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Update: Americans and Religion

Eighty-four percent of Americans identify with a Christian religion

Religion and Social Trends

by Frank Newport

GALLUP NEWS SERVICE

PRINCETON, N.J. -- The arrival of Christmas and the beginning of a new year provide Gallup an opportunity to review a year's worth of data on Americans and their religion, with a special focus on Christmas. Here are 10 interesting observations:

1. Nearly 9 out of 10 Americans say it is OK for people to wish others "Merry Christmas" as a way of spreading holiday cheer.

There's been a great deal of controversy this year over the secularization of Christmas. Some conservative and religious groups argue that the substitution of "Happy Holidays" and "Seasons Greetings" for the traditional "Merry Christmas" (plus efforts to remove overt Christmas displays from public places and public schools) takes away from the true meaning of the holiday. Those in favor of the changes argue that an emphasis on Christmas and religion is offensive to those who are not Christians.

The Dec. 17-19 CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll asked Americans the following question: "Which comes closer to your view: People should avoid wishing others 'Merry Christmas' because they might offend someone who does not celebrate Christmas, (or) it is OK for people to wish others 'Merry Christmas' because it is a way of spreading holiday cheer?"

The answer? Eighty-eight percent of Americans say it is acceptable to use the traditional "Merry Christmas" greeting. Only 11% say that it should be avoided to be politically correct.

Interestingly, even 79% of Americans who do not identify with a Christian religion (i.e., either identify with a non-Christian religion or have no religious identity at all) believe that it is acceptable for people to wish others "Merry Christmas".

2. Despite the strong agreement that it is OK to say "Merry Christmas", the American public does not strongly agree that the tendency to substitute a more secular greeting has been a bad thing for society.

As you may know, many stores and other public institutions now use the words "Happy Holidays" or "Season's Greetings" rather than "Merry Christmas" in their displays and in their interactions with the public. Do you think this is a change for the better or a change for the worse?

	Change for the better	Change for the worse	NO DIFFERENCE (vol.)	No opinion
2004 Dec 17-19	44%	43	12	1

Additionally, a substantial percentage of Americans personally use the more secular greeting "Happy Holidays" at this time of year.

GALLUP WORLD POLL



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At this time of the year, which greeting would you be more likely to give to someone you just met --
 [ROTATED: "Happy Holidays" (or) "Merry Christmas"]?

	Happy Holidays	Merry Christmas	NEITHER/BOTH (vol.)	opinion
2004 Dec 17-19	41%	56	3	*

3. Most Americans -- regardless of religious affiliation -- celebrate Christmas.

Gallup polls conducted in 1994 and 2000 found that the overwhelming majority of Americans celebrated Christmas.

Do You Celebrate Christmas?

	Yes	No	No opinion
	%	%	%
2000 Dec 2-4	96	4	*
1994 Dec 16-18	96	4	*

* Less than 0.5%

4. More than 8 in 10 Americans are Christians.

About 84% of Americans identify with some form of Christianity -- including those who say they are Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, or some other Christian religion. The rest of the American adult population has no religious identification (9%), identifies with a non-Christian religion (5%), or has no answer at all when asked about their religion. These estimates are based on a compilation of over 12,000 interviews conducted by Gallup in 2004.

America's Religious Identification 2004

Based on 12,043 Gallup poll interviews conducted in 2004

	%
Protestant	50
Catholic	24
Other Christian	10
Other, Non-Christian religion	5
No religious identification; atheists, agnostics	9
No response	2

5. Younger Americans are much less likely to identify as Protestant than are those who are older.

America's Identification as "Protestant"

Based on 12,043 Gallup poll interviews conducted in 2004

	%
18- to 29-year-olds	37
30- to 49-year-olds	47
50- to 64-year-olds	55
Age 65 and older	63

These significant age differences are correlated with two other age-related distinctions: Younger Americans are more likely than those who are older to say they are another Christian religion other than Protestant or Catholic, and younger Americans are more likely than those who are older to claim no religion.

It is quite possible that the word "Protestant" itself is recognized less by younger Americans today than it has been in the past. Gallup asks the respondent to choose among a series of labels, one of which is "Protestant". Younger Americans who are members of denominations that would be traditionally identified as Protestant might not recognize the label and instead volunteer a specific denominational name, which in turn is reported in the Gallup survey results in the "other Christian" category. In other words, it may be that young people are not abandoning non-Catholic Christian denominations as much as they are abandoning the "Protestant" label.

6. The number of Americans who identify as Catholics has been remarkably constant for many years.

About one quarter of Americans are Catholic, a percentage that has changed very little over the past decade. The highest concentration of Catholics in America is in the East (37%). The lowest regional concentration of Catholics is in the South, where only 16% are Catholics. Although Hispanics are much more likely to be Catholics than the average American, the prevalence of the Catholic religion among Hispanics is by no means universal. Fifty-six percent of Hispanics identify as Catholic, 23% are Protestant, and 7% say they have no religious affiliation or identification.

7. Those with no religious preference are likely to be liberal, Democrats, younger, and to live in the West.

The 9% of Americans who say they do not identify with any religion whatsoever tend to be politically liberal, Democrats, independents, younger, living in the West, students, and those who are living with someone without being married.

This table displays the percentage within each of these subgroups who do not identify with any religion, or who explicitly say they are atheist or agnostic.

Americans who do not identify with a Religion or are Atheist or Agnostic

Based on 12,043 Gallup poll interviews conducted in 2004

	%
Liberal Democrats	20
Living together, not married	18
18- to 29-year-olds	16
Never married	16
Live in West	15
Politically independent	15
Students	15
Men ages 18-49	14

8. More than 4 in 10 Americans attend church weekly.

The 2004 survey data continue to show that more than 4 out of 10 Americans claim to attend church on a regular basis. This conclusion is based on the responses to two questions. First, 44% of Americans say they attended church or synagogue within the last seven days prior to the interview. Second, 34% of Americans say they attend church at least once a week and another 10% say they go almost every week. (Only 14% of the public say they never attend church.)

How often do you attend church or synagogue -- at least once a week, almost every week, about once a month, seldom, or never?

	At least once a week	Almost every week	About once a month	Seldom	Never	No opinion
	%	%	%	%	%	%
2004	34	10	15	27	14	*
2003	32	13	13	30	11	1
2002	32	13	15	29	10	1
2001	32	11	15	29	13	*
2000	35	11	14	29	10	1
1999	32	12	15	27	13	1
1998	32	13	17	28	10	1
1997	29	13	17	29	11	1
1996	29	12	15	32	11	1
1995	31	12	16	30	10	1
1994	32	13	16	28	10	1
1993	--	--	--	--	--	--
1992	34	10	14	27	14	1

* Less than 0.5%

Did you, yourself, happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days, or not?

	Yes	No
	%	%
2004	44	56
2003	41	59
2002	44	56
2001	41	59
2000	44	56
1999	43	57
1998	40	60
1997	40	60
1996	38	62
1995	43	57
1994	42	58
1993	40	60
1992	40	59

These survey measures of church attendance have not changed materially during the last decade.

9. The demographics of church attendance

There are significant differences within subgroups of the American population in terms of self-reported church attendance:

- Women are more likely to attend church than men.
- Blacks are significantly more likely to attend church than whites.
- Those Americans 18- to 29-years-old are least likely to attend church while those ages 65 and over are most likely to attend.
- Church attendance is highest in the South and lowest in the West.
- Those households that make under \$30,000 a year are less likely to attend church than those that

make more.

Republicans are much more likely to attend church than independents or Democrats.

Catholics are less likely to attend church than Protestants.

10. Religion is very important to a majority of Americans.

Religion is very important to about 6 out of 10 Americans, while another quarter say that religion is fairly important in their lives. Only 16% of Americans in 2004 said that religion was not very important to them. This measure of the personal importance of religion to one's daily life has not changed much during the last decade.

How important would you say religion is in your own life -- very important, fairly important, or not very important?

	Very important	Fairly important	Not very important	No opinion
	%	%	%	%
2004	59	24	16	1
2003	61	24	15	*
2002	60	27	13	*
2001	58	28	14	*
2000	59	29	12	*
1999	59	29	11	1
1998	61	27	12	1
1997	60	27	12	1
1996	57	28	15	*
1995	58	29	12	1
1994	58	29	12	1
1993	59	29	12	*
1992	58	29	12	1

* Less than 0.5%

Religion is of most importance to women, blacks, older Americans, those living in the Midwest and South, those with lower levels of education and income, Republicans, conservatives, and Protestants.

Survey Methods

Results are based on telephone interviews with 1,002 national adults, aged 18 and older, conducted Dec. 17-19, 2004. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 3 percentage points. For results based on the 478 national adults in the Form A half-sample and 524 national adults in the Form B half-sample, the maximum margins of sampling error are ± 5 percentage points.

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