

A traditional, commercialized Christmas

By [Nicole C. Kirk](#)

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In Chicago Christmas begins in November, with the revealing of Marshall Field's (now Macy's) Christmas windows and the hanging of golden trumpets on the façade of the grand old department store. Inside, for more than 100 years the Walnut Room restaurant has glistened in its holiday glory with its centerpiece: a stunning Christmas tree. On the fifth floor, Santa awaits his eager fans in Santaland. The store buzzes with shoppers in a crush of shopping bags from Macy's and other stores up and down the historic State Street shopping district.

A couple of blocks away, a towering Christmas tree stands in Daley Plaza, with a bustling Christkindlmarket at its foot. Adjacent is a privately sponsored life-size nativity scene, with a sign informing visitors that they are keeping the "Christ in Christmas." Nearby stands an enormous menorah, along with a recent addition: an eight-foot "A" representing atheism and agnosticism, in celebration of the winter solstice and the Bill of Rights.

A little farther North, Michigan Avenue sparkles in its finery of lights and greenery with elegant shops proclaiming they hold the perfect Christmas gift or stocking stuffer. Stores burst with shoppers. The countdown to Christmas, or rather the shopping days left before Christmas, brings urgency to the shoppers milling between stores inspecting merchandise and making purchase after purchase. Further gift suggestions come directly to our homes and pockets through e-mail.

Accompanying the shopping frenzy is the yearly lamentation against the commercialization of Christmas. Ministers write newsletter columns and blogs reminding parishioners of the meaning of Christmas. Rick Steves, the popular travel guru, pitches his European Christmas special DVD for the annual fund drive as an experience of the "real" Christmas.

An extensive [Pew study on Christmas](#) records the shift from a religious holiday to a cultural event. While 96 percent of Christians celebrate Christmas, eight in ten non-Christian Americans celebrate it as a cultural holiday. The particular celebrations

and beliefs vary. The study also asked respondents to compare Christmas celebrations from their childhood to current celebrations—revealing a shift from decorations, church, and caroling to family gatherings, friends and gift giving.

What is Christmas, then? A religious holiday? A cultural event? A shopping season?

From the beginning, as [scholar Leigh Eric Schmidt](#) has noted, the American Christmas lent itself to the spectacular. The question of the shift to commercialization and focus on shopping is a complicated one. Schmidt offers that “no one really knows when gift giving became a focus,” with Christmas shopping initially confined to mostly toy and candy shops on Christmas Eve in the 1820s and 30s. Most Protestants avoided celebrating Christmas, making New Year’s the focus of gift giving instead. But Christmas offered the masses time off for entertainment, so street fairs, theatre spectacles, and other forms of holiday merriment developed—along with a growing marketplace for gifts.

By the late 19th century, Christmas celebrations shifted from the public street fairs to shops and department stores and home-based rituals. Christmas displays and store-based rituals had been growing each year, with department stores hosting caroling gatherings that drew thousands, visiting Santa in the store’s toy department. Decoration schemes mimicked cathedrals or winter wonderlands, making the store a destination in itself.

The goal was to entice shoppers to spend money. But for some shop owners these displays were also sincere expressions of their Christianity. Schmidt traces how for some shoppers, visiting these displays and taking part in Christmas rituals became a part of Christmas—just as much as the home- and church-based rituals. New immigrant groups brought new variations to the celebrations, with some customs adopted more widely. In the American context, the marketplace has a long history of being intertwined with Christmas—making it more both/and than either/or.

Many bemoan the commercialization of the Christmas (or holiday) season. But perhaps it is useful to reflect on the complexity and uniqueness of the American Christmas, in all its diverse expressions and forms: cultural, religious and commercial.

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