes.

Cawley does not explicitly say that it is a 'myth' to use 'nominal' as a one-size-fits-all label, but it is implied in the way in which he deals with the subject. As he presents the stories of some 'nominals' he has met, he distinguishes four types or categories:

- *Churched* – regular Churchgoers who are committed to their Church and often actively involved.
- *Casuals* – affiliated to a Church who only occasionally go to a service, mainly during Christian holidays.
- *Wanderers* – have drifted away from involvement with a local church, even though 'many of them have not permanently abandoned the faith'.
- *Official Christians* – otherwise secular people who check 'Christian' on forms. '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.'

The distinguishing criterion is people's relationship with the Church. Once the types are defined, Cawley looks to another aspect, namely what people believe. The result is the following matrix:⁵

	Churched	Casual	Wanderer	Official
Relationship with church	Regular and committed	Occasional, mainly festivals	Past involvement, present estrangement	Non, expect perhaps baptism
Attitude to church	Usually positive	Usually positive or indifferent	Usually negative or indifferent	Could be anything
Beliefs	Essentially Christian	Elements of Christianity	Elements of Christianity	Could be anything

The 'churched' are regular churchgoers, the 'casual' are registered members who hardly ever go to church, the 'wanderers' have stopped going to church and some are no longer members either, while the 'official' are unaffiliated to a church but identify as 'Christian' when responding to survey questions. We shall come back to this classification further on.

Inadequacy of the label 'nominal'

In passing, we find it somewhat surprising that Cawley puts all four types under the same heading of 'nominal Christianity', while the main thrust of his book is precisely to avoid generalist qualifications, to listen to the personal stories of people, to discern the specific aspects of each type, and to contextualise our pastoral ministry and evangelistic approach.

What, then, is the common denominator of all these stories? What makes all of them examples of one category? It is the Evangelical bottom-line, mentioned above. All nominal Christians, whatever their differences, 'need to engage with Jesus'. Basically, they are not yet converted. Cawley insists that

⁵ *Idem*, p. 162.

conversion is usually a process that takes time, that it is a cluster of several experiences. That makes every personal pilgrimage to faith a unique story, Cawley insists, but it is always about responding to Jesus.⁶

Like so many Evangelicals, Cawley uses the term nominal to indicate the common denominator of all forms of so-called nominal Christianity. But that is at the same time its limitation. When we take a closer look at the groups of people concerned, it becomes clear that 'nominal' is too general a term to adequately describe the major characteristics of each form of 'nominality'. Further on, we shall propose several other terms to give a more precise indication of the categories or groups of people that can be distinguished.

For want of a better alternative, we shall keep using the term 'nominal' as a collective term for these phenomena, in inverted comma's. In name only, so to speak.

Maps and coordinates

Cawley's matrix is helpful as a method of mapping the field. To draw a map that brings out that variety in a systematic manner, we need two coordinates, so to speak: parameters and categories. In recent literature, various classifications or 'maps' of 'nominals' are proposed, depending on the parameters that are used to analyse the relation between stated adherence and actual commitment to the Christian faith. We shall discuss some of these classifications, and then present ours,

Parameters

To begin with, here are the six parameters that were identified in the preceding article as essential aspects of being Christian:

- Initiation (becoming Christian)
- Faith (trust, relationship with God, spiritual experience, believing 'in')
- Beliefs (knowledge, meaning, believing 'that')
- Church attachment (membership, felt belonging)
- Church participation (attendance, active belonging)
- Practice of spiritual life (prayer, devotional reading and other disciplines, spiritual growth)
- Practice of the faith (witness, Christian conduct in daily life in society)

Ideally, then, all the aspects go together, but this is not always the case. Some believe 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, of knowing something for sure.

Classifications

These different configurations of aspects allow us to distinguish certain types of 'nominality'. Several authors propose classifications, usually based on one or two church parameters ('belonging').

Within and outside the Church

Using the single criterion of church attendance, the Lausanne Occasional Paper on Nominal Protestants distinguishes four types among Church members, and adds a fifth category of people beyond the scope of both parameters:

⁶ *Idem*, p. 165ff.

- One who attends church regularly and worships devoutly, but who has no vital personal relationship with Jesus as Saviour and Lord.
- One who attends church regularly but for cultural reasons only.
- One who attends church only for major church festivals (Christmas, Easter, etc.) and ceremonies (weddings, baptisms, funerals).
- One who hardly ever attends church but maintains a church relationship for reasons of security, emotional or family ties, or tradition.
- One who has no relationship to any specific church and who never attends but considers himself a believer in God (in a Protestant traditional sense).⁷

A later Lausanne document brought them back to three major categories:

- Those who have never attended church
- Those who have ceased to attend church
- Those who do attend church.⁸

More recently, South-Korean theologian Jeung-Ou Nam has published a study in French, about sociological Christians (the generally used term in a French speaking context) and the renewal of the Church.⁹ He looks at this phenomenon from a global perspective and adds a detailed case study of his home country South-Korea. Using the parameters of church affiliation and church participation, and combining it with another one, namely faith, he distinguishes what he calls 'three levels of concrete involvement in the life of the Church'.

- The Christian is registered in the records of the Church, but he is not present at the service. There are two ways of non-presence:
 - those who are never present in worship services
 - those who were formerly present but who no longer come to church.
- The Christian is registered in the Church's records, goes to church frequently, but does not have faith. Here we should think of churches dominated by liberal theology, its members might be actively involved while denying basic classical Christian doctrines.
- The Christian who is not registered in the Church but has faith. Here the author refers to the phenomenon described as 'believing without belonging'.

These classifications make an important point: nominal Christianity is found among Church members, as well as outside the organised Church community.

Church members and church leavers

We already mentioned Eddie Gibbs and noticed that he defines nominality as the absence of faith experience (believing in) and faith practice (commitment to discipleship). He distinguishes three categories.¹⁰

- Christians by birth. Individuals and even entire communities may self-identify as Roman Catholics, Lutheran, Anglican, etc., but only by virtue of their birth or because that particular tradition is identified with their national, tribal or family identity. This kind of nominalism, Gibbs argues, arises within the context of Christendom in the western world and in nations where European Christian traditions were imported as part of colonial influence.

⁷ LCWE, *Christian Witness to Nominal Christians among Protestants*, § 1.

⁸ *Statement on Nominality*, § 2.1, 2.2 and 2.3.

⁹ Jeung-ou Nam, 'Les chrétiens sociologiques et le renouveau de l'église.'

¹⁰ Eddie Gibbs, 'Nominalism', p. 611f.

- Second generation Christians. They are found in any church that is more than a generation old, but especially in rapidly growing churches, which fail to nurture new believers in the faith. As a consequence, the growth impetus will not be sustained beyond the first generation of believers. This, he argues, represents the greatest challenge facing the vibrant churches of Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia experiencing unprecedented numerical growth.
- Those who have stopped being part of a congregation. Some of them because they no longer adhere to the doctrines or the ethical codes, others because of dissatisfaction with the superficiality and the ‘consumer models’ of the church.

This last category should be noted. Gibbs was one of the first Evangelical authors on mission and church development to call attention to the Evangelical church-leavers. He wrote about ‘the multitudes which have already voted with their feet by swelling the ranks of the lapsed and the notional “believers”, suggesting strategies to win them back.’¹¹

Nominal and notional

In his overview of the ‘religious positions’ in Britain, Peter Brierly starts with a belief parameter, by separating those who believe in the Christian God and those who don’t. He then divides the first population in different categories, by using the parameters of church affiliation and church participation. This leads to the following break up:

Belief in the Christian God				Non-belief in Christian God	
Regular attenders		Non-regular attenders		Other Religions	Nonreligious
Not church members	Active church members	Nominal church members	Notional Christians		
2%	4%	7%	47%	7%	33%

Brierly has drawn up this table to show the evolution of the percentages for the different ‘religious positions’ over the years, starting in 1980 and ending with a prognosis for 2020. Here we only show his figures for 2010.¹² Our interest is in his classification. In his view, nominal Christians ‘say they believe in the Christian God but virtually never (if ever) attend church, even though they are church members, indicating they probably attended church at one stage’. He distinguishes them from non-affiliated ‘notional’ Christians who ‘are not church members and have never attended church, but they say they believe in God and sign themselves as “Christian” on a Census form’.¹³

Interestingly, Brierly found that unaffiliated ‘notional’ Christians occasionally attend a Church service, and that there is even a small percentage of unaffiliated regular attenders (see the first column). Unfortunately, the diagram does not provide information about the religious experiences, the beliefs and the behaviour of these people.

Forms of nominality among the unaffiliated population

We are not the only ones curious to know more about that. British sociologist Abby Day has asked the same questions, in her research concentrated on people ‘who appear to be not institutionally affiliated but will sometimes claim when asked, and usually only when asked, a subjective self-identification as “Christian”’. She argues, convincingly, that this is ‘the most significant neglected group within the sociology of religion’.¹⁴

11 Eddie Gibbs, *In Name Only*.

12 Peter Brierly, *Where is the Church Going?* § 17.2, table 17.2.2, *Overview of Religious Positions, 1980 to 2020*. The author specifies that the figures for 2010 were originally based on data in the *UK Church Statistics 2005-2015*, but revised in the light of the 2011 Census.

13 Peter Brierly, *Where is the Church Going*, § 16.

14 Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging*, p. 26.

While Brierley would call them 'notional' and not 'nominal', Abby Day refers to this group as 'Christian nominalism'. Other researchers describe them as 'believing without belonging', a phrase coined by Grace Davie. A collaborator of Peter Brierley, David Voas, has characterised them as the 'fuzzy faithful' and the way they relate to Christian beliefs as 'fuzzy fidelity'. Their religious positions oscillate between those of the religious and the non-religious populations.¹⁵

Intrigued by the fact that 72 per cent of those who answered the religion question in the 2001 census opted to identify themselves as 'Christian', Abby Day set out to find out what that Christian identity meant for people who have no faith in God, Jesus, or Christian doctrine. Instead of the Church parameter, she used belief as the major criterion. That led her to distinguish three types of 'nominalism outside the Church':

- *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 do not believe in God and never attend church services, but they are Christians because they see England as a Christian country, and so Christianity is an ethnic marker of Englishness.
- *Natal* nominalists take their Christian identity from their parents or grandparents. They were born of Christian parents, christened or baptised in their childhood, and used perhaps to go to church in their childhood but no longer do so today. Some do not believe in core Christian doctrines.
- For *aspirational* nominalists, being 'Christian' confers goodness, respectability and a sense of belonging to those who have the same aspirations. They affiliate themselves with Christianity but are not church goers.¹⁶

We shall return to this classification in our discussion of 'unaffiliated Christianity'.

Close to and far from the Church

In the German speaking realm, Protestant pastor Gerald Kretzschmar researched the place of the church in society. Analysing the data of the most recent surveys of the Lutheran Church, he gave the following typology of Protestant Christians in Germany:

- *Highly religious and close to the church*: strong agreement with Christian convictions and belief in God, high solidarity with the Church and regular participation in church life.
- *Little religious, but close to the church*: rejection of Christian beliefs, but strong attachment to the church and regular participation.
- *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.
- *A bit religious and a bit involved in the church*: median position in religiosity and churchliness.
- *Non-religious and not involved*: rejection to Christian belief in God and Christian religious experience, rare to no involvement in the church life.

This rather complex and somewhat paradoxical picture is the result of combining three parameters, religious experience (faith, believing in), religious beliefs (believing that), and church participation. By asking to what extent people were religious and/or related to the Church, the researcher found five configurations – only among affiliated Christians. It would be interesting to see the results of a similar survey among the non-affiliated Germans. Probably that would show a picture similar to that of their British counterparts, mentioned above.

¹⁵ David Voas (Brierley Consultancy, London) "Fuzzy fidelity: threat or opportunity?" by Prof David Voas, *Future First*, Vol 1, No 6, 2009, Pages 1,6 and "The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe," *European Sociological Review*, Vol 25, No 2, 2009.

¹⁶ *Idem*, summary of chapter 9, p. 174ff.

What strikes the reader, is that Kretzschmar never qualifies any of these types as ‘nominal’. Instead, he looks at them from the perspective of attachment and involvement, and qualifies them in terms of closeness and distance, as *Kirchennahe* or *Kirchenferne*. Some are in the centre of churchlife, others are in the margin. We find this a helpful terminology. Later on, we shall introduce the term ‘marginal Christianity’.

Our matrix

How then shall we draw a map of the vast field of nominal Christianity? It seems to us that the Church parameter is indeed the most appropriate one to begin with. However, we should bring in the other parameters as well to complete the picture of the various types. The schematic form resulting from this combination is a matrix, such as the one presented by Luke Cawley. Taking his matrix as a starting point, we come to the following modified and elaborate version. Instead of four types, we find that there are really five forms of ‘nominal’ Christianity. Moreover, while Cawley only mentions two parameters, Church and beliefs, we add other parameters so as to give a more complete picture.

In our table below, the horizontal axis shows five categories of nominality, according to the different ways of relating to the Church. The vertical axis shows a comparative list of the main characteristics of each form, according to the parameters of being Christian.

Comp

Apart from the first line (forms of nominality), the descriptions in all the other lines is provisional. The aim is just to give an indication. We need to take a closer look at each form to give more precise descriptions. For the same reason, we have left the last lines open.

Table: Categories of nominality

	Churched	Marginal	Parallel	Unaffiliated	Dechurched
Church attachment	Members High attachment	Members Various levels of attachment	Mostly members Little attachment	Not members Little attachment	Once members Little attachment
Church participation	Regular attendance Involved in activities	None or occasional (holidays, rites de passage)	None or occasional	None or occasional (holidays, rites de passage)	None or occasional
Initiation	Baptism + church rites, or conversion + baptism	Baptism + church rites	Baptism + church rites, or conversion + baptism	None	Baptism + church rites, or conversion + baptism
Faith	...	...		...	...
Beliefs	...	...	...	...	...
Practice of spiritual life	...	...	...	...	...
Practice in daily conduct	...	...	...	...	...

Compared to the matrix of Cawley, we begin with the same category of *churched* nominals. Our second category of *marginal* nominals corresponds to what he calls the ‘casual’, but it is broader, including forms of so-called minimal Christianity.

Those whom Cawley calls 'Wanderers' are in fact Church-leavers, people who disconnect from a faith community, who are no longer actively involved. We call them *dechurched*.

His description of what he calls 'official nominals' lacks clarity, because he includes people who were baptised as infants (and who are therefore officially Church members), as well as non-affiliated persons who identify as 'Christians' in surveys and polls. The first really belong to the category of marginal Church membership, while the latter constitute, in our view, a distinct category which we simply call *unaffiliated* nominal Christianity.

There is yet another form of nominality that goes unnoticed in the analysis of Cawley, as in any other classification that we are aware of. We call it *parallel* Christianity.

Global, regional and sectorial maps

In geography, there are global maps and there are maps of a certain part of the world, a continent or a country or a city. The latter are more detailed, but they use the same coordinates. Similarly, our matrix, and many other classifications of 'nominals', are general or global maps. With the help of the same categories and parameters as in these global maps, we can do a mapping of nominal Christianity in one continent only, or in one country only.

Regional and country maps

The regional approach is valuable and useful, because the social status of Christianity and the religious and cultural developments in society are not the same in different parts of the world.

For instance, there are marked differences between Europe on the one hand and North-America and other Western societies on the other hand, when it comes to the place of the Christian religion in society. So much so that sociologists of religion like Grace Davie, Peter Berger, Jean-Paul Willaime and many others qualify Europe as 'the exceptional case', as compared to the rest of the world.¹⁷

For instance, in Europe, nominality is to a large extent the legacy of European Christianity, in which Churches were closely related to the political powers. Christianity was the official religion, often obligatory and at times imposed by force. In other parts of the world, Christianity has spread in a different way.

Secularisation and secular worldviews originated in Europe. While they have spread to other parts of the world, they are particularly present in Europe. Much more could be said on this topic, but within the limits of this article we must leave it at these brief indications.

Furthermore, many studies on nominality so far have been conducted in a Western context. But there are marked differences, not only within the Western world, but also between countries like the United States, Canada or Britain on the one hand, and on the other hand Latin-America, Africa, the Middle-East, Russia and its neighbouring countries of the former Soviet-Union, South-Asia, China, Korea, Australia, the Oceanian isles, and so on. Each region presents specific characteristics with respect to the practice of the Christian religion. When it comes to nominality, it can be helpful to study it in a regional context.

In this respect it is worth noting the emerging interest in this subject in a non-Western context. Recent studies have been conducted in these parts of the world. Pars pro toto, we mention two African and two South Korean authors.

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Turning to the Koreans, Jeung Ou Nam has published a French article on 'the sociological Christians and the renewal of the Church'.¹⁸ He finds that nominal Christianity is no longer a characteristic of countries with a history of established churches, but also in other parts of the world. He then

¹⁷ Peter Berger, Grace Davie & Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?* Grace Davie, *Europe the Exceptional Case*. Jean-Paul Willaime, *Europe et religions*.

¹⁸ Jeung Ou Nam, 'Les chrétiens sociologiques et le renouveau de l'église.'

includes an interesting case-study of nominality in South-Korea, a country marked by a spectacular quantitative growth of the Christian population.

His compatriot Young-gi Hong has published a detailed study of nominalism in Korean Protestantism.¹⁹

Sectors of Christianity

Another form of regional mapping is to concentrate on a major sector of Christianity, on a major church-tradition and the areas of the world where this tradition was dominant in the past, or still is today. Call it sectorial mapping. An example that immediately comes to mind are the three Lausanne Occasional Papers (LOP), published in 1980. Each of them deals with nominality in a major church tradition, among Roman-Catholics, among Orthodox, and among Protestants. Notice that at that time, no attention was paid to forms of nominality in Evangelicalism, Pentecostalism and Charismatic Movements.

We also notice that the method of mapping is not the same in these three publications. In the first document, the total Roman-Catholics population is classified by using different parameters, regeneration and faith for some, theological views (beliefs) and political positions (practice) for others. This resulted in the following 'map' of categories and characteristics:

- Traditional and conservative Roman Catholics (holding the dogma of the Counter-Reformation as defined by the Council of Trent): Traditional and conservative; often politically right.
- Modernist/Progressive Roman Catholics: Post-Vatican II liberals; theologically, and often politically, left-wing.
- Moderated Roman Catholics: The 'Montinian Center' which is more attached to Vatican II documents. Some are biblically oriented, some are political reformists.
- Cultural Roman Catholics: This includes a family, tribal, and social identity with little knowledge of theology. It is often manifested in popular religiosity and syncretistic superstition.
- Ethnic Roman Catholics: Often migrants using their religion to provide a sense of belonging. They feel that not to be Roman Catholic is not to belong, and to lose nationality and roots.
- Alienated/lapsed Roman Catholics: These are indifferent not only to Roman Catholicism but also to the God of Catholicism whom they equate with Christianity.
- Charismatic Roman Catholics: Some are truly born again and committed to the Lordship of Jesus and enjoy the emotional uplift and personal freedom. They are committed to remain Roman Catholics.
- Those who see themselves as Evangelicals.

All these categories are considered 'nominal', except the latter two. The decisive parameter is conversion ('born again'). In fact, the whole discussion on Roman-Catholic theology hinges on initiation, how does one become a Christian.

The document on Protestantism concentrates on the nominals among them, i.e. 'those who have no vital personal relationship with Jesus as Saviour and Lord'. Here the decisive parameter is faith. Next, the nominal population is subdivided on the basis of one parameter, church attendance, in those who...

- attend regularly and seem to worship sincerely but who have no vital personal relationship with Jesus as Saviour and Lord
- attend church regularly but for cultural reasons only.
- attend church only for major church festivals, weddings, baptisms, funerals.

¹⁹ Young-gi Hon. 'Nominalism in Korean Protestantism'.

- hardly attend church but maintain a relationship with the church either for security or family or even traditional reasons.
- have no relationship with an organized church and never attend church but nevertheless consider themselves as Christians.

While the document on the Orthodox sector gives a detailed description of their history, theology and church practices, as well as an overview of the different Orthodox communities all over the world regions, it does not draw a map of the nominals among them, as in the other two documents. One gets the impression that all Orthodox are 'nominal'.

In the *Purpose Document* of our Consultation, this classification is maintained, but the three Church traditions are now located as three different geographical regions, in which one of them is dominant. Participants will work in three groups *Roman Catholicism*, *Orthodoxy*, and *Protestantism/Evangelicalism*. Notice that nominality in Evangelical circles is now included!

The sectorial approach helps to clarify the picture within the population linked with one church-tradition, but we are not sure whether it is helpful to combine this with a regional approach. The main problem is it tends to look at a geographical region only from one angle, that of Roman-Catholicism in this country, that of Orthodoxy in that country, that of Protestantism in another country. But no country is only made up by only one of these confessions, even if one expression of Christianity has been dominant in the past and shaped its culture. Even when one form of Christianity is still predominant in some countries, no country is a cultural island in the world. Especially in a world that is increasingly becoming a global village.

Moreover, there are cross-sectional cultural and religious developments that affect the whole population, and all the various Christian confessions and denominations. All Western societies, for example, are traversed by secularism, the postmodern outlook, consumerism, and a shift from adherence to religious institutions to individualised spirituality.

Given these developments, it seems to us, that the regional approach is a better way to start than the sectorial approach. Begin with a country or a continent and look at all sectors of Christianity represented in that region. A next step could be to see how nominality takes form in this or that church-tradition.

We suggest that our matrix is a good tool to use, because it uses general categories that are not dependent on one church-tradition. Moreover, it tries to bring into play all the parameters of Christian identity. But of course, other maps can be used for this purpose as well.

Categories of 'nominal' Christianity

We shall now take a closer look at these five categories. In each case, the question is where the 'nominal' comes in exactly, and with respect to which parameter(s).

1. Churched yet nominal

The first category consists of 'churched' Christians, i.e. affiliated to a church and regularly going to Mass or a worship service. Of all the categories of 'nominal', this one is by far the most difficult one to judge. Where exactly does nominality come in? Certainly not in the area of 'belonging', because we are dealing with faithful church members, many of whom are actively involved. They might sing in the choir, lead Sunday School for children, or a youth group. Some take up responsibilities of leadership (elders, deacons).

Even so, this can be a belonging without believing, and/or belonging without behaving.

Among this 'churchy' population, we find proponents of liberal theology that stands in opposition to the clear teaching of the authors of the Bible. Denial of the resurrection of Jesus, for example.

There can be absence of personal faith, spiritual life. Daily practice can be indistinguishable from that of the surrounding society.

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. In which case, we are dealing with nominal Christians.

It is in this context what we should situate the 'true versus nominal' discourse. We have raised some questions with respect to this approach, but we do acknowledge the intention behind it, namely that these people will grow into a deeper understanding of what the Christian faith really is all about. This category is also the *Sitz im Leben* of the 'discipleship versus nominality' discourse. In the foregoing we have objected to the categorical use of the term 'nominal', but we should not discard the pastoral desire underlying this discourse, namely to see these regular churchgoers become committed disciples of Jesus-Christ.

In our view, we should be reluctant to call certain church members 'nominal', let alone 'non-Christians', because we might speak too quickly without really knowing what the other really experiences and believes. We might even make ourselves guilty of 'judging a brother or a sister'. Having said that, we underline the pastoral intention to see people come to a closer relationship with God in Christ, through his holy Spirit.

2. Marginal church membership

Secondly, the category of affiliated Christians who hardly ever go to church. We call them marginal church members, following German and Dutch parlance (*Kirchenferne, randkerkelijk*).

Here, the nominality clearly refers to the area of 'belonging'. To put it more precisely, this is 'formal belonging without real belonging'.

When we look at the absence of church participation, we 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. We also easily assume that they have never really chosen to be a Christian. However, we should not jump to conclusions. We can only tell when we have met with them, listened to their story.

Luc Cawley rightly remarks that 'church attendance should not be taken as a measure of a given person's attitude to Christ or to the church.'²⁰

One of the reasons why we find marginal church membership puzzling and difficult to assess is a difference of conception of what the church means for believers.

Evangelicals have a high view of church involvement. In our view, this is an essential part of an 'authentic' Christian identity. Most of them see the church is that of the 'gathered community' of believers, as opposed to 'multitudinal' churches composed of regenerated believers as well as unregenerated 'Christians'. From that point of view, we are quick to discard registered members who hardly ever show up in church. When we talk with them, we might discover that they often feel attached to the church, while admitting that they are not practicing members.

Even though Roman-Catholic, Orthodox and historic Protestant churches encourage its members to be involved in the local parish, they regard baptism a more important marker of belonging than church attendance. Marginal membership is not necessarily seen as a rejection of the church, nor as a contradiction with a person's Christian obligation.

Surely, many people at the margin of church life also have marginal knowledge of Christian doctrine and a marginal, or perhaps a non-existent relationship with God. Many disagree with the moral teaching of the church, or they just don't follow it up, without feeling too guilty about it. In such cases, the qualification 'nominal' is therefore not unjustified.

²⁰ Luc Cawley, *The Myth of the non-Christian*, p. 160.

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, what strikes us and makes us pause to think, is that many 'nominals', especially among the Roman-Catholics and the Orthodox, do not sever all links with the institutional church. Although their daily life is largely secularised, and although they may have a secular worldview, they wish to maintain at least an administrative link with organised religion. Reasons may vary:

- 'It is useful to maintain membership to ensure a Christian burial.'
- 'The church does good work for the poor and I want to support that.'
- 'In times of need, I might need the church.'
- 'Maybe God would be offended if I deregister.'
- 'I want to end up in paradise, not somewhere else.'

Minimal church participation

Another factor should be taken in account, namely the widespread idea of what we would call minimal church participation. 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, or 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. A few 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 the Italians are baptised Catholics. He explained that this is even part of the national identity.

However, the overwhelming majority hardly ever attend a mass, but that doesn't 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 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.²¹

Minimal church participation 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 in order to be acceptable to God. For many people, it has become automatic to do the minimum thing and be comfortable. It almost goes without saying. So, while Evangelicals from their point of view would call them 'nominal', these persons themselves do not feel that they are Catholic or Orthodox 'just in name'.

3. *Parallel Christianity*

There is yet another form of nominality that goes unnoticed in any one of the classifications that we are aware of. We would call it *parallel* Christianity, because it refers to people who are largely disconnected from local church life, but actively involved in parallel structures of social work, Christian NGO's or missions.

²¹ This conversation took place during my stay at the Italian Evangelical Bible Institute in Rome, March 22, 2010. Ronaldo Diprose passed away in 2017.

This category also includes people who connect with Internet, television and social media, rather than a visible parish community.

Viewed from the angle of the local parish or the local Evangelical assembly, they are 'nominal' as far as their church practice is concerned, but they are necessarily 'nominal' with respect to other parameters. On the contrary, many of those who are active in parallel structures, take their Christian identity very serious. In each case we must look where nominality comes in.

To date, not much attention has been paid to this subject. We can make some observations though. must therefore limit

Missions

First, there are the mission organisations that almost function as a church for the workers who are involved. As they attend the conferences of the mission, the prayer meetings and the Bible studies of the team, and training programs, they don't have time left for a local church. Some don't feel the need. Of course, this is everything but uncommitted Christianity! Even so, one can put the question whether the link with local fellowships of believers could become a relationship 'in name only'.

Social Christianity

Second, there are those for whom the involvement in structures for social welfare, or in the actions of Christian NGO's to combat poverty, and for whom this takes the place of involvement in the local church. A recently conducted large scale survey among French protestants brought to light that only a small minority regularly attends church, and that an increasing number see their social activities as the main, if not the only expression of their Christian faith.²²

Surely, the initial motivation of these people is related to their Christian identity. However, there is a real risk for social Christianity to evolve into nominality. The organisations generally do not provide spiritual edification or worship opportunities. As people are engaged disconnected from church life, their spiritual life is not nourished. While they might fight against injustice in the name of Christian values, their faith is left starving.

Church at distance

Thirdly, there are Christians who prefer watching a service on television or through podcasts and live streaming on the computer, instead of going to a church nearby. 'Whereas local preachers once would only have had their sermon received by whoever was at worship on Sunday, they can have a global reach', comments Meriel Jane Waissman. 'The concept of community stretches and expands, as relationships forged on Sunday mornings continue to evolve through our digital ties.'²³ It is estimated that the Church of England today reaches more people through social televised services than in their actual church buildings.²⁴

While these are tremendous opportunities for churches to connect with an unaffiliated public, the flipside is that church members will use these means to connect at distance. We are not talking about those who are not able to go to church, because of illness or old age. We are talking about those who prefer a church at distance to the real fellowship with other believers.

When this become the rule, what will be the consequences for their spiritual life, their relationship with God, their understanding of the Bible, their commitment to living out the faith from day to day? Asking the questions is enough to say that there is a risk of superficiality, of a consumer attitude, and an impoverishment of their Christian life. In the long run, this might end up in nominality

22 Fédération protestante de France/IPSOS, *Les protestants en France en 2017*.

23 Meriel Jane Waissman, 'Is the Internet Killing Christianity?' *Huffington Post*, February 10, 2014.

24 Olivia Rudgard, 'Church of England reaches more on social media than in services', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 October 2017.

Internet

Fourthly, there is the Internet with its possibilities to download daily devotional texts, chat with other believers on a forum, set up virtual group meetings, or even to create 'liquid churches'. Clearly, the nominality comes in with respect to physical church participation. The question is whether this will induce nominality in other areas as well. Through Internet, people have access to a wealth of information, also concerning the Bible and questions related to true Christian faith, but also to uncountable amount of non-truth, fake-news and theological rubbish. When connecting to the Internet takes the place of a participating in a local community, the Christian life becomes individualised, with the tendency for each one to develop a theology and a spirituality à la carte, without the corrective factor of sound teaching. In the long run, there is a real risk of heretical ideas and deviating into practices that are a contradictory to the Christian identity. In other words, nominality.

The question can be asked whether the Internet has a destructive effect on church life and in the long run on Christian life as such, or whether it will transform the way in which churches function. We can only mention this and notice the need for research and reflection.

4. Unaffiliated yet 'Christian'

The fourth category concerns those who are not affiliated to a church but identify as 'Christian' when asked what their religious position is.

'Believing without belonging'

It has become commonplace to refer to these people as 'believing without belonging', a term coined by Grace Davie.²⁵ Her analysis is based on the European Values Studies (EVS) are a series of surveys conducted by universities in several European countries at regular intervals. What makes the EVS interesting, is that they use several criteria to assess the religious situation of modern Europe: denominational allegiance, reported church attendance, attitudes towards the church, indicators of religious belief and subjective religious dispositions. This is similar to our approach, although our parameters are not exactly the same.

There are two types of variables to measure religious practice, she says: on the one hand those concerned with feelings, experience and the more numinous religious beliefs, on the other hand those which measure religious orthodoxy, ritual participation and institutional attachment.

It is only the latter (i.e. the more orthodox indicators of religious attachment) which display an undeniable degree of secularisation throughout Western Europe. In contrast, the former (the less institutional indicators) demonstrate considerable persistent religious adherence. With this in mind, 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 definition 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.²⁶

This leads Grace Davie to the conclusion that 'religious belief is *inversely* rather than *directly* related to belonging. In other words, as the institutional disciplines decline, belief not only persists, but becomes increasingly personal, detached and heterogeneous and particularly among young people.'

Believing without belonging has quickly become a catch phrase that rings a bell with most people who study the religious situation in their country. It describes the phenomenon that Christian beliefs are widespread beyond church institutions. Davie says that the religious landscape in Europe is now paradoxical: 'What is going away is inherited, institutionalized Christianity — what many would call

²⁵ Grace DAVIE, *Religion in Britain since 1945*.

²⁶ Grace Davie, *Europe: the exceptional case*, p. 7f.

“nominal Christianity. Yet new patterns of orthodox Christian faith (and of other religions) are growing too. Contrary to the confident predictions of its death, religious faith is an increasing presence in the modern world order.”²⁷

Grace Davies’ message is both exciting and challenging for Christians in cities today, writes Tim Keller, leader of the Church planting network City to City.

Gone is that great “canopy” of nominal Christians who were not personally devout but who thought religion was a good thing and important for society — and who were not very difficult to draw into Christian churches. On the other hand, contemporary people have the same intuitions of God and sin and spiritual longings for love, meaning, and grace that their ancestors did.²⁸

Notional Christianity or fuzzy fidelity

However, this idea has not gone several unchallenged. We mention three valid points of criticism. Firstly, not all those who retain a latent sense of belonging to the inherited Christian will identify as ‘Christians’ in surveys and censuses. We cannot range them under the large of nominal Christianity. Only those unchurched who tick the box ‘Christian’, whatever they mean by that identity, can be taken in consideration.

Secondly, 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. When we look at surveys and read field studies, we get the impression of notions instead of Christian beliefs. Some authors, like Peter Brierley, therefore, speak of ‘notional Christianity’.²⁹ David Voas has introduced the term ‘fuzzy fidelity’ to describe a ‘casual loyalty to [Christian] tradition’.

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 asked, depending on the wording and context of the question. These nominal Christians comprise more than half the population in most European countries.³⁰

Cultural Christianity (‘behaving without belonging’)

Another criticism is that the unchurched who call themselves ‘Christian’ are not so much attached to Christian beliefs as to social values associated with the Christian tradition. This point is made, rather convincingly, by Allan Billings. Together with some colleagues, this British Anglican priest analysed the religious situation in his region. According to the 2001 census in the UK, over seventy-six 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 secularisation theories, they used the idea of believing without belonging as a tool to better understand these people in their cities, towns and villages. But this didn’t give much more clarity. 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 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

27 Quoted by Tim Keller, ‘The City, the Church, and the Future’.

28 *Idem*.

29 Peter Brierley, *Where is the Church Going?* § 17.2.

30 David Voas, ‘Fuzzy fidelity: threat or opportunity’, p. 1 and 6. See also his article ‘The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe’.

Matins or Evensong. They see the Church, in other words, as a spiritual resource. But they do not want to belong.³¹

We could call this 'behaving without belonging.' Granted, this is a diluted form of practising Christianity. It only touches the social behaviour side of it, omitting the belief side and the worship side almost entirely.

Allan Billings calls such people 'cultural Christians.' He distinguishes them from 'church Christians' (people who regularly go to church and adhere to its basic beliefs). This term should not be confused with the *Kulturchristentum* in nineteenth-century Germany, although there are similarities. As I talk with people in my French surroundings and look at their attitude to Christianity, I recognize this description. In this country, as in Spain, the preferred term is sociological Christians. There are many sociological or cultural Roman Catholics, like the cultural Anglicans in Britain, described by Billings and his team. I suspect that the reader will 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 the deceased floating on a cloud to heaven, of a horned devil that tempts people to commit a deadly or 'capital' sin. It has above all left us with values and a morality, notices Allan Billings: '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. We are a people who have been shaped and continue to live by Christian values.'³²

He goes on to say that many people want to abide with social values that have a Biblical origin, and which they do not hesitate to call Christian values.

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 Christianity. 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.³³

Similarly, Callum Brown indicates, with respect to the same British situation,

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.³⁴

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 is an ethnic marker of Englishness. *Natal* nominalists take their Christian identity from their parents or grandparents. These people used perhaps 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 church goers.³⁵

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.

31 Alan Billings, *Secular Lives, Sacred Hearts*, p. 11.

32 *Idem*, p. 15f.

33 *Idem*, p. 18.

34 Brown, Callum. *The Death of Christian Britain*. London, Routledge, 2001, Page 8.

35 Abby Day, *Believing in belonging*, chapter 9.

5. *Dechurched*

The last category could be called 'church leavers' but that is not so polite, so we use the more abstract term dechurched. However, we are indeed referring to people who have stopped being actively involved in a church, who no longer attend services. Some remain affiliated, others have stopped church membership as well. Have they therefore become 'nominal'? Strictly speaking only with respect to the church parameters. It remains to be seen to what extent this is also true for the other parameters.

There are two sub-categories here. First those who have become dechurched because they no longer believe in the teaching of the church, they no longer agree with the moral code of the church, they have doubts about God, the historicity of the Bible. When they still identify as 'Christians', affiliated or unaffiliated, they can indeed be called nominal.

Notice that many people no longer go to church, not because of doctrinal issues or personal doubts, but because of disappointment and negative experiences with church leaders. While some of them join another church, most of them seem to disconnect altogether from church involvement. 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 leave because they feel burned out and no longer capable of giving of themselves personally.³⁶

This phenomenon is also affecting Evangelical churches. A recent study in the Netherlands among dechurched Evangelicals brought to light that many of them try to maintain their spiritual life on an individual basis, through personal contact with other believers, through occasional or regular group meetings, but that there is a gradual decrease in commitment and conviction.³⁷ The Barna Research Group has recently published a report on dechurched Evangelicals in the United States, showing that this phenomenon has reached considerable proportions, from 7 percent of all Americans in 2004 to 10 percent in 2017.³⁸ This report labelled this group as 'those who love Jesus, but not the church.' They still believe in Scripture, and most of the tenets of their Christian faith, but they have lost faith in the church,' said Roxanne Stone, editor in chief of Barna Group.

They're Christians who say their faith is important to them but haven't attended church in six months or more. This crowd shares a lot of core beliefs with their churchgoing neighbors; nearly all of them (around 95%) believe in only one God, that he is everywhere, and that he is the 'all-powerful, all-knowing, perfect creator of the universe who rules the world today.' And 89 percent of them are committed to Jesus.³⁹

Upon reading the report, we realise that these people are not at all nominal just because they have stopped going to church. But what we have said about parallel Christianity and unaffiliated 'Christians' also applies to this group. In the long run there is the risk of a decreasing commitment to the Christian faith, as it is no longer nourished by the fellowship and no longer exposed to the teaching of the word of God.

36 Statement on Nominality, § 2.2.1.

37 Otto de Bruijne et al. *Ooit Evangelisch*.

38 Roxanne Stone, 'Meet Those Who "Love Jesus but Not the Church".' Research Release, published in *Faith & Christianity*, March 30, 2017, and in *Christianity Today*, April 2017.

39 Quoted by Kate Shellnutt, 'Just Give Me Jesus: A Closer Look at Christians Who Don't Go to Church.' *Christianity Today*, April 07, 2017.

To conclude

Our observations and reflections in this paper are presented as a basis for discussion, so they are open for correction, modification and further development. We hope that they will serve as a starting point for fruitful deliberations.

By way of conclusion we take up our introductory remark that we wanted to move beyond third-person language about nominality and listen to the first-person language of the stories of the people concerned. Let us anticipate the following step, that awaits us after this paper. When all is said about Christians called nominals, we shall have to move from third-person to second-person language, and beyond...

We are not only theologians but also pastors, evangelists, mission workers, practitioners. As such we are challenged to move on from 'they' to 'you'. How do we translate our idea of nominality in second-person language? In words that make sense to them? How do we translate our 'but' in words that build bridges of understanding? What do we say to these people when we meet them? How do we relate to them?

A keyword is invitation. 'God continually invites all people to a deeper faith in Christ and a growing commitment to follow Him, responding to and being sustained by the grace which has been shown in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross and inspired by the indwelling Spirit'.⁴⁰

As we meet and share with so-called nominals, we might be in for surprises. For unexpected findings. Perhaps for the discovery that with this or this person, we should drop our idea of nominality and change our language from a distant 'they' in a brotherly 'we'. In that case, we can change the 'but' in an even smaller word, a two-letter word capable of opening horizons, taking up a challenge, getting on with a job, catching hope: SO. 'We are Christians, so...'

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