

= More popular than Jesus =

" More popular than Jesus " (or " Bigger than Jesus ") was a controversial remark made by the Beatles ' John Lennon in 1966 . Lennon said that Christianity was in decline and that the Beatles had become more popular than Jesus Christ . The comment drew no controversy when originally published in the United Kingdom , but angry reactions flared up in Christian communities when it was republished in the United States five months later .

Lennon had originally made the remark in March 1966 during an interview with Maureen Cleave for the London Evening Standard , which drew no public reaction . When Datebook , a US teen magazine , quoted Lennon 's comments in August , five months later , extensive protests broke out in the Southern United States . Some radio stations stopped playing Beatles songs , their records were publicly burned , press conferences were cancelled , and threats were made . The controversy coincided with the group 's US tour in August 1966 , and Lennon and Brian Epstein attempted to quell the dispute at a series of press conferences . Some tour events experienced disruption and intimidation , including a picketing by the Ku Klux Klan . The controversy contributed to the Beatles ' lack of interest in public live performances , and the US tour was the last they undertook , after which they became a studio @-@ only band .

= = Background = =

In March 1966 , the London Evening Standard ran a weekly series of articles entitled " How Does a Beatle Live ? " which featured John Lennon , Ringo Starr , George Harrison , and Paul McCartney respectively . The articles were completed by journalist Maureen Cleave , who knew the group well and had interviewed them regularly since the start of Beatlemania in the UK . Three years previously she had written they were " the darlings of Merseyside " , and had accompanied them on the plane on the group 's first US tour in February 1964 . For her lifestyle series in March 1966 , she chose to interview the group individually , rather than all together , as was the norm .

Cleave interviewed Lennon on 4 March 1966 . At his home , Kenwood , in Weybridge , she found a full @-@ size crucifix , a gorilla costume , a medieval suit of armour and a well @-@ organised library , with works by Alfred , Lord Tennyson , Jonathan Swift , Oscar Wilde , George Orwell , Aldous Huxley , and The Passover Plot , by Hugh J. Schonfield , which had influenced Lennon 's ideas about Christianity . Cleave 's article mentioned that Lennon was " reading extensively about religion " , and quoted a comment he made :

Christianity will go . It will vanish and shrink . I needn 't argue about that ; I 'm right and I 'll be proved right . We 're more popular than Jesus now ; I don 't know which will go first ? rock ' n ' roll or Christianity . Jesus was all right but his disciples were thick and ordinary . It 's them twisting it that ruins it for me .

Cleave 's interview with Lennon was published in the Evening Standard in March 1966 and provoked no public reaction in the UK . Church attendance there was in decline and the Christian churches were making no secret of their efforts to transform their image into something more relevant to modern times . Music historian Jonathan Gould wrote , " The satire comedians had had a field day with the increasingly desperate attempts of the Church to make itself seem more relevant (' Don 't call me vicar , call me Dick ... ') . " In 1963 , the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich , John A. T. Robinson , published a controversial but popular book , Honest to God , urging the nation to reject traditional church teachings on morality and the concept of God as an " old man in the sky " , and instead embrace a universal ethic of love . Bryan R. Wilson 's 1966 text Religion in Secular Society explained that increasing secularization led to British churches being abandoned . However , in the US , churches remained popular .

Both McCartney and Harrison had been baptised in the Roman Catholic Church , but neither of them followed Christianity . At the start of Beatlemania , the group came into contact with the Revd Ronald Gibbons , who told reporters that a Beatles version of " O Come All Ye Faithful " might provide the Church of England with " the very shot in the arm it needs " .

= = Response in the US = =

The day after Cleave 's article appeared in the Evening Standard , Beatles press officer Tony Barrow offered Datebook , a US teen magazine , rights to all four interviews . Barrow believed the pieces were important to show fans that the Beatles were progressing beyond simple pop music and producing more intellectually challenging work . As Datebook had already run pieces on fashion designer Mary Quant and on the effects of LSD , it seemed like a suitable vehicle to carry this information .

In late July 1966 , nearly five months after UK publication , Datebook republished the interviews . However , art editor Art Unger decided to deliberately put Lennon 's quote about Christianity on its front cover , cutting the prose before it . In Birmingham , Alabama , WAQY DJ Tommy Charles heard about the quotation from his coworker Doug Layton , and was immediately incensed , saying " That does it for me . I am not going to play the Beatles any more " . Charles and Layton asked for listeners ' views on Lennon 's comment and the response was overwhelmingly negative . Charles later stated , " We just felt it was so absurd and sacrilegious that something ought to be done to show them that they can 't get away with this sort of thing " . Al Benn , who was the Bureau Manager for United Press International News , heard the WAQY show and immediately filed a news report in New York City , culminating in a major news story in The New York Times on 5 August . Around two dozen other stations followed WAQY 's lead with similar announcements . Some stations in the Deep South went further , organising demonstrations with bonfires , drawing hordes of teenagers to publicly burn their Beatles records and other memorabilia .

Epstein was so concerned by the reaction that he considered cancelling the group 's upcoming US tour , believing they would be seriously harmed in some way . He then flew to the US and held a press conference in New York City , where he publicly criticised Datebook , saying the magazine had taken Lennon 's words out of context , and expressed regret on behalf of the group that " people with certain religious beliefs should have been offended in any way " . Epstein 's efforts had little effect , as the controversy quickly spread beyond the borders of the US . In Mexico City there were demonstrations against the group , and a number of countries , including South Africa and Spain , made the decision to ban the Beatles ' music on national radio stations . The Vatican issued a public denouncement of Lennon 's comments .

The Beatles left for their US tour on 11 August 1966 . According to Lennon 's wife , Cynthia , he was nervous and upset that he had made people angry simply by expressing his opinion . The Beatles attended a press conference in Chicago , Illinois ; Lennon did not want to apologise but was advised by Epstein and Barrow that he should . Lennon quipped that " if I had said television was more popular than Jesus , I might have got away with it " but stressed that he was simply remarking on how other people viewed and popularised the band . He described his own belief in God by quoting the Bishop of Woolwich , saying , " ... not as an old man in the sky . I believe that what people call God is something in all of us . " Adamant that he was not comparing himself with Christ , he tried to explain the decline of Christianity in the UK . Pressed for an apology by a reporter , he said " if you want me to apologise , if that will make you happy , then OK , I 'm sorry . " Journalists gave a sympathetic response , and told Lennon that the Bible Belt were " quite notorious for their Christian attitude . "

When the tour began , it was marred by protests and disturbances . Telephone threats were received , and concerts were picketed by the Ku Klux Klan . Daily Express writer Robert Pitman , responding to the US outcry , wrote , " It seems a nerve for Americans to hold up shocked hands , when week in , week out , America is exporting to us a subculture that makes the Beatles seem like four stern old churchwardens . " The reaction was also criticised in the US ; a Kentucky radio station declared that it would give the Beatles ' music airplay to show its " contempt for hypocrisy personified " , and the Jesuit magazine America wrote : " Lennon was simply stating what many a Christian educator would readily admit " .

The Memphis city council , aware that a Beatles concert was scheduled at the Mid @-@ South Coliseum during the tour , voted to cancel it rather than have " municipal facilities be used as a forum to ridicule anyone 's religion " , and also saying , " the Beatles are not welcome in Memphis " .

The Ku Klux Klan nailed a Beatles album to a wooden cross , vowing " vengeance " , with conservative groups staging further public burnings of Beatles records . The Reverend Jimmy Stroad stated that a Christian rally in Memphis " would give the youth of the mid @-@ South an opportunity to show Jesus Christ is more popular than the Beatles " . The Memphis shows did take place on 19 August ; the afternoon show went as planned , but there was a minor panic when a firecracker was set off on stage during the evening performance , which led the group to believe they were the target of gunfire .

The group hated the tour , partly due to the controversy and adverse reaction from Lennon 's comments , and were unhappy about Epstein continuing to organise live performances that were increasingly at odds with their studio work . Harrison seriously contemplated leaving the band , but was persuaded to stay on the condition that the Beatles would from now on be a studio @-@ only group . After a break , they reconvened to record Sgt. Pepper 's Lonely Hearts Club Band , which drew strong commercial success and critical praise when released in June 1967 .

= = Aftermath = =

Lennon was asked about the controversy three years later during a trip to Canada , in 1969 . He repeated his opinion that the Beatles were more influential on young people than Christ , adding that some ministers had agreed with him . He called the protestors in the US " fascist Christians " , saying he was " very big on Christ . I 've always fancied him . He was right . " In 1978 , he thanked Jesus for an end to the Beatles ' touring , saying " if I hadn 't said [that] and upset the very Christian Ku Klux Klan , well , Lord , I might still be up there with all the other performing fleas ! God bless America . Thank you , Jesus . "

In 1993 , Michael Medved wrote in The Sunday Times that " today , comments like Lennon 's could never cause controversy ; a contemptuous attitude to religion is all but expected from all mainstream pop performers . " In 1997 , Noel Gallagher claimed that his band Oasis were " bigger than God " , but reaction was minimal .

In a 2008 article marking the 40th anniversary of the Beatles ' double album The Beatles (also known as the " White Album ") , the Vatican newspaper , L 'Osservatore Romano , issued the statement :

" The remark by John Lennon , which triggered deep indignation , mainly in the United States , after many years sounds only like a ' boast ' by a young working @-@ class Englishman faced with unexpected success , after growing up in the legend of Elvis and rock and roll . The fact remains that 38 years after breaking up , the songs of the Lennon @-@ McCartney brand have shown an extraordinary resistance to the passage of time , becoming a source of inspiration for more than one generation of pop musicians . "

In response to the statement , Starr said " Didn 't the Vatican say we were Satanic or possibly Satanic , and they 've still forgiven us ? I think the Vatican 's got more to talk about than the Beatles . " In its 14 April 2010 edition , L 'Osservatore Romano responded to Starr 's comments , stating that " John Lennon had no need of forgiveness from the Vatican , L 'Osservatore Romano reprinted its 1966 article on John Lennon 's comments . The 1966 L 'Osservatore Romano article noted that Lennon had apologised for his comments and that fellow Beatle Paul McCartney had criticized them . " In 2010 , Starr said that he had now found religion , adding , " For me , God is in my life ... I think the search has been on since the 1960s . "

In 2012 , the Houston Press music blog compared several aspects of popular media and concluded Jesus is more popular than the Beatles .

In 2015 , The Philippine Star said that almost half a century , Lennon 's statement proved half @-@ wrong : Rock ? n roll is dead but Christianity expanded with Catholicism experiencing exceptional growth through Pope Francis ? lead .

= = Other mentions = =

On 18 May 1968 , Lennon summoned the other Beatles to a meeting at Apple Corps to announce

that he was the living reincarnation of Jesus : " I have something very important to tell you all . I am Jesus Christ . I 'm back again . " The meeting was adjourned for lunch and Lennon never mentioned the subject again . In May 1969 , Lennon and McCartney recorded " The Ballad of John and Yoko " , with Lennon singing the lines , " Christ , you know it ain 't easy , You know how hard it can be , The way things are going , They 're gonna crucify me . " In a BBC interview a few months later , Lennon called himself " One of Christ 's biggest fans " , talked about the Church of England , his vision of heaven , and unhappiness over being unable to marry Yoko Ono in church .

On 3 December 1969 , Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice asked Lennon to play the part of Jesus in the stage production of Jesus Christ Superstar , which he declined , although he said he would have been interested if Ono could play the part of Mary Magdalene . Lennon mentioned Jesus again in his 1970 song , " God " , singing , " I don 't believe in Jesus " , but also sang that he did not believe in the Bible , Buddha , Gita , and the Beatles . While living in Los Angeles with May Pang , Lennon once said to DJ Wolfman Jack , " To boogie or not to boogie , that is the Christian . " Critics of Lennon 's lyrics also focused the line " Imagine there 's no heaven " on Lennon 's 1971 song , " Imagine " .

Lennon was murdered on 8 December 1980 by Mark David Chapman , who had become a born @-@ again Christian in 1970 and was incensed by Lennon 's " more popular than Jesus " remark , calling it blasphemy . He later stated that he was further enraged by the songs " God " and " Imagine " ? even singing the latter with the altered lyric : " Imagine John Lennon dead " .