



Faith on Their Sleeves: How Christian Merch Signals a Generational Return to Belief

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Is there actually a quiet comeback to religion? Faith is showing up on hoodies, playlists, and TikTok, challenging the narrative that religion is dead.

Christian Smith's new book, [Why Religion Went Obsolete](#), tells the depressing tale of traditional religion's decline in America. A believer himself, Smith notes that each of the last six generations has been less observant than the one that came before. Only about 19% of Gen Z (born 1997-2012) report having a "strong" or "somewhat strong" affiliation with their religion, less than half of some older generations. Smith notes that traditional religion strikes many young people not just as wrong but as strange, outdated, and unnecessary. In a world with so many options, why spend your time or attention on religion?

But perhaps traditional religion isn't quite dead. Witness the curious rise of what I'll call "Christian Merch" — clothing, accessories, and public displays that openly reference Christian symbols or themes. In my travels, I've noticed more wearing of cross necklaces than ever before, sweatshirts with messages like "God is Good" and "Be the Light," backpacks adorned with turquoise ichthys symbols, and TikTok influencers filming GRWM ("get ready with me") reels while casually sporting faith-based apparel. Am I simply noticing it more, a frequency illusion—or is there actually more of it to see? If the latter, is Christian Merch a sign that religiosity is making a comeback among young people in America? Is it more performance than conviction—just another way to grab attention? Or is it possible that it's a little of both?

Emily Belle Freeman, Young Women General President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, seems to suggest that something deeper may be happening. Speaking of today's rising generation, she observed: "Our youth are unusually gifted in reaching out to others and sharing what they believe in a convincing fashion. These are gifts that you were born with and that you're here in church learning to develop so that you can be a powerful magnet towards the gathering throughout your life. This is the reason for the timing of your birth. This is the role of the youth of the Church."

In other words, what may look to some like a surface-level display might actually reflect something far more intentional: a generation prepared to declare their faith in public ways, inviting others, in a fashion uniquely suited to their moment in history.

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Wearing Belief—The Rise of Christian Merchandise

History has a way of repeating itself. In the 1970s, another rising generation—caught between the materialism of their parents and the chaos of the sexual revolution—began to visibly separate themselves from the culture around them. The Jesus Movement was born, and with it came a new wave of Christian expression: T-shirts, jewelry, bumper stickers, and patches that declared "Jesus Saves." The fish symbol became an everyday sign of personal conviction. Historian Colleen McDannell observed that Christian retail

flourished during this time, summed up by a 1978 ad that read, “If it’s worth sharing, it’s worth wearing.” From that modest beginning rose the megachurch movement, Contemporary Christian Music, and decades of growing evangelical influence.

Today, a new kind of faith-driven expression is emerging from unexpected places—skateparks, start-ups, and Shopify carts. Joe Pemberton, a software designer and father, launched [Nauvoo Supply Co.](#) in 2021 after finding mainstream brands out of step with his values. What began with a minimalist “1830” tee nodding to Latter-day Saint heritage quickly grew into a catalog of over 30 unapologetically faith-rooted designs. For Joe, it’s more than business—it’s a cause. He believes public expressions of belief can spark courage in others, which is why he’s leaned into bold statements like an “Occupy Missouri” tee—a doctrinal riff on Elon Musk’s “Occupy Mars”—and a Family Proclamation line he admits is “brave,” even among the faithful. Sales have doubled annually, but what matters most to Joe is inviting connection and reflection in a world where faith is often countercultural.

Nauvoo Supply doesn’t seem to be an outlier. Brands like Elevated Faith, God Is Dope, and Corinthians Corner have built loyal followings with bestsellers that blend faith and design. At the same time, modest clothing companies like DM Fashion, Main Street Exchange, The Reflective, and Modest Molly boutique are quietly booming—catering not only to conservative Christians, but also to Orthodox Jews and Muslims. Together, they reflect something bigger than a market trend: people want to wear what they believe.

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That shift hasn’t gone unnoticed by church leaders. Elder Clark Gilbert, a General Authority Seventy and Commissioner of Education for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, has spent considerable time thinking about what he calls a reawakening among the rising generation. “There’s a deeper phenomenon happening, and we think it is the hastening ... These young adults are smart, and they’re turning back to religion. They’re turning back to a relationship with Jesus Christ ... It’s an amazing thing to behold.” Earlier this year, Gilbert and Elder D. Todd Christofferson shared global data from Church Education programs that shows the growth is not only real—it’s youth-led and peer-to-peer. While supported by institutions, it’s clearly not driven by them. “We see, in a

broader way, this happening ... in Jewish schools, Catholic schools, Evangelicals, whatever. There is a movement—not quite as dramatic as we are seeing here in the Church Educational System—but it is broad.”

If the youth of the seventies were rejecting materialism and moral confusion, it’s worth asking: what is this rising generation rejecting? And what new spiritual expressions might rise from it?

Music as Merchandise—Faith in the Charts

This cultural shift isn’t limited to what young people wear—unless you include wearing their earbuds. Music has become another form of spiritual self-expression. Take Forrest Frank, for example, whose 2024 album “Child of God” debuted at No. 1 on Billboard’s Top Christian Albums chart. His breakout song “No Longer Bound” found its way to number 2 on Spotify’s U.S. Viral 50. What seems to be resonating is that Frank is genuinely living what he sings. Josiah Queen topped the same chart with “The Prodigal,” and when Megan Woods released “The Truth,” hers shot to number one. Lauren Daigle, whose powerful vocals and spiritual themes consistently land her on the Billboard 200—not just the Christian charts—performed at this year’s Super Bowl pre-show, indicating how mainstream faith-infused content has become. It seems that this raw, faith-centered music, especially when it is more than performative—and delivered by their peers, is mirroring a generational vibe shift.

This same appetite for faith that shows up in music and merch extends to the world of podcasts. According to Edison Research’s Q1 2024 [report](#), the Religion & Spirituality category now ranks ninth among podcast genres in the U.S. for weekly listeners aged 13 and older. Clearly, Gen Z is leaning in: those ages 18–24 make up a growing share of the podcast audience. There is also the success of shows like *The Bible in a Year* with Fr. Mike Schmitz, which topped Apple’s charts in both 2021 and 2022. Many young people appear to be seeking spiritual insight and connection through platforms they’ve grown up with, and formats that are native to them—streaming faith into their lives one song, one episode at a time.

More Than a Trend: From Statement to Identity

Not everyone sees this trend as a sign of spiritual depth. Some critics argue that faith-themed fashion can veer into performative religion and trivialize sacred belief. There's a subtle but striking disconnect when a large cross dangles in a plunging neckline, or when Christian slogans are printed on muscle tees alongside aggressive or politically charged symbols that feel out of step with the teachings of Christ. These contradictions raise fair questions: Is this faith, fashion, or a new kind of cultural identity? Whichever, for many, these public signals of belief are sincere entry points into a faith their parents may have neglected or taken for granted.

What might all this mean—culturally, spiritually? Perhaps something as simple, and as seismic, as the hastening of a rising generation that refuses to keep belief to themselves. For many young people today, Christian merch isn't just aesthetic—it's identity. It's belonging. It's a way to publicly own belief in a world where symbols matter. They grew up surrounded by flags, filters, and profile bios that signal who we are and what we stand for. Why wouldn't rising faith join the mix? What some might dismiss as surface-level is actually consistent with broader Gen Z patterns: a craving for authenticity, a resistance to pretense, and a boldness in broadcasting values through image and action. This creates both an opportunity and a challenge for parents, youth leaders, and churches. How do we nurture this impulse—to express, to share, to signal spiritual belonging—without losing reverence at the heart of it?

Importantly, this isn't just an American moment. Across the UK and Australia, similar shifts are underway. In [Australia](#), reports of rising conversions and Gen Z-led interest in church are challenging narratives of decline. In the [UK](#), many describe a subtle but growing "rebirth" of faith. That conversation may take more than one article. But what's clear is that something is shifting. Across TikTok feeds, playlists, and hoodies, a vibe shift is unfolding.

Faith is not fading, it's trending. Baader-Meinhoff Phenomena aside, there is more Christian Merch to see—because more are choosing to be seen.

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About the author

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