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To cite this article: Suzanne van Geuns (22 Oct 2025): Jordan Peterson's hollow core, *Celebrity Studies*, DOI: [10.1080/19392397.2025.2575690](https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2025.2575690)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2025.2575690>



Published online: 22 Oct 2025.



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Jordan Peterson's hollow core

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'His YouTube-posted lectures helped me transform my life in a meaningful way', writes a user on a Jordan Peterson forum, but he is 'not the same man he once was' (bigpenhound, 2025). In a post entitled 'I miss the old JP', another fan laments that he used to watch Peterson's videos to 'listen to something meaningful that inspired me to be a better man', but now finds that 'JP feels like [. . .] a very smart man telling me what to be angry about' (goodluckanddont_itup, 2024). Peterson became a celebrity in 2016 when he spoke out against political correctness on his YouTube channel.¹ A psychology professor, he posted lectures to his YouTube channel in which he used examples drawn from across the Western canon to provide insights into the human mind. His 2018 bestseller, *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos*, translated these insights into practical adages. Peterson's celebrity is that of the authoritative and compelling public intellectual, a 'very smart man' who is unafraid to swim against the 'politically correct' tide and exhorts others to do the same.² Peterson's admonishing and even bracing tone is an integral part of his persona and has remained constant across his media production. Yet it increasingly rings hollow to longtime fans. 'I miss the man who told me to clean my room and gave me a darn good talking to about looking at my own life', writes one commenter (Mongowoodworks 2024). What drives this disappointment, or, put differently, what has happened to *meaning* in Peterson's celebrity?

Peterson's content derived its sense of substance and meaningful depth from his treatment of religion, which is a key component of his celebrity. Scholars working at the intersection of celebrity studies and the study of religion have written about celebrities' claiming of religious traditions and theorised the crossovers between the star-as-commodity and the star-as-guru (i.e. Lofton 2011, Fessenden 2018, Craig 2023). On the face of it, Peterson lends himself well to such analyses. His 2018 book tour saw him offer dictates about taking responsibility and accepting suffering – the latter beginning, famously, with cleaning one's room – to teary-eyed audiences (Bowles 2018). He seems to exert a guru-esque appeal over predominantly male crowds. His transition to a diet of nothing but beef, salt, and water recalls the ascetic religious practices of mystics (Hamblin 2018). But Peterson's celebrity does not fit this religious mould entirely smoothly. He became addicted to anti-anxiety medication while his wife underwent cancer treatment. To rid himself of his 'purely physical' dependency, he needed to be put into a coma for a month, a service he obtained in Russia (Beyerstein 2020). In the face of fame and familial stress, Peterson could not maintain the order and equanimity he so forcefully told his

audiences to adopt. Fans remarked on his 'hypocrisy', but he managed to quell these complaints by leaning into his intellectualism (ASheepNamedAlaska 2019, QuackedForLife 2019). His second book, *Beyond Order* (2021), drew on complex theories and a range of religious narratives to argue that too much structure can be as harmful as too much chaos. It preserved his celebrity status by positioning him as a professor first and practitioner or 'guru' only second, audiences' obvious devotion notwithstanding.

Peterson's treatment of religion generated a sense of meaning, albeit neither through his own beliefs and practices nor through the social function he fulfils for his fans. Instead, in line with his celebrity's centre of gravity, Peterson produced a sense of great meaning through his explicit *intellectual* engagement with religion, which, at his peak, undergirded both his status as a celebrity professor and his popularity among young men. This trick - and its failure - also explains their later decline. Peterson is part of an intellectual tradition that begins at the 1930s Eranos Conferences, which gathered scholars from a range of disciplines to uncover the 'essence' of religious experience (Wasserstrom 1999, p. 241, Hakl 2013). Two of Peterson's most important intellectual ancestors were esteemed guests at Eranos: Carl Gustav Jung and Joseph Campbell. Jung, who initially collaborated with but then broke away from Freud, founded analytical psychology. Interested in myths and religions, he theorised them as expressive of a 'basic stock' or 'archaic level of mind' (Jung 2014, p. 112, Dohe 2016, p. 11). For Jung, *individuation* or the making of a unique self out of this primal basic stock, was the primary task for the modern person. Campbell, himself a celebrity professor, had read Jung. He claimed to have boiled down religious myths from across time and space to a basic stock: the universal monomyth, a basic plot that is relevant and meaningful wherever it appears (Murphy 2000, p. 189, McCutcheon 2001, pp. 43–45, Campbell 2008). Peterson, too, is in the business of universal monomyth. In his lecture on personality, *The Lion King*, the story of Pandora's box, the figure of the swamp witch, and the Christian concept of original sin become interchangeable; all stories mean that humans should develop themselves.³ Learning to draw connections between universal meanings and your own particular circumstances, Peterson promises, will empower you to inhabit the plotline differently – correctly.

These two strands came together in Peterson's engagement with religion at the height of his fame, before doubt set in among his fans. His status as an academic, from the genre of the lecture to the teacherly tone that pervades his content, undergirded a passionate, almost fierce call for his viewers to infuse their lives with essentialised religious meaning. That is, the professional detachment of the professor legitimates decontextualisation, a form of detachment that allows culturally distinct tropes and symbols – i.e. those tied to specific Indigenous, Christian, or narrative traditions – to appear expressive of a universal human 'core'. Peterson's fanbase responded to his call to seek meaning by joining him in the analytical pursuit of connections between religion or myth and psychological states. 'It dawns on me while thinking about King David', writes a user, that he was 'a warrior, but also a creative [...] and also an empathetic, loving person' (TryingToGetSmartAF 2017). They speak in an abstracted, theorising register, moving back and forth between religion and mindset, knowing one through the other. 'I have some ideas on the myth of the knight rescuing the damsel', reads another post from Peterson's heydays (2020). 'I think you found a very real translation of a human characteristic', praises a commenter (HotlineHero 2020). The emphasis on meaning in Peterson's most beloved lectures prompts fans to abstract *their* human feelings and habits into *the* human experience,

rendered as an unchanging and unavoidable psychological plot that is expressed not just in every religion but even in every popular story. Everyone has always struggled and will always struggle as you do, his lectures proclaim – a conclusion as potentially fixing as it is freeing.

Peterson's fans embraced his delivery of the universal meanings at the core of all rituals and stories as, at the very least, *emotionally* freeing. This embrace reflects the historical emphasis on meaning's transformative potential in twentieth-century male empowerment projects. The 1980s mythopoetic men's movement, for example, similarly leaned on Jung and Campbell. Reeling from the second feminist wave, men believed they needed to 'steal back the key [to power] from under [their] mother's pillow', as poet Robert Bly put it in the fairy-tale language typical of the movement (Bly 1990, p. 11).⁴ Mythopoetic empowerment was a psychologised process, requiring that men get in touch with their deepest feelings – anger, usually – by means of religion, the more 'ancient' and 'primitive' the better (Faludi 2006, pp. 321, 322).⁵ Journalist Susan Faludi describes retreats where 'men dressed in tribal masks and wild-animal costumes [and] beat drums', drawing on a racist conception of Indigenous religion as primitive and unchanging (Faludi 2006, p. 306). Peterson stands in this tradition. He designed a floor in his house to replicate the Big House the Kwakwaka'wakw nation uses for ceremonies, including large totem poles. 'I listened to the stories', Peterson writes in a characteristically defensive blog post on the topic, and 'understand their psychological, mythological and practical significance' (Peterson 2018). Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonial objects are 'aesthetic and personal' to him, their significance or meaning a vehicle for transgressive self-expression and purposeful self-transformation. Treated as part of Jung's 'basic stock', religious rituals and stories become points of access to an eternal, timeless reservoir of universal meanings from which Western men can pull to enrich their inner lives – or rooms – and narrate themselves differently.

The universalised insights into the human mind that Peterson presents via religion should have an unlimited shelf life, but fans increasingly remark on a loss of meaning. The problem is a perceived shift from professor to political pundit. 'I'm happy enough with what he does', writes one commenter, it just now 'lines up with *The Daily Wire* in a way that I don't consider flattering' (nogaynessinmyanus 2025). *The Daily Wire* sits at the heart of the right-wing conservatism that came into power with the second Trump presidency. Under an exclusive contract with the media company, Peterson's output has changed little.⁶ *We Who Wrestle with God* plumbs Bible stories for universal psychological truths, and his most recent masculinity series prominently references dragons (Peterson 2022, 2024). But Peterson's deep dives into the unchanging core of human experience necessitate a view of religious meaning as personal and aesthetic, separable from its origins. At his peak, Peterson's detached, professorial posture buttressed this decontextualisation – but he has since left academia for *The Daily Wire*. Peterson has previously spun off personal oddities ranging from his diet and emotional outbursts to his induced coma and his totem pole purchases. All appeared to fans as quirks, tangential to his ultimately intellectual pursuit of universal religious essences. But the particularity of Trumpian politics is proving harder to shake. The association situates him in space and time, when his fans loved him for situating their struggles in a cosmic realm – eternity, not everyday politics. The well of religious meaning may never run dry, but Peterson's long-time viewers now find it stained in party colours.

Notes

1. Peterson's channel gained significant popularity after he posted videos critiquing a Canadian law he erroneously believed would compel him to use students' preferred pronouns. See Stacy (2020).
2. See also Van de Ven and van Gemert (2020).
3. Most of his lecture content from this period draws on his dense academic tome filled with similar analyses. Compare Peterson (1999, 2017).
4. Bly, like Peterson, is a Jungian. The premier poet of the mythopoetic men's movement, he moves from initiation rites in Kenya to the 'Bhairava energy' of Christ to articulate the religious universal that men are 'Wild'.
5. See also Mechling and Mechling (1994), Bonnett (1996), Ferber (2000), Gelber (2012).
6. The exact fit between the MAGA movement and Peterson's mythopoetic style is worth further consideration. In an essay entitled 'Last Boys at the Beginning of History', journalist Mana Afsari has profiled young men who view Trump as a wild, great man whose actions should be viewed through the lens of an overarching 'theory about who human beings are, and what they long for'. Peterson's bread and butter is the provision of such theories. See Afsari (2025).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Suzanne van Geuns is writing a history of online seduction advice for the University of Chicago Press's Class 200 series. *Seductive Methods: Sexual Success in the Computational Imagination* traces how, why, and to what effect men seeking to improve their social intelligence turn to the language and logics of artificial intelligence. Her research interests are in American religion and computation, with an additional focus on public-facing scholarship. She was previously at Princeton's Center for Culture, Society, and Religion and will join the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as Assistant Professor of Religion and Technology in 2026.

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