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# The young still believe

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Religion and Ethics Reporter

A public-opinion poll has found that the core elements of Christian faith are accepted by a substantial majority of young adult Canadians although few of them have grown up in a church or regularly attend religious services.

Where they get it from is a bit of a mystery. It will be good news – maybe – for Canada's mainstream churches, which increasingly voice fears that an entire generation could be largely beyond their reach, oblivious of the Christian stories and the Christian church's teachings.

Not so, says the Angus Reid organization.

Its survey found that almost as many Canadians in the 18-to-34 age group (66 per cent) as those 35 and over (70 per cent) believe in salvation from sin through faith in the Resurrection of Jesus. Canadians in general overwhelmingly identify themselves as Christians.

At the same time, however, the young Canadians had strongly negative feelings about organized religion, and only 15 per cent indicated they attended a religious service on a regular weekly basis. Forty per cent said they attended no religious institution at all.

In the 35-54 age group, 17 per cent attend church on a weekly basis (once a week or more); in the 55-and-over group, the figure was 31 per cent.

The poll, done for *The Globe and Mail* and CTV, was conducted April 11-16 and surveyed 1,500 adult Canadians. It has a margin of error of 2.5 points, 19 times out of 20.

Angus Reid senior vice-president Andrew Grenville said the fact that few young Canadians regularly attend church didn't surprise him – only about 20 per cent of all adult Canadians do – but their statements about faith did.

Because young Canadians, unlike older Canadians, live in a society where they have never had to deal with the institutional church, the retention of faith "in some ways ... is astonishing," he said.

These young Canadians, he said, are for the most part the daughters and sons of baby

boomers who fell away from the church and did not raise their children inside it.

"But obviously a transmission of faith has occurred in a family setting," Mr. Grenville said. "We don't know how deep that transmission is. The basic elements of faith are there, but beyond that we just don't know."

The indications are that, beyond the basic faith elements, there isn't much. Responses to survey questions about the Bible and the importance of faith in day-to-day life suggest that, for young adult Canadians, conventional Christian teaching seems to do little more than float on the surface of their lives.

David Reed, a specialist in religion and society who teaches at the University of Toronto's Wycliffe College, said an explanation for the transmission of Christian faith values to Canadians who live their lives outside the church lies with the fact that Christianity is Canada's dominant religion – "a kind of spiritual template for the culture."

When religion becomes woven together with culture, Prof. Reed said, its tenets become fused with the culture's values, with its creative art forms, with its basic cultural conversation.

"But what has happened in the past 20 years is the unlocking of the religion from the church."

The 18-to-34 generation would be beyond reach of the church, he said, if Christianity were not a missionary religion. He pointed out that the evangelical fervour that swept through North America in the 19th century was a response to empty churches. There are a lot of empty churches today.

"The church just needs to reorder its message. It's been used to being the inheritor of biological births and the immigrant boat. But now that those have dried up, it doesn't know what to do," Prof. Reed said.

The Angus Reid survey also found that:

- Atlantic Canada is the country's real Bible Belt – not, as commonly assumed, Alberta and British Columbia. In fact, B.C. wins the title of the most Godless place in Canada.
- Fewer Quebecers than other Canadians attend church regularly, and acceptance of conventional church doctrine in Quebec ap-

pears lower than in other parts of Canada. Mr. Grenville said Quebecers are inclined to view themselves as culturally, but not particularly religiously, Roman Catholic.

- The percentage of adult Canadians who say they believe in God – 84 per cent – has not changed significantly in more than half a century although regular church attendance has plummeted. The institutional church has experienced the same erosion in public confidence as other Canadian social institutions, a phenomenon explored by University of Toronto political scientist Neil Nevitte in his book, *The Decline of Deference*.

- Eight out of 10 Canadians in all age groups say they don't think they need to go to church to be a good Christian and 70 per cent across all age groups say their private beliefs about Christianity are more important than what the church teaches.

- Fewer than half of Canadians believe the devil is active in the world today.

Why Atlantic Canada is the true Bible Belt is in part a product of its continuing stable, traditional society but largely the result of its history.

The evangelical Great Awakening movement that swept the Maritime provinces after the American Revolution and the U.S.-Canadian War of 1812 penetrated deeply into Maritime society. It set the dominant religious tone for the region and, still today, has left a mark.

In Atlantic Canada, 93 per cent of adults believe in God and 28 per cent attend church once a week or more – in fact, nearly 50 per cent once a month or more, far higher than in other parts of the country.

British Columbians showed the least belief in God and – just after Quebec – the most infrequent church attendance. (Fifteen per cent of Quebecers attend church on a weekly basis; in British Columbia, the figure is 18 per cent.)

Mr. Grenville suggested two reasons: high levels of immigration from non-theistic parts of the world and – contrary to the province's prevailing mythology – the province has the country's highest suicide rate and lowest satisfaction-with-life index. It is not the land of the religiously hopeful.

The article EM0002 reprinted above is used in Chapter 1 of the STAT 231 Course Materials.