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Church Postmodern Culture

"How (Not) To Speak Of God" by Peter Rollins, SPCK, London, England, 2006. The purpose of this piece is to enlighten readers to my interaction with this book. I am offering a summary, my observations, what I believe the author is attempting to communicate, my doubts and objections, and finally, an assessment of the book. My hope is that this will whet the reader's appetite and that they will then read the book for themselves with an open mind.

On the back cover Jonny Bakers states "This book brings together Christian mysticism, postmodern philosophy, and the practices and liturgies of an alternative worship community trying to make sense of Christianity in a postmodern environment. The results are stunning - original, provocative, and creative." Rollins' book is divided between two parts: Part One is a philosophical and theological treatise of Rollins' thoughts and contributions to the emerging conversation from his academic days at Queens University in Belfast. Part Two contains this learned knowledge in praxis and experimentation in an emerging project Rollins found in Belfast called Ikon. As people read Rollins book for themselves, they need to remember Rollins' conclusion as "...the territory I thought I was helping to chart was actually discovered a long time ago by my ancestors. It is both frustrating and comforting that no matter how fast I run, those who have long since died have already arrived at where I am attempting to go." (Rollins, xv) This humility, in my opinion, helps the reader to more ably roll with the punches of some uncomfortable and "scary" ideas that will definitely push buttons and quite possibly cause some readers to be pushed to the edge.

Today more than ever, especially in the United States, there is a great polarization, whether in politics or religion, that is fighting tooth and nail to push an agenda. Especially in matters of faith for the Christian right there is a fight to keep absolutes at the forefront and a plot to squelch relativism. Chapter 1, *God rid me of God*, explores this theme. Rollins sees the emerging church moving beyond these polarities of absolutism and relativism as he views both of these extremes as idolatrous. (p. 2) The idea is to move away from our western way

of seeing, viewing and being Christian and recapture our eastern, Hebraic roots. Rollins, through his work in this book wants us to see "...the orthodox Christian as one who believes in the right way - that is, believing in a loving, sacrificial and Christlike [sic] manner." (Pp. 2-3) In other words, by believing in the right way versus having right beliefs, we can move beyond meaninglessness and relativism. For Rollins, relativism is "self-contradictory because to say there is no meaning in the universe is itself a meaningful statement." (p. 11)

In Chapter 2, *The Aftermath of theology*, Rollins discusses two different ways in which we approach religious tradition. One way is admitting God exists and acknowledging that we can be in a loving relationship with God yet recognizing our ability to fully grasp God is limited. In other words, "God cannot be reduced to our understanding of that relationship." (p.20) The second way in which we approach this religious tradition is by squeezing tightly onto our dogmatic belief systems and therefore, thinking we have God figured out. This form of boxing God in is a violent handling of God and brings about violence to God's children. This is "...a type of idolatrous relation in which we believe that our ideas actually represent the way that God and the world really operate." (p. 20-21) This is nothing more than Pharisaical pride that Jesus always spoke against. Instead of white knuckling the laws, we need to let go and allow God to overtake us and free us to be who God wants us to be. As people of God we "... must speak and yet we must maintain our silence, we must maintain distance amidst proximity of God, and we must worship while being careful not to make God into the object of our worship." (p. 30) God is not an object to be grasped but rather seduces and transforms us as evidenced in real living examples of transformed lives that have encountered God in authentic relationship instead of lofty ideals.

Within Chapter 3, *A/theology as icon* and Chapter 4, *Inhabiting the God-shaped hole*, I see real arguments arising from USAmerican evangelical right wing Christians who view Christianity through modern lenses. There is much they would pick apart with their seasoned answers throughout the entire book, but my focus will remain within these two chapters. Rollins states that "This emerging a/theology can thus be described as a genuinely ecumenical device, for by unsettling and decentring [sic] any idea of a one true interpretation held by one group over and against all the others, a network of bridges is formed between different interpretative communities who acknowledge that we are all engaged in an interpretive process which can never do justice to the revelation itself." (p. 31) By reading this, these modern thinking Christians feel they have

their point proven that postmodern thought is relativistic and that it is this kind of thinking that enables theology to accommodate culture in the wrong ways.

Another place in Chapter 3 where I see Rollins ruffling feathers is his idea of evangelism. Most evangelical Christians view evangelism as a persuasive means of communicating Biblical truth in order to give someone an answer. For Rollins, evangelism means "...we must have faith to believe that those who seek will find for themselves...If this is true, then the job of the Church is not to provide an answer - for the answer is not a phrase or doctrine - but rather to help encourage the religious question to arise." (Pp. 40-41) In other words, we are to be an aroma of God to people. This is a really radical paradigm shift in thinking and, once the dust settles, can either offer an epiphany or burning anger and heartburn. For those who have all their ducks in a row, all their answers neatly packaged, this will seem absurd and ungodly. For those open to rethinking these things, then it will take what Kierkegaard calls a "leap of faith" into the absurd as when Abraham obeyed God to sacrifice Isaac. God commanded that we shall not commit murder but then asks Abraham to do the unthinkable - kill his son. Why didn't Abraham question God about this because it certainly was absurd? Yet, Abraham took a leap of faith into the absurd to be faithful to God.

A place in Chapter 4 where I believe Rollins will find some critique is the idea of death bringing us into more authentic beings. Philosopher Martin Heidegger believed "it is only in realizing that we are moving towards death that we can become authentic human beings, for once we realize that we are going to die, we take more responsibility for our life." (p. 47) Many Christians believe they are already authentic by being true to God and the Bible. People who are not followers of Christ I believe are searching for authenticity but I would beg to differ that people are thinking about death. They are in love with the here and now of their lives and thus, are already taking responsibility for their lives. Thinking about death is a spiritual issue and many people are not spiritual in the sense that Christians define spiritual.

I really enjoyed this book and found it to be well thought out, researched, and scholarly. My belief is that Rollins genuinely knows the pulse of this emerging generation and offers valid and comprehensible thought and praxis. He understands the difference between religion and faith, where religion is a human attempt to define God and faith is a place of holding our ideas of God loosely. "A true seeking after God results from an experience of God which one falls in love with for no other reason other than finding God irresistibly lovable." (p. 50)

This is my prayer for myself and brings to mind a parable I once found on Ikon's web site:

" Whoever shall lose their life

There is an ancient story, passed down through the generations that tells of a group of unknown disciples who witnessed the bloody crucifixion of Christ.

Not able to stay another moment in the place where their Messiah had just been crucified they packed their few belongings and left for a distant shore. With great sorrow they turned their back on the place of their birth, never to return. Instead they founded an isolated community far away from Jerusalem. On the first night that they set up camp each disciple vowed to keep the ground holy, they promised that as long as they were permitted to live they would keep the memory of Christ alive and endeavour to follow the way that he had once taught.

The community lived in great solitude for over a hundred years, spending their days reflecting upon the life of Jesus and attempting to remain faithful to his ways. All this despite the overwhelming sorrow in their hearts and the harrowing sacrifices that such a dedicated life required.

Endless days passed until at dawn one morning, a small band of missionaries stumbled upon the isolated settlement. These preachers of the Word were amazed by the community that they found, they were startled by the fact that these dedicated disciples of Christ had no knowledge of his resurrection and ascension. Without hesitation the missionaries gathered together the entire community and taught them about the events that had transpired after the horrific crucifixion of their Lord, telling them of His victory over sin and death and the subsequent rewards we can partake of because of this.

That evening there was a great celebration in the camp. Yet, as the night grew dark, one of the younger missionaries noticed that the leader of the community was absent. This bothered the young man and so he set out to look for the elder. After some time he eventually found the leader kneeling in the corner of a small hut, on the fringe of the village, praying and weeping.

"Why are you in such sorrow", asked the missionary in amazement "for now is the hour for great celebration".

"Indeed" replied the elder, who was all the while crouched on the floor, "this is an hour for rejoicing, but it is also a time for great sorrow".

"For over a hundred years we have followed the ways taught to us by Christ. We emulated his teachings faithfully even though it cost us deeply, and we remained

resolute despite the belief that death had defeated Him and would one day defeat us also”.

The elder slowly got to his feet and looked the missionary compassionately in the face.

”Each day we have forsaken our very lives for Him. Why? Because we judge Him wholly worthy of the sacrifice, wholly worthy of our being. You find me now, praying for myself and for my future generations, for I am fearful that we may one day follow him not because we love Him and believe him to be worthy of that love, but rather because we love ourselves and want the treasures of eternal life that he offers”.

After offering these thoughts to the young missionary, the elder left the hut and made his way to the celebration, leaving the teacher on his knees in quiet contemplation.”
(Adapted from an Islamic story)

May we all continually become aware of God and our need for God indwelling every fiber of our being. Amen!