What Do Non-Christians Really Think About Christians and Christianity?

By Erica Meissner

This study was conducted by Erica Meissner as part of an internship project for Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel and the UW-Madison’s School of Human Ecology Department of Human Development and Family Studies. The purpose of this study was to extract the thoughts and feelings of non-Christians regarding Christians and Christianity.

Misunderstandings often exist between Christians and non-Christians, creating a wall that limits communication and ultimately results in diminished outreach opportunities. Are Christians doing something wrong? What are non-Christians really looking for in their religious and spiritual life? Have non-Christians had good or bad experiences with Christianity? This study sheds light on these questions.

Definition

Non-Christian: Non-Christian is a term used here to define anyone that does not see him/herself as a Christian. This most often brings to mind an Atheist, but that only acknowledges a small proportion of this population. The term non-Christian also includes those who believe in a god or many gods, but do not believe in Jesus Christ as their savior. It includes both Agnostics and those who may have considered themselves as Christians at some time in the past. With this research, one can better understand the population of “non-Christians.”

Method

Participants

This study includes a total of 60 participants, 62% male and 38% female. Over a period of two weeks, participants were self-selected at the UW-Madison student union by approaching a proctor, expressing interest in the questionnaire, and giving informed consent. Participant ages range from 16 to 60+, with the largest proportion (40%) aged 21-25 (see Figure 1).

Participant self-reported ethnicity follows: 71% Caucasian, 8% European, 5% Asian, 3% Hispanic/Latino, 3% Multi-racial, 3% Blended American, 2% Jewish, 5% did not answer. Free ice cream coupons were given to participants upon completion of the questionnaire packet.

Figure 1

Apparatus

A five-page packet was used to obtain information on participants’ thoughts and feelings toward Christians and Christianity, as well as their demographic information. A few of the questions were drawn from a questionnaire given to Christian undergraduates at a private Catholic college, but most were created by the intern and supervisors. Three different signs were used over the course of the two-week data collection to attract participants to the table where the proctor sat. The message on the signs changed depending on its apparent ability to attract participants.

Procedure

Upon approaching the proctor, all participants received a brief summary of the content and
purpose of the questionnaire, stating that it was for non-Christians only. Once the participant stated interest in completing the questionnaire, the proctor gave the participant an informed consent form and questionnaire packet to be completed at nearby tables. Participants took an estimated average of 10 minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Upon completion, participants returned the forms to the proctor and received a debriefing statement to take with them and a coupon for free ice cream from a nearby ice cream shop. The informed consent form, questionnaire, and demographic information sheet were each placed in different envelopes, separating identifying information from the corresponding questionnaire to protect the anonymity of participants. The proctor entered each individual’s response into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, creating graphs to summarize the data.

Results & Discussion

First, the questionnaire tried to understand the population of non-Christians by reviewing some basic Christian beliefs. Of the 60 participants, 60% have considered themselves Christians at some point of their life. Half of the participants believe in God, 37% do not, and the remaining 13% are unsure. Regarding Jesus Christ, 53% believe that he was just another man, 21% see him as a prophet, 12% believe he was the Son of God, and 3% do not believe he existed at all (see Figure 2).

![Figure 2](image)

In a similar question, 61% think that Jesus is not God, while 2% believe that Jesus is an extension of God. Of the remaining 37%, 23% are unsure of the Bible’s claim of Jesus as God and 14% chose not to answer. Forty-three percent of participants believe in an afterlife of some kind, while 52% do not and 5% are unsure. Looking specifically at belief in the existence of hell, only 28% of respondents believe in hell and 67% do not. Similarly, only 30% of participants believe angels exist and 63% believe they do not. These statistics help us to understand that non-Christians entertain a variety of beliefs.

One interesting distinction in beliefs that must be highlighted is the distinction participants make between Religion and Spirituality. Only 13.3% of participants view themselves as religious, while 55% view themselves as spiritual. The distinction between religion and spirituality, as explained by 93% of participants, is that religion is organized or external to the self, while spirituality is personal or internal to the self. When asked which spiritual person they most admire, participant responses were broad, referencing many historical figures such as Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and the Dalai Lama, as well as family members and friends (see Figure 3).

![Figure 3](image)

No matter what an individual believes, he/she thinks about God at some point in time. To gauge how often this happens, the questionnaire asked participants to estimate on a range of 0 to 10. On the range from 0 (never) to 10 (throughout the day), participants are split between thinking of God only once every few months and thinking of
Christians and Christianity

Him once or a few times a week. When thinking of God, respondents tend to think most about what God is like (32%), wanting God's help (14%), and whether or not He exists (11%). Other respondents think of God regarding creation and nature (8%), world hardships (8%), what others think about God (8%), and family (4%). Taking a slightly different direction on the same question, participants were asked when they think about God more: 40% during hard times, 17% while talking with others, 9% while considering politics and worldly evil, 9% when happy, 6% in relation to sleep, and 6% randomly. Another 17% gave original answers.

As Christians, our joy is to bring the gospel of Christ to those who do not know him. In Romans 10:17, Isaiah says, “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” Are we effectively spreading the word of Christ, or is it just something we talk about? The next part of this questionnaire looked at how non-Christians perceive Christians, using direct and indirect questions.

When asked, “How do you think/feel about the Christian Church?” 55% of participants answered with negative comments, 23% gave neutral comments, and 15% did not answer, leaving 7% giving positive comments regarding the Christian Church. Participants were then asked how they thought/felt about Christians. Forty-seven percent of participants responded that Christians are “normal,” 20% said “judgmental,” 17% said Christians are nice or kind, 10% said Christians are okay as long as they keep their beliefs to themselves, and the remaining 7% did not answer. In other words, 20% of participants view Christians negatively, 57% neutrally, and 17% positively. This shows that a large distinction must be made between how non-Christian participants view Christians and how they view the Christian Church.

Looking further into the issue discussed above, participants were asked what it means to “be a Christian.” Seventy-five percent answered “to believe in Jesus Christ/God/Follow the Bible,” while 7% did not know, and 5% did not answer. The other 13% gave original responses ranging from negative comments such as “to follow things blindly, like being in a cult headed by a charismatic leader,” to positive comments like “to care for other people unconditionally the way Jesus Christ cared for people.” The majority of participants described the average Christian positively or with a neutral tone: 20% “nice,” 11% “giving,” and 34% “like anyone else.” Those who viewed the average Christian in a negative manner viewed them as hypocritical (19%) or pushy (10%). The remaining 6% gave non-categorical answers.

Another responsibility of Christians is to tell others about God. We see this in Matthew 28:19-20 when Christ tells his disciples to “go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.”

This questionnaire took an indirect method of looking at non-Christians’ perspective of how Christians evangelize. When asked “To what extent do you discuss Christianity with friends?” and given multiple answers from which to choose all that apply, 26% stated “not often,” with 5% designating “not often with Christians” and 4% designating “not often with non-Christians.” Twenty-three percent reported that they discuss Christianity with friends “when occasion demands,” and 13% never do. Only 2% responded often, while 13% designated “often with Christians,” and 13% designated “often with non-Christians.” From this we see that the majority of participants talk with their friends only rarely about Christianity, if at all. This presents a question: Are Christians too subtle? Taking this a step further, this questionnaire asked participants about their conversations with Christians regarding faith. Sixty-nine percent of respondents have had someone try to “save them,” 23% have not, and 8% were unsure.

From the statistics, it looks like Christians have room for improvement on evangelizing to non-Christians. This questionnaire sheds light on topics Christians can focus on in
evangelism. Participants were asked openly why they do not believe in God, and the majority, 65%, said that they do not believe in God because of a lack of scientific proof. Fifteen percent said that there were too many gods to choose from, 12% said there was too much pain in the world for there to be a God, 4% said because they were raised agnostic, and 4% said because of bad experiences. In answering, “What topics/issues make Christianity unappealing to you?” participants were divided between 11 topic groups: political right-wing fundamentalism, the Christian view of the afterlife, the political power of the Church in history, the existence of God, the triune God, the divinity of Christ, the virgin birth, the Christian view of divorce and alternative lifestyles, the pro-life stance, and the strictness of Christianity (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

Looking further, participants were asked what arguments against Christianity they see as valid. Thirty-nine percent stated “disagreements between scientific evidence and the Bible,” 27% stated “the authority of the Bible and its writers,” and 19% said “the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead.” Thirteen percent of participants gave unique answers. Two examples of responses are “the divergence of Christian doctrine from the words of the Bible” and “the failure to acknowledge others’ beliefs.”

Taking a more peripheral view of Christianity, participants were asked if they thought the media has an impact on their own perception of Christianity. Participants were split down the middle; fifty percent said it does have an impact and fifty percent said it does not. Participants were then asked what they think are Christianity’s main contributions to society. Nineteen percent responded that Christians helped aid in preserving history. Seventeen percent answered “charity and caring toward the needy,” 15% “a sense of tradition,” 14% “architecture,” 13% “art,” 8% “knowledge of God,” and 7% “music.”

Sixty-two percent of participants stated that they are intrigued in some way by the Christian Church. This statistic is important because it should give all Christians hope. Even though most participants feel negatively toward the Christian Church, there is still something that intrigues them and may be able to draw them into conversations. One way that Wisconsin Lutheran Chapel likes to draw students into their campus ministry is through music, so participants were asked what kind of music they like to hear in a church: 26% classical, 23% variety, 19% live band, 16% pipe organ, 13% contemporary, and 3% gospel, Gregorian chant, and electronic.

The last question participants were given to answer was, “What would you say to Christians if they would listen?” (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Participants’ responses were grouped into similar categories: don’t convert me, don’t judge others, practice what you preach, be tolerant of others, keep your religion to yourself, and listen to others. Some
participants even want to start a political and/or scientific discussion with Christians. From these answers we can perceive the undertone of individuality of religion, referencing a turn to a sense of spirituality rather than religion. This suggests that religion has become more of an opinion than a truth.

**Conclusion**

Although the sample size for this project was small and does not represent the entire population of non-Christians, it does, however, offer Christians a new way of thinking about evangelism. If the needs and perspectives of the people we are trying to evangelize to are changing, we should evaluate our patterns to ensure their continued effectiveness. The simple truth is that God has called Christians to tell others about Him, so let us go and do His work.

---

**Church Door Symposium Cancelled!**

Due to the brotherly concerns expressed by numerous clergy and Synod officials around the issue of church fellowship, the 3rd annual Church Door Symposium has been cancelled. Although the Executive Director and the members of the CHARIS Board of Directors disagree with the judgments that hosting non-WELS speakers, even on religious topics, represents a violation of Scripture and WELS doctrine, concern for maintaining harmony in the church, coupled with concern for the continued success and vitality of CHARIS and Wisconsin Lutheran College, override any reasons for taking a stand on this issue at this time.

It is an unfortunate fact that great confusion exists among clergy and laity alike around applications of the church fellowship principles. Rather than contribute to this confusion, the leaders of The CHARIS Institute have decided to cancel this year’s symposium. Our prayer is that we will find a way to resolve this confusion about church fellowship so that CHARIS can again host outstanding scholars on relevant subjects in the future without controversy.

May God guide us to live and work in the freedom of his gospel so that we can be salt and light to a dying world.