News



People ice skate near the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center in New York City Dec. 5. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

Cathy Lynn Grossman

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If there ever was a "war on Christmas" in America, Santa may have won.

Nine in 10 U.S. adults celebrate the holiday, according to the Pew Research Center. However, that celebration is shifting in a secular direction. And a growing number of Christians discount key elements of the biblical Nativity story.

Just three years ago, 51 percent of U.S. adults said Christmas for them is more a religious holiday than a cultural one. But that has slipped to 46 percent in the new Pew survey, released Tuesday (Dec. 12). Neither does this trend trouble most people. Only 32 percent say it "bothers" them even somewhat.

President Trump's demand that Americans all say "Merry Christmas," which drew cheers at his rallies, now draws shrugs from most U.S. adults: 52 percent say it doesn't matter how they are greeted in stores and businesses, and 32 percent say they prefer to hear "Merry Christmas."

The survey also finds a "striking shift" in the overall share of people — down from 65 percent in 2014 to 57 percent today — who believe four key elements of the biblical Nativity story.

- Jesus was born to a virgin: From 73 percent to 66 percent.
- Baby Jesus was laid in a manger: From 81 percent to 75 percent.
- Wise men, guided by a star, brought Jesus gifts: From 75 percent to 68 percent.
- An angel announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds: From 74 percent to 67 percent.

There's slippage among both Protestants and Catholics. The Pew report notes the share of white mainline Protestants who believe in the virgin birth, for instance, has dropped from 83 percent to 71 percent. And the share of Catholics who believe the birth of Jesus was announced by an angel of the Lord now stands at 82 percent, down from 90 percent.

And the narrative doesn't fly with most "nones" – people who claim no religious identification: 53 percent reject all four elements, up from 42 percent in 2014.

Christian culture-watchers say they've seen these trends gathering strength for years. Rather than despair, however, they see openings to evangelize about the Incarnation — God sending his son to be a savior.

"It's not surprising, that as the culture grows more secular, fewer people find the Nativity story authentic, or even meaningful," said the Rev. James Martin, editor at large of the Jesuit magazine America.

"But for the Christian, however, it is essential. The Incarnation is one of the key beliefs of Christianity. Many people find it hard to believe: God becoming human, after all, is hard to fathom. But we have a God who is, at heart, mystery, and therefore unfathomable," the priest said.

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The survey captures how "too many people think Christmas is about a mall and not a manger," said Ed Stetzer, executive director of the Billy Graham Center at Wheaton College.

"On the upside, and Christians always look at the upside, as fewer people celebrate Christmas without knowing the story of Christ, we have the opportunity to tell them why Jesus came, why he lived and died, and ultimately that he rose again — changing everything for Christians, not just one day," said Stetzer.

The Pew survey of 1,503 U.S. adults, conducted by phone Nov. 29 to Dec. 4, has a margin of error of plus or minus 2.9 percentage points overall.