

Poll: U.S. split on 'Happy Holidays' vs. 'Merry Christmas'

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(RNS) While more than nine out of 10 Americans say they plan to celebrate Christmas this year, they are divided on whether businesses should use messages like "Season's Greetings" rather than "Merry Christmas," according to a new poll.

The latest PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll, released Thursday (Dec. 16), found Americans are split, 44 percent in favor and 49 opposed, on whether retailers should use generic holiday greetings out of respect for people of different faiths.

The so-called "War on Christmas" has been a rallying cry for conservatives in recent years as they resist attempts to remove nativity scenes from town squares, Christmas carols from public schools and the words "Merry Christmas" from sales flyers.

The poll found a significant number of people engaging in secularized celebrations of Christmas, with Americans more likely to watch Christmas movies like "It's A Wonderful Life" (83 percent) than attend religious services on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day (66 percent).

The holiday season is also slightly interreligious: One in 10 Americans say members of their families also celebrate another December holiday, such as Hanukkah or Kwanzaa.

Researchers said the range of ways that Americans celebrate Christmas could explain why the holy day is taking on a less religious feel.

Robert P. Jones, CEO of Public Religion Research Institute, which conducted the poll in partnership with Religion News Service, said Christmas has always evolved, from its Dec. 25 date claimed from a Roman pagan festival, to the decorated tree from German tradition.

The fact that significant numbers of Americans read both the biblical story of Jesus' birth and "'Twas the Night before Christmas" is a continuation of that tradition, he said.

The PRRI/RNS poll also found that:

- College graduates, Democrats and people with no formal religious affiliation are more likely to have family celebrating more than one December holiday.

- Slightly more Americans (43 percent) read "'Twas the Night Before Christmas" than read a Christmas story from the Bible (40 percent).

- Half of Republicans, three in four white evangelicals, and two in three black Protestants say they read the Christmas story from the Bible. Fewer portions of Democrats (34 percent), white mainline Protestants (37 percent) and Catholics (26 percent) do likewise.

- Most white evangelicals (79 percent) and Catholics (82 percent) attend Christmas Eve or Christmas Day services, compared to 63 percent of white mainline Protestants.

-- White evangelicals (69 percent) and Republicans (64 percent) are most likely to say stores should use "Merry Christmas," while a majority of Democrats (58 percent) and Catholics (55 percent) prefer generic holiday greetings instead.

-- People in the Midwest (56 percent), South (54 percent) or rural areas (53 percent) are more likely to object to generic holiday greetings than those living in the Northeast (33 percent) or urban areas (47 percent).

While some Christians bemoan the commercialization of Christmas, interfaith organizations and Christmas advocates see reason to cheer its wider appeal.

Robert Putnam, a Harvard scholar and co-author of "American Grace: How Religion Unites and Divides Us," said he found it surprising that nearly half of Americans choose "Happy Holidays" as their preferred consumer greeting.

"That represents a major change over the last 50 years toward greater interfaith sensitivity," he said.

Although there's no long-term data on the trend -- "because no one would even have thought to ask that on a survey," he said -- Putnam suspects it closely mirrors American's growing acceptance of intermarriage.

Edmund C. Case, CEO of InterfaithFamily.com, which encourages Jewish-Christian couples to raise Jewish children, agreed that a declining stigma against interfaith marriage has had an impact.

InterfaithFamily's own December survey, which polled 586 people, found that about half of interfaith families put up a Christmas tree, nearly 80 percent exchange Christmas presents, and about 20 percent would take offense to someone wishing them a "Merry Christmas."

"They say that it's a nice family time, and it's a tradition for the parent who grew up with it," Case said. "They consider it kind of like Thanksgiving."

Phil Okrend, president of MixedBlessing, a company that makes interfaith and multicultural holiday cards, said it makes sense to consider regional demographics regarding December behavior.

"If you live somewhere with a majority of Christians, then you can say 'Merry Christmas,' and if you're in a more diverse area, you can say 'Happy Holidays,'" he said. "It's not diminishing anything, because we're more alike than not."

The PRRI/RNS Religion News Poll was based on telephone interviews conducted Dec. 9 to 12, with 1,015 U.S. adults. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.