



# Insurrection: To Believe Is Human To Doubt, Divine

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## **Insurrection: To Believe Is Human To Doubt, Divine** Peter Rollins

In this incendiary new work, the controversial author and speaker Peter Rollins proclaims that the Christian faith is not primarily concerned with questions regarding life after death but with the possibility of life *before* death.

In order to unearth this truth, Rollins prescribes a radical and wholesale critique of contemporary Christianity that he calls *pyro-theology*. It is only as we submit our spiritual practices, religious rituals, and dogmatic affirmations to the flames of fearless interrogation that we come into contact with the reality that Christianity is in the business of transforming our world rather than offering a way of interpreting or escaping it. Belief in the Resurrection means but one thing: participation in an *Insurrection*.

## **Insurrection: To Believe Is Human To Doubt, Divine Details**

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# From Reader Review *Insurrection: To Believe Is Human To Doubt, Divine* for online ebook

## Derek says

Peter Rollins has been on my list of authors to read for a long time, as he is one of those authors that a lot of authors I read and people I respect have mentioned and recommended. Although it took me years to finally get to reading one of his works, I would not be surprised if I read through all of the rest of his books in the next few months, judging by how much I appreciated his writing and his thought process in *Insurrection*.

I started reading my way through Rollins with *Insurrection*, his fourth book, because it seemed from what I had read about his work that this is the point at which much of his philosophy of "pyro-theology" started to emerge in a more clear manner. Rollins discusses pyrotheology as the burning away of any and all presuppositions and worldviews that would otherwise interfere with our theology, including (especially) the elements of religion and Christianity that have served as a security blanket to followers of Jesus. He deconstructs many of the ways that churches have come to believe and practice in order to reach back to the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Christ without the trappings that have obscured those events over the past two millennia.

I have read similar works that have contained similar arguments by authors such as Bruxy Cavey, Brian McLaren, and Rob Bell, but Rollins' take is, in my estimation, the most philosophically driven and abstract of these kinds of works. Cavey, McLaren, and Bell have some investiture in "pastoring" readers through their new understanding as a result of their vocation as pastors, whereas Rollins seems to have much more interest in pursuing the thought experiment to its logical conclusion (or even past that point at times) as a philosopher and thinker, without the same kind of regard for caring for his audience as in those other works, a factor that seems to unfetter him in order to allow him to craft a "headier" argument.

It is not difficult to see why Rollins' work has become so influential on those other writers or in the context of the post-modern church movement of the past decade (a movement that is often labeled as "emergent" even though that is somewhat of a generic misnomer). He has taken a lot of the ideas that have been espoused within the context of deconstructing theology and expressed them in a way that is accessible and meaningful.

That's not to say that *Insurrection* is necessarily that palatable or easy; in fact, it is quite challenging at times to make it through, as evidenced by the fact that I had to restart it after several months away and then it still took me a lot longer than I had expected to make it through the text. Its difficulty lies in just how much Rollins packs into his writing and thinking and the level of deconstruction that is happening; it seems as though, just at the point at which he can't go any further that he does, and that step opens up a variety of questions about institutional implications and personal ramifications.

That said, I think it's worth it to read *Insurrection* if you're like me and attempting to engage on a journey of reflection and deconstruction in order to peel away the layers of culture that have obscured the character of Christ within the church. On the other hand, if you have not started to ask questions about the Christian culture and worldview, you might need someone else to ease you into this kind of thinking. I would not recommend Rollins as a starting point - Bell is the obvious gateway author for that kind of thinking - but I would say that a journey that begins with Bell logically leads to Rollins.

I felt as though I missed so much as I was reading through this book, whether it was because I could not nearly hope to consume it all on a first reading or because I do not yet have the faculties to be able to process

everything that he was saying. I think this is definitely a book that I will have to read again, particularly after I have read the rest of Rollins' works. I think it has the potential to be quite the journey, and I'm looking forward to it.

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### **Alastair Mccollum says**

Enjoyed, if enjoying is the right word, it's a disturbing and challenging effort to get Christians to enter into the pain, desolation and absolute separation from God that is at the heart of the crucifixion. Rollins strips away the props that sustain an ultimately shallow spiritual life in order to confront us with the wonder, the disturbing, frightening, beyond-comprehension wonder of God's engagement with humanity, and humanity's engagement with God... A book that for many will involve some struggling, thinking, praying...a book that i know is also going to divide opinion as some will really really dislike it...

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### **Ali M. says**

**UPDATE:** One of my favorite theology bloggers, Richard Beck, wrote up a great critique of *Insurrection* here. Well worth the read. I agree that Bonhoeffer presents a more consummate vision of *etsi deus non daretur* (living as if there was no God) than Rollins, one that does not exclude the importance of worship and prayer in private, and loving God-as-object as much as God-as-action. However, I know Rollins is writing another book that he claims "deepens and develops" some of the themes brought up in this one, so I'll have to see where he takes things.

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Wow. This may be the most thorough and relentless breakdown of Christian psychology I've ever read.

Rollins' central thesis is dead-on, for my money: the modern church has become a security blanket for people, a comfortable construct that shields us from the world and prevents us from facing the true nihilistic devastation that is at the heart of the Crucifixion: a loss of God, a loss of meaning, and a loss of hope.

*"Eloi, eloi, lama sabachthani?"* / "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) – Rollins asserts that we have missed the profound implications of Christ's experience on the cross, of God being forsaken by God. Based on this assertion, he proceeds to systematically torch every lie Christians tell each other about God and about themselves: even the lies that feel so genuine when we're telling them. As he correctly points out, we are too often satisfied with the false God we've created for ourselves – an image that makes us feel better, a deus ex machina that is always there when we need our problems fixed. We essentially ignore Christ, no matter how much we profess him. We don't truly process the fact that he experienced the same dark night of the soul and loss of God that all of us do at some point. We miss the point that *God himself embraced doubt as a human being*, both in Gethsemane and on the Cross – and until we do the same, we have not truly participated in Crucifixion and Resurrection with him, and we can never really experience change.

Over and over again, the Scriptures tell us to die to ourselves in order to find ourselves, but most churches are structured to prevent us from doing this. They afford people no opportunity to face doubt – the divine catalyst – and therefore no opportunity to die to the comforts and masks that keep them afloat every day.

Some communities do, of course, and those are the ones that contain world-changers. Because once you've faced your own fears and misgivings and wrestled with them, there's really nothing left to hide behind. And that's when we can love fearlessly, holding nothing back. And that's where God is.

Now, this has been my own takeaway. Did I agree with every word Rollins wrote? Certainly not. But I don't think he wants me to. As he points out toward the end, it's in the challenge and in the conflict itself that truth is unearthed and becomes visible – not in any pat answers or established systems. When the deus ex machina God of religion dies, Christ and the Resurrection remain, as confounding and unsafe as ever.

There is so much to digest and think about in this slim little volume that I couldn't possibly summarize it all in a review. Suffice to say, if you ever read it, I would LOVE to discuss it with you.

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### **BJ Richardson says**

Paul Tillich asks questions and addresses issues that need to be discussed. Although I might not agree with all of his answers, he boldly addresses whether the church today is really about its mission. Using the overarching motif of garden (surrender), cross (despair), and resurrection (new life) he walks through what it means to be a Christian who will embrace our world without identifying ourselves by it. It is a good read for those who want to seriously look at some tough questions. Unfortunately, it is also a book that will likely be misquoted misunderstood and abused by those who are only looking for something to quote or bash.

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### **John Lucy says**

Really, this should have been two separate books. It was recommended to me by a friend who thought that I'd like much of what Rollins has to say. I did agree with much of Part I and found it very intriguing, although I've never been a fan of putting the Crucifixion at the heart of our faith. I'm much more of a Creation and Resurrection type guy, though of course I see that neither of those things would have relevance without the cross. Rollins, though, sets up Part I with the crucifixion as the heart of all his theology. Questionable.

Rollins also argues that living in doubt, as if there were no God, is the ultimate way of life. Now I am radical myself in thinking that humans are divine and thus could live as if God doesn't exist, but I don't think that is the ultimate or even the intended way of life. The problem lies, I think, in that Rollins seems to believe that God doesn't really exist at all, that God is in love when we love other people. God is not a thing so much as a presence in love. That leads to some serious questions: how was the world created then? How is grace given or received, particularly prevenient grace? How does God (love) love us? Rollins doesn't have an answer. Rollins doesn't seem to notice the issues. If he did, I'm not sure he'd have an acceptable answer for anyone.

Part of the problem with Rollins' propositions is that I think he tries too hard in answering objections to religion, mainly that people who believe have a blind faith. Rollins' answer, to swing the pendulum completely the other way to praise constant and never-ceasing doubt, is reactionary at best. He clearly does not take into account any objections or issues with his argument.

Rollins also sometimes misuses quotations from authors such as Bonhoeffer and Kierkegaard. Anyone who knows those authors well would sometimes thank Rollins for creative insights into certain writings but

oftentimes roll their eyes in disgusted fascination.

The book does have some saving graces. The questions that it raises are worth thinking about seriously. Do we believe in God simply to feel comfortable? Do we go to church simply to feel comfortable? Are we capable of living in life's tensions? Personally, having a great fondness for Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Marx, and others, I think those questions are too often ignored in Christian thought. This book can serve as an introduction to some of those questions but really should only serve as an introduction. Unfortunately Rollins' argument is logically unsound and poorly argued as well as completely unorthodox and, might I say, unChristian and unreligious.

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### **Steven Fouse says**

*Insurrection: To Believe is Human, to Doubt Divine* by Peter Rollins explores the philosophical importance of and the means by which we live out Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection. This book is short and easy to read, but filled with references to deep-thinking philosophers and theologians.

**The Good:** This is a book that explains, in a satisfactory way, why actions are more important than beliefs, why doubt is so important and vital to faith, and how embracing our worst fears about the futility of our existence actually frees us to embrace life in a real way.

**The Bad:** For those unfamiliar with philosophy or theology, this book may seem overly deep and eye-glazing. It will fly over some heads.

**The Ugly:** With discussions about the value of atheism and the brokenness of the Church system, many fundamentalists and evangelicals will cry heresy.

For those interested in a meaningful understanding of what it means to follow Jesus in living out the crucifixion, I cannot recommend this book highly enough.

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### **Darius says**

I really **hate** this book. *Insurrection* cut me to the core - it caused me to experience nearly the full range of human emotions, physical manifestations and all. The doubt mentioned in the title is an understatement. Rollins managed to get me to a place of sheer existential dread, more than a few times. Think of it as the book equivalent of heavyweight champion-era Mike Tyson (I got knocked the F\*\*K OUT). There are very few other works that I've thought through so deeply and processed to such a significant degree after reading. Despite the pain, I now realize that I needed this book, because above all else it's inspired me to live and love like never before.

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### **Vegantrav says**

*Insurrection* asks the reader to accept the challenge given by Bonhoeffer: to embrace a religionless Christianity, a Christianity without dogma, a Christianity wherein the philosophical question of God's existence is really not, existentially speaking, important at all, a Christianity which requires us to give up

God in order to find God, a Christianity which offers no easy answers but forces us to ask hard questions and requires us to embrace the pain and the anxiety of our uncertain, strange existence.

*Insurrection* is a child of Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Bonhoeffer, and Tillich. Rollins envisions Christianity not as a religion but as an existential engagement with a world that presents us with death and meaninglessness. Christianity does not, for Rollins, function mythologically: it does not tell us from whence we came; it does not tell us where we are going; it does not show us how to find salvation in a world to come or even in this world; it does not comfort us as we face death and our own finitude.

Rather, Christianity requires us to give up religion (for Rollins, this is Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane), to give up God (on the Cross), and to find God (in the Resurrection) not as an individual being or something but rather as an act: the act of love, loving the world and embracing it in the face of despair and meaninglessness.

The insurrection that Rollins proclaims is rebellion against the power structures of the world: political, social, religious, etc. These structures hide reality from us and allow us to deceive ourselves into living lives that, while they may be comfortable, are not authentic, are not true to ourselves and our place in the world. And so if we want to live in truth, then we must give up our identities as defined by the cultural constructs which define our world: we are, following Paul, no longer male nor female, rich nor poor, Christian nor Muslim nor Hindu, American nor Ethiopian nor Arabic; instead, we are all one in Christ: we are all one in our anxiety and our uncertainty and our sadness but also in our joy and our happiness.

Christianity in destroying our pseudo-identities allows to live authentically by loving our precarious situation in the world and working continually to be honest with ourselves about the nature of the world and trying to change the world, to rebel against all the structures that support and empower the evils of the world: poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, political oppression, social discrimination, etc. In Christianity, we do not retreat from this world nor see ourselves as separate from it; rather, we recognize fully our position in this world yet engage it to change it through the power of God--that is, the power of love.

Christianity helps us to see the world as it is and encourages to us change it. Christianity works to bring eternal life into the here and now. It is not concerned with what happens after death but is fervently interested in what happens before death. Christianity, for Rollins, ceases to be a religion. It is not a relationship with God. It is, instead, the place where God acts--that is, the place where love abounds.

*Insurrection* sees Christianity as asking us to completely die to the self, to die to all the socially and culturally constructed identities that we have, to empty ourselves in the experience of the *kenosis*, to know the reality of a life without God that Christ knew when he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Once we have seen what we are not and recognized that we have lost God on the Cross, then we can all see what are together and can work together and love one another. And it is here that the *Insurrection* becomes the Resurrection: we have destroyed the lie that comforts us, the lie that tells us who we are, the lie that promises that everything will end well, the lie that promises us answers; once these lies, these idols of the mind are destroyed, we can begin to live the life of Resurrection, the life of love--that is, the life of God--that transforms our world and destroys the powers of oppression and deception.

The life of Resurrection, though, may not comfort us in the face of death and meaninglessness, but it does allow us to look honestly upon our finitude and embrace our sisters and brothers in love as we share our common world and work, even in the face of meaninglessness and death, to make a world of love.

I'll end this review with one of my favorite passages from the book:

"In the Incarnation, then, we find a fundamental transformation in the way that we are to approach God, a shift that takes us away from the religious understanding, which treats God as an object worthy of love, to a religionless understanding in which God is found in the very act of love itself . . . in the Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection we discover that God is not something we encounter directly and thus is not something that we experience. Rather, God is that which transforms how we experience everything, i.e., love. God is the name we give to the way of living in which we experience the world as worthy of living for, fighting for, and dying for."

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### **Marty Solomon says**

In chapter five, Rollins shares a story about a man who is rumored to be smuggling items across the border. The authorities monitor the man's activity, searching through the items of the wheelbarrow each time, unable to identify what the man is smuggling. When the man is asked later what it was we was smuggling across the border, he informs the questioner that he was quite naturally smuggling wheelbarrows.

This story accurately depicts my experience of reading this book by Rollins. I feel as though he walks me through the philosophical lens of how I view the world and begins to point out things that I have been looking for -- which happen to be right under my nose.

As someone who orients his life from a philosophical/theological reference point, I have always found Rollins' writing to be refreshing. There are so many books written about the "what" and the "how to" and not too many on the "WHY". Even when one finds such a book, it seems to succumb to the pressure to make the thoughts applicable and practical. This is not so in *Insurrection*. And while this may be one of my frustrations -- wanting to be told what to DO with all of the thoughts and new lenses I've been handed -- it also may be the very strength of the book.

One thing is for certain, I have definitely had my worldview questioned and have realized in how many places my reality is illogical, unreasonable and needing a refreshing overhaul.

The first half of Rollin's book begins to deconstruct the way that we deal with the narrative and reality of the crucifixion. I felt as though those few chapters jostled me awake, exposed the part I've played in the systems that I've critiqued, called me to die and reassured me that such a death was to be embraced and accepted all at the same time.

The second half of the book begins to paint large pictures with broad strokes of what a resurrected reality begins to look like. While I'm still not sure how this will manifest itself in my daily life, I am quite sure that I am now holding my lenses in my hand, wondering if I've been using the right prescription this whole time.

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### **David Gregg says**

I haven't finished this book. I may. But every time I pick it up I feel like the author is talking to an established audience, not to me. I'm new to Rollins and he seems to me to be using his own vocabulary in much the same way that American Evangelicalism uses its own particular vocabulary. There are in-words and in-phrases to which in-group members never give a second thought. It's easy to forget that the uninitiated may not necessarily know what precisely is meant by "following the Spirit", "spiritual warfare", "under a



covering", "coming to the altar", or "the body of Christ".

This may be an exercise in giving Rollins the benefit of the doubt. If I am in fact understanding him correctly, he constantly disappoints and frustrates me.

I am myself quite willing to challenge the traditional understanding of faith in God. I personally believe that Christianity, by its virtues of humility and honesty, *requires* a Christian eventually to come to a crisis of personal atheism wherein she must admit that she, being human, and her predecessors, being human also, could be wrong about it all: in interpretation, in application, in heart. This authenticity requires her to lay aside her assumptions, logical arguments however intellectually sound they may seem, and exegetical rejoinders -- to cease the empiricism. She must ultimately have simple, pure *faith* that God is, without relying on reason or proof -- Biblical or otherwise. This is the quintessential trial of personal faith and personal atheism. It *requires* an ordeal of doubt. Without the struggle of doubt, there is only assumption or ignorance, and neither is faith. It is as to step voluntarily into the opaque black mystery of death with full conviction of the inadequacy of all one's resources, simply in trust. It is to confront mortality, not defying it by reaching for symbolic immortality, but to walk headlong into death trusting, scary as it is, for resurrection on the other side. It is to answer the question "Do you have faith in me?", not by an overused tongue, but by following with the feet, or else become a rogue or hypocrite.

Allowing, even encouraging, Christians to doubt, I can get behind that. But what underlies my passion in this is a faith in the existence and character of a *personal God*. Rollins, if I am not misunderstanding him (which is a distinct possibility, as I have said), seems to be requiring us to admit that there is no personal God to trust. He sounds like a spiritual atheist, or perhaps agnostic, desiring to keep the psychological and philosophical framework of Christianity, without the conscious Life behind it. Having come through my own personal atheism, I can empathize with that, but I don't think I would want to write a book trying convince others of it.

These are very preliminary reflections, seeing as I have neither finished the book, nor become familiar with Peter Rollins from other works.

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## **Billie Pritchett says**

Liked it. Don't know quite what to make of it still, though. Peter Rollins' *Insurrection* is an engaging but weird book. Rollins' main point seems to be that large swaths of our existence is preoccupied with feelings of anxiety, a sense of meaninglessness regarding the purpose of our existence, and perhaps a deep tendency toward feeling guilty that we are not the kind of people that we think we are. Rollins believes that Christianity can provide us with a means to wrestle with this anxiety, meaninglessness, and guilt, not by denying them place in church or in our communities but by recognizing that the engagement with these issues and uncertainty toward these issues is at the core of Christianity. I don't think that he quite establishes that position with sufficient evidence. People can be Christian for other reasons, of course, but they need not be for the reasons Rollins provides, nor do I think he gives enough credence to make readers believe that what he says is correct. Fun read, nonetheless.

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## **David says**

Here's the thing: if you've read a bunch of Zizek already, and thought about how it applies to the American church, a lot of this will feel very familiar. A lot of this feels like "Zizek for Churchies" or something.

Here's the other thing: I'm glad such a thing exists. It draws the lines connecting Zizek's thought to important conclusions about how the church can leave behind some of its most embarrassing and damaging current tendencies, and it does so in a way that has at least a fighting chance to not totally alienate people in the church.

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### **Erin Hecker says**

This is one of the most frustratingly honest and refreshing books on the modern church/Christianity. It will totally mess with you - in the very best way.

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### **Kath says**

I found this very interesting although I confess the philosophy occasionally lost me. It was original and radical, the sort of book I would enjoy discussing with others of like mind. I felt reassured that the feeling of complete doubt and sense of meaninglessness could be a) experienced by far better Christians than me and b) regarded as a way of understanding the crucifixion in a deeper way. I also identified with his thoughts that engaging with others around us in love is a way of experiencing God.

It was illuminating how he demonstrated that church ministers and worship structures can subconsciously collude in a false certainty. However I hesitate at his possible conclusion which is that there is no external being that is God and wonder what the point of church and liturgy would be. He does suggest more room for expressed doubt and reference to suffering in church worship which I feel could be helpful to some but could disturb others.

Well written with many references to famous films and various fables to help illustrate certain points. Radical, but not for the sake of it, I felt his warmth and desire to engage with real people. This was not just an academic exercise.

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### **Chet Duke says**

I couldn't tear my eyes away from the book, but not necessarily in a good way. Honestly, this felt like an attempt to write something profound, but in the end much of it was "meaningless," a term Rollins would probably enjoy very much. It felt more or less like the blabbering of an undergraduate student in a Continental Philosophy class. Everything was very vague, undefined, and mystical. The whole point of the book is that doubt is preferable to a concrete set of beliefs, yet somehow that amounts to an affirmation of the Crucifixion and Resurrection.(?) Rollins is no doubt an intelligent man, but I'm not sure what he was getting at with this book. A couple things I didn't get that maybe someone else will find:

(1) He seems to despise organized religion. I'm guessing this is what he means when he frequently refers to "fundamentalism." Although he never defined fundamentalism, I guess he pictured something evangelical, perhaps even charismatic? I wish he was more specific in his critique of what he meant by fundamentalism.

(2) His arguments are somewhat weak and show him to be naive on basic principles of interpretation. For

example, the argument that Jesus didn't quote Psalm 22 from the cross is because it is put in Jesus' native Aramaic tongue instead of Hebrew. He says that in Jewish faith the Hebrew Scriptures were read, memorized, and recalled in the original language and not one's native tongue. Perhaps he would want to ask Paul why every OT verse quoted by him in the NT comes from the LXX rather than the Hebrew Bible. Even if Matthew was written in Aramaic (which is debatable) this has nothing to do with Hebrew, much less making a case against Jesus referring to the passage in Psalm 22. This, if anything, indicated that Rollins lacked a basic understanding of the post-Alexandrian Hellenism that largely flooded the Hebrew language of the Jews and replaced it with Greek. I wouldn't build my argument on that paragraph as Rollins seemed to do.

(3) "Radical doubt, suffering, and the sense of divine forsakenness are central aspects of Christ's experience..." Is that really how Rollins interprets Jesus on the cross? When did Christ ever doubt the work on the cross? I just didn't get this.

(4) Rollins never really defines his own theological stance. I'm guessing he is an "a/theist"? This is a position he seems fond of, which looks like a shallow form of mysticism or a glorified form agnosticism. I may be way off, but I don't really know how to place him.

(5) The book lost credibility as a serious theological work in this statement on page 174: "the truth is not located in one position or the other, neither is the truth some overarching whole that contains all the various conflicting ideas. The truth arises in the very conflict itself, the conflict that drives us onward." Attempting to squash any concrete perspective on truth doesn't carry much weight in serious theological work. If anything, this undermines his attempt to convince anyone that he is right. Just another interpretation to consider.

There were a few saving points, especially his criticism of hypocrisy within the church. However, this largely made Rollins out to be another caricature of relativistic, postmodern theology. But if you don't agree with my position you are free to "doubt" me. After all, that's preferable...

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## **J.R. Forasteros says**

Insurrection by Peter Rollins reads as a manifesto calling for a radical change to the Evangelical Church. It's a call to have a "religionless Christianity" that will look very different from what has come before. Rollins states as much in his introduction:

Each epoch in the life of the Church arises from the white-hot fires of a fundamental question, a question that burns away the husk that was once thought to be essential in order to reveal once more the revolutionary event heralded... They offer us a unique opportunity to rethink what it means to be the Church, not merely critiquing the presently existing Church for failing to live up to its ideals, but rather for espousing the wrong ideals.

The "wrong ideals" for Rollins are embodied in the (in)famous Chick Tracts published by Jack T. Chick. Though he doesn't cite them until well into the second half of Insurrection, breezing through a few of them before digging into Insurrection would not only help determine what sort of religion Rollins would have us abandon, but might also make us more sympathetic when Rollins steps beyond the bounds of Orthodoxy, as he does in several places.

Chick Tract Christianity is primarily a belief system – you enter it by intellectually ascribing to a set of ideas

about a god who exists outside of the world. Chick Tract Christians believe that at some point, this god will resurrect everyone, punish the bad people, destroy the world and whisk away the good people (i.e., those who have the right beliefs) to live with him in Heaven.

Certainly, Chick Tract Christianity is an extreme form of Evangelical theology, but many of Rollins' critiques weigh on more moderate forms as well. We should pay attention.

Rollins wants to move theology away from stated beliefs to embodied practices. He summarizes his book by saying,

It is only when we are the site where Resurrection takes place that we truly affirm it. To believe in the Crucifixion and Resurrection means nothing less than enacting them.

As such, he divides *Insurrection* into reflections on Crucifixion and Resurrection, with attention in each on how we can live these out as realities that define our lives rather than beliefs that actually prevent us from embodying the Gospel message.

Rollins identifies Chick's god who exists outside reality and who intervenes in our world as a *deus ex machina* (drawing on Bonhoeffer). According to Rollins, believing in this sort of personal deity is a normal human response to the apparently meaninglessness of life. When belief in God becomes a "psychological crutch" to make us feel better about our lives and the world we live in, that belief actually becomes harmful to us.

Yes, this is essentially Marx's critique of religion – that belief can become something that numbs us to the reality of the world around us. Belief can pacify us, inoculate us to the pain and injustice happening in the world.

For Rollins, experiencing the Crucifixion is experiencing the death of this *deus ex machina*. When we realize that life really is scary, that it's not fair, that God isn't going to pop in and pull us out of the mess we call reality, we experience "existential atheism". As Rollins describes it:

The Crucifixion signals an experience in which all that grounds us and gives us meaning collapses. Christ experiences the loss of that which grounds each of these realms—God... To participate in the Crucifixion is to experience the breaking apart of the various mythologies we use to construct and make sense of our world... Christian belief in the Crucifixion is not about accepting some historical event; we are not invited to merely affirm or contemplate the death of Jesus on the cross, but to undergo that death in our own lives.

The problem with Church as we experience it now, Rollins argues, is that the Church actually prevents Christians from participating in the Crucifixion.

To remedy this, Rollins calls Church leaders to doubt with their congregations. To create experiences that lead individuals to encounters with real despair. This is vital if we are to become a people who lives the Resurrection. According to Rollins, until we confront the basic purposelessness of reality, we can't discover the meaning that lies within that emptiness. This is what Rollins calls Resurrection life: the meaning that we find in the midst of chaos. Rollins would have us measure our faith not by the rightness of our beliefs but by the love of our actions. He claims:

The truth of a person is to be located, not in the story they tell about themselves, but in drives and desires that manifest themselves in material practices.

It's in describing his vision of the Resurrection life Rollins really pushes back on Jack Chick Christianity. For Rollins, much of Christianity has been about Escapism – that at some point we'll leave this place and all its pain. But Rollins challenges us to consider that the act of love brings meaning to meaninglessness. That loving can create purpose and beauty, and that we can therefore learn to embrace the world when we love the world. It's created churches that are comfortable with injustice, that use ritual to escape the reality of a broken world.

Rollins would have us embrace that broken world, the same way God embraces the world through the Incarnation. Rollins sees a Resurrection Church as a community that actively resists labels that divide us. It's a community that practices facing our despair and living fully in the present moment. To his credit, Rollins does as much as he can in this format to help us imagine what that sort of community could be – both with video links and discussion questions that help groups process *Insurrection*.

No book as radical as *Insurrection* can not pose some serious challenges to Orthodox Christianity. While he's hard to pin down, Rollins seems to deny basic Orthodox beliefs like the personhood of God and the deity of Christ. And though I suspect Rollins would push back that he's challenging belief itself, these are serious issues a faithful Christian community must deal with as they work through *Insurrection* – and the discussion guide at the end of the book is a great place to start doing just that.

Because his ideas are so revolutionary, *Insurrection* is hard to read. In that he's popularizing thinkers like Caputo and Žižek, Rollins brings Post-modern philosophy to bear on Christian theology. And the Church cannot afford to ignore these ideas. We must engage them. Rollins is a philosopher first and theologian second; we need a serious theological engagement with what he presents. Rollins makes it clear in *Insurrection* that he welcomes this engagement, and he's provided us with an excellent starting point.

Bottom Line: *Insurrection* might be the first fully post-modern, popular-level Christian work. Whether you love it or hate it – and it'll probably be both, it deserves to be taken seriously.

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## **Keith Dow says**

In *Insurrection*, Peter Rollins wages pyro-theology by continuously flicking matches at the church, hoping that it will catch on fire and illuminate. Some of them catch, while others are extinguished mid-air.

Many of his most illuminating points are those which find their origins in Bonhoeffer, including the call to live in the world taking full responsibility for one's actions, "etsi deus non daretur" [as if God did not exist] and that to be in Christ is to live as one fully (hu)man.

Some other points worth considering:

- Pastors should not be 'allowed' to proxy the faith of others. Let them doubt. Let them be real.
- We token-protest fundamental problems because we are unwilling to make the life-changes necessary to make a real impact.
- Churches themselves often provide a once-a-week catharsis to feel like we are good, which in itself is a way out of doing the good we know we should do.
- That God is love, in love, and perhaps not experienced outside of love warrants exploring.
- We need to be able to face the darkness, suffering, and our experienced lack of meaning head-on. This is possible through Christ on the cross.
- We don't need to dream new dreams. We need to change the system so dreaming new dreams is possible.

Other points are interesting, but not convincing. Certain readings of Scripture, such as Paul on "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female" transitioned to "there is no theist or atheist" seem to be more a matter of positing hypotheses than arguing a point.

Rollins integrates stories well, but there seem too to be too many of them and not enough time developing single trajectories. Psychological insights such as the man who needed to convince the chickens that he isn't seed (i.e. he is convinced that he is human, but those in his environment are the ones that need 'convincing'... His underlying assumption that he is seed remains below the surface) are profound, but again need to be developed further and from other angles.

And never, ever, question Batman. Atheistic Christianity is one thing, but questioning Batman? Back off.

Biblical development is also needed. As much as he would like to point everything to the rupturing moment on the cross, a more thorough study is needed if he is to convince people that his view is an authentic reading rather than just a personally meaningful reading.

There is much to think on in this work, and many matches that burn brightly. I just feel he needs something more sustained, like a blowtorch, to get the job done.

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## **Doug says**

Peter Rollins might just be the most interesting and creative-yet-ancient Christian theologian writing at the moment. His two books *\*Insurrection: To Believe is Human, To Doubt Divine\** and *\*The Idolatry of God: Breaking Our Addiction to Certainty and Satisfaction\** are both powerful discussions of the spirituality of Christ's crucifixion for everyday life. Both books discuss different and important angles of the same core topics, with perhaps *\*Insurrection\** taking it from the angle of the gospels and *\*Idolatry of God\** from Paul's matrix of sin, law, and idol. Rollins argues through parable, film, psychology, and traditional theological categories to lay out a wonderfully clear and helpful spirituality. If we could just master this very basic yet revolutionary material, the church would make great leaps forward. Those completely unfamiliar with key figures in high medieval and Renaissance theology try to dismiss Rollins as a postmodernist, but the core of his theology is actually pre-modern. In short, one could say he is translating such grand church figures as John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila, the Philokalia, and Thomas Merton for a modern Christian audience. I've read each of Rollins' books twice now, and I'm finding them more and more helpful. You don't have to agree with everything to be provoked forward in your own growth. Very important reading.

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## **Luke Boyce says**

This is a book I've been meaning to read for a very long time and finally made my way to it after listening to Rollins discuss his ideas elsewhere. There were parts of the book that I really loved and there were parts that I was a little frustrated with. In general, I love Rollins philosophy. His general thesis on the nature of true belief only through the process of doubt and disbelief is fascinating and I come from a personal perspective on that. But I was hoping there would be more in the way of how this looks in reality. It's a lot of philosophy without much support or examples of how that philosophy is truly practiced in a real-world scenario. And as a person who is no longer a believer, I was interested in hearing how one practices such a life of divine doubt

and there was not much there. It was a quick read, and I appreciated that, but in the end I found that it was full of nice ideas and intriguing philosophy but lacked any substantial attestation on the nature of those philosophies in practice. In reality, I'd give it 3.5 stars, but I'm leaning towards 4 stars because I like Rollins' head. It's a book I would highly encourage any believer to read and I think, had I read it 5 or so years ago it would have made a massive, massive impact on me, but I'm a bit past it at this point in my life. It is, none-the-less, a beautiful philosophy.

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## **Mike says**

I like books which deal with Christians and doubt. I have come to distrust books that give pat answers and easy formulas for solving insoluble problems. One of my favorite books is Greg Boyd's book "Benefit of the Doubt" which challenges the reader to embrace doubt as a helpful part of life and then deal with it carefully and over time.

"Insurrection" is also about doubt; but it swings the pendulum too far the other way from being overly certain about everything. This book makes doubt and unbelief into a permanent philosophy. I struggled with where to place this book in my bookshelves. That may seem like a small decision, but I struggled to understand where this book fits. Rollins wants to style himself as a theologian--or others do perhaps--but there is very little theology in here. Some would argue that I view that as a modernist, which is why I can't see the validity of his theology. But even if I was a post-modernist, I would struggle placing this as a theology book.

Eventually, I decided this was a philosophical treatise that uses a biblical muse as its jumping-off point. Rollins is a classic post-modern philosopher who wants to engage a group of people who desire to stay in touch with Christianity while rejecting most of what the Church embraces. For those who read this review, this book appeals to all the disenfranchised Christians around the world. Unfortunately, I agree with his assessment that this group is growing very large and loud. With the failure of the Emerging church to produce an alternative to today's megachurch/sunday-morning-concert style of religion, Rollins approach is the viewpoint of the anarchist. "Blow it all up".

This book is a pseudo-theological basis for doing just that.

I admit, this is theology in the broadest sense of the word: A study related to God. But in that broad sense Hawking, Dawkins, Hitchens and Woody Allen write books on theology. In a more narrow sense, Rollins barely interacts at all with any stream of theology. Instead, he creates simple caricatures of Fundamentalism, Charismatic churches, the American church, etc. and uses that facade to contrast his more robust philosophy. It is like comparing a cartoon to a painting. The painting will always look like it has more depth.

Rollins has always wanted to be stylized as a "Heretic Theologian" and therefore feels no need to engage contemporary or classical theology. In addition, he wants to be taken seriously by both philosophers and theologians. I suspect this book fails at both.

And this is the problem I have with the book. The people he most wants to engage are those who grew up in church and have a passing knowledge of theology. To them, he has to present this book as a theological examination of certain issues. But it is actually a philosophy which has nothing in common with Christian Theology. Let me give some examples.

Rollins begins each chapter with engaging parabolic stories. No question Rollins is a good story-teller and has collected engaging and provocative stories. I may use some of them again in my speaking. Then, he takes a tangential point of each story and launches into an aspect of the last week of Jesus' life in order to make a radical point. He does this with Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Then, he goes to the seminal event of the crucifixion. After spending several chapters there, he explores the resurrection.

All of this sounds like theology, doesn't it? But it's not.

Let's take his examination of the crucifixion. Rather than engaging any of the orthodox meanings of the crucifixion, he develops a completely novel way of looking at it. In "Insurrection" the Cross is not about sin, death or judgment. To Rollins, the cross represents that moment when Jesus realizes he is an Atheist. Lest you think I'm exaggerating, the sub-chapter is called "When God became an Atheist". He describes the agony of Jesus on the Cross and boils it down to his cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." This chapter is compelling because we have all felt this separation from God, whether we have admitted it or not. I liked where he was going with this. But then, for no apparent reason other than his post-modern approach to this subject, he takes a logical leap of faith. This is not surprising, since much of his understanding of Theology comes from Kierkegaard.

In this approach to Jesus' cry, he borrows heavily from St. John of the Cross and Madame Guyon, mystics who spoke of the Dark Night the soul endures. But whereas those writers arrive at a goal of contentment and surrender to God, Rollins does not. To him, the point of the Cross is to recognize that we have lost God and may never find him again. He advises churches to embrace this a/theism as he calls it, and jettison any hymns of hope. We should have hymns of sorrow and despair with no final verse that solves it all. Rollins states that the best Christian is the one who follows Christ's example and gives up on God completely. Only then can you start living a life of freedom from Religion.

According to this a/theism, the best Christian is one who suffers, who lives in despair and finds contentment in never having God help them.

Religion to Rollins means the church. As a survivor of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, he does not see the church containing much meaning any more. Like many is this post-modern wasteland of belief, he wants to blow it all up and start from scratch with Christianity. His philosophy is called "Pyro-Theology" which simply means "burn down the church." In this, he is quoting the Spanish Anarchist Durruti who said "The only church which illuminates is a burning church." Durruti was not referring to revival.

So, as I said, the best Christian is this a/theist. If you embrace the cross you give up hope in God. You learn to live in this life without God's direct "deus ex machina". This is an interesting twist. The phrase "deus ex machina" means "God in the machine". It refers to a plot device employed by lazy writers to superimpose a previously unknown gimmick to save a hero from his crisis. Rollins believes too many Christians live this way. They want God to just do a miracle and save them from the logical outcome of living in this world. He says the true follower of the Cross will desire that God does not ever show up unannounced.

This is actually a point I began to agree with him about. I have believed Scripture is pretty clear that God's direct interaction with man is limited and used only when nothing man can do will suffice. We should not live our life relying on God to constantly bail us out. That is weak religion for sure. But then, Rollins won't leave it alone.

It is like George Costanza on the T.V. show Seinfeld. When they were developing an idea for a show, George has an insight: "The show is about nothing." In essence, he is saying the show doesn't have a plot.



The characters and their reactions are the key point. But in the interview with NBC, George can't leave well enough alone. Every time the producers try to find any meaning in the show, George interjects with shouts of "It's about nothing. It's about nothing."

This is what Rollins does. Instead of allowing us to think, "Surely we should want God to interact somewhat in this life with us", Rollins says "NO, NO, NO! You have been abandoned by God and He will never show up. If you're a holy person, accept that and stop whining."

That has a perverse appeal to the cancer patient who has prayed for years to be healed. It sounds right to the refugee who sees his entire family slaughtered in front of his eyes. It feels like it might be true. But it has nothing to do with anything but one verse in the Bible. No one in the Bible lived that way and to live that way now is ludicrous.

This is just a repackaging of Camus. I'm accurate in this. He even references Camus' approach to the legend of Sisyphus. In that legend, the greek gods make Sisyphus roll a rock up a hill and then let it roll down again. He is sentenced to do this for eternity. Camus sees this as the essence of Existentialism. At its core, there is no meaning to rolling a rock up a hill. But Camus says there is no meaning to anything. All Sisyphus has to do is find his own meaning in this process and he will be happy. He will be happy even though it is all meaningless.

From this we conclude that Rollins is simply a Camus existentialist with some late 20th century european communists thrown in for good measure.

He does the same twisting of philosophy with the resurrection. The resurrection is not an event, but an idea. The idea is that there is no God to look forward to in heaven. God is seen when I show love to someone these days. God is love, he does not love. We love and that shows God's resurrection power. Rollins believes there is no transcendent God. God is the love that we show. He makes a great show of mentioning Mother Teresa's crisis of faith in the late 40s and says she gave up on the idea of a God. But she keeps the name God and applies it to acts of love. When she loves, there is God.

So is Rollins now a pantheist, a humanist, an existentialist or what?

I guess what bothers me is that he doesn't prove anything he claims; he just says it. We can accept it on the basis of whether we like it or not. He borrows heavily from Derrida of course, but also, strangely, from european philosophers like Zizek.

Side note: Zizek makes no sense to me. I have read him dozens of times, and he gets more tied up in knots every time. Perhaps it is because I am reading translations of him, but I don't think so. His views on the value of Communism and the way economics should work are nonsense. Yet, Rollins quotes him a dozen times. None of the quotes look like they fit the point Rollins is making. He also quotes Camus, Heidegger, Caputo, Derrida, and many other a/theistic voices. If this is radical Christianity, it is amazing how much it looks like tired European philosophy.

In order to understand this book, you already have to be a follower of Rollins. Otherwise, this makes very little sense.

So why on earth would I give it 2 stars instead of zero? Five reasons:

1. It is interesting and readable. I would tackle this over Caputo and Zizek any day. He actually makes sense.

2. His stories are great.
3. I love his observation that Paul rarely mentions any of the events of Jesus' life except his death and resurrection. I think the point he draws out of it is shallow, but his observation is new to me and got me thinking long into the night.
4. I like his appreciation of Mother Teresa and the value of putting love into action. If he had said that God is present when we love, I would have changed my view of the book. But he doesn't want to negate his view that there is no "deus ex machina" so he has to say that we are God and we are Love.
5. He does evaluate some of the problems with some evangelical churches correctly. His recipe solutions are very post-modern. That is to say, he does not believe in solutions. He thinks that deconstruction is the solution because we don't need solutions, just dialogue.

I believe most who love this book in the 4-5 star range already loved this philosophy or this writer and haven't examined the contents carefully enough. I hope that is the case.

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