

# Jordan Peterson and the Unknown God

*“All the Athenians and strangers which were there spent their time in nothing else, but either to tell, or to hear some new thing.”*

—Acts 17:21

To some, Jordan Peterson is a breath of fresh air. To others, a guru. Many find him and his ideas to be dangerous. Still others see him as a sign of the times. In a sense, they're all right.

What you do with Peterson, to borrow from the man himself, depends on what or where—or on Whom—you place your “highest value.” What's more, that highest value will serve as your hermeneutic, the interpretive lens through which you watch his ever increasing library of YouTube videos and read his best-selling book, whose confident, authoritative title promises a great deal: [\*12 Rules for Life\*](#).

Jordan Bernt Peterson (born in 1962 to the conservative hinterlands surrounding Edmonton, Alberta) became Jordan B. Peterson thanks at least in part to leftist looniness. Before controversy enveloped him, he was a perfectly respectable professor of psychology at the University of Toronto. Personable, forthright, and approachable, he presents as a curious polymath who loves to teach and is ever collecting and synthesizing ideas under the banner of the field he professes. The appeal is obvious to anyone who's watched Peterson's videos, provided that, before hitting the play button, the viewer is not already convinced that he's about to see a recorded lecture by Satan.

Peterson exhibits both erudition and winsomeness: earnest, learned, interesting, authoritative without appearing condescending, adept at repeating concepts freshly as if they

are just now occurring to him—the sort of teacher who holds students rapt, making them disappointed that the bell just rang. Thus, before his 20 years and counting at his current post, he held faculty positions at McGill and Harvard.

As a psychologist, both in the classroom and in his private practice, Peterson is a Jungian, a fact well-known to anyone who follows the almost universally negative mainstream press pertaining to him. Briefly, Carl Jung, Freud's student, parted ways with his mentor because of disagreements over theory concerning the human psyche, including the role of the libido and sexual development in shaping human consciousness, and the nature and composition of the unconscious mind. Whereas Freud conceived of the unconscious mind as the primitive id, ever infantile and operating according to the libidinous "pleasure principle," Jung emphasized what he called the "universal unconscious," mankind's commonly shared structures of understanding. In deep time, the collective unconscious evolved "archetypes"—"modes of apprehension" through which each individual understands himself and acts. According to Jung, man does not choose to adopt archetypes or gain them through experience; they are embedded deeply in the brain, part of the operating system, the product of millions of years of evolution stretching back before *Homo sapiens* or *erectus*—or even *Homo*.

Jung recognized commonalities in the history of the human race that appear in culture and/or religion: the myth of the "Wise Old Man," the "Great Mother," the "shadow" that is the lurking monster within. The universality of these archetypes throughout recorded time and across different groupings of peoples, revealed particularly in world religions, demanded for Jung that the archetypes be recognized as part of the human psyche, features of reality that account for consistent and somewhat predictable human behavior. Freud dismissed (as today's critics of Jung and Peterson dismiss) these archetypes as nonscientific speculations, ungrounded in organic evidence,

too vague to be proved or disproved. Jung countered that Freud actually started it, with his archetypical “Oedipus complex,” and regretted that he stopped there, obsessing over sex and denying the validity of cultural and religious impulses, thereby narrowing the potential for understanding man’s own quest for meaning and understanding.

Establishing and grasping the relationship between these common unconscious archetypes and their impact on conscious thought and action is the essence of analytical psychology, the field that is Jung’s own creation; achieving the balance between the collective unconscious and the conscious mind through an expertly guided, free-flowing verbal expression of imaginations, fantasies, and dreams is the essence of Jungian psychotherapy. Through dreams, the collective unconscious manifests itself to the individual, and by acknowledging the “shadow” (or libidinous, selfish id) within oneself and understanding one’s thoughts and actions as they relate to the archetypes, the soul can achieve balance and discover meaning. Jordan Peterson’s first book, *Maps of Meaning*—something of a doorstopper not aimed at, or understandable by, a popular audience—represents his long research on and development of these archetypes, his identification of them in individuals (men and animals) and in their expressions in human cultures, and ultimately his attempt to explain why, by turning aside from the proper navigation of these maps of meaning, human beings fall prey to harmful ideologies such as communism and Nazism. The book is, in part, an answer to Peterson’s own recurring nightmares.

Like Jung, Peterson draws ethical lines between the way things are and the way things should be, making the philosophical connection between *isness* and *oughtness*. Then again, such is true of psychology in every form, to a certain extent: It is the application of established dogma to the world of experience. Its priests (unlike your pastor) are deemed worthy of testifying as expert witnesses in court.

Reading, say, the *New York Times*'s most recent snarky takedown of Peterson, you'd think Carl Jung was himself the devil and also Hitler. This is a curiously anachronistic guilt-by-reverse-association technique, so typical of today's "journalism," born of ignorance and served up to the ignorant for sharing on Facebook. Nonetheless, a search of Google Maps will still yield directions to the Jungian psychotherapist nearest you, and when you arrive you'll have nary an Antifa picket line to cross or flamethrower to dodge. Not so long ago, Jung and Peterson were cool like Joseph Campbell; prophets of a kind of academic scientific mysticism. TV Ontario thought so; it produced a series—13 episodes—on Peterson's *Maps of Meaning*.

What made Peterson worthy of being deemed an unperson was his public (*i.e.*, YouTube) opposition in September 2016 to Bill C-16, the Liberal Trudeau government's "Act to amend the Canadian Human Rights Act and the Criminal Code" aimed at the protection, celebration, and glorification of "gender expression" and "gender identity." Peterson declared that he would refuse to be compelled to play pronoun bingo in the classroom or on the quad of a publicly funded campus, and that, as a result, he would likely face criminal penalties if the bill passed. (It did.) The whole thing was tailor-made for the global democracy known as the World Wide Web, where viral videos spread quickly *via* social-media shares. Profiles of the courageous Peterson in conservative magazines and on conservative websites led to television sit-downs with nonpolymath ideological interviewers, which led to more viral videos ("Jordan Peterson DESTROYS [Host Name Here]"), which led to myriad YouTube channel subscribers, which led to Patreon support of Peterson from fans and well-wishers to the tune of \$80,000 per month.

The stars have aligned for this best-selling book. The media's Stage IV Trump Derangement Syndrome, the rise of both Antifa and the Alt-Right, the fever pitch of feminists on campuses,

the attribution of intersectional racism to every conceivable inequality by the Opinion Journalism of the clones of Ta-Nehisi Coates, the spectacle of conservatives (politicians, church leaders) trampling over one another to be first in line to confess the sins of the Christian white cis-male, and, most significantly, the crisis of masculinity among young men: Taken together, these cultural conditions have made the field white unto harvest for Jordan Peterson. The deracinated, democratized, depressed, devolving West has descended into moral anarchy. The subtitle of [\*12 Rules\*](#) speaks directly to things as they are: "An Antidote to Chaos."

"Be precise in your speech" (No. 10). "Do not let your children do anything that makes you dislike them" (No. 5). "Pursue what is meaningful, not what is expedient" (No. 7). "Stand up straight with your shoulders back" (No. 1). These rules sound like horse sense; they resonate. The 12 rules resonate because they are axiomatic. It even feels a little rebellious, a bit countercultural, to read and appreciate them, because they are nothing like the *reductio ad Mein Kampf* they are made out to be by the media. But then, the same is true of the author. Peterson—as anyone who understands the Jungian foundation of his thought would grasp instinctively—abhors identity politics. "Create chaos, overturn the Establishment, and save the West by sharing ironic frog memes, then march around Charlottesville chanting 'Jews will not replace us'" is not one of the 12 rules. It can't be, because such a silly statement flies in the face of at least two of Peterson's actual rules. Yet the media continuously refer to Peterson as the guru, the prophet, the father-figure of the Alt-Right. This is particularly ridiculous when one considers that the leading figures of the Alt-Right, that amorphous entity that rallies around the "14 Words" ("We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children"), openly mock Peterson as the feckless guru of the "Alt-Lite" because, among other things, he doesn't advocate white racial consciousness. Still, before

me as I write are these titles and ledes from recently published mainstream-media sources: “Popular alt-right provocateur” (the *Independent*); “From Jordan Peterson’s fanboys to the wider alt-right” (*Vox*); “Who is Jordan Peterson, favorite figure of the alt-right?” (NBC News); “Alt-Right Hero” (*Slate*); “Right-winger? Not me, says alt-right darling Jordan Peterson” (*Sydney Morning Herald*); *ad infinitum*.

Sometimes the conflation of Peterson and the Alt-Right is ignorantly repeated, echoed out of the chambers of leftism. Other times, it is spoken as a bald-faced lie. Either way, the conflation is political. Broad-brush painting is the conventional technique of tasteless writers today. To question the veracity of a #MeToo claim because the details don’t make sense is to advocate rape. To recognize that the dominant black subculture of warehoused urban America is prone to fatherlessness, crime, and welfare dependence is to be guilty of believing that blacks are biologically inferior and worthy of homicide by cops. To recognize the noble character of Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson and seek the preservation of their public monuments is to long for a return to African slavery and separate water fountains. To question the morality of “gender confirmation” surgery is to prefer that little boys and girls who are mentally and emotionally confused about their sex commit suicide. And anyone who voted for Donald Trump because of the policies for which he campaigned *de facto* endorsed every vulgar thing he’s ever said or done, including tweets and Stormy Daniels, and has thus betrayed the evangelical Christian faith and/or conservatism.

The chief conflation—the one that gets Jordan Peterson lumped in with racist ideologues whom he actively opposes—is the progressive left’s equivocation of white identity politics with the concept of hierarchy and authority in any form. In a word, intersectionality. If the ultimate *telos* of Progress is total and absolute Equality, the exercise of “white privilege”

is a kind of rape. Similarly, the traditional wedding vow of a wife to “love, honor, and obey” is tantamount to selling oneself into slavery. The “gender binary” (the insistence on the existence of two sexes, and the accompanying social pressure to conform one’s “gender identity” and “expression” to a preexisting norm or form that pertains to one’s assigned sex) is a tool of patriarchal oppression. In fact, “patriarchal oppression” is redundant: Patriarchy is oppression.

It ought to be obvious, then, why the ship of Jungian psychology has run aground on the rocks of intersectionality. Any study of the records of human society that mines for the archetypes of a collective unconscious will inevitably turn up inequalities. Neither the Goths nor the Egyptians were willing to think outside the box of the gender binary. Nor were the philosophically oriented Athenians. Hierarchy was something of a feature in various African tribal societies—even in Eddie Murphy’s mythical Kingdom of Zamunda. To suggest, as Peterson does, that there are any “maps of meaning” that evolved millions of years ago in the brains of man’s primitive ancestors and that, further, human beings who today ignore these archetypes plunge headlong into chaos, strip themselves of any chance at finding true fulfillment in life, and ultimately roll out the red carpet for a bloodthirsty tyrant—to say these things is to undercut the progressivist project entirely.

“All people serve their ambition,” Peterson writes. If, then, your ambition is to see the progressive left humiliated and stripped of all political power, you are likely to love this book. The same goes for those who see the “decline of the West” as a series of left-liberal wins against conservative standards, those who value the restoration of “Western culture” above all else. You’ll love the book because of its enemies, or you’ll love it because the 12 rules represent rational arguments in favor of “traditional values” and (by

implication) arguments against the lunacy of hormone “replacement” therapy, gay marriage, and the like. How could one not rejoice in the fact that white middle-class male snowflakes are drawn to a man who paternalistically tells them to stand up straight, and to “assume that the person you are listening to might know something you don’t”?

We cannot stop there, however. There is another question to consider regarding this book. By entertaining this question, admittedly, we risk being dubbed seamless-garment, separatist fanatics who can’t get along with anyone and can’t work toward a common moral or cultural goal with someone who doesn’t agree with us 100 percent, thus dooming us to political failure. However, as Josef Pieper argued, following Thomas Aquinas and, really, the entirety of Christian thought—Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox—down through the centuries, prudence is the first of the Four Cardinal Virtues for a reason. We must above all be open to the truth, for only then can we discover the contours of “the good” that we must pursue. Our highest aim must not be the “morals” that were once held commonly in the West, or finding “meaning,” or imagining an achievable political victory: Above all, we must value Truth itself.

We know what Jordan Peterson values. But the vexing question is this: Does it matter how he arrives at his rules?

One of the oddities of the incessant drumbeat of Peterson-hate in the media is the fact that he is a self-proclaimed classical liberal who admits that he doesn’t believe in God, although he’d like to. If you are a Christian, please read that sentence again. Do we possess the prudence required to meditate on what Peterson’s unbelief might mean—how it shapes his thought, and how that might influence those lost young men who read him?

The very First of the Ten Commandments is “Thou shalt have no other gods.” In fact, the Preamble, the *Shema Yisrael*—considered by the Jews to be the first commandment—is



"Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one." The truth of all of the Commandments is grounded in the supreme truth that Yahweh is God, and therefore you shall have no others. We shall honor our (binary!) fathers and mothers because the one and only God Who exists created the world in such a way that parents and all authorities are to be honored; this dovetails with the classical understanding of the cardinal virtue of justice, where each is to be rendered what he is due. Each has his due because God made man and the cosmos that way. The Biblical revelation shares in common with the philosophical paganism of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle a grounding of morality in Divine Being, which exists immaterially and outside of the human soul (Gk. *psyche*).

What happens when you ground morality, public and private, in the human psyche itself? You get Descartes' *Cogito*, the Enlightenment, and the historical decline and fall of this thing we call "the West," which was the flowering of the Christian Faith among the children of barbarians in Europe. Eventually, you get Darwin—the sought-after and thus inevitable solution to the West's growing hatred of traditional authority and ascendant love for empirical science. You get 20th-century Mainline Liberalism, which feebly attempted to maintain Christian "morality" and ceremony without the embarrassing trappings of what Francis Schaeffer referred to as the "God Who is there" and Who, as an infinite-personal Being, "is not silent." Peterson's intellectual world is dominated by Darwin, as was Jung's. Their worldview is rooted not in the fertile Christian Middle Ages but in the desiccated hell scape of the modern/postmodern West.

In Peterson's Chapter/Rule 4, "Compare yourself to who you were yesterday, not to who someone else is today," he takes a deep dive into the Bible (as he does routinely in his YouTube lectures) and stresses the importance of religion. And make no mistakes about it: If one followed Peterson's interpretation of the Bible to a T, one might escape the "hell" of misery

Peterson warns against, but one would also end up in the actual Lake of Fire. That is, if the contributions of Augustine, Chrysostom, the Cappadocians, Anselm, Lombard, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards are taken into account. Peterson's treatment of Biblical Christianity resembles that of some postmodern intellectuals of the right (including those paleoconservatives who have embraced sociobiology as their theory that explains everything), who see Christianity as having unique value to the West not because it is uniquely true for everyone but because it is ours and therefore true for us. In this way Peterson (and others) attempt to embrace pluralism while rejecting multiculturalism, all the while proclaiming the importance of religion. Those who would dismiss religion and the need to have a god outright, Peterson scolds, are arrogant and ignorant:

You simply don't understand how every neural circuit through which you peer at the world has been shaped (and painfully) by the ethical aims of millions of years of human ancestors and all of the life that was lived for the billions of years before that.

But what is the scientific evidence for this ostensibly scientific claim? For Peterson, as for Jung, the mere existence of religions and their cults and ethical codes are proof that evolution has encoded these things into the brain. This amounts to the same scientism that Peterson sometimes condemns; it is a faith in empirical data that he believes himself wise enough to interpret. Not coincidentally, Jung was an avid reader of the Gnostics, and Peterson quotes in this book the "Gospel of Thomas" in a rather blasé manner, as if it were merely another equally valid and authoritative witness to Christianity.

Peterson's Rule 4 concludes with an admonition to "Pay attention. Focus on your surroundings, physical and psychological. Notice something that bothers you, that

concerns you, that will not let you be, which you could fix, that you would fix." In other words, identify goals that are both achievable and good, and accomplish them. This appears to many conservatives as delightfully sage advice for the basement-dwelling snowflake. But how does Peterson arrive at the decision to take baby steps toward dealing with "that pile of paper" on one's desk? By agreeing with Nietzsche that the Old Testament god of the Jews (birthed by their deep-brained maps of meaning) was in many ways more authoritative, certainly more vigorous, than the god Jesus invented for the New Testament, who is love and forgiveness. In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche wrote that the act of combining the Old and New Testaments, with their contradictory gods, into something that Christians call "'The Book in Itself' is perhaps the greatest audacity and 'sin against the spirit' which literary Europe has on its conscience." The Alt-Right concurs, and proposes various versions of an ethnocentric religion of Jehovah-Thor-Odin as an opiate for the white masses. Peterson agrees with Nietzsche's assessment enough to cite it, but he is interested in determining how and why the early Jewish Christians—again, as a result of the deterministic influence of unconscious archetypical categories—sought to reconcile Jesus with the demiurgic god of the Old Testament "redactors." Peterson concludes that, at least for the West, the truth is found not in a rejection of the New Testament god in favor of the Old, but in a full embrace of the Nietzschean absurdity. This requires a Personal Decision, a "declaration of existential faith, that allows you to overcome nihilism, and resentment, and arrogance. It is that declaration of faith that keeps hatred of Being, with all its attendant evils, at bay."

This differs not at all from the Neo-orthodoxy of the 20th century Mainlines, who fought (and failed) to reconcile Darwinism with the claims of 19th-century European theological liberalism and wound up embracing Christian existentialism. Faith is redefined from confidence in the objectively true

Word of God, knowable through the grace bestowed upon sinful man by the Holy Spirit, to a bold leap toward the absurd. Scattered throughout his lengthy forays into Jungian theories of reality and folksy explanations of Darwinian biology, Peterson parrots Karl Barth here, and Norman Vincent Peale there.

[A]s for such faith: it is not at all the will to believe things that you know perfectly well to be false. . . . It is instead the realization that the tragic irrationalities of life must be counterbalanced by an equally irrational commitment to the essential goodness of Being.

This is how you tackle that pile of papers on your desk. It is also how Peterson's "Jesus" showed himself to be the Son of God. For this faith in the absurdity that the Old Testament god preferred by Nietzsche and Richard Spencer is one and the same with the New Testament god of love and forgiveness is a decision "to act as if existence might be justified by its goodness—if only you behaved properly." According to Peterson (as opposed to the fantasies of the racist neopagans) this existential faith "is simultaneously the will to dare set your sights at the unachievable, and to sacrifice everything, including (and most importantly) your life." Peterson repeatedly attributes this attitude to Jesus of Nazareth.

This is not a bulletproof plan for recovering Western values. This is an ironic history of how the West was lost.

It is wincingly painful to read in nearly every chapter the musings of decades-stale theological neoliberalism, which came out of the oven half-baked to begin with. Yet Peterson writes of the JEDP theory of the Old Testament (the Documentary Hypothesis of redaction criticism that insisted, among other things, there are two Creation accounts in Genesis, one from the "Elohists" tradition and another from the "Jahwists," which were clumsily stitched together and believed by ignoramus Jews and Christians for centuries to be a unified narrative) as if

it were established fact and also essential to understanding why you should "Treat Yourself Like Someone You Are Responsible for Helping" (Rule 2). Ironically enough, the existentialist philosopher Walter Kaufmann, whom Peterson cites approvingly and more than once in this book, shredded the JEDP theory in 1978, by demonstrating how the same redaction criticism, if applied to Goethe's known work, would have demanded that *Faust* had multiple authors.

The wincing only increases when Peterson draws a moral argument for standing up straight from the dominance hierarchy of lobsters. In the modern view—the view that spawned the philosophies of both Peterson and the ideologues he warns against—man shares ancestors and traits with the lobster. Man is not uniquely made or created; he is an ascending animal who is uniquely aware, "conscious." For Peterson, man's predicament is complicated by consciousness. Here he finds the significance of Adam and Eve: Ages ago, they became fully human *by sinning*. Then "their eyes were opened." Before the "Fall," man was "less, not more," because he was "unaware" of Good and Evil. This is the complete opposite of the Biblical teaching, so carefully and concisely explained by Augustine, whose described the Fall not as a gain in any sense but as a total loss of freedom: *non posse non peccare et mori*.

Ripped out of his Biblical context, Peterson's imagined prelapsarian Adam is a mere animal, and "chaos" in the natural world (yang) is not the result of God cursing His image-bearers for defying His Law. Rather, it is a feature of "Creation" of which man became aware by making a choice. The "god" of whom Peterson writes is not the personal Being Who can say that everything He created is "good"; he is impersonal "Being" seeking "balance" between order and chaos, both of which Peterson describes as essential features of existence. Salvation, then, is not a gift of God's grace but a matter of human striving—speaking "order" (yin) into chaos "consciously, of our own free choice." (Peterson's "Jesus" did this *ad*

*extremis*; he shows us the Tao.) The precursor to this saving “faith” is not repentance before the holy God Whom we have offended, but enlightenment and self-knowledge. This is the way of the Gnostics; it also sounds a bit like the way of the Jedi in *Star Wars*. Could this partly explain Peterson’s appeal? Carl Jung studied ESP. Peterson has speculated online about the possibility of immortality if one were to achieve complete balance. One sees the specter of Obi-Wan. Thus, there is no Righteous Judge coming, no substantive (*homoousios*) Son of God, incarnate in human history, “that man whom [God] hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead” (Acts 17:31b). But then, what of the Hitlers and Stalins of this life? What if they, on balance, enjoyed themselves? Is there no coming recompense for their sin that is commensurate with their evil—beyond the “hell” they already experienced? The Force doesn’t care; that’s just the way things are. No personal God means no one for Hitler—or any other sinful man—to answer to. It also means no hope of eternal salvation.

Considering the difficulties presented here, and in light of the miserable state of our society and culture, we ought to ask some uncomfortable questions of ourselves: How did we get to the point where we thought we needed Jordan Peterson? In other words, why is it that we are so desperate for a purveyor of Jungian archetypes, the collective unconscious, Nietzschean existentialism, liberal/Neo-orthodox theology, and practical agnosticism to tell us the meaning of the Bible, why we ought to tell the truth, why we should be kind to others, why we should refuse to use the made-up pronouns *zhe* and *zhir*, and ultimately how to find meaning and purpose in life? Is it that we, as philosophers, theologians, opinion-writers, and journalists—even as parents and grandparents—have completely lost touch with the truth and therefore cannot teach it to our children and to the young men in our communities? Do we possess faith, hope, and love, but lack Jordan Peterson’s prudence and fortitude? Could we, if called upon, declare the truths of the

Unknown God, as St. Paul did to the Athenians, to Peterson himself?

Would we, if given the chance? Or would we just ask for an autograph?

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