

## *Nominal Christians*

The Second International Lausanne Consultation on Nominalism gets under way in March, 2018, in Rome. The first such Consultation took place in Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, in England in December 1998. As a result of the Lausanne Consultation that took place in Pataya, Thailand, in June 1980, in which many gathered to think through the issues connected with global evangelisation, several booklets emerged with titles such as *Nominal Christians among Roman Catholics, ... among the Orthodox, ... among Protestants*, as well as others looking at Traditional Religionists in various countries and continents.

### ***Religious Positions***

The phrases “Nominal Christian” and “Notional Christian” have partly dropped from extensive use in the last few years. Nominal Christians were originally defined as those people who “were church members and believed in God but who never attended church (except perhaps at Christmas or Easter),” while Notional Christians were those who “believed in God but who never attended church and do not necessarily make any effort to follow the Christian ethic (perhaps because they confuse ‘Christianity’ with ‘Britishness’).” Numbers for both were estimated along the following lines for the UK:

*Table 1: Overview of Religious Positions, 1980 to 2020*

Year	Total %	Belief in the Christian God				Non-belief in Christian God		
		Regular attenders		Non-regular attenders		Total %	Other Religions %	Non-religious %
		Not yet Church members %	Normal Church members %	Nominal Church members %	Notional Christian %			
Column	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
1980	<b>77</b>	3	8	9	57	<b>23</b>	4	19
1990	<b>75</b>	3	7	8	57	<b>25</b>	5	20
2000	<b>72</b>	2	5	8	57	<b>28</b>	6	22
2010	<b>60</b>	2	4	7	47	<b>40</b>	7	33
2020E	<b>50</b>	2	3	6	39	<b>50</b>	9	41

This Table may be read as follows. The figures in Columns A and F total 100%, which represents the entire population. Column A is the total of Columns B, C, D and E; Column F is the total of Columns G and H. Regular churchgoers are the total of Columns B and C. Church members are the total of Columns C and D. Each percentage is a percentage of the entire population in that year.

There is no suggestion that any of these definitions is watertight. Figures for 1980 and 1990 were first published in 1997<sup>1</sup>, but have been updated in this Table; figures for 2000 were originally based on data in *UK Church Statistics 2005-2015*, as were the original figures for 2010, but these (and those for 2020) have been revised in the light of the 2011 Census figures.

The value of the Table is that it gives a total national perspective, and that it seeks to indicate trends. The figures shown come from a variety of sources – attendance (B + C) largely from Church Censuses, membership (C + D) largely from individual denominations, the percentage who are Christian (A) from government Census data, the numbers belonging to other religions (G) from those various religions. The split between Columns B and C relies on sample surveys. This means that the figure in Column E is the balancing figure between Column A and Columns B, C and D, and the figure in Column H the balancing figure between Column F (which is always 100% less the percentage in Column A) and Column G.

The figures in Column A are critical. The 2000 figure of 72% comes from the 2001 Population Census. The 2010 figure is taken from the 2011 Census (which put it at 59%), but it is at odds with the figure from British Social Attitudes (BSA) which would put it lower. The forecast 2020 figure is based in part on the number of church funerals and the age of churchgoers,<sup>2</sup> and the number likely to join the church in the 10 years leading up to 2020. The BSA larger numbers for those who say they have no religion (40%) are similar to the 2011 YouGov survey of 64,300 people of whom only 55% said they were Christian,<sup>3</sup> and to the 2011 Premier Radio study which showed 56% Christian, 35% No religion and 9% Other religions.<sup>4</sup>

The key trends shown are:

- Church membership (total of Columns C and D) declines by half in the 40 years 1980 to 2020;
- The proportion of the population who are *churchgoing* church members (Column C) declines much faster than the *non-churchgoing* members (Column D);
- The declining proportions of nominal Christians, which are largely, one assumes, because many are older people who are literally dying out (Column D);
- The fast declining proportion of notional Christians (Column E);
- The fast increasing proportion of the non-religious (Column H).

Those in Column D will 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. Some call this group “de-churched” – they have come out of a church involvement. Is there a confusion between their agreement with “I believe in God” with “I believe in Christianity,” as Edward Bailey has argued?<sup>5</sup> Some in Columns D and E would describe themselves as “deconverting”<sup>6</sup> because “God did not help them, especially in times of trouble.” In his book *The Future of Christianity* David Martin quotes Regis Debray’s comment, “The twilight of the gods turns out to be the morning of the magicians.”<sup>7</sup> A later name for them is “invisible”.

Why should those in Column E who are not church members and have never attended church be included at all? Simply because they say they believe in God and sign themselves as “Christian” on a Census form. The fact that this proportion stayed at almost three-fifths (57%) of the population for the period 1980-2000 suggests that it is these, rather than nominal Christians, who might be mistaken as followers of an implicit religion. As Callum Brown indicates, “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.”<sup>8</sup> They are different from those in Column H who neither believe nor say they are Christian. Those in Column E, however, decline by a third between 2000 and 2020, suggesting they are a dying group.

### ***European figures***

The publication of the first two parts of the *European Churches Handbook*<sup>9</sup> enabled figures for 1980 and 1990 along the lines of Table 1 to be compiled,<sup>10</sup> and is reproduced below in Table 2 on the next page. Figures for later years are unfortunately not available.

The Table shows much larger proportions of nominal Christians in Scandinavia, along with the Netherlands and both parts of Ireland, than in the other western countries of Europe including Britain. The situation did not change greatly in the 1980s. Notional Christians on the other hand were more uniformly distributed across these 11 countries except for the Netherlands and the Republic of Ireland.

The letters in the columns correspond to the same letters and columns in Table 1.

Table 2: Religious Structure of Various European Countries

Country	1980						1990						Population mns
	Total %	Not yet church members %	Normal church members %	Nominal church members %	Notional Christian %	Non- Christ- ian %	Total %	Not yet church members %	Normal church members %	Nominal church members %	Notional Christian %	Non- Christ- ian %	
Column	A	B	C	D	E	F	A	B	C	D	E	F	~
Austria	<b>92</b>	1/2	26 1/2	9 1/2	55 1/2	<b>8</b>	<b>89</b>	1/2	21 1/2	13 1/2	53 1/2	<b>11</b>	7.6
France	<b>86</b>	1/2	12 1/2	9 1/2	63 1/2	<b>14</b>	<b>85</b>	1/2	12 1/2	8 1/2	63 1/2	<b>15</b>	55.4
French-speaking Switzerland	<b>95</b>	1/2	16 1/2	9 1/2	68 1/2	<b>5</b>	<b>84</b>	1/2	14 1/2	8 1/2	60 1/2	<b>16</b>	1.5
Spain	<b>78</b>	0	19	8	51	<b>22</b>	<b>69</b>	0	20	4	45	<b>31</b>	40.1
Denmark	<b>90</b>	0	5	20	65	<b>10</b>	<b>91</b>	0	5	18	68	<b>9</b>	5.1
Finland	<b>93</b>	0	5	28	60	<b>7</b>	<b>91</b>	0	5	23	63	<b>9</b>	5.0
Norway	<b>91</b>	0	5	26	60	<b>9</b>	<b>86</b>	0	5	27	54	<b>14</b>	4.2
The Netherlands	<b>63</b>	1	28	29	5	<b>37</b>	<b>59</b>	1	27	23	8	<b>41</b>	15.2
Great Britain	<b>67</b>	3	8	9	47	<b>33</b>	<b>65</b>	1	9	5	50	<b>35</b>	56.0
N Ireland	<b>90</b>	6 1/2	42 1/2	20 1/2	20 1/2	<b>10</b>	<b>81</b>	4 1/2	40 1/2	15 1/2	20 1/2	<b>19</b>	1.6
Irish Republic	<b>98</b>	1	63	22	12	<b>2</b>	<b>97</b>	1	50	31	15	<b>3</b>	3.5
<b>OVERALL</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>74</b>	1/2	<b>14 1/2</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>195.2</b>

### Religious or Spiritual?

The above comments may be helpful in discerning some key trends, but some would argue the logic is too rigorous and that life is much more messy than that. It probably is! Some years ago, another dichotomy emerged in a number of surveys which took the concept of “nominal” and “notional” one stage further. Tables 1 and 2 may help define “religiousness” but they do not define “spirituality,” and answers to different sets of questions in public surveys show that many people are unclear about what these words mean.

What is the difference between being religious and being spiritual? Are people “either/or” or can they be “both at once”? While some religious people might also describe themselves as spiritual, would some spiritual people also describe themselves as religious?

A possible explanation of the terms could define “religious people” as submitting to and adhering to the authority and practice of any established religion/set of religious beliefs. “Spiritual people” on the other hand could be defined as experiencing, or being aware of, either within or without an established religion, a reality beyond the physical, mental and tangible.<sup>11</sup> Professor Steve Bruce of Aberdeen University suggests in his book *Secularization*<sup>12</sup> that spirituality has three features: a belief in some sort of supernatural force or entity, a perception that being spiritual changes how one sees and feels about the world, and an ethical dimension that being aware of our spiritual nature should make us better people.

“Alternative spirituality is the preserve,” he says, “of middle-aged, middle-class women with university-level qualifications. Women with no educational qualifications do not engage with holistic practices centred on personal growth: they prefer horoscopes, fortune-telling, astrology and tarot.”<sup>13</sup>

An American academic paper gave the following figures for US and German students,<sup>14</sup> and the UK figures have been added.<sup>15</sup>

*Table 3: Religiousness and Spirituality in Three Countries*

GERMANY		Spiritual?		Total
Religious?		YES	NO	
	YES	10%	31%	<b>41%</b>
	NO	11%	48%	<b>59%</b>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>79%</b>	<b>100%</b>

UNITED STATES		Spiritual?		Total
Religious?		YES	NO	
	YES	41%	23%	<b>64%</b>
	NO	24%	12%	<b>36%</b>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>35%</b>	<b>100%</b>

UNITED KINGDOM		Spiritual?		Total
Religious?		YES	NO	
	YES	12%	15%	<b>27%</b>
	NO	34%	39%	<b>73%</b>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>46%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Attempts to interpret these results may not always be valid. For example, in Germany the “religious” percentages are much higher if a specific religious event has occurred in a person’s life, such as a “conversion experience,” perhaps baptism or confirmation, becoming a church member, taking first communion. This would result in the top line 10% and 31% of the Table becoming 25% and 42%, and the second line, 11% and 48% becoming 12% and 21%.

In the United States, such a situation seems rarer. In other words, the “religious” percentage (which is higher than in Germany) is not significantly increased by a specific religious event in a person’s life. On the other hand, those describing themselves as spiritual may become disaffected and consequently the percentage is decreased by some kind of active disaffiliation.

Such disaffiliation seems more common in the United States than elsewhere, according to another piece of academic research.<sup>16</sup> Nearly half, 44%, of those who have “deconverted from Christianity” said it was because of “interpersonal dissatisfaction” which is academic-speak for people saying that God did not help them in times of trouble. Rather more, 84%, said they left the church because they were “frustrated by Christian beliefs” or not getting honest answers to difficult questions. Very few ex-Christians were drawn away from Christianity by non-Christian friends or relationships. The dissatisfaction is probably age-related also. Three times more Americans in their 20s than in their 60s feel that religion in American life is less important now than 5 years ago.

While detailed explanations are lacking for the UK figures, those given are closer to Germany than to the US. It could therefore be inferred, perhaps, though some might regard this as a sweeping generalisation, that a number of Europeans become “religious” through a specific event even though they have had a childhood without faith, while Americans may lose their childhood faith, in which they have been brought up, as they grow older. However, until such terms have a clearer definition, and wider research has been carried out, such implications can only, at best, be regarded as tenuous.

Is there a link between Tables 1 and 3? Does the 12% in the UK Religious/Spiritual box in Table 3 correspond to the total of Columns B, C, D and G in 1990 (18%) of Table 1? The 39% Not Religious/Not Spiritual box in Table 3 could correspond with Column H (33% in 2010). Notional Christianity (Column E) is then somehow a mix of “Not Religious but Spiritual” and “Religious but Not Spiritual”. But Nominal Christianity is surely a mix of these two as well.

### ***What is Spirituality?***

*Spirituality* is seen as something inherent which people develop or shape for their own individual selves rather than it being shaped by the formality of a religious organisation. Spirituality is somehow about “inner being” rather than community or society, and is expressed by “buying” resources (like a meditation course or going on a pilgrimage or taking yoga classes). The World Values’ Study suggests that spirituality is higher in Catholic and Orthodox countries, and is thus more to do with a belief in the beneficent spirit world, such as angels, or saints.

Spirituality differs from religiousness in that if a person feels they are spiritual they will still continue to feel that as they get older, whereas those who say they are religious are more likely to stop calling themselves that as they get older, despite the fact that people have more confidence in religious institutions as they age.

In terms of holistic spirituality, Bruce suggests it “lacks any levers to extract more commitment than the participant wants to give at any time.”<sup>17</sup> The word “spirituality” conjures up different meanings for different people. The Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust undertook a comprehensive survey on the topic, in which the first question asked, “What is spirituality?”, the largest answers to which are shown in Table 4:<sup>18</sup>

*Table 4: What is Spirituality?*

75%	It can sometimes be expressed through religion, but not always
72%	It is about the deepest part of our “inner self”/”soul”
71%	It forms part of our identity
69%	It helps us in a hard time/crisis
68%	It is a source of peace
64%	It gives us our values
63%	It is a source of hope
...	....
31%	It is about relating to God

While these answers are different from the meaning of “Spiritual” in the book edited by Grace Davie, *Predicting Religion*,<sup>19</sup> there is a degree of overlap. In that book “Spiritual” is defined as exploring the inner self (63%), meditating (59%), searching for the meaning of life (53%), praying privately at home (31%), upholding humanistic values such as justice and equality (29%). The overlap comes somewhere in the realms of inner being, understanding our values, wanting peace.

The whole spiritual debate could be taken into a different direction altogether. The churches in the UK can be divided into Trinitarian and Non-Trinitarian, the latter accounting in total for half a million members in 2015 (one-seventh of total church membership). They include the Christadelphians, Church of Christ Scientist (Christian Scientists), Church of Scientology,<sup>20</sup> (The) Family (or Children of God), Community of Christ, Global Church of God, International Churches of Christ, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Living Church of God, Mormons (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints), (Swedenborgian) New Church, Spiritualists, Unification Church (Moonies), the Unitarians and Free Christian Church and others.

In this context “Trinitarian” is defined as those groups which “accept the historic formulary of the Godhead as the three eternal persons, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, in one unchanging Essence.”<sup>21</sup>

These are not the same as the many New Religious Movements, the largest of which (in the UK in 2007) were the School of Meditation (4,500 people), 3HO<sup>22</sup> (3,700), Sri Sathya Sai Service Organisation (adherents of the guru Sai Baba) (2,700), School of Economic Science (2,500) and the

Pagan Federation (2,400).<sup>23</sup> There are also the Druid Network, the Falun Gong, Mazdazman, and the Society of Inner Light to name but a few others.

### ***What is Religiousness?***

Table 4 shows that spirituality and religion are perceived differently, although one may sometimes embrace the other. Grace Davie's book gives these answers to what "religious" means:

77%	Participating in church rituals (such as the Eucharist)
71%	Subscribing to religious doctrines
69%	Sharing in worship at church
23%	Studying the Bible at home
18%	Respecting nature

Religion perhaps implies a formality or a tangibility, whereas spirituality is more informal and less tangible. The phrase that was being favoured in 2011 about this uncertain type of religiosity was "Fuzzy Christianity" which had been introduced by Prof David Voas.<sup>24</sup> He suggested that religious commitment in Great Britain comprised three groups of people: the Religious (25%), the Non-religious (35%) and the Fuzzy Faithful (40%).

Why do people become less religious? Is it because they are less involved with communities of faith or vice versa? A loss of faith in God due to disappointment or disillusionment? Is it because religion is seen more as a choice, such as which sport shall I play? Does "God" figure less in people's account of the world? Is it that children are brought up to think more independently? Or do religious values become swamped by materialism and pleasure activities? All these ideas have been suggested, including the idea that the 2011 "Arab Spring was not primarily religious, even if spirituality played a part."

Involvement with a religious person may well be the prelude to engagement. Transmission in a family context is still key. Some have suggested that the Methodist decline is partly because leadership expected parents to pass on the faith to their children and that hasn't happened. Denominations taking a more individual approach, like the Pentecostals, are growing. In other words, being "religious" implies a more personal commitment, perhaps to an external authority.<sup>25</sup>

Prof Linda Woodhead of the University of Lancaster and Abby Day of the University of Kent looked at the problem a different way, suggesting there are four types of Christian people:<sup>26</sup>

- *Moral* Christians, who admire Christian ethics and feel an affinity to Christianity
- *Ethnic* Christians, who say they are Christian because they are British or because it is their culture
- *Cradle* Christians, who were baptised as babies
- *Faithful* Christians, who go to church, read their Bible, say their prayers and for whom faith is an active experience.

Putting percentages to these four groups is uncertain, but it may be they could be 2%, 4%, 30% and 6% respectively, leaving a gap of 17% to make up the 59% of British people who ticked "Christian" in the 2011 Population Census. That 17% would be the "Invisible" Christians referred to later.

### ***Believing without Belonging***

Prof Grace Davie, then Professor of Sociology of Religion in Exeter University, made a great impact with this subtitle to her 1994 book, *Religion in Britain since 1945*,<sup>27</sup> as she tried to sum up where people were spiritually. They were no longer church members but they still believed in Christianity. She rightly threw out the reverse, "Belonging without believing," which may have been more true of an earlier generation, especially of the three million who joined the church between 1920 and 1950,<sup>28</sup> despite or because of the turbulence of the World Wars.

But even the grounds which Davie made clear for "believing without belonging" were changing

in the 1990s, and when Prof Paul Heelas along with Linda Woodhead made their detailed study of religion in the town of Kendal in northern England in the year 2000, their book<sup>29</sup> had the subtitle “why religion is giving way to spirituality.”

All three (Davie, Heelas and Woodhead) were wrestling with the changes in spirituality that were taking place, and their combined 2003 book<sup>30</sup> simply illustrated where they had reached. Others, such as Canon Alan Billings, a parish priest in Kendal and undoubtedly aware of the University’s research, looked at the same seemingly secular situation but from a warm pastoral heart. Billings book,<sup>31</sup> sub-titled “the role of the Church in a time of no religion,” contended that the traditional sociological view of secular Britain was misleading. He felt the Church would understand its contemporary ministry and mission better if it thought of the nation as “culturally Christian.”

Grace Davie summed up the difficulty in understanding trends by sub-titling her latest book,<sup>32</sup> *Religion in Britain*, “a persistent paradox,” which is probably very fair comment! Nobody could have foreseen how Christianity in the UK would change in the years after 1994 and the publication of her initial book on this topic. “Christianity has suffered a steady though not yet catastrophic decline in its presumed strongholds: rural areas with a settled population, or schools favoured by the middle class and so on.”<sup>33</sup> Church-going in London, however, along with many other religions, in total contrast, had risen quite sharply.

Church attendance in Greater London increased from 620,000 in 2005 to 720,000 in 2012 – an unprecedented growth in any urban context.<sup>34</sup> The growth came about in three broad areas – huge numbers of churches (chaplaincies they were called) for different language groups, spearheaded by the Roman Catholic Church (over 35 languages in Westminster Diocese alone); aggressive and very enthusiastic church planting by many Pentecostal Black churches, some 400 new churches in London alone in these 7 years; and an increasing number attending some of the large Evangelical churches in the capital. London attracts a high percentage of young worshippers partly because 18% of London’s population is in their 20s (against 11% in Britain as a whole), but also because London has many immigrants, a large proportion of whom are also in this age-group. “The real driver is London’s emergence as a world city, where nearly 40% of the population was born outside Britain. Religion in the metropolis is affected ... more by trends in the world ... in favour of exuberant forms of worship such as Pentecostalism.”<sup>35</sup>

Davie suggested a replacement in her latest book of her famous phrase, which is unlikely to be so popular, “From obligation to consumption.”<sup>36</sup> She is conscious of those who sometimes feel religious in some way who, while they might attend church occasionally, feel little necessity to do so, or to continue to do so if they no longer wish to. Davie anticipated in thought what Archbishop Justin Welby said of the UK in an interview with Nick Robinson on the Radio 4 *Today* programme on 14<sup>th</sup> December 2017, that “the country has moved from a sense of inherited faith to faith by choice, and that is a smaller group of people.”<sup>37</sup>

### ***Vicarious Religion***

Prof Grace Davie has also explored the concept of “vicarious religion.” What is “vicarious religion”? She defined it as the notion of religious ritual performed by “churches and church leaders on behalf of a much larger number,”<sup>38</sup> who (implicitly at least) not only understand, but quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing. She cites ritual at baptisms or funerals as examples. Is this “Nominal Religion”? Davie would argue that church leaders and churchgoers are believing on behalf of others.

She would also argue that “church leaders and churchgoers are expected to embody moral codes on behalf of others, even when those codes have been abandoned by large sections of the populations that they serve.”<sup>39</sup>

Is the role of the Church to be there when we need it? In March 1996, a madman went loose in a school in Dunblane, Scotland, and shot 16 children and a teacher. The following night a huge queue of people waited outside the small Cathedral there wishing to pay their respects, or pray, or try to come to terms with the tragedy. Likewise in Soham, Cambridgeshire, when two young girls were killed in August 2002, there were thousands upon thousands of flower bouquets sent and the village church was full of teddy bears. More recently, in 2017, many turned to the local churches for shelter, food, comfort and prayer at the time of the Grenfell Tower fire disaster.

These tragic events indicate that death touches hearts in unique ways, and frequently people turn to the church almost instinctively for solace even if they cannot begin to understand “why”. Princess Diana’s death in 1997 also released a flood of flowers with hundreds of thousands signing books of condolence, as well as increased church attendance in the immediate aftermath, as sometimes happens during or after great national events or calamities (as when George VI called National Days of Prayer such as for Dunkirk).

“Most people,” wrote Professor of Philosophy, Dr Harriet Baber, “are not cranked up to a high level of existential angst, but need what Churches offer in time of trouble and serious reflection. The Church once provided a common language for expressing our feelings, making sense of our lives, and for coping with every aspect of the human condition. It was there when we needed it. Now, our emotional language is impoverished, and we struggle to invent the means to deal with events that mark the course of our lives. We have contrived secular rituals for commemorating public tragedies and there is an emerging folk-religion of poetry readings, political candle-vigils, and roadside teddy-bear shrines to mark the deaths of children in traffic accidents.”<sup>40</sup>

Davie would suggest that “the reactions to say Princess Diana’s death were simply ‘writ-large’ versions of what goes on in the everyday lives of individuals and communities. ... It is the taken-for-grantedness of this situation that is the crucial point: the presence of the churches and their availability to ordinary people are simply assumed.”<sup>41</sup>

### ***Beyond the UK***

Much of this article has been entirely confined to the UK. Is Nominal Religion simply an English phenomenon? Grace Davie would vehemently argue “NO,” and wrote a book about it, *Europe, the Exceptional Case*, in which she argued that while Christianity and other religions were growing throughout the rest of the world, they were fast declining in Europe.<sup>42</sup>

*Table 5: Reported Beliefs, Selected European Countries, 2010*

Country	Believe there is a God %	Believe there is some sort of spirit or life force %	Do not believe there is any sort of spirit, God or life force %	Don't know %	Base (=100%)	Population in 2010 Millions
Malta	94	4	2	0	500	0.4
Cyprus	87	9	3	1	502	0.9
Greece	79	16	4	1	1,000	11.2
Italy	74	20	6	0	1,018	60.1
Ireland	70	20	7	3	1,007	4.6
Portugal	70	15	12	3	1,027	10.7
Northern Ireland	59	23	15	3	302	1.8
Spain	59	20	19	2	1,004	45.5
Germany (West)	52	27	17	4	1,002	66.0
Switzerland	44	39	11	6	1,026	7.6
Austria	44	38	12	6	1,000	8.4
Great Britain	37	33	25	5	1,009	61.5
Belgium	37	31	27	5	1,012	10.7
Finland	33	41	22	4	1,001	5.3
Iceland	31	49	18	2	501	0.3
Denmark	28	47	24	1	1,006	5.5
The Netherlands	28	39	30	3	1,018	16.7
France	27	26	40	7	1,018	62.6
Norway	22	44	29	5	1,037	4.9
Sweden	18	45	34	3	1,007	9.3
<b>Overall</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>17,997</b>	<b>394.0</b>

Although the Table on the previous page comes from a later study than in *Europe*,<sup>43</sup> it illustrates the essential argument that Europe collectively is moving to shun God and religion. Of the 20 European countries in the Table, four (Great Britain, France, Italy and West Germany) all have populations in excess of 60 million people, and thus form almost two-thirds, 64%, of this group of countries. These four encapsulate the problem of Europe – two have majorities which believe in God and two don't. One on each side of this twofold division is/was a nominally Roman Catholic country.

Davie argues that part of the problem is the tightness of the definition of “belief” – a tight definition produces less agreement for belief, whereas a looser definition produces more agreement. It thus becomes a question of what does “belief in God” mean? It has “little to do with Christian teaching,” and can include things like the paranormal, fortune-telling, fate and destiny, ghosts, luck and superstition, according to Davie. What then is “nominal” or even “notional Christianity”? It seems it is largely belief in something which has taken out the guts of what “Christianity” means, and therefore, some would argue, not really worth very much.

A quote is given from a study of the 1960s<sup>44</sup> in which respondents were asked, “Do you believe in a God who can change the course of events on earth?” to which one respondent replied, “No, just the ordinary one.” Davie then asks, “What is the significance of an ‘ordinary’ God?” and quotes from the conclusions of this study, “We have some evidence that for those people who do not go to church yet say they are religious and pray often, religious belief has moved quite far from the orthodox church position and is really much closer to what would normally be called superstition.”

The evidence that Grace Davie deduced for her case, that Europe alone is declining globally, has been refuted by later statistics from the World Christian Database which has shown that while Christianity throughout the world continues to grow as a percentage of the global population it only does so because of the extraordinary growth being seen in Sub-Saharan Africa, as evidenced by the first volume in the new series of *Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity*.<sup>45</sup> A detailed analysis of the 51 countries in this part of Africa is given in *UK Church Statistics*, No 3, 2018 Edition.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Invisible Religion***

Meanwhile, another word has entered the vocabulary of notional or nominal Christianity – the word “invisible.” This came especially through the publishing of Dr Steve Aisthorpe’s research in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland in his book<sup>47</sup> *The Invisible Church*, the sub-title of which was “Learning from the Experiences of Churchless Christians,” where he found an extraordinarily large number of people who clearly believed in God but did not go to church. This survey of 2,700 people built on the foundations of research undertaken in 2012/13.<sup>48</sup> He would say as a result of his work that approximately 44% of the population of the Highlands and Islands identify themselves as Christians but are not engaged with a church congregation.<sup>49</sup>

His work was especially valuable in that it seemed to refute two comments often made about such people. One was that nominal or invisible Christians are those who have only *recently moved* into the area where they are now living. He found that half, 49%, had lived their whole life in the area and another third, 31%, for over 20 years. The other clear conclusion was that these people were not just those who had casually or *briefly come* to church. On the contrary he found a quarter, 23%, had been attending their particular church for over 20 years, and another quarter, 27%, had been doing so for between 10 and 20 years. So these are not new immigrants nor those who have not been previously committed.

While Aisthorpe’s use of “invisible” in this context may have originated with him, the concept didn’t. Patrick Johnstone, editor of many editions of *Operation World*, was certainly familiar with it. In the 1986 edition of his book, for example, he says that the percentage of evangelicals in the UK was 7%, a figure which had risen to 8.5% by the 2000 edition and in the latest volume<sup>50</sup> it increases to 8.8%. In the 1986 edition there is an additional comment to say that “only about a third of these attend church” – a percentage which broadly agreed with the results of the 1989 English Church Census when 3.0% of the population were Evangelicals in church.<sup>51</sup> Where were the other two-thirds? They were “invisible.”

Why do people become “invisible”? Not necessarily newness to their area and not indifference to the church itself. Steve Aisthorpe examined this too and found the key issues were about welcome, hospitality and inclusion. “Sadly,” he writes, “about a quarter of respondents (with no significant

differences on the basis of age, gender or previous experience of church) agreed with the statement, ‘I used to go to church but felt that I didn’t fit in.’ The data also encourages us to think afresh about what we mean by ‘church’. Most of those surveyed expressed a sense of belonging to the worldwide Christian community despite not being affiliated to a congregation.”<sup>52</sup>

He suggests his survey indicates that “congregations may need to rediscover the priority of discipleship.” Some “invisible” Christians were happy to be such (31%), others wished to follow their own spiritual quest (41%), while a few (8%) would welcome the opportunity “to join a small group of Christians who meet in homes and discuss faith and life together.”

What is the real extent of “invisibility”? Johnstone focuses purely on Evangelical Christians, but there is no reason to think that these are the only believers who become “invisible”. Evangelicals were 40% of all churchgoers in 2005, a growing percentage (they were 30% in 1989<sup>53</sup>), so doubling his percentage of “invisibles” would seem at least an estimate of the total proportion – giving the 17% mentioned on Page 6 in the section “What is Religiousness?” At the same time the very high percentage Steve Aisthorpe found from his study of one of the most remote parts of the UK, 44%, needs to be modified to take account of more general environments and church congregations. Perhaps halving it would be more realistic for the general population, making the two estimates of the same order.

### No Religion

The end of the story is not quite yet. The latest phrase that is used by many people, especially younger people, is that they have “No Religion,” or, as they are often referred to, the “Nones.” Successive Censuses have narrowed the question. In the 1991 Population Census in Northern Ireland, the results were published as proportions of Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Church of Ireland, Methodists, Other Christians and “None”. In 2001 the question included the five Christian alternatives and “Other Religions” and “No Religion/Not stated,” whereas by 2011 the final two categories became separated and those with “No Religion” were measured without being mixed with those not answering the question. The detail is given in Table 6:

Table 6: Religion in Northern Ireland, 1991, 2001 and 2011

Country	Percentage in each Relig'n 1991						Percentage in each Religion 2001						Percentage in each Religion 2011								
	RC	Pres	Cofl	Meth	OXn	None	RC	Pres	Cofl	Meth	OXn	Oth	No R	RC	Pres	Cofl	Meth	OXn	Oth	No R	N/a
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>ALL N IRELAND</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>40.2</b>	<b>20.7</b>	<b>15.3</b>	<b>3.5</b>	<b>6.1</b>	<b>0.3</b>	<b>13.9</b>	<b>40.8</b>	<b>19.1</b>	<b>13.7</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>10.1</b>	<b>6.7</b>

Relig'n = Religion; RC = Roman Catholic; Pres = Presbyterian Church of Ireland; Cofl = Church of Ireland; Meth = Methodist; OXn = Other Christian; Oth = Other religions; None (1991) = Other religions, No Religion and Not stated; No R (2001) = No Religion and Not stated; N/a (2011) = Not stated Source: NINIS website from Population Censuses

“No Religion” is therefore a relatively modern phrase, and when asked in the 2011 Population Census, 26% of the UK ticked this box (25% in England, 32% in Wales, 37% in Scotland and 10% in N Ireland). Of the 25% ticking No Religion in England, only 7% of the Black people living in England did so, 11% of the Irish, but 32% of those with “Mixed” backgrounds and 56% of the Chinese.<sup>54</sup> They are also much more likely to be in their 20s than over 60 as Figure 7 shows.

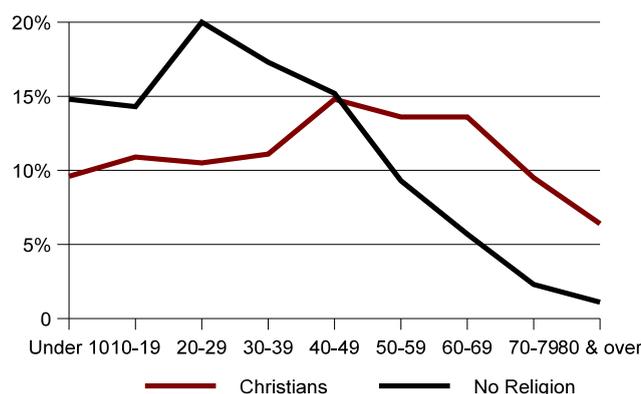


Figure 7: Percentage of Christians and Those with No Religion by Age-group, 2011

However, even this phrase does not quite mean what it seems to mean. Quoting Theos think-tank research, Prof Linda Woodhead showed that, of those who say they have “No Religion”:

- 44% believe in a soul, 35% in God or a higher power, but none will ever attend church
- 23% believe in a soul and say they are atheists
- 34% actually believe in life after death, and 10% that God designed the world, but still call themselves “non-religious.”

While such statements may destroy the concept of “No Religion” pointing instead to a very heterogeneous grouping, it also reflects a very vibrant secularism, such as Richard Dawkins has been advocating.

### ***So what does all this say?***

The concept of “Nominal” and “Notional Christianity” which was perhaps first named as a concept in the 1980s the reality has been around for longer than the last 40 years. The terms were quickly applied to those in other religions as well as it became obvious that there were nominal/notional Muslims, nominal/notional Hindus, nominal/notional Sikhs and so on. All religions have a group of those who seem to be at the periphery or tail end of belief. It is *belief* rather than *attendance* which describes a nominal or notional person, a less committed or personal belief in one’s religion, an unwillingness to accept all its various formularies. In Christian terms, this will mean probably not reading or even accepting the Bible, the Holy Scriptures, as the authoritative foundation for belief.

Different terms have been used for this group of quasi-believers including looking at whether people are Religious or Spiritual (or both), whether people can “believe without belonging”, are part of the “invisible” church or just simply have “No Religion.” But even those in this last category have religious beliefs, conventional or unconventional.

How do we *reach* people who are nominal Christians was the question the Lausanne movement asked back in 1980 and is re-asking today? The answers are much the same now as then, and much the same as seeking to reach anyone with the good news of Jesus Christ – explaining the forgiveness He has to offer through His death by repentance of sins and re-birth by the power of the Holy Spirit, whether that be presented in traditional church, Fresh Expressions, Messy Church, in “reaching” courses such as Alpha and Christianity Explored or in mega events such as J John’s football stadium outreach.

### **Notes**

- 1) *Religious Trends* No 1, 1998/1999, edited by Peter Brierley, Christian Research, London, 1997, Table 2.2.
- 2) *UK Church Statistics* No 3, 2018, edited Peter Brierley, ADBC Publishers, Tonbridge, Kent, UK, 2017, Tables 2.8 and 13.2.1 respectively.
- 3) YouGov Report “Poll finds majority Christian in name but not in practice” in *Church Times*, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2011.
- 4) Article “Happy Birthday, King James”, by Getin Russell-Jones, *The Plain Truth*, Autumn 2011, Pages 6-8.
- 5) Paper “Living with Implicit Religion” at the 2007 Denton Conference by Canon Prof Edward Bailey.
- 6) Article “‘Reconverted’ complain that God did not help,” by Ed Thornton in the *Church Times*, London, 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2011.
- 7) *The Future of Christianity*, Prof David Martin, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot, 2011.
- 8) *The Death of Christian Britain*, Callum Brown, Routledge, London, 2001, Page 8.
- 9) *European Churches Handbook*, Part 1 (Denmark, Finland, France, French-speaking Switzerland, Norway and the UK) and Part 2 (Austria, Netherlands, N Ireland, Republic of Ireland and Spain), published by MARC Europe, Bromley, Kent in 1991 and 1992 respectively, based on the publication of individual church handbooks for each of these countries. The third volume was never published.
- 10) Op cit., *Religious Trends* No 1, Footnote 1, Table 2.4.4.
- 11) Article in *FutureFirst*, Brierley Consultancy, Tonbridge, Kent, October 2012, Page 6.
- 12) *Secularisation*, Prof Steve Bruce, OUP, 2011, Page 103.
- 13) *Ibid.*, Page 107.
- 14) Article “‘Spirituality’ as Privatized Experience-Oriented Religion” by Heinz Streib and Ralph Wood, in *Implicit Religion* Vol 14 No 4, 2011, Page 440.
- 15) Summary report of “Christianity and the University Experience,” 18<sup>th</sup> February 2011.
- 16) *Ibid.*
- 17) Op Cit., *Secularisation*, Footnote 12, Page 114.

- 18) Article “Professional’s Calling: mental healthcare Staff’s Attitudes to Spiritual Care”, by M Parkes and P Gilbert, *Implicit Religion*, Vol 14, No 1, 2011, Equinox Publishing, Sheffield, Pages 23-43.
- 19) *Predicting Religion*, Christian, Secular and Alternative Futures, edited by Grace Davie, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, Ashgate, Hampshire, 2003, Page 138.
- 20) Recognised officially as a religion by the Home Office on 10<sup>th</sup> December 1996, replacing its previous cult status.
- 21) This definition was used for years in determining which organisations should be listed in the *UK Christian Handbook*, 2007/2008, Christian Research et al, edited by Heather Wraight, 2006, Page 4.
- 22) Staning for the “Healthy, Happy, Holy Organisation” made up of teachers and followers vof Kundalini Yoga, as taught by Yogi Bajan. It came to the UK in early 1970, [www.kundaliniyoga.org.uk](http://www.kundaliniyoga.org.uk).
- 23) A more detailed list can be found in *Religious Trends* No 7, 2007/2008, Christian Research, 2008, Pages 106 and 107.
- 24) Article “Fuzzy fidelity: threat or opportunity?” by Prof David Voas, Brierley Consultancy, London, *FutureFirst*, Vol 1, No 6, 2009, Pages 1,6 and also his article “The Rise and Fall of Fuzzy Fidelity in Europe,” *European Sociological Review*, Vol 25, No 2, 2009.
- 25) Unpublished paper given by Rev Dr Philip Hughes at the Sixth International Researchers Conference, Brazil, April 2011.
- 26) Article in *The Tablet*, December 2012.
- 27) *Religion in Britain since 1945*, Believing without Belonging, Institute of Contemporary British History, Grace Davie, Blackwell, Oxford, 1994.
- 28) Church membership in 1920 in the UK was 37.0 million in 1920 and rose to 40.1 million by 1950, figures from *Religious Trends* No 2, 2000/2001, Christian Research, Eltham, London, 2001, Table 2.7.
- 29) *The Spiritual Revolution*, Why religion is giving way to spirituality, Prof (in Religion and Modernity) Paul Heelas and Dr Linda Woodhead, Dept of Religious Studies, University of Lancaster, Blackwell Publishing, Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World, 2005.
- 30) Op cit., see *Predicting Religion*, Footnote 19.
- 31) *Secular Lives, Sacred Hearts*, The role of the Church in a time of no religion, Canon Alan Billings, SPCK, 2004.
- 32) *Religion in Britain*, A Persistent Paradox, Wiley Blackwell, Chicheseter, West Sussex, 2015.
- 33) Website of *The Economist*, story “Setting the Thames on fire” 20<sup>th</sup> February, 2015, Page 2.
- 34) *Capital Growth*, What the 2012 London Church Census reveals, Dr Peter Brierley, ADBC Publishers, Tonbridge, Kent, 2013.
- 35) Op cit., Footnote 33, *The Economist*.
- 36) Ibid., Page 7.
- 37) *Church Times*, 22<sup>nd</sup>/29<sup>th</sup> December 2017 issue, Page 7.
- 38) Op cit., *Religion in Britain*, Footnote 27, Page 6, but based on *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates*, Prof Grace Davie, OUP, 2001.
- 39) Ibid., Page 6.
- 40) Article “The end of a take-it-or-leave-it faith” by H Baber in the *Church Times*, London, 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2011.
- 41) Op Cit., *Religion in Britain*, Footnote 27, Page 7.
- 42) *Europe, the Exceptional Case*, Prof Grace Davie, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 2002.
- 43) The Eurobarometer 73,1, Jan/Feb 2010, European Commission, 2012, given in op cit., *Religion in Britain*, Footnote 26, Page 75.
- 44) Article by Nicholas Abercrombie et al, “Superstition and Religion” in *A Sociological Yearbook of Religion in Britain* 3, edited by David Martin, SCM Press, 1970.
- 45) *Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Edinburgh Companions to Global Christianity, edited by Kenneth R Ross, J Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu and Todd Johnson, Edinburgh University Press, 2017.
- 46) Op cit., *UK Church Statistics* No 3, Footnote 2, Pages 15.1 to 15.11.
- 47) *The Invisible Church*, Learning from the Experiences of Churchless Christians, Dr Steve Aisthorpe, Church of Scotland, 2014.
- 48) [www.resourcingmission.org.uk/resources/faith-journeys-beyond-congregations](http://www.resourcingmission.org.uk/resources/faith-journeys-beyond-congregations)
- 49) Statistically, we can be “95% confident” that the true proportion of all who fit our criteria is in the range 41.93% to 45.67% (that is, c.127,600 to 139,000).
- 50) *Operation World*, 7<sup>th</sup> Edition, The Definitive Prayer Guide to Every Nation, Jason Mandryk, WEC International and Biblical, 2010, Page 852.
- 51) *Religious Trends* No 6, 2006/2007, Christian Research, Eltham, London, 2006, Table 5.15 as a percentage of the population.
- 52) Article by Steve Aisthorpe in *FutureFirst*, Brierley Consultancy, October 2014, Page 1.
- 53) Op cit., *Religious Trends* No 6, Footnote 51, Table 5.15.
- 54) *UK Church Statistics* No 2, 2010-2020, edited Dr Peter Brierley, ADBC Publishers, Tonbridge, Kent, UK, 2014, Table 14.2.1.