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The Peculiar Opacity of Jordan Peterson's Religious Views



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During a recent conversation in Vancouver—the first night of a massive four-part event sponsored by Pangburn Philosophy—Sam Harris asked Jordan Peterson a question that he can never quite answer: “What do you mean by God?”

If you've ever heard Peterson discuss the subject or read either of his books, the answers he provided in Vancouver will not surprise you. God is "how we imaginatively and collectively represent the existence and action of consciousness across time." God is "that which eternally dies and is reborn in the pursuit of higher being and truth." God is "the highest value in the hierarchy of values." God is the "voice of conscience." God is the "source of judgment and mercy and guilt." God is the "future to which we make sacrifices and something akin to the transcendental repository of reputation." God is "that which selects among men in the eternal hierarchy of men."

It went on like this for awhile, but you get the idea. Or do you? Peterson's definition of God is a sprawling, book-length collection of abstractions, some of which are grounded in narratives about the human condition, while others are mere descriptions of psychological and temporal realities ("...the future to which we make sacrifices"). In other words, it's a definition that's so elastic and subjective as to be almost meaningless. As Harris put it, "That's not how most people most of the time are using the word, and there's something misleading about that."

To which Peterson responded, "I never made the claim that what I'm talking about is like what other people are talking about." That's true, and he often says he doesn't define 'belief' or 'God' in the same way as anyone else. Even when he's asked a more specific question—about, say, his belief (or lack thereof) in the divinity of Christ—he says the answer depends on the interviewer's definitions of 'Christ' and 'divine.' But Peterson still uses words like 'divine' all the time. He's happy to describe consciousness as divine, which he considers to be an "axiomatic statement." He's more than willing to tell you "magical things happen as the logos manifests itself" before announcing his firm belief that the logos is divine, too. But only if, by 'divine,' you mean "Of ultimate transcendent value."

But then, what does Peterson mean by 'transcendent'? Or 'value'? And what will he mean by all the words he uses to answer those questions? Communication becomes extremely difficult if we allow ourselves repeatedly to be drawn into a labyrinth of semantic distinctions. That is precisely why there has to be some fundamental agreement about what words actually mean at the beginning of any conversation.

This is something Peterson can be particularly bad at doing, when the mood takes him—just listen to his excruciating two-hour conversation with Harris that never managed to get past the disputed meaning of the word 'truth.'

With some questions, Peterson behaves the same way as anyone else trying to communicate an idea or argument. He clarifies what subjective terms mean to him in specific contexts and then does his best to answer the question at hand. But with others, he says there are insuperable semantic differences that make clear answers unattainable. Instead of doing his best to adhere to definitions of words like 'God,' 'divine,' and 'religion' that are likely to be understood and shared by his audience, Peterson endlessly repurposes them in ways that make it impossible to have a straightforward discussion.

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MAPS OF MEANING

THE ARCHITECTURE OF BELIEF



JORDAN B. PETERSON

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It's no surprise that Peterson struggles to make coherent claims about his religious beliefs—his use of religious language and imagery has always been slippery. For example, he often professes his belief that "hell exists," but it's clear he isn't talking about a supernatural, eternal torture chamber—he's just using the word as a metaphor for suffering (as many people do). In his 1999 book *Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief*, he argued that the "rejection of the unknown" is a manifestation of "Luciferian pride, which states: *all that I know is all that is necessary to know*. This pride is totalitarian assumption of omniscience—is adoption of God's place by 'reason'—is something that inevitably generates a state of personal and social being indistinguishable from hell."

Peterson also described the rejection of the unknown as something "tantamount to 'identification with the devil,' the mythological counterpart and eternal adversary of the world-creating exploratory hero." Does he think the Devil is a real supernatural being that actually interacts with the world? Does he think hell is a physical reality? If asked, I suspect he would answer "No" to both of these questions, but he always wants to split the difference—after all, hell (in the sense that Peterson uses the word) is perfectly real to those who are in it. The "world-creating exploratory hero" wouldn't make any conceptual sense without an "eternal adversary," and so we call that adversary the Devil.

While it's helpful to view some psychological facts through the lens of archetypes, mythological narratives, and metaphors about heaven and hell or God and the Devil, Peterson doesn't want you to think of these things as mere literary devices or explanatory tools. He wants you to think of them as *true* in a more fundamental sense; as integral components of the human experience that we discard at our peril. To Peterson, our ancestors may have had an impoverished understanding of the world from a scientific perspective, but their spiritual life was rich and sustaining. Now that spiritual life is falling away, and he wants us to reclaim it.

Religious apologists have long sought to reconcile faith with science, and I doubt that Peterson would take issue with this project. But he's willing to admit that scientific and philosophical progress has diminished the power of religious and spiritual traditions in

our lives. As he puts it in *Maps of Meaning*: "Prior to the time of Descartes, Bacon, and Newton, man lived in an animated, spiritual world, saturated with meaning, imbued with moral purpose. The nature of this purpose was revealed in the stories people told each other—stories about the structure of the cosmos and the place of man."

Peterson is nostalgic for the "mythic world" that has been deconstructed by scientific and philosophical inquiry over the past few centuries, and he laments this process in *Maps of Meaning*: "Now we think empirically (at least we think we think empirically), and the spirits that once inhabited the universe have vanished." For Peterson, this is a slow-moving catastrophe, and not just because it has sapped our lives of meaning. It has also undermined our sense of morality.

Recall what Peterson wrote about the "adoption of God's place by 'reason'" and the "totalitarian assumption of omniscience." Peterson isn't just concerned about what many religious people regard as the intellectual hubris of atheists—in *Maps of Meaning*, he writes that the rejection of religion is inherently corrosive to our "belief in the utility and meaning of existence." He even uses the words 'religious' and 'moral' interchangeably: "We have become atheistic in our description, but remain evidently religious—that is, *moral*—in our disposition."

If you think atheism is, by definition, a rejection of morality and meaning, then nobody who lives an ethical and purposeful life can possibly be an atheist. In Peterson's world, to the extent that someone is *really* an atheist, he is a malevolent agent of chaos. To the extent that someone is committed to the values that underpin Western civilization, he is not really an atheist. This is why he identifies with Friedrich Nietzsche's claim that the "death of God" would destroy the moral and psychological pillars that once held Western civilization aloft. And it's why he blames the greatest moral cataclysms of the twentieth century on atheism.

In a [recent interview](#), Peterson stated that he regards Nietzsche's writings as prophetic warnings about the "deaths of tens of millions of people in the aftermath of the death of God." But this is just the same false dichotomy—a society is either God-

fearing or murderous (a dichotomy Peterson extends to individuals)—that apologists have been repeating for decades.

Nietzsche's theory can't account for the fact that fascism co-existed with Catholicism everywhere from Spain and Portugal to Italy, Croatia, and Slovakia (where the despot who ran the country was actually a Roman Catholic priest, Jozef Tiso). Nor can it explain the bizarre synthesis of beliefs that made up the religious substrate of Nazism—a tangle of Christian millenarianism and anti-Semitism, Nordic blood myths, and other scattered forms of mysticism. Call this ideological abomination whatever you want, but it certainly wasn't atheism.

Although some Nazis were hostile to Christianity, it's not as if German soldiers, members of the SS, and other Nazi elites repudiated Christianity *en masse*—on the contrary, many of them continued to take their faith very seriously. And Hitler frequently used Christian symbolism in his speeches for a reason. He understood that the vast majority of Germans were Christians (Catholicism doesn't deserve all the blame here—many were Protestants as well), and he wanted them to see that Nazism was compatible with their faith.

How does Peterson accommodate these facts? Does he argue that Nazis couldn't possibly be true Christians? That would just leave him with the same tautology mentioned above: if you behave well, you're a Christian, and if you don't, you're not. If he refuses to declare who is and isn't a Christian, he's left with the fact that the most heinous crimes of the twentieth century were committed by people for whom God was still very much alive.

During the most recent Pangburn event in London on July 16, Peterson made his now-routine claim about the horrors of "secular" systems like communism and fascism: "The secular alternatives [to religion] that we produced in the twentieth century were certainly no less blood-sodden, and they produced nothing of any productivity whatsoever." However, earlier in the evening, he had made a concession that seemed to complicate this claim. After asserting that democratic institutions "grew out of the Judeo-Christian substrate," he went on to observe that, "There are Christian

substructures—maybe most obviously in the case of the Russian Orthodox Church—where the same metaphysical principles apply, but out of which a democracy did not emerge.”

Despite his simplistic claims about the provenance of fascism and communism, Peterson is clearly capable of recognizing that the historical development of large-scale political and cultural institutions is a complex process that can’t be solely attributed to religion. He even admits that the criticism of religion was a necessary component of the rise of democratic institutions in the West: “It does seem to me that what we have in the West is the consequence of the interplay between the fantasy-predicated poetic Judeo-Christian tradition and the rational critique that was aimed at that by the Enlightenment figures.”

Doesn’t it give him pause that many of these figures—such as David Hume and Baruch Spinoza—were atheists? Would a society based on the principles they espoused be a “bloody catastrophe” that would lead to the “deaths of tens of millions of people”? Harris made a similar point onstage in London: “It was not the ideas of Bertrand Russell and David Hume that brought us to the Gulag or to Auschwitz.”

But this is where Peterson’s redefinitions come in handy—he can simply say that Hume, Spinoza, and Russell weren’t really atheists. He even said this about Harris several times, describing his attempt to ground ethics in a scientific understanding of well-being as a “transcendent” project to move the world as far away from hell as possible. To Peterson, anyone who “acts out the logos” in the service of making the world a better place is participating in a divine process, whether they admit it or not. Under this assumption, even the most vociferous attack on religion can ultimately be construed as a religious exercise if it’s undertaken for the right reasons.

Because Peterson believes morality is inextricably bound to religion, he says every other attempt to behave ethically is a religious exercise, too. In his international bestseller ***12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos***, Peterson dismisses the protestations of any unbeliever who doesn’t spend his days raping, murdering, and stealing. After explaining the moral necessity of internalizing a religious structure, he

writes, "You might object, 'But I'm an atheist.' No, you're *not* ... You're simply not an atheist in your actions." Hitler and Stalin, on the other hand, were *real* atheists: "It was in the aftermath of God's death," Peterson writes, "that the great collective horrors of Communism and Fascism sprang forth."

It's almost always a mistake to argue that a single variable is responsible for systems as complex and historically contingent as fascism and communism—particularly when the precise role of that variable is wide open to interpretation. In his infamous interview with Cathy Newman on Channel 4 News, Peterson said, "If you're a social scientist worth your salt, you never do a univariate analysis." Yet that's exactly what he has done with his assertion that atheism is to blame for the greatest engines of chaos and bloodshed in the twentieth century.

This misreading of history is suggestive in the context of the rest of Peterson's work. As he explains in *Maps of Meaning*, he has spent much of his life trying to "make sense of the human capacity, *my capacity*, for evil—particularly for those evils associated with belief." And the nightmares of the twentieth century were what drove this pursuit: "How was it possible," he asked, "for people to act the way the Nazis had during World War II?" It must have been a powerful and indelible revelation when he realized the Nazis acted that way because they had abandoned God.

Which brings us back to the problem with which we began. What *does* Peterson mean by God? What is this force that gives our lives a transcendent purpose and binds us to the values and principles that ward off the evil he has been trying to understand for so long? Peterson's definition encompasses everything from our most fundamental moral axioms to the psychological forces that compel us to assume greater responsibility for ourselves and our fellow human beings. In other words, his idea of God is too vague and expansive to be useful: He might as well just add an 'o' to the word.

Despite Peterson's strenuous insistence that his definition of God is unique, he still wants you to know that *someone's* God is, in fact, your God—a point he makes repeatedly in *Maps of Meaning*: "The fundamental tenets of the Judeo-Christian

moral tradition continue to govern every aspect of the actual individual behavior and basic values of the typical Westerner." When it comes to telling us where our morality comes from, Peterson's equivocal, opaque language suddenly falls away and he leaves us in no doubt about what he's trying to say. He's making yet another simplistic, monocausal argument that ignores all the elements of our philosophical and cultural tradition that contradict it.

So what about the rationalist critiques of religion written by Enlightenment atheists like Hume and Spinoza? Or the withering attacks on Christianity by Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine? What about all the aspects of our Christian heritage that Peterson doesn't emphasize, like the virulent anti-Semitism that infected the Third Reich, the scriptural warrants for slavery and genocide, and the savage religious wars that preceded the Enlightenment? Why has moral progress so often required our civilization to renounce the dogmas and dictates of the Judeo-Christian tradition Peterson reveres?

Peterson knows he doesn't have to answer these questions because, despite all his declarations to the contrary, he isn't bound by this tradition. In one breath, he tells the audience they live in a society that would collapse without the immovable foundation of Judeo-Christian values. In the next, he reminds them that *his* God is a modern God, unsullied by the barbarism of ancient texts and unencumbered by the immense weight of history. There's just one problem: Jordan Peterson's God is nobody else's God.

Religion



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Matt Johnson has written for many outlets and is the author of the forthcoming book, *How Hitchens Can Save the Left: Rediscovering Fearless Liberalism in an Age of Counter-Enlightenment* (Feb 2023)



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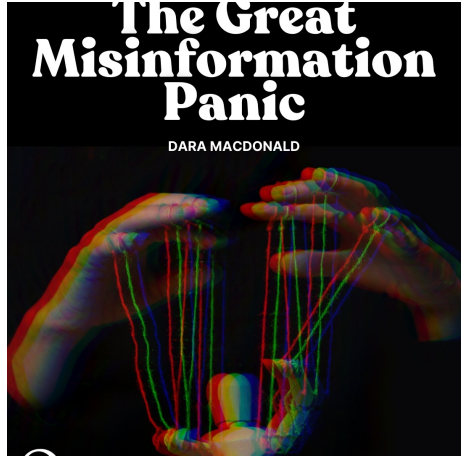
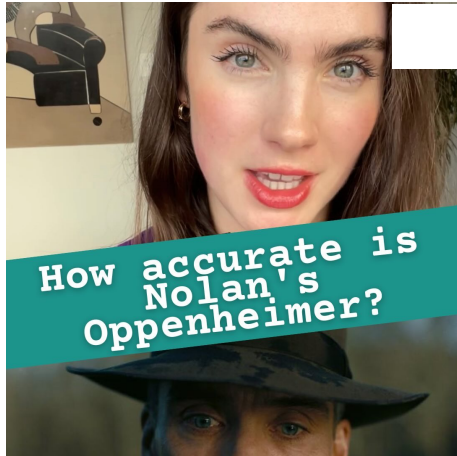
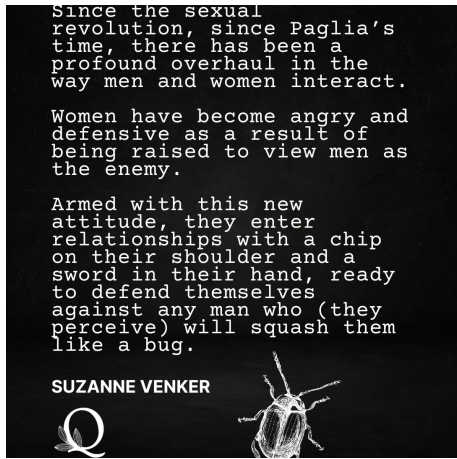
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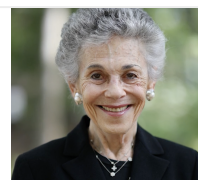
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