

Peter Rollins spent much of his early working life in a number of social work environments, including youth work with Christian Fellowship Church and YMCA, church planting in Carrickfergus and work in homeless shelters. He entered full-time education after this, but continued to engage in youth and community work as well as organize various academic events. While at Queen's University, Belfast, Peter Rollins founded Ikon, a community that describes itself as iconic, apocalyptic, heretical, emerging and failing, and he now facilitates the development of this community while lecturing in philosophy.

HOW (NOT) TO SPEAK OF GOD



Peter Rollins



First published in Great Britain in 2006

Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
36 Causton Street
London SW1P 4ST

Copyright © Peter Rollins 2006

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

SPCK does not necessarily endorse the individual views contained in its publications.

Scripture quotations taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION, copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

Used by permission of Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, a member of the Hodder Headline Plc Group.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN-13: 978-0-281-05798-6

ISBN-10: 0-281-05798-2

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset by Graphicraft Ltd, Hong Kong
Printed in Great Britain by Bookmarque Ltd, Croydon, Surrey

To the Menagerie

For you opened your doors to us

Contents



<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>Foreword</i> by Brian McLaren	ix
<i>Introduction: The secret</i>	xiii

Part 1

HERETICAL ORTHODOXY: FROM RIGHT BELIEF TO BELIEVING IN THE RIGHT WAY

Chapter 1: God rid me of God	5
Chapter 2: The aftermath of theology	20
Chapter 3: A/theology as icon	31
Chapter 4: Inhabiting the God-shaped hole	44
Chapter 5: The third mile	55

Part 2

TOWARDS ORTHOPRAXIS: BRINGING THEORY TO CHURCH

Service 1: ‘ <i>Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?</i> ’	77
Service 2: Prodigal	86
Service 3: Sins of the Father	91
Service 4: A/theism	97
Service 5: Advent	103
Service 6: Judas	109
Service 7: Prosperity	115
Service 8: Heresy	120
Service 9: <i>Corpus Christi</i>	125
Service 10: Queer	131
<i>Notes</i>	139

Acknowledgements



Books are authored by countless people and credited to only one. They each represent little kingdoms of thought built from the toil of others that gratify the tiny tyrant who chained the disparate ideas together. If I were to begin to thank all those who have helped to steer my thinking, it would be a long list. With that in mind, I will stick to thanking those who were directly involved with encouraging me in this particular work. My thanks go to Ian Mitchell, the one who said that I ought to publish a book on this subject; Alison Barr, who opened up the way for it to be published; and Andrew King and Cary Gibson, who helped render the material publishable. My deep thanks also go to Brian McLaren, Phyllis Tickle, Jonny Baker, Helena Macormac, the Ikon ‘cyndicate’, Francie and my parents.

Foreword



I am a raving fan of the book you are holding. I loved reading it. I have already begun widely recommending it. In the last two days I have recommended it to three rabbis, and in recent weeks, to many Christian leaders. Reading it did good for my mind and for my soul. It helped me understand my own spiritual journey more clearly, and it gave me a sense of context for the work I'm involved in. It drew unexpected connections – between the medieval Christian mystics and contemporary philosophy, for example, and it stirred my imagination. In fact, I would say this is one of the two or three most rewarding books of theology I have read in ten years. Do I sound like I'm raving yet?

My enthusiasm is all the more significant because I read a lot of theology. To me, nothing (or almost nothing) is more elevating and challenging, yet more humbling and overwhelming, than setting the mind to think about God, and to think about thinking and speaking about God. I am nearly always working through a work of theology, either ancient or contemporary. So when I say this book is among the best I've read, I'm saying something significant.

And it's more significant still because the author of this book is a young – and I think it's safe to say up-until-now *unknown* – emerging theologian. But as this book makes clear, he deserves to be known and appreciated, especially when one thinks that this may be the first of many contributions he makes in the years to come.

Growing up in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Peter Rollins has seen Christianity expressed in one of its more dysfunctional Western forms where the division between Protestants and Catholics frequently has gone bloody, hateful, and bitter. Speaking of God in Northern Ireland has too often fomented distrust and prejudice, not peace and reconciliation: speaking of God has too often been part of the problem, not of the solution. Like a kid growing up in a conflicted family characterized by loud and violent fights with the windows wide open, he has

Foreword

had to grapple with issues that more genteel dysfunctional families can more successfully hide. His setting prepares him uniquely to speak about how (not) to speak for God – and one hopes that people in other settings will learn much from him, including my own conflicted country.

Coming of age in what is often called a postmodern context, Peter Rollins was not formed – at least not successfully – within the constraints of modernity. He represents what is to me one of the first and most hopeful expressions to date of Christian theology being done in a postmodern context – not merely speaking of postmodernity in the context of theology, but speaking of God meaningfully in the context of postmodernity. Some have said that theology in the context of postmodernity is impossible or unfruitful, but here they will see better (im)possibilities. Again and again, Peter challenges us to embrace opposite ends of common modern polarities, and, in so doing, shows the creative and constructive power of what is commonly called *deconstruction*.

Equally unusual and significant, Peter is doing the serious work of theology while rooted more in a faith community than in an academic institution. As the second part of the book makes clear, Peter believes that people who are engaged in real communities of spiritual practice are uniquely prepared to speak of God. The rituals and gatherings of the Ikon community may be uncomfortable to some, even as they prove inspiring and moving to others.

I know I winced on one occasion as I imagined participating in some elements of the liturgies that were described. If we find ourselves offended or disturbed by elements of the Ikon services, we might ask ourselves whether the disruption of a disturbing liturgy is necessary at times to arouse people like us from the religious slumbers that so frequently overtake us – like the bizarre characters in a Flannery O'Connor novel or short story, for example – to jolt us into the realization that we routinely tolerate the intolerable in the ways we speak of God. Could there be some resonance here with the disturbing actions taken by some of the biblical prophets – like Isaiah preaching naked for three years, Ezekiel cooking his food over excrement, or Hosea marrying a woman of ill repute – actions whose very oddness disrupts business as usual in the ways we speak of God?

Foreword

Peter includes them not so that others will imitate them as a ‘mass-reproducible model’, but so that the reader can imagine what this way of (not) speaking of God looks like as practised in one innovative faith community in one storied location at one important historical moment. One hopes that many others will be inspired to appropriate creativity in their situations.

Not many who speak of God do so in ways that are at one moment deeply inspiring and poignant in resonance with the great Christian mystics and, at the next, disturbing in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets. Not many people who speak of God do so with a mixture of Pentecostal/Evangelical experience, a wide reading in Christian devotional literature, and a thoughtful engagement with postmodern philosophical scholarship. Peter does.

Add to all these rare qualities one more: Peter’s strong talent for turning a phrase. In the coming pages you will encounter freshly worded insights like these: colonizing the ‘name’ of God with concepts . . . the brutality of words . . . believing the right way . . . God’s omni-nameability . . . theism, atheism, antitheism, and a/theism . . . hyper-presence . . . the God-shaped hole . . . consumption and condemnation . . . a transfinite set of interpretations. If you’re like me, you’ll find yourself underlining and marking page after page, grateful for not only the stimulating ideas, but for their lucid expression. And Peter’s effective and creative use of parables comes as an added surprise, evoking the practice of a communicator who, many of us believe, spoke of God as no other person ever has, to such a degree that he himself was named the Word made flesh.

I share Peter’s enthusiasm for what he calls ‘the emergent conversation’. Here he makes one of the most important contributions to date to that conversation. I hope that what he says here will draw more and more people into that conversation – including people who will charitably, respectfully and responsibly challenge some of his ideas. In this way, both he and they will give us all more to think and speak about. As Peter says, ‘That which we cannot speak of is the one thing about whom and to whom we must never stop speaking.’

All in the emergent community share the hope that our ongoing conversation about and with God will prove converting and transformative for all of us who participate, and for our faith communities,

Foreword

and for our world. Many will share my enthusiasm about this book and my gratitude to – and for – its author.

Brian D. McLaren

(www.anewkindofchristian.com, www.amahoro.info)

Introduction

The secret



That which one writes last is read first. As such, the introduction of a book is really the author's conclusion, a way of looking over the ground that has been traversed and expressing the overall trajectory of the journey. Looking over what I have written, I find myself wondering once more why I have chosen the subject of God. After all, this area must be among the most difficult and dangerous of them all. So much ink has been spent in writing of God and so much blood has been spilt in the name of God that I shudder each time I think about writing on the subject. Because of this concern I have often found myself drawn to the sentiment expressed by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in the final sentence of his influential *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*:

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.¹

Time and again I have found great wisdom in this phrase, and yet I have not left these pages blank. Perhaps part of the reason why I find myself unable to stay silent derives from the fact that long before I ever came across this sentiment, I had become deeply involved with the evangelical charismatic movement. Here I learnt a very different type of wisdom, one that I have never been able to shake. In short it was this:

God is the one subject of whom we must never stop speaking.

At first these two approaches seemed like oil and water, yet I could not completely reject either. When the philosophical subtlety of the former gained power, I would find myself tempted toward a mystical humanism; and when the passion of the latter gained a stronger grip, I started a slide in the direction of religious fundamentalism.

Introduction

Yet, in the midst of this tug of war, I began to feel that these positions need not be enemies. The more I reflected upon the depth of these perspectives, the more I began to suspect that, far from being utterly foreign to each other, there was a way in which they could inform and enrich each other. More than this, I began to suspect that such a dialogue between these two positions not only could be personally liberating but also could unleash an approach to faith that might help to revitalize the Western Church.

Yet the question remained as to what this dialogue would look like, for each time I reflected on the positions, I was struck by their seemingly exclusive and all-embracing nature. While Wittgenstein's God was an unbreakable secret that could not be shared, to contemporary evangelicals God was one who had broken this secrecy and thus needed to be shared.

Each time I returned to the horns of this dilemma, I found myself drawn to the Christian mystics (such as Meister Eckhart), for while they did not embrace total silence, they balked at the presumption of those who would seek to colonize the name 'God' with concepts. Instead of viewing the unspeakable as that which brings all language to a halt, they realized that the unspeakable was precisely the place where the most inspiring language began. This God whose name was above every name gave birth, not to a poverty of words, but to an excess of them. And so they wrote elegantly concerning the limits of writing and spoke eloquently about the brutality of words. By speaking with wounded words of their wounded Christ, these mystics helped to develop, not a distinct religious tradition, but rather a way of engaging with and understanding already existing religious traditions: seeing them as a loving response to God rather than a way of defining God.

In these often overlooked writings I discovered a way to embrace both the wisdom of those who would say that God is unspeakable, and must therefore be passed over in silence, and the wisdom of those who would say that God can, and must, be expressed. The union can be articulated like this:

That which we cannot speak of is the one thing about whom and to whom we must never stop speaking.

Introduction

For the mystic God was neither an unspeakable secret to be passed over in silence, nor a dissipated secret that had been laid bare in revelation. Rather, the mystic approached God as a secret which one was compelled to share, yet which retained its secrecy.

By the late medieval period this perspective was largely drowned out by the approach of theologians such as Duns Scotus, and it remained on the sidelines of faith throughout modernity (I am thinking here primarily of the influence of Cartesian thought). Even today, when I looked around, it seemed that the mystical approach was being either ignored by the wider Christian community or viewed as a private practice to be engaged in during remote weekend retreats. The only people who seemed to be taking this subject seriously were the supposedly nihilistic postmodern philosophers. Yet the more I studied this discourse, the more I returned to the view that this lost language was among the most stunning, sophisticated and simple ways of approaching faith. It became clear to me that for the Western Church to prosper in the twenty-first century, it needed to engage with this ancient language.² It was in light of this that I set about writing *How (Not) To Speak of God*.

The work itself is made up of two quite different though complementary parts. Part 1 draws from my experience as an academic and introduces some of the theoretical background for this type of thinking. Chapter 1 explores the nature of revelation and argues that, far from being the opposite of concealment, the Word of God has mystery built into its very heart. Chapter 2 builds upon this insight by exploring how such thinking critiques the idea of theology as that which speaks of God in favour of the idea that theology is the place where God speaks. Against the idea that we can speak of God I argue that we must embrace an a/theological approach that acknowledges the extent to which our supposed God-talk fails to define who or what God is. Chapter 3 delves deeper into these issues by exploring how this a/theology is not divorced from God but rather is a response to the work of God and a means of approaching God. Chapter 4 explores how the rediscovery of mystery, doubt, complexity and ambiguity in faith helps us come to a more appropriate understanding of religious desire, while Chapter 5 draws out the centrality of love in Christian thinking.

Introduction

Part 2 draws upon my experience as founder and active participant in a group called 'Ikon'. Ikon was originally an experimental project dedicated to exploring the relationship between mysticism and postmodern thought in a liturgical context and has since developed into an important model for those who are seeking to rethink the structure of religious communities in a contemporary environment. Ikon's main event takes place in Belfast once a month in a pub called The Menagerie and is attended by a range of people spanning the liberal/conservative, protestant/catholic and theist/atheist divides. The services themselves can be described as a form of 'theodrama' inasmuch as they employ a cocktail of live art, poetry, prose, ritual, liturgy and music so as to immerse the individual in a sensually rich environment that is designed to draw out an openness to the incoming of God.

Part 2 is composed of a brief description of ten Ikon services. Each chapter offers a background to the particular evening and an outline of what transpired. Part 2 is designed to offer some examples of how one group has explored, within a liturgical context, the theory discussed in Part 1. The hope is not that people will reconstruct these services in their entirety (although everyone is welcome to do so) but rather that, by describing some of the ways that we have approached the issues, these outlines will be a type of springboard that will enable others to create more inspiring, challenging and provocative services than we have as yet been able to imagine.

The book as a whole is aimed at either those already involved in what has been called 'the emerging conversation' or those who would like to understand it in a deeper way. The reason for my interest in this diverse network derives from the fact that it is here where I have been lucky enough to encounter others on a similar quest as myself. Indeed, it is in the fruits of this conversation that I see real hope for a robust, challenging and inspirational form of Christianity, one with roots in the past, a sensitivity to the present and a vision for the future. The term 'emerging Church' has also been used to describe this diverse community. While it is a useful term, the word 'Church' can be quite misleading, since the movement is not so much developing a distinct religious tradition within Christianity, but rather is re-introducing ideas that help to both revitalize already

Introduction

existing religious traditions and build bridges between them. It is not then a revolution that is in the process of creating something new but rather one that is returning to something very old. It is here that I am reminded of G. K. Chesterton when he wrote of a desire to one day pen a story that tells of an English yachtsman who miscalculated his journey and returned to England with the belief that he had discovered a new land. On sharing this idea, he writes:

There will probably be a general impression that the man who landed (armed to the teeth and talking by signs) to plant a British flag on that barbaric temple which turned out to be the Pavilion at Brighton, felt rather a fool. I am not here concerned to deny that he looked like a fool. But if you imagine that he felt like a fool, or at any rate that the sense of folly was his sole or his dominant emotion, then you have not studied with sufficient delicacy the rich romantic nature of the hero of this tale.³

The hero of Chesterton's allegory overcomes any sense of foolishness with a profound joy, as he is in a unique position to experience the wonder and fear associated with discovering something new alongside the comfort and security of having come home.

The energy and vitality that exists within the emerging conversation is exhilarating, and at times it seems as if those involved are charting a new direction for Christianity. Yet time and again familiar-sounding place names gently remind us that this discovery is at the same time a re-discovery. I began this introduction with the comment that it is really my conclusion, and my conclusion is this: 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.

Peter Rollins

