

Let's clean up our act, before the Messiah arrives

MARK PAVILONS

Just when did we begin to lose faith? It's no secret that Christianity has been waning, slowly slipping year after year. In Pew Research Center telephone surveys conducted in 2018 and 2019, 65% of American adults describe themselves as Christians when asked about their religion, down 12 percentage points over the past decade. Meanwhile, the religiously unaffiliated share of the population, consisting of people who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular," now stands at 26%, up from 17% in 2009. Both Protestantism and Catholicism are experiencing losses of population share. Currently, 43% of U.S. adults identify with Protestantism, down from 51% in 2009. And one-in-five adults (20%) are Catholic, down from 23% in 2009. A declining share of Canadians identify as Christians, while an increasing share say they have no religion - similar to trends in the United States and Western Europe. The Pew survey in Canada, conducted in 2018, found that a slim majority of Canadian adults (55%) say they are Christian, including 29% who are Catholic and 18% who are Protestant. About three-in-10 Canadians say they are either atheist (8%), agnostic (5%) or "nothing in particular" (16%). Canadian census data indicate that the share of Canadians in this "religiously unaffiliated" category rose from 4% in 1971 to 24% in 2011, although it is lowest in Quebec. In addition, a rising share of Canadians identify with other faiths, including Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Judaism and Buddhism, due in large part to immigration. The 2018 Pew Research Center survey found that these five groups together make up 8% of Canadian adults. There are many reasons for these statistics, but those are best left to the religious experts among us. I'm the sure the Pope is struggling with this, too. Again, our western arrogance and ignorance hinders our progress, as we ignore some cultural lessons staring us right in the face. Why don't we find out why those other religions are growing and how those believers practice their faith? We may be surprised, and discover more about tradition, love, family and the unifying power of faith than we're aware. Of course, the one step forward, two back philosophy sometimes hinders our progress. Quebec recently enacted a new law that bans many public employees - including teachers, police officers and judges - from wearing religious symbols in the workplace. Advocates of the measure say it promotes the separation of church and state, but opponents already have challenged the law in court, saying it targets Muslim women and erodes religious freedom. I don't know how I'd react if someone told me I couldn't wear a cross or crucifix. France banned head scarves and other religious symbols in public schools in 2004, and banned full-face veils in all public places in 2011. A ban on face veils is also in force in other European countries. Pew Research Center didn't ask Canadians for their opinions on these laws, but most people across Western Europe favor at least some restrictions on Muslim women's dress. These matters seem trivial when we consider the biggie - the end of days. All of our pettiness, avarice and ill gotten gains will be turned to dust when we face judgement. Just who will come to judge us? The word messiah in English means a savior or a "hoped-for deliverer." The word moshiach in Hebrew actually means "anointed." In Biblical Hebrew, the title moshiach was bestowed on somebody who attained a position of nobility and greatness. For example, the high priest is referred to as the kohen ha-moshiach. In Talmudic literature the title Moshiach, or Melech HaMoshiach (the King Messiah), is reserved for the Jewish leader who will redeem Israel in the End of Days. One of the principles of Jewish faith is that one day there will arise a dynamic Jewish leader, a direct descendant of the Davidic dynasty, who will rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, and gather Jews from all over the world and bring them back to the Land of Israel. All the nations of the world will recognize Moshiach to be a world leader, and will accept his dominion. In the messianic era there will be world peace, no more wars nor famine, and, in general, a high standard of living. Aren't these things we all long for? Some people believe that the world will "evolve" by itself into a messianic era without a human figurehead. Judaism rejects this belief, pointing to our own history dominated by greed, power and enslavement. Others believe in Armageddon, that the world will self-destruct, either by nuclear war or by terrorism. Reliable prophecies from all religions predict world peace, but after large-scale prolonged calamities. Even Nostradamus predicted a Third World War, destruction of the Middle East, and increasing devastation caused by global warming. This year is pivotal, scholars say. Stay on your toes, people! Prophets speak of the arrival of a human leader, of a magnitude that the we can only imagine. His unique example and leadership will inspire mankind to change direction. Signs of the pending arrival of the Messiah, and the "end of days," include an increase in wars and conflicts; more weather incidents like earthquakes, floods, and famine, and an increase in anti-semitism. We've seen all of these things in recent years, and they're increasing. How long have we yearned for world peace? Recent actions in Iran have certainly derailed it for the time being and we are seeing the fallout from this most recent horrific incident. As we wait, patiently, for the "second coming," perhaps we should strive to improve our society, our species and our fellow men and women. Maybe we can get a head-start on the next phase of our world by ushering in all of those ideals we all wish and pray for. Maybe if we make world peace and winning the battle

against evil our priorities, the better off we will all be.

