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Da Vinci Code gospel to 22% in Alberta

Novel wins converts to scenario in which Jesus survived, had family and moved to France

Janice Tibbetts

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OTTAWA - Almost one in five Canadians believe that Jesus Christ's death on the cross was faked and that he married and had a family, according to a new poll that challenges the cornerstone Christian belief in the resurrection.

Albertans were most likely to accept The Da Vinci Code's premise, with 22 per cent reporting they believe in a hoax.

"It shows that The Da Vinci Code is winning the day," says religious studies professor Richard Ascough, referring to the bestselling novel that raises the conspiracy theory.

The poll, conducted for CanWest News Service in the days leading up to Easter, indicated that 17 per cent of Canadians and 13 per cent of Americans believe author Dan Brown's premise, which has been fiercely disputed by Christian religious leaders, most recently in a Good Friday service in Rome.

Seventy-three per cent of Canadians and 78 per cent of Americans said they believe that Jesus died on the cross and he was resurrected to eternal life. The Resurrection is central to the Christian faith and Easter is considered the most important religious holiday of the year.

Another new book, The Jesus Papers by author Michael Baigent, also claims that Christ never died on the cross but that he married Mary Magdalene and he later moved to France with their daughter.

Ipsos Reid conducted its telephone survey with 814 Canadians and 768 Americans on April 11 and 12. The poll has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points, 19 times in 20.

Andrew Grenville, the polling firm's senior vice-president, said he was shocked that many Canadians believe the death of Jesus was faked. He said the number was particularly surprising considering only 10 per cent of Canadians identify themselves as atheist or agnostic.

"The fact that so many people embrace this belief that has been popularized in The Da Vinci Code, I found shocking, frankly," Grenville said.

"I would have expected a lot of people to say Jesus never existed, or Jesus was just some guy, but to say the death was faked and he had kids is a very firm position to take. It speaks to the power of storytelling."

Grenville said he believes it is the first time the question has been asked in a poll, so there is no way of determining whether views have changed on the question.



CREDIT: Ed Kaiser, the Journal

Rob Young portrays the risen Jesus in an Easter production at the West Edmonton Christian Assembly. It took 185 volunteers -- actors, technical crew and other staff -- to bring the Easter story to life.

Ascough, a professor at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., said he's surprised that only 10 per cent of Canadians and nine per cent of Americans had no answer to the question. He speculated that the debate surrounding *The Da Vinci Code* and *The Jesus Papers* has forced people into forming opinions.

"There's sort of no middle ground," he said. "I wonder if works like Baigent's and Dan Brown's have forced people to say, 'I don't buy that Jesus didn't die so therefore I will affirm that he did.' "

The poll revealed a clear division between Christians and non-Christians, with only eight per cent of Christians accepting the conspiracy compared to 31 per cent of non-Christians.

After Albertans, Quebecers were next most likely to believe in the hoax theory at 19 per cent, followed by Ontarians at 18 per cent and British Columbians at 15 per cent. Only 13 per cent of Atlantic Canadians and eight per cent of residents of Manitoba and Saskatchewan reported believing in the theory.

The *Da Vinci Code* has sold more than 40 million copies since its release in March 2003 and a movie based on the book will premiere next month.

In a Good Friday service before Pope Benedict in Rome, the preacher for the papal household condemned the theories that have made money by denying church teachings about Jesus, according to *The Associated Press*.

"Christ is still sold, but not anymore for 30 coins," Rev. Raniero Cantalamessa told the Pope and the rest of the congregation in St. Peter's Basilica, referring to the Apostle Judas's betrayal of Jesus before his Crucifixion.

Cantalamessa did not specifically name *The Da Vinci Code*, but he clearly referred to it and the upcoming movie.

"No one succeeds in stopping this speculative wave, that instead will register a boom with the imminent release of a certain film," he said.

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