

To join or not to join Peter Rollins' *Insurrection*?

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There is no doubt that 'pyro-theologian' Peter Rollins should be applauded on the publication of *Insurrection*, which I have just read with great enjoyment and admiration. Not only is it a singularly arresting piece of work, but glancing at the reaction to it in the blogosphere, I have rarely seen such constructive and refreshingly respectful debate (with the author's vigorous participation) catalyzed by a book within a mere few weeks of its appearance. Rollins has clearly made an outstanding contribution at the cutting-edge of reflection concerning the future of the Church; *Insurrection* is an engagingly written and extremely skilful distillation of a discussion of considerable theoretical complexity (with Tillich, Heidegger, Lacan and Žižek in the background) into a language which is highly accessible without ever being simplistic – even in its wonderfully original treatments of *The Prisoner*, Batman and Roadrunner (!) -, and which is clearly rooted in lived realities.

Rollins' basic contention, namely that the Church largely remains a prisoner in practice (whatever it may say in theory) of its often unavowed allegiance to the *deus ex machina* that Bonhoeffer deplored in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, is passionately and compellingly argued in such a way that *Insurrection* is – or at least should be – difficult to ignore. His point is surely well-taken when he asserts that we need to undergo the transformative encounter with the Crucifixion in all its radicality on both an intellectual and existential level, allowing ourselves to be stripped by the Cross of all our certainties and idolatrous desire for security, and his exposure of our sophisticated psychological mechanisms of evading the confrontation with suffering is extremely penetrating. With its insightful protest against all triumphalist or escapist forms of religion and relentless insistence that 'our practices do not fall short of our beliefs; they are our beliefs', *Insurrection* will surely resonate with many who have felt an inauthenticity in the worship life and structural organization of the Church (whatever the denominational framework) without necessarily being able to articulate their unease with the same acuity as Rollins. *Insurrection* does us a great service in the pertinence of the questions the book poses and its refusal to be satisfied with merely theoretical responses; I therefore hope that it will be widely read and discussed as a valuable resource by those thinking pastorally about the Church today.

This having been said, the significant theological concerns raised by otherwise highly sympathetic e-reviewers such as Derek Flood, Jason Clark and Nate Bostian cannot simply be dismissed, and I would like to probe them a little, while perhaps adding a few of my own. At heart it would seem that the reservations – or perhaps rather a desire for clarification (even while acknowledging that an acceptance of ambiguity is a key part of the message of *Insurrection*) – largely have to do with the ambiguous relationship between philosophy and theology in Rollins' thought and a certain degree of conceptual confusion between the two domains. Without a certain familiarity with its philosophical apparatus – obvious to readers of Continental philosophy of religion but not necessarily apparent to all-comers – *Insurrection* is easily mis-understood, as on the surface it seems like a straightforward work of theology destined for a broad audience. In such a context a term such as 'a/theism' detonates like a bombshell (even if Rollins is at pains to point out that he is effectively bracketing ontological concerns), whereas such language is standard fare in post-Heideggerian philosophy of religion.

The possibilities for confusion and for talking at cross purposes in the dialogue between Peter

Rollins and his critics can be illustrated by looking at the crucial concept of *kenosis* (self-emptying) which plays such a central role in *Insurrection*. Rollins is evidently not the first philosopher to leave his readers wondering about the relation of his (existential) reading of the Cross to the historical event of Golgotha – the classic instance being Hegel's 'Speculative Good Friday' -, in which a theological concept is taken and pushed philosophically in a direction which, though not wholly severed from its Biblical moorings, is certainly not shackled by them nor accountable either to exegesis or to historical criticism. It is this which arguably both constitutes the greatest strength of philosophical accounts of the Crucifixion such as that of *Insurrection* (in that they are able to universalize the Cross into a general principle) and their Achilles heel, in that they are inevitably open to the charge of having deserted historical particularity for speculative, if not arbitrary, abstraction.

Those readers not familiar with the kind of stimulating but complex postmodern philosophical debates which form the immediate intellectual background to *Insurrection* may well not be aware that the term *kenosis* has been used in precisely this manner within much Continental philosophy of recent decades after its 'religious turn' (Jean-Luc Marion's *kénose de l'image* in *La Croisée du Visible*, Jacques Derrida's *kénose du discours* in *Sauf le Nom*, Gianni Vattimo's post-Heideggerian view of 'secularization as kenosis', Jack Caputo's 'weak theology' and – perhaps most spectacularly and controversially, Slavoj Žižek's 'double kenosis' in his exercise in trial by combat with John Milbank entitled *The Monstrosity of Christ*). With all these writers – with the possible exception of Marion, whose understanding is fundamentally shaped by a classical understanding of 'mystical' theology in the tradition of the Christian *via negativa* – the term is used in relation to discussions of apophaticism which are clearly not unrelated to traditional Christian theology, but which are addressing much broader philosophical concerns. Indeed, in Žižek's virtuoso performance, aided by 1960s Death of God theology and contentious re-interpretations of Meister Eckhart, Hegel and G.K. Chesterton (!), the concept of kenosis is taken so as far as to turn orthodoxy on its head.

As has been pointed out recently by Frederiek Depoortere in his study *Christ in Postmodern Philosophy*, a common feature of the most radically 'negative' readings of Philippians 2:5-11 (which Rollins is evidently following in *Insurrection*) is the philosophical move of truncating Paul's famous passage in such a way that only the 'abasement' of Christ is mentioned and elevated to a metaphysical principle, without the subsequent 'exaltation' which completes the *Carmen Christi*. If this appropriation of New Testament motifs is a legitimate component of Continental philosophical discussion, it naturally becomes highly problematic when a 'philosophical' concept of *kenosis* is then re-incorporated into a *theological* treatment such as *Insurrection*, as the distance from Paul's original then becomes jarringly apparent. This discrepancy would seem to account for some of the sense of disorientation on the part of Rollins' more theologically conservative reviewers, as they are left not knowing what to make of his curiously ambivalent use of familiar New Testament material deployed for unfamiliar ends.

The impression left not only by *Insurrection* but also by many of Rollins' captivating (and highly entertaining) recent interviews around its publication is that this method, while extremely effective in jolting the reader out of any sense of complacency, also places the author – and other postmodern philosophers turning their hand to theology - in something of a double bind. On one hand Rollins cannot and indeed does not want entirely to free himself from all accountability to the historical narrative (apart from which his use of the Gospel accounts would be reduced to an empty cipher); indeed, at times he is not averse to appealing to exegesis, as in his discussion of the use of the Aramaic in Mark 15:34's cry of Godforsakenness from the Cross. On the other hand, however, he cannot really engage either with the classical

theological tradition nor with recent Biblical scholarship where the latter has called post-Bultmann approaches into radical question (for example Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses* or the work of NT Wright). Rollins as philosopher cannot follow this path as then he would have to engage with the narrative of the early Church in its fullness, including its central affirmation of the Lordship of the risen Christ enthroned as *Kyrios*, which is absolutely crucial to Pauline thought in the development of his narrative of cosmic redemption (Romans 8, Ephesians 1, Colossians 1). This theme proves a stumbling-block for writers such as Rollins and Caputo (not to mention Žižek), since the word 'Lordship' inevitably smacks of a 'metaphysics of presence' that this would allow the return through the back door of Lacanian Big Other that they understandably wish to excise. A 'strong' reading of the Resurrection therefore seems impossible to integrate within Rollins' pyro-theological framework and has to be screened out of his reading of Christian tradition in a way that is both theologically and historically problematic, as it effectively renders the origins of Christianity totally opaque.

This is in some ways extremely frustrating for the reader familiar with, say, Jürgen Moltmann's *Crucified God* (as good a demonstration as any that Bonhoeffer's legacy is not the exclusive preserve of the 'Death of God' theologians), many of whose sources Rollins shares, or, in a more popular vein, NT Wright's *Surprised by Hope*. In both, an extremely strong case is made out that it is precisely the Resurrection as a proleptic instantiation of the Kingdom that is simultaneously present but also to come in its fullness which provided the early Church with its non-violent yet genuinely revolutionary and radically anti-imperial force. Far from leading to triumphalism, the Resurrection of the *crucified Christ* arguably provides the best of all touchstones for authentically radical theology. The Lordship of the one whose power is in weakness (and here of course Rollins, Caputo and Vattimo are absolutely right), and who is united to 'the least of these' in an irrevocable *kenosis* unmask and de-legitimizes all human Empires and power structures in the name of a kingdom of justice that can never be said to have 'arrived'. As Moltmann shows extensively in his *The Coming of God*, this eschatological vision would seem just as deconstructive of a 'metaphysics of presence' as anything that postmodern philosophy can offer, while providing a genuine hope that is arguably far more robust than Rollins' definition of Resurrection as 'the state of being in which one is able to embrace the cold embrace of the Cross'.

It is of course not difficult to sympathize with Rollins' sense that questioning current versions of religious certainty is an urgent matter; coming from Belfast, one of the world's cities most historically damaged by 'bad religion', his reaction is wholly understandable and justified. So too are some of his other (absolutely legitimate) targets, such as the prosperity Gospel's permeation of the charismatic circles which provide his own background. At the same time it is hard not to feel that this reactive mode of theologizing also skews *Insurrection's* narrative somewhat. I may be speculating here, but it would seem that his negativity towards overly immanentistic tendencies within the charismatic movement leads him to a complete neglect of pneumatology (other than in a curiously undeveloped reference to the 'epoch of the Holy Spirit'). In his call to 'return to the event that gave birth to the early church', it is perhaps worth considering whether and how Peter Rollins' programme might change were he to acknowledge that the Church was not only born at Easter *but also at Pentecost*, in an experience of non-coercive yet very real spiritual power that can only be argued away at the cost of jettisoning the core of the New Testament corpus as a deposit of the faith of the first Christians. Indeed, it might be said (unless we accept a wholly non-Pauline view of human nature) that without the transformational work of the Spirit in the believing community, Rollins' laudable social programme based on an embrace of the Cross is unrealizable.

This missing pneumatological dimension is perhaps a place where an interesting conversation might be initiated between Rollins' theological pyrotechnics and social Trinitarians or others seeking a way to deconstruct monolithic, hierarchical theism from within orthodoxy itself by means of a retrieval or *ressourcement* of ancient Christian sources. It is certainly undeniable that historically, an overly-positive Christianity has had baleful social and political consequences, and yet this does not necessarily mean that a full-scale incendiary attack on all forms of *theologia gloriae* is the only alternative. My suspicion is that Rollins may simply not be aware of the ways in which the challenge of Heidegger's famous critique of onto-theology – to which he alludes without ever mentioning it explicitly – has been addressed from within Christian tradition (and here I would recommend not only Moltmann but particularly the Eastern Orthodox thought of Chrestos Giannaras and John Zizioulas – whose engagement with existentialism and Levinas in *Communion & Otherness* would I think offer much fruitful material for Rollins). So my hope is that *Insurrection* will be the starting-point for discussion – and practical action – that its author clearly intends it to be, and I trust that his contribution to this on-going conversation will be every bit as provocative, poetic and impassioned as the inspiring book that he has just given us.