

Seeds of doubt: Ikon's Peter Rollins

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Peter Rollins is a prominent figure in the Emergent church movement in the United Kingdom. Schooled in philosophy, with several degrees from Queens University in Belfast, Rollins is determined to revitalize Christian practice with a peculiar blend of self-critical Christian practice and theory. He works with a group called Ikon, which engages in “anarchic experiments in transformance art” and holds “theodramatic” events in pubs and on the streets of Belfast. Rollins is the author of How (Not) to Speak of God and The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church Beyond Belief (both published by Paraclete).

What theological perspective energizes your work?

Too much of Christianity wants God to come down and tell us what the truth is. The Bible is not some simple creed. It's not a worldview that opposes other worldviews. It's something that brings life, that brings transformation. I think that this understanding of faith resonates with people who are tired of a religion in which believing the right thing is what it's all about.

What is your background in the church?

I had a conversion experience when I was 17, and I was part of the charismatic evangelical tradition. I was heavily involved in church planting, in evangelism and in the megachurch phenomenon. But I started to feel uncomfortable with the language I was using and with the violence that I felt I was doing to people in telling them what they needed to believe.

How did Ikon begin?

One day I was at bar—a real dive—and I said to my companion, “I don't know what I want to do, but I want to do something else, and I'd love to do it in this pub. I would like to do something in a space that is neutral and open, a place where people are just sitting around having a pint.”

I told the bar owner, whose name was Francie, that I wanted to borrow his pub to do something religious. I knew only that it would involve poetry and music and wouldn't be preachy. He said, "OK, you are on in three weeks."

So I had a space and three weeks in which to set something up.

Whenever you create a void, God speaks life into that void. Sure enough, a couple of nights later I was talking with a friend who is a disc jockey, and he said, "I would love to DJ at something like that." A poet friend said she would love to do some poetry. And another friend, who is a mystic at heart, said, "I would love to tell a story at that."

After we presented our event, Francie said, "OK, I'll put you on for next month." And after three months he said, "You're on the schedule for the whole year."

What is an example of an Ikon event?

We held one gathering recently in which we put a woman on a stepladder that was about 20 feet tall. She was wearing a woolen dress that we had made—a dress that went to the floor and was unraveling. We were all also wearing unraveling clothes that linked to the dress and to other people—a way of suggesting that we are continually creating as well as being created by God. On the center stage we had a little puppet and a puppeteer who did all of the storytelling. On two projectors we showed the Apostles' Creed via computer, and people could go up and put in the creed what they wanted to and take out what they wanted to. The computer document was created in Microsoft Word, with the tracked changes displayed so you could see all the alterations that people had made.

What does Ikon do beyond the performances at the pub?

We try to disrupt people's understanding of Christianity and get them to think differently. For example, we take on atheism for Lent. We read all the great atheistic critiques of religion, such as those by Feuerbach, Marx and Freud.

There's a big thing in the UK called the Alpha Course—it's a 12-week introduction to Christianity. Ikon offers the Omega Course—it's about how to leave Christianity in 12 weeks.

We have a group called the Evangelism Project that goes out to be evangelized. We visit other religious traditions, both within Christianity and outside

Christianity—Buddhism, humanism, Jewish traditions, Scientology. We go to listen and learn and to be transformed.

We also have a group called the Last Supper. Twelve of us meet in a supper room in a bar, and we invite public figures to come and talk to us about what they believe and why they believe it. If we don't like what they say, it's their last supper with us.

It appears that in some ways you are interested in sowing seeds of doubt.

When we come to doubt the interventionist God, as we all do when we encounter suffering and death, we generally go one of two ways. One way is to say, "I'm not sure there is a God, because of all of this suffering." Or we say, "I believe there is a God who got all of this started, the God of the philosophers, but I don't think God intervenes."

There's a third way: to maintain one's doubts about God, but also to believe in God's intervention. That is, one can say, "I don't know who or what or if God is, but something happened in my life. I was reconfigured. I was rebooted. Something happened to transform me, and I want to live in fidelity to that."

This kind of belief Augustine articulates in his *Confessions* when he asks, "What do I love when I love my God?" He has doubts about God, but there is no doubt that he is fundamentally and utterly committed to God.

Some people say, "You are putting doubt at the center." I say, "No, that's what modernism does." At Ikon we put the experience of transformation at the center. At an Ikon gathering, everyone in the room can say, "Something happened to me. There is some reason that I am sitting here in this dingy pub talking about religion and politics and not at home in front of the telly."

What kind of people make up Ikon?

Atheists and theists, liberals and conservatives, Protestants and Catholics, gays and straights—the whole works.

Who are its leaders?

I like to think of Ikon as a donut with a hole in the middle. Usually a church is more like a Danish pastry: you've got the jammy center, which is your leadership. We try to have a hole in the center so that we are all on the edges.

To us, a priest is one who refuses to be a priest, who pushes back and creates a priesthood of all believers. A parallel example can be found in psychoanalysis: people think that the analyst's job is to analyze, but quite often the analyst is really there to refuse to be one, to make the patient into the analyst.

My views are just as legitimate as everyone else's, but my job is to make sure that no one view colonizes the space. Some people think that Ikon is crypto-evangelistic or neo-evangelical. Other people think it is crypto-atheistic, trying to keep young people out of the church. Think of two people sitting over a beer and one of them is saying, "I'm going to convert you to Christianity," and the other one is saying, "I'm going to get you out of Christianity." I love that as long as neither one is colonizing the space.

How do you plan the gatherings?

We have a group called the Cyndicate (spelled with a *c* like *cynic*), and anyone can be a part of it. We meet once a week, on Monday nights, to plan the monthly gathering.

Would you call Ikon a community?

No, because as soon as you say that word all of the people who need community come out—the group turns incredibly needy, and suddenly the whole thing is on its way to vanishing. The best way to forge community is not to call it a community. We call Ikon a collective, a gathering or a crowd. People naturally make connections, and community happens.

I make an analogy to the way a planet creates a gravitational orbit. Ikon creates an orbit that brings interesting people together. The most important thing is not the planet; it's the orbit. But you can't have the orbit without the planet. The most important parts of our gatherings are pre-Ikon and post-Ikon, but you can't have either of those without Ikon itself. We have about 45 minutes before an Ikon meeting starts where people just have a drink and chat, and the same for a couple of hours afterward.

Paradoxically, I say, "Ikon doesn't care about you. Ikon doesn't give a crap if you are going through a divorce. The only person who cares is the person sitting beside you, and if that person doesn't care, you're stuffed." People will say, "I left the church because they didn't phone me when my dad died, and that was really hurtful." But

the problem is not that the church didn't phone but that it promised to phone. I say, "Ikon ain't ever gonna phone ya." Pete Rollins might. But if he does, it will be as Pete Rollins and not as a representative of Ikon. Ikon will never notice if you don't come. But if you've made a connection with the person sitting next to you, that person might.

Ikon is like the people who run a pub. It's not their responsibility to help the patrons become friends. But they create a space in which people can actually encounter each other.

What is Ikon's relationship to the church?

Ikon is like the warning on the side of a package of medicine tablets. You can't have the tablets without the warning, but the warning without the tablets is nonsense.

Often I say that Ikon works only if you are rooted in a religious tradition. Ikon doesn't make sense if you are not located somewhere, because it is fundamentally a rupture and a provocation. We have to have something to deconstruct. Ikon has led some people to church, and it has led some people out of church.

What future do you envision for Ikon?

Right now we have three different types of gatherings—Ikon Evolves, Ikon Speaks and Ikon Recalls. In Ikon Evolves we create some new kind of gathering. Ikon Speaks is a 45-minute talk or artistic presentation. Ikon Recalls involves reviewing a past gathering and rethinking it on the basis of where we are now as a collective. We try to reimagine.

What have you learned in doing Ikon?

Ikon is my response to realizing that the first half of my religious life was tragically wrong. I'm not sure yet where Ikon is going wrong, but I am sure that if you ask me in four years, I'll be doing something else—to repent of this.

Is there something particularly Irish about what you doing?

In Ireland, we bleed religion. We are passionate about it. We wrestle with God. Israel is a very important idea for me personally and important for us Irish people, because we are fighters, in both the worst and the best senses. We want to fight with God.

At one of our gatherings called “The Sins of the Father,” we addressed the idea of God sinning against us. That’s very much in line with Irish spirituality. Also important is Ikon’s critique of belief-centered religion. Like Christianity in the U.S., Irish religion is very belief-centered. It’s about believing in the right thing—believing in God and believing that Jesus died for your sins.

Ikon offers something more like Pascal’s version of religion, in which belief grows out of behavior and out of belonging—the way a child grows up in the faith of her parents, then comes to oppose that belief and eventually comes to some kind of resolution about her own belief.

There is a beautiful Jewish parable about two rabbis sitting in a park arguing about a passage of the Torah. They’ve been arguing about it for years and can never come to an agreement. God is so tired of their contending that finally God parts the sky, comes down and says, “You guys have been fighting for years. I’ll tell you what the passage means.” And in a rare moment of unity, the two rabbis turn to God and say, “What right have you to come down here and tell us what it means? Go away and let us argue.”