

Voices: What in the world is a non-practicing Christian?

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Pew Research Center published the results of a [survey examining religion in western Europe](#), a society often described as “post-Christian.”

The biggest “takeaway” for most was how closely the religious demographics of western Europe match the religious demographics of the United States. Around the same percentage of both populations identify as “religiously unaffiliated” or “nones,” though nones in America are more likely to engage in religious behavior or hold religious beliefs (a phenomenon I’ve written about [here](#)).

More interesting to me and less commented on by others was the survey’s repeated use of the phrase “practicing Christians” and “non-practicing Christians” as comparable groups.

Survey oddities

The survey defined a “non-practicing” Christian as one who self-identified as a Christian but “attend church no more than a few times a year.”

The survey’s examination of the beliefs of these “two groups” of Christians is strange and makes me question what exactly Pew Research Center thinks Christianity is.

Pew asked respondents whether they believed in “the God of the Bible,” an “other higher power,” or “not in any higher power.” Among “non-practicing Christians,” only 24 percent claimed they believed in “the God of the Bible.” The majority, at 51%, believed in an “other higher power” than the

God described in Scripture.

Fifteen percent of this group *do not believe God exists at all*.

This survey underscores my larger frustration with Pew Research Center: they don't seem to understand Christianity. This latest survey implies self-identification as a Christian makes one a Christian — even if one does not attend church and does not believe that God exists.

I don't think it's falling into the "[no true Scotsman](#)" fallacy to say that this definition of Christianity is too thin.

What is it, then, that makes one a Christian?

On non-practicing Christians

The phrase "non-practicing Christian" is an oxymoron.

To say that "non-practicing Christians" exist is to say that Christianity is a purely mental phenomenon: it's about what one *believes* rather than what one *does*. A Christian, in this understanding, is simply one who agrees with a certain series of truth claims.

Imagine applying that criteria to other groups: "non-practicing athletes" who profess to be athletes but don't actually play any sport, or a "non-practicing mechanic" who doesn't actually repair vehicles.

Christianity is not a series of beliefs one agrees or disagrees with. It is a vocation. The gospel of Christ is a free gift, but one that demands action in response.

As [James](#) reminds us, hearing the word of God is not enough; to be a Christian means to be a disciple of Christ, and Christ's disciples were not simply those who agreed that God exists and that Jesus was God in the

flesh. They were those who gathered into a community of individuals under Jesus' guidance.

Following Christ, participating in the Body

My argument is that there is really no such thing as a “non-practicing Christian” because Christianity involves more than simply personal belief.

I say this for two reasons and, as always, I welcome your feedback.

First, I want to encourage anyone, Christian or not, to consider the definition of “Christian” that any particular survey applies before taking the data it provides too seriously. Institutions with a fundamental misunderstanding of what Christianity is will inevitably reach problematic conclusions. Including a large body of people who do not believe God exists in their “Christian” category demonstrates this problem.

Second, and more importantly, a theological point: being a Christian, by the biblical understanding, means being a part of the church, Christ's body.

The church does not offer salvation, and no one will be saved by the church. Salvation comes from Christ alone, through faith alone. But the salvation Christ offers is one that reaches its culmination in the context of the church.

If a “non-practicing Christian” is a Christian who can attend a church but chooses not to, I'm not sure that “non-practicing Christians” exist. [Even the demons](#) have right belief.

Christ calls us to follow him *in the context of* other people seeking to do the same. When Christ bids us to follow him, he bids us to follow him in the church.

Nothing in Scripture allows us to think any other way.

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