



A NEW KIND OF
ROCK STAR

The keen following Jordan Peterson has developed tells us much about what's missing in our public culture, writes **John Roskam**.



This column is a little different, as I thought I might tell you about the rock concert I went to in Melbourne back in March this year. It wasn't actually a rock concert but it felt like one.

The Melbourne Recital Centre (capacity 1,000) was sold out and outside on the footpath people were offering to buy \$90 tickets for up to \$500. Seventy per cent of the crowd were males under the age of 30. I came straight from work and was in a suit, but nearly everyone else was in a t-shirt and jeans. I wasn't sure what made me feel more out of place – my age, my attire or the fact that, unlike the person sitting next to me and in front of me, I didn't have tattoos. When the star attraction appeared on stage the crowd started cheering and rose to its feet. After the clapping and applause finally died down, the crowd sat in rapt silence to listen to a professor of psychology talk without notes for two hours about the meaning of life and the purpose of human existence.

It was an incredible performance. It was at once brilliant and meandering, without an apparent direction, yet also absolutely incisive and to the point. The lecture began with a 20 minute exegesis on a sixth-century religious icon, the Christ Pantocrator of St Catherine's Monastery at Sinai (*pictured at left*), which through its asymmetry represents the duality of humankind – meaning and meaninglessness.

In case you haven't guessed by now, I'm talking of course about Jordan Peterson's lecture in Melbourne on March 8, which was followed by sold out shows in Sydney

and Brisbane. For those of you who haven't yet come across Peterson and his work, instead of me trying to do him and his reputation justice, I'd simply suggest you Google 'Jordan Peterson Cathy Newman interview' and watch the twenty-nine minutes of his interview – which has now been viewed more than nine million times.

After that, a quick Google search will introduce you to his YouTube channel which has more than 900,000 subscribers. Watch his discussion on *The Rubin Report* with Ben Shapiro and David Rubin and then watch what I regard as one of his very best lectures, 'Postmodernism and Cultural Marxism'. Then you can move on to his 12-part series of lectures on the psychology of the Bible. You're not going to be able to watch the whole series tonight because each lecture goes for at least two and a half hours.

Peterson's new book *12 Rules for Life – An Antidote to Chaos* is currently the best-selling nonfiction book in the world (and is reviewed by Daniel Wild on page 42).

Before I make a few observations about what happened at the Melbourne Recital Centre in March, I'll quote a few lines from David Brooks' January article about Peterson in *The New York Times*. The topics that Brooks mentions are the themes Peterson covered in his lecture last night.

Tyler Cowen argues that Jordan Peterson is the most influential public intellectual in the Western world right now and he has a point. Peterson has found his real home on YouTube, where his videos have attracted something like 40 million views.

In his videos, Peterson analyses classical and biblical texts, he eviscerates identity politics and political correctness and, most important, he delivers stern fatherly lectures to young men on how to be honorable, upright and self-disciplined – and how to grow up and

take responsibility for their own lives.

Parents, universities and the elders of society have utterly failed to give many young men [*I'd go further – I'd say many young people – both young men and young women*] realistic and demanding practical wisdom on how to live. Peterson has filled that gap.

Peterson gives them a chance to be strong. He inspires their idealism by telling them life is hard.

For much of Western history, he argues, Christianity restrained the human tendency towards barbarism. But God died in the 19th century, and Christian dogma and discipline died with him.

That gave us the age of ideology, the age of fascism and communism – and with it, Auschwitz, Dachau and the gulag. Since then we've tried another way to pacify the race. Since most conflict is over values, we've decided to not have any values. We'll celebrate relativism and tolerance. We deny the true nature of humanity and naively pretend everyone is nice. The upside is we haven't blown ourselves up; the downside is we live in a world of normlessness, meaninglessness and chaos.

Peterson doesn't dumb things down. He makes no concessions to the idea that everything needs to be bite-size and comprehensible. At times it takes real effort and determined concentration to follow what he's talking about. Yet people – and especially young people – nevertheless turn up in the droves to hear him deliver two hour lectures and millions watch his videos that go for even longer. I think this says something. People want to be challenged – and they know that not everything has to be easy.

The appeal of someone talking about the meaning of existence to young people is amazing to watch. To me what's even more amazing is that much of what Peterson talks about was commonplace in the public discourse up until only

a few decades ago. Today a discussion about meaning has been replaced by talk about emotions and feeling. One of Peterson's key insights is that emotions and feelings are fleeting; having a purpose to life is not. Happiness and sadness comes and goes. Sitting in the crowd and listening to the discussion in the aisles and hearing the questions to Peterson after the lecture it became clear that many young people are starting to understand that they've never participated in a discussion about why are we here.

That discussion was once led by religion, but it no longer is. And young people are certainly not going to be exposed to a conversation about existence in school classrooms or university tutorials. As Peterson notes, young people are more likely going to be inculcated in the nihilistic beliefs of postmodernism. I hesitate to draw a comparison between Jordan Peterson and the work of the IPA – but I will. I think the knowledge that they're missing out on something is part of the reason why the IPA now has more than 1,000 Young IPA Members through our *Generation Liberty* Program.

In my essay to accompany the research report Dr Bella d'Arbrera completed last year on the teaching of history in Australian universities, I touched on the sense of loss young people are facing when I quoted a friend of mine, Dr Rufus Black, who is the new Vice-Chancellor at the University of Tasmania. In a speech he talked about how a study and understanding of our history and our cultural traditions helps young people make sense of the world – and sadly that study and understanding is gradually evaporating. Which is why the IPA's *Foundations of Western Civilisation Program* is so vital. Rufus said:

Not knowing our cultural past is like not having a memory of growing up. Our loss of cultural knowledge is probably a lot worse than that. Imagine how little you would know about yourself if your memory only went back a week. With the knowledge that we could choose differently comes perspective. With historical perspective comes meaning. There is nothing more grounding than having a sense of belonging to a story much larger than our own.

Peterson's message is related to the point that Rufus was making, when he said: 'With the knowledge that we could choose differently comes perspective'. Perspective lets us make sense of the chaos around us and having the ability to make a choice gives us the ability to choose our own future. Which is an incredibly positive and optimistic message. As Peterson is at pains to point out, the downside of having the power to choose is that you then have the responsibility to choose. One of the reasons that I'm so passionate about history and the teaching of history is that the way the subject is taught today in schools and universities attempts to convince young people that the choices that individuals make don't matter – and the only thing that determines the future of families, communities and nations is class, race and gender.

If people's choices don't matter, then people don't matter either. Which comes back to one of Peterson's axioms: 'treat people as if they matter'. Which is an injunction of optimism – and responsibility.

Thank you for your support. ▣

NB: This article was adapted from an email sent by John Roskam to IPA Members the day after the event.



