Analysis: More than merely a ‘vibe shift’?

By Chine McDonald17 April 2026

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Chine McDonald considers renewed interest in spirituality among the young.

IN MARCH 1966, John Lennon declared that The Beatles were “more popular than Jesus now”. Instead of claiming that the Fab Four were God-like, he was reflecting on a culture in which young people had turned away from the religion that had formed the background to their parents’ lives and culture. The pop-music scene, with its floppy haircuts and electric guitars, was obsessed over by many young people in the 1960s with a religious fervour similar to that seen in the Billy Graham Crusades, which had taken place in Harringay, in north London, a decade before. The 1954 London Crusade had run for 12 weeks over the spring, attended by more than two million people; nearly 40,000 made a Christian commitment, many of them young people. Recent months have made me question more than ever whether young people today are as anti-religious as their parents, or whether there is, indeed, a renewed interest in spirituality among younger generations. Last weekend, the 29-year-old boxer Connor Benn, a son of Nigel Benn, came out into the ring to the song “Oceans” by Hillsong. As he took on the former two-time world champion Regis Prograis in the £15-million fight, screened on Netflix, he had a cross tattoo on his chest. Benn shares Bible verses, prayers, and daily reflections with his £2.6 million followers on Instagram. The boxing industry is replete with biblical references. Fighters often have “God first” on their clothing or gloves; on Saturday night, another boxer, Tyson Fury, got into the ring with John 3.16 written on his shorts. Call it what you will, a spiritual awakening, rebirth, renewal, revival, seems to be taking place among younger people, especially those who spend a lot of their time online on social media, podcasts, and YouTube. Take Ferne McCann, a former star of The Only Way Is Essex, who last month revealed her new-found religious belief. “Walking with God and trusting his guidance has brought me so much peace and clarity,” she told her 2.8 million Instagram followers. Or Harry Clark, 25, from The Traitors (Features, 10 October 2025), whose documentary detailing his quest to meet the Pope was broadcast over Easter and explored his return to his Roman Catholic faith at a time of great difficulty in his life.

SOMETHING is changing. Some have suggested that this increasing openness to religious ideas is merely a “vibe shift”, and nothing more. For all the furore over the Bible Society’s retraction of its The Quiet Revival data from YouGov (News, 2 April), I continue to be astonished at just how much media coverage the initial results got a year ago. It was covered everywhere from The New York Times to Sky News and all the national broadsheets; the podcast The News Agents devoted a whole episode to it. The interest — I would go so far as to say, obsession — with what was, in reality, just a poll says something about the increased interest in all things religious. Beyond the “vibe shift”, however, statistics showing rising Bible sales, young people coming to faith across Europe, and increases in adult baptisms point to something. In 2024, the RC Church reported a 21-per-cent rise in the number of baptisms of people over the age of seven, and, in the same year, the number of adults receiving holy communion for the first time increased by 44 per cent on the year before: from 1850 to 2659. In the Church of England, teenage and adult baptisms rose by 11.5 per cent in 2024 on the previous year, and confirmations were up by 5.3 per cent. Some have explained this as parents’ catching up to baptise their children who could not be baptised during Covid; but one might expect to have seen the catch-up lead to a boost in the year or two after the pandemic, not four years later. Pew Research Centre’s 2024 Spring Global Attitudes Survey suggested that, while 18-34-year-olds were the group least likely to identify as Christian (25 per cent compared to 43 per cent on average), those who did were statistically more likely to go to church at least once a month than older Christians. They also prayed more, the study said and were more likely to believe in life after death, and most likely to believe in God and to say that religion was very or somewhat important in their lives. Some will put this down to the growth in young people of other religions, including Islam, and suggest that this is all down to higher rates of immigration. But the last time I checked, immigrants were people, too; and we underestimate the positive impact that having friends of other religions has on how someone practises their own. No one is pretending, of course, that churches are full of new converts, nor that there are more Christians than non-Christians in England and Wales. The most recent Census shows that the fastest-growing group are the non-religious, and that those who identify as Christian constitute 46 per cent of the population — down from 59 per cent in 2011 and 72 per cent in 2001. Although the vast majority of people in England and Wales identified as Christians in the early 2000s, those

years were marked by a distinctly anti-religious culture, especially after 9/11. It was into this culture that Theos, which seeks to make a compelling case for Christian and religious ideas in public life, was launched, to a somewhat frosty reception. WHEN I walk into the Theos office on Great Peter Street in Westminster, one of the first things that I am greeted with is a newspaper clipping with the headline: “Why Theos will fail”. Just days after Theos was launched in 2006, Martin Newland, writing in The Guardian, predicted that a religion think tank “hadn’t got a prayer” in a world dominated by anti-religious secular humanism. Newland had been burned by talking publicly about his own Roman Catholicism in the same newspaper some time before. His prediction that Theos would fail reflected something of the cultural mood at the time: religion was widely seen as irrational, irrelevant, and even dangerous. Public atheism had gripped the nation in the years after 9/11, and faith was expected to retreat quietly into private life. It is why he couldn’t see how Theos’s argument, as outlined in Dr Nick Spencer’s first report, Doing God: A future for faith in the public square, could possibly cut through. But, as we at Theos celebrate that we are still here, 20 years on — with a programme of events at St Martin-in-the-Fields, the National Gallery, Southwark Cathedral, and Westminster Abbey — what we see is that the cultural climate in which we find ourselves is very different from the one at our formation. Now, after years of global instability, political upheaval, and a pandemic, people are starting to ask questions in public about God, life, and what it means to be human. Clearly, there is a dissatisfaction among young people with the non-belief of those who came before them. Now, as boxers, politicians, and reality-TV stars are much more comfortable talking God, our task at Theos is to articulate what that means and what difference it makes to how we live our lives, individually and collectively. As my colleagues at Theos often say, the answer isn’t simply more religion: it’s better religion.

Chine McDonald is director of Theos.