Opinion
Guest Voices



Jordan Peterson, right, and conservative political commentator Charlie Kirk speak with attendees at the 2018 Young Women's Leadership Summit hosted by Turning Point USA at the Hyatt Regency DFW Hotel in Dallas. Peterson's videos appear on Kirk's media site DailyWire+. (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore/CC BY-SA 2.0)



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In June, psychologist Jordan Peterson signed on with the Daily Wire, a self-proclaimed "right-of-center" multimedia site, for which he has already recorded a plethora of video content. One of his most watched DailyWire+ videos thus far is "Message to the Christian Churches." The video was prompted by his growing Christian fanbase, as well as by his own spiritual quest.

A few years ago, a family friend in his late 20s explained why he didn't want to go to Mass with his family on Easter morning. "The priests make the Bible sound so boring," he said. "I can't help but fall asleep during their homilies. I'd go to church if they played clips of Jordan Peterson talking about the Bible instead of having the priest give homilies. At least Peterson makes the Bible relevant."

Peterson's psychological analyses of the Jungian archetypes found in the Bible largely ignore the text's metaphysical and ethical truths. And yet his appeal to young men was part of the reason then Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron pointed to him as an example of how to engage the "nones" (religiously unaffiliated youth) to the U.S. bishops' Committee on Evangelization and Catechesis in June 2019. Soon after, Barron appeared on Peterson's podcast. Though many Catholics were skeptical about Barron engaging so closely with a figure who draws alt-right crowds, others commended him for opening the doors of the church to Peterson, who in the interview admitted he had a desire for faith and admired the Catholic Church.

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I found myself caught somewhere between these two "sides." To Barron's credit, he never indicated that he intended to use Peterson's work itself for evangelization purposes. Rather, he wanted to encourage Catholic pastors and educators to engage with his work — despite its ideological nature and lack of total congruence with a Catholic worldview — to understand the needs of young people, many of whom find

Peterson's videos attractive. And I agree that it's much more effective to engage in a charitable dialogue with people whose ideologies don't fully converge with the church's teachings than to shout them down, downplay the convergences and tell them why they are in the wrong.

But if that’s the case, I always wondered why Barron never engaged with Peterson's counterparts on the left, perhaps figures like U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, philosopher Slavoj Zizek, or professor and author Ibram X. Kendi, whose ideological left-wing rhetoric may not overlap perfectly with orthodox Catholic teaching, but does resonate strongly with many "nones" and does indeed converge with Catholic principles in several regards. Barron's videos condemning poststructuralist thought, critical theory and "woke ideology" seem to run contrary to the evangelization method he has been using to engage with ideologues of Peterson's stripe.

Peterson's video message to "the Christian churches," one of his first released after his partnership with Daily Wire, reflects some of the fruits of his dialogue with Barron. Already with more than 1.2 million views (surprisingly only half the amount as his "Message to Muslims"), the video displays Peterson sitting in what one might presume to be a house in the country, with bookshelves and a stack of wooden logs in the background — fitting his whole "chadded intellectual" persona. Peterson squints into the teleprompter, as the screen switches periodically between camera angles in an attempt to hold the audience's attention for 11 long minutes of Peterson's pontificating. He proceeds to meld his characteristic Canadian accent with what seems to be his attempt to emulate his boss Ben Shapiro's biting, no-nonsense "wise guy" rhetorical style.

At the 2019 USCCB General Assembly, then Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert E. Barron su

At the 2019 USCCB General Assembly, then Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert E. Barron suggested Jordan Peterson's message might bring religiously unaffiliated, or "nones," particularly young people, back to the Catholic Church. (CNS/Bob Roller)

His tirade targets critics of toxic masculinity — nothing groundbreaking to those already familiar with Peterson's videos — and praises "traditional" notions of masculinity that uphold heroic virtue, channeling instinctive aggression, and a stoic sense of duty to build up civilization and defend one's family. He sprinkles his diatribe with Daily Wire-isms like: "Wake up, sunshine!" "… that old joker Derrida … " "In the words of that mass murderer Karl Marx … " Peterson's overt ideological flair

gives the video a performative edge that renders it almost amusingly entertaining, albeit in an ironic way.

He goes on to tell "the Christian churches" that they should be upholding such masculine ideals and should be actively attempting to attract young men, going as far as suggesting that they put up billboards that read "Young Men Welcome Here!"

He encourages them not to beat young men down for their "toxic" tendencies, but rather to sublimate them in a productive way by asking "more from them [and] remind[ing] them who they are … You're churches, for god's sake! Quit fighting for social justice, quit saving the bloody planet! Attend to some souls, that's what you're supposed to do, that's your holy duty. Do it NOW … before it's too late."



One of Jordan Peterson's most popular DailyWire+ videos is "Message to the Christian Churches." In it, the Canadian psychologist tells "the Christian churches" to uphold "traditional" masculine ideals and place billboards that read "Young Men Welcome Here!" (NCR screenshot/DailyWire+)

Keeping in mind that Peterson is trying to fit into the role of a hyperbolic performative shock jock like his peers at Daily Wire, I'm inclined to take his "message" with a grain of salt. I must admit that Peterson makes points that

churches ought to consider (with a grain of salt.) I, like Peterson, question whether what often comes off as an attempt to "neutralize" men's aggressive tendencies is as useful as harnessing, integrating and transforming said tendencies toward virtuous ends. I've noticed that most of my friends who look up to Peterson happen to be working class and are people of color who see him as an alternative to a puritanized vision of masculinity that is more accommodating to bourgeois college-educated elites is something worth taking seriously.

My primary concern has more to do with Peterson's reactionary posturing, which clouds any of the redeemable qualities of his message, which is the same problem facing his colleagues at the Daily Wire such as Shapiro, Candace Owens and Matt Walsh. Not only does their posturing make it difficult for people who disagree to engage with some of the valid points they may make, but its performative, extravagant flair makes it hard to take them seriously.

My other concern has to do with the integrity of his message from a Christian perspective. Petersons emphasis on the value of channeling more "instinctive" manifestations of cis-typical masculine biology and psychology, and on the moral importance of fidelity to one's duties, is not necessarily "anti-Christian." But these virtues in themselves are pagan if they never are transformed by the theological "Christian" virtues of faith, hope and charity.

It seems to me that Peterson misunderstands what is most essential about Christianity. It is not merely a set of moral teachings, ideas or beliefs. It is not an ideology that upholds "traditional values." It is an encounter with a Person, an experience of God's love in the flesh. Surely Jesus himself (as well as the many male saints) embodied the natural masculine virtues that Peterson celebrates. But for Jesus, such virtues were not ends in themselves. Jesus didn’t die on the cross out of a sense of manly courage or duty, but out of desire to give himself to humanity out of love.

The Christian notion of a "masculine genius" highlights a particular "mode of giving" (to use the words of Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar) that incorporates certain natural virtues, elevating them to the supernatural ideal to which we are all called: fatherhood and motherhood, which is ultimately a call to love creatively and generate life.

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Take St. Joseph as an example. Hardly a "weakling" or a "wimp," nor "toxic" and "aggressive," St. Joseph was the ideal father because he courageously served and sacrificed for his wife and foster son — not merely out of a moralistic sense of duty, but as a response to a supernatural calling to love. The summit of masculinity, as demonstrated by figures like St. Joseph, is this kind of paternal love — the same for women, in a way that incorporates their unique gifts and virtues.

I concede that developing a sense of duty might be a significant starting point for many men especially ones who don't grow up in stable environments. It may be a stepping stone to understanding God's love for them and their supernatural vocation. But let's not kid ourselves. Peterson's video hardly grasps the essential "message" of Christianity, and runs the risk of reducing it to something that it is not.

You don't need to go to church to be taught how to adhere to your duties and establish order in your life. You can easily pick up a copy of a book by Marcus Aurelius, Nietzsche, Confucius, or a self-help book like Peterson's 12 Rules for Life. For young men who want to understand the fullness of Christian virtue, I'd recommend they instead pick up a copy of Pope Francis' apostolic letter Patris corde ("With a Father's Heart") on the life of St. Joseph.