

Peter Rollins' Religionless Christianity: The Radical Bonhoeffer for a New Generation

Prof. Frits de Lange, Protestant Theological University, Groningen, The Netherlands
fdelange@pthu.nl; www.fritsdelange.nl

*This paper explores how the philosopher, story-teller and theologian Peter Rollins (1973) creatively develops in his work Bonhoeffer's notion of 'religionless Christianity'. He coins his work 'pyro-theology', because it burns down traditional metaphysics. In his provocative and dissident expression of Christian faith he finds himself close to the work of representatives of radical postmodern theology like John D. Caputo and Slavoj Žižek. 'Rollins writes and thinks like a new Bonhoeffer', Caputo writes on the back cover of Rollins' *Insurrection* (2011). This paper investigates that claim.*

One of my students, interested in Rollins' work and how it relates to the legacy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, attended the Wake festival, the four-days event Peter Rollins yearly organizes in his native town Belfast, Northern Ireland.¹ During a short break in a full program, filled with singer-songwriters, authors, philosophers, artists and activists, gathering in pubs and tasting good beer and gins, she interviewed Rollins about Bonhoeffer:

'I started off reading with your book *Insurrection* (2011)', she says, 'and I found a recommendation of John D. Caputo there, stating that: "Rollins writes and thinks like a new Bonhoeffer." Are you aware of that?' Rollins answers that nobody would agree with Caputo there. He frankly admits that he is not a Bonhoeffer scholar in the academic sense of the word, and is not very interested in, for example, the question of continuity/ discontinuity in Bonhoeffer's work. Bonhoeffer scholars 'see him as a kind of one person over time – they see the later works in the light of the earlier works and vice versa.' That's not the way he reads Bonhoeffer. In fact, in his work is focused on 'that little bunch of letters, that probably just twelve pages of theological letters that for me sketch out a radical form of Christianity'. In the letters from April 30, 1944 onwards, Bonhoeffer develops 'a radical different understanding of Christianity and that's what I'm trying to explore. I feel very much that the *Letters and Papers* is something that I'm trying to be faithful to.' 'There are different Bonhoeffers', Rollins explains, 'the liberation-theology Bonhoeffer,

¹ 'A wake is a gathering that takes place between a death and a funeral. It traditionally takes place in the home of the one who has passed and helps those gathered to come to terms with the loss. A wake is a social event that allows a community to confront what has happened. Yet despite the seemingly depressing nature of a wake, they are a place of joy and connection, and well as remembrance and mourning.

Wake is a festival that marks the death of various cultural, political and religious gods that have impacted our lives. It is a festival that employs talks, music, mentalism, movies and art to help us come to terms with these deaths and say our farewells to the lifeless bodies that impacted us.' (<http://peterrollins.net/2016/03/wake-the-line-up/>)

the evangelical Bonhoeffer, so I must freely admit that I don't lay claim to the "true Bonhoeffer". However, I am making my steak in the ground saying: I think this is where he was going. I think I'm trying to be faithful to the thing he was trying to do.²

The question for this paper is whether Rollins is right in holding this claim: is he really 'faithful to the thing Bonhoeffer, in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, was trying to do?

PYRO-THEOLOGY

Rollins (1973 Belfast, Northern Ireland) is introduced on his own website as: 'a provocative writer, philosopher, storyteller and public speaker who has gained an international reputation for overturning traditional notions of religion and forming "churches" that preach the Good News that we can't be satisfied, that life is difficult, and that we don't know the secret.' In his irreligious reading of Christianity he attacks the distinction between sacred and secular and blurs the lines between theism and atheism.³

Rollins is the driving force behind alternative faith communities both in his native country of Ireland and the US. Most notable among them is the 2001 founded Ikon community, later on followed by IkonNYC, collectives that blend live music, visual imagery, soundscapes, theatre, ritual and reflection. Rollins coins these experiments in non-religious liturgy as 'transformance art' within a 'suspended space'.⁴

Although Rollins does not directly identify with the so called emerging church movement, he has been of significant influence on the movement's development.⁵ Rollins is an active performer in the social media, (12,500 followers on Facebook) representing a new generation. He develops his thought as an a/religious activist in travelling from event to event, making his living of writing, organizing online-courses, webinars, and speaking on festivals and weekends. He is a prolific writer of books, but he is more present online and on Facebook than in bookshops.⁶ Rollins is a religious rebel, who presents himself as an 'orthodox heretic'. Perhaps one could call him a punk theologian who inspires a contra-movement against the establishment of

² Maren Mielke, Open interview with Peter Rollins at the Old Inn – Crawfordsburn, 28 April 2016 (unpublished).

³ <http://peterrollins.net/about/>

⁴ 'Just as an icon is a physical creation that invites us to experience a sacredness in, but not fully contained by, the creation so ikon endeavours to form spaces in which the world that we inhabit is experienced as possessing a profound depth. By creating iconic spaces where the event opens up participants to a love of the world, ikon is committed to practices that evoke a deep celebration of, and commitment to, life.' (<http://pyrotheology.com>)

⁵ Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church. Understanding Emerging Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014.

⁶ The books he published: *How (Not) to Speak of God* (London: SPCK 2006); *The Fidelity of Betrayal* (London: Paraclete Press 2008); *The Orthodox Heretic, and Other Impossible Tales* (London: Paraclete Press 2009); *Insurrection. To Believe is Human; to Doubt, Divine* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 2011); *The Idolatry of God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 2012); *The Divine Magician* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 2015).

middle-class church and academic theology.⁷

Rollins coins his theology ‘pyrotheology’ and one of the most recent events he organizes is called ‘Building on Fire’. The term explains why Rollins’ theology starts with religion criticism:

‘Pyrotheology prepares the ground for a more fertile faith through self-critical dialogue and creative community events. By theoretically setting fire to the layers of belief we put over reality to protect ourselves from reality, pyrotheology seeks to ignite a sense of greater depth in life beyond the need for wholeness and certainty. Pyrotheology explores how the events testified to in the founding documents of Christianity invite us to fully embrace the reality of our brokenness and unknowing.’⁸

A ritual in one of Rollins’ liturgical services literally illustrates the pyro-character of his theology: attendants are asked to reflect on some images of God put to a wall and choose the image that resonates the most with their image of God. Outside there is a fire inside a large metal oil drum. One by one people leave the room and put their paper to the fire, as someone puts a hand on their shoulder and says the following prayer: ‘Lord, we offer up these images to you...’⁹

Rollins avows that the late Bonhoeffer is one of his most important influences.¹⁰ Rollins’ reading of Bonhoeffer is throughout selective, and ‘deconstructive’, in the sense John D. Caputo gives to this notion: his hermeneutics does not strive for unequivocal conceptual clarification (What did Bonhoeffer exactly mean by...), but tries to ‘unpack’ in new, creative projects what ‘stirs’ in these notions: what spooks around, which event insists in these letters to come into existence?¹¹

Philosophically he lets himself inspire by postmodern thinkers as Jacques Derrida, and - increasingly - by Slavoj Žižek. Nietzsche and Freud (the latter preferably in the interpretation of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan) are among his intellectual sources. Theologically, he seeks the company of Paul Tillich, and – a forgotten name, but highly influential on Rollins - Paul Hessert.¹² Rollins is a close friend and ally of John D. Caputo - ‘my intellectual mentor’ - with whom he regularly performs in conferences and events. They

⁷ Rollins left High School at the age of sixteen without qualifications. He was unemployed for several years before taking a job as a youth worker in Carrickfergus and working in a homeless shelter run by the Simon Community on the Falls Road, Belfast (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Rollins).

⁸ <http://pyrotheology.com>. Cf. Bonhoeffer’s focus on faith as the conformity to reality, in the chapters ‘Christ, Reality, and Good’ and ‘Ethics as Formation’, in: *Ethics*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 6, Clifford Green (ed.). Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2005), 47 -75, 76 – 102.

⁹ Rollins, *How (not) to speak of God*, 100f.

¹⁰ ‘The late Bonhoeffer does indeed haunt the idea’s I am exploring’, (<http://peterrollins.net/2008/05/carrying-the-cross/>). ‘... looking back at his [Bonhoeffer’s] work, I feel that the position I currently take has deepened and enriched my understanding of his words immensely and may even be true to the direction he was taking them.’ (<http://peterrollins.net/2008/05/carrying-the-cross/?replytocom=171>)

¹¹ John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God. A Theology of Perhaps*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press 2013, 85f.

¹² Paul Hessert, *Christ and the End of Meaning. The Theology of Passion*. Rockport MA: Element Inc. 1993.

mutually refer to the other's affinity with Bonhoeffer. 'Rollins writes and thinks like a new Bonhoeffer, crucifying the trappings of religion in order to lay bare a radical, religionless, and insurrectional Christianity,' Caputo writes on the back cover of Rollins' *Insurrection* (2011). Alternately, Rollins declares in his foreword to Caputo's latest publication *Hoping against Hope* that the book 'can't help but remind the sensitive reader of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "religionless Christianity."¹³ Let's consider then Rollins relationship to Bonhoeffer more closely.

A/THEISTIC CHRISTIANITY

'Religionless Christianity' – these two words describe Rollins project in short, and it is precisely here that his work shows strong affinities with the late Bonhoeffer.¹⁴ Bonhoeffer's phrase in his letter from April 30, 1944, 'The Pauline question of whether *peritome* [circumcision] is a condition of justification is to day, in my opinion, the question whether religion is a condition of salvation. Freedom from *peritome* is also freedom from religion.' is the motto of Rollins' 2012 book *Insurrection*. Rollins performs for a new generation radical faith as a life practice that centres in the crucifixion and therefore (sic!) has left religion behind, both in a descriptive and a normative sense: because of Christ crucified we *cannot* be religious anymore, neither *should* we.

According to Rollins, the event of the cross 'opens up a type of *religionless* faith in which we are able to embrace the world without some security blanket. It is here, in the midst of the ashes of the death of the *deus ex machina*, that a different understanding of God becomes visible.'¹⁵ Rollins defines – as Bonhoeffer did – faith not in terms of a propositional belief system, but as participation the life and death of Jesus Christ. the Crucifixion, he says, we move from traditional theism, through atheism to something that unifies and transcends them. A type of a/theistic Christianity.¹⁶ 'A place, as Bonhoeffer described, one takes full responsibility for one's existence as though God did not exist and, in fully doing so, lives fully before God.'¹⁷ These phrases strongly remind Bonhoeffer's in his Letters from April 30, 1944 onwards. Rollins explicitly refers to them, throughout his work. First, in his critique of religion, then in the way he present faith as the affirmation of this-worldly life, and finally – his alternative ecclesiology – in describing post-religious communities of faith as spaces where anxiety, meaninglessness, and guilt as

¹³ John D. Caputo, *Hoping against Hope. Confessions of a Postmodern Pilgrim*. Foreword by Peter Rollins. Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2015, p. ix.

¹⁴ Rollins introduces his view on religionless Christianity, paraphrasing Bonhoeffer's prison letters, in a recent 2016 video posted on his Facebook account:

<https://www.facebook.com/OrthodoxHeretic/videos/1297207643641253/>

¹⁵ Rollins, *Insurrection*, 132.

¹⁶ 'In contrast to the New Atheism the radical Christian affirms what may be called "a/theism." A/theism aims to rupture, not the actual beliefs of a person, but the way those beliefs functions as a crutch to prevent the individual from actively participating in the difficult challenge of embracing the world.' (*Insurrection*, 72)

¹⁷ Rollins, *Insurrection*, 160f.

part of being human are not escaped, but are acknowledged and worked through.¹⁸

Bonhoeffer's own understanding of religion is both descriptive and normative.¹⁹ The age of religion, as 'a historically conditioned and transitory form of human expression' is past, Bonhoeffer observed in his letter from April 30, 1944. 'We are approaching a completely religionless age; people as they are now simply cannot be religious anymore.'²⁰ Religion is, descriptively, a form of expressive behaviour. On the other hand, precisely this form of expression functions in its *deus ex machina*-character as an – and here is the normative element - illusionary escape for taking responsibility for one's life. There is a strong Nietzschean element in Bonhoeffer's understanding of religion as a belief system in which God is presented as an excuse for human weakness and fear.²¹

Rollins takes up both the descriptive and the evaluative dimension in his concept of religion, but strongly emphasizes the latter in his plea for a *mature* Christianity: 'Bonhoeffer returned to the Scriptures in order to uncover a Christianity that is able to speak to the wide-eyed intelligent adult in us, or indeed to rediscover a Christianity that can help to bring us into adulthood, rather than keeping us as infants. (...) Bonhoeffer wondered whether it is possible to embrace God ... out of a seduction that is caught up in the call of God rather than the need of God.'²² According to Rollins, we should stand shoulder by shoulder with mystics like Meister Eckhart who condemned the way we treat God like a farmer treats his cow, needing it only for the milk that it produces.

But why religion is so persistent, why the secularization theorists of the 1960s turned out to be wrong in their expectations? Because it is hard to give up on this God of cheap religion, and step into the costly truth that Christianity does not flee but embrace our human condition and asks us to fully experience it.²³ The God of religion is used to explain the inexplicable, to make sense of what seems senseless. When we don't have an answer, God does, when something terrible happens to us, God can fix it. God is a word that helps us to sleep at night. Rollins: 'That's what Bonhoeffer meant with *deus ex machina*.'²⁴ Part of Rollin's pyro-theological mission is the unmasking of religion as a crutch, a safety blanket, or - another metaphor he likes to use – an addictive drug that withholds us from the affirmation of real life, and say yes to its joys and sufferings. Every Lent, he organizes an online course *Atheism for Lent: A 40 Day Pilgrimage into the Cloud of Unknowing*, in which he explores

¹⁸ Rollins, *Insurrection*, 179, with a full quotation of the *metanoia*-fragment of Bonhoeffer's letter from 21 July 1944, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8, John de Gruchy (ed.). Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2010, 486.

¹⁹ This might be the reason that Bonhoeffer's perception that 'the age of religion in altogether ... is past' (LPP, DBW 8, letter of April 30, 1944, 362, is so hard to crack for sociologists.

²⁰ Bonhoeffer, LPP (DBW 8) 362f.

²¹ Cf. my 'Aristocratic Christendom: On Bonhoeffer and Nietzsche', in: Brian Gregor & Jens Zimmermann (eds.), *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press: 2009, 73 – 83.

²² Rollins, *Fidelity of Betrayal*, 102f., with explicit reference to Nietzsche.

²³ Rollins, *Insurrection*, 43.

²⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/OrthodoxHeretic/videos/1297207643641253/>

atheism, both philosophically and theologically. Richard Dawkins, Feuerbach, Freud, Nietzsche, Marx, but also Bonhoeffer, Tillich, and John Caputo are on the reading list. Is God a delusion or a projection, or should we better approach God in terms the ground of Being, an elusive hyper-being, an Event? In the introduction of this course, Rollins states that ‘just as Christ is presented as experiencing the loss of God, so Atheism for Lent gives you the chance to explore that experience for yourself, discovering what worlds it might open up.’²⁵ He also offers, live and streamed online, *The Omega Course*, subtitled: *Adventures in religionless Christianity*. The title mirrors the teaching series called *the Alpha Course*, Charles Marnham created in 1977, designed to introduce people into the basic elements of Christian faith, now reaching over 27 million people across 169 countries. Rollins: ‘The Omega Course is designed to introduce people in the church to some religionless readings of Christianity. Readings that carve out an escape route from the type of faith expressed in The Alpha Course. (...) At its core, The Omega Course aims at unearthing the incendiary, counter-cultural scandal of the gospel by clearing away the rumble of religion.’²⁶

Rollins’ perception of religion reflects all the characteristics that Bonhoeffer assigned to religion in his late letters. Religion is *individualistic*, moving God from the world into an “inner” and “private” sphere; *metaphysical*, in the sense that it assumes a world above, separated an apart from this world. Religion is also *provincial*, reserved for the margins of life, while God becomes a God-of-the gaps. Finally, religion creates a class of *privileged* insiders and becomes a system of power, an elite that has access to divine knowledge and exerts institutional power over the souls of outsiders.²⁷ With these characteristics, religion prevents people in the development into fully responsible individuals.²⁸ We should introduce people into Christianity not with comforting Alpha, but with disturbing Omega-courses.

The militant tone Rollins uses can be explained by the pervasiveness in our times of religion, functioning as an escape in the Bonhoefferian sense. The frontlines between a religious and a religionless Christianity need to be articulated more radically than ever before. Rollins regards the rise of fundamentalism as ‘an impotent reaction to the loss of religion, an attempt to put it back in the center’. It proves ‘the growing redundancy of religion. It is the violent kickback against the continual loss of ground that religion has had to concede in recent years.’²⁹ The so called ‘return of religion’ in the last decades should not be interpreted as the sociological falsification of Bonhoeffer’s concept of religion, but rather as the confirmation of its adequacy: religion is weakness, and the more our culture fears complexity, doubt and ambiguity, the more powerful it becomes. Religion satisfies the human need of safety in risky times by offering illusions that keep us away from God’s cruciform reality.

BONHOEFFER AND BEYOND

²⁵ <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/atheism-for-lent-a-40-day-pilgrimage-into-the-cloud-of-unknowing-tickets-18563556096> (personal website of Mike Clawson)

²⁶ <http://emergingpensees.blogspot.nl/2009/12/religionless-christianity-and-emerging.html>

²⁷ Cf. Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Eine Biographie*. München: Kaiser Verlag 1978⁴, 977-986.

²⁸ Rollins, *Insurrection*, 139.

²⁹ <http://peterrollins.net/2008/06/religion-fundamentalism-and-christianity/>

The letters from prison remind Rollins of the few enigmatic lines the Pre-Socratics once left behind. Despite their fragmentary character, they nevertheless are the foundations on which western philosophy was built. The same applies for Bonhoeffer's enigmatic, groping thoughts on which the future of Christian faith depends. Rollins takes up the creative theological task of filling in the blanks between the lines. This also implies that we have 'to move beyond Bonhoeffer'. Though Bonhoeffer remains 'an important transitional thinker', Rollins suggests that 'other thinkers have done the work that Bonhoeffer signaled and hinted at.' 'He opened up a way of thinking (or at least expressed it) that was not exhausted in the Radical Theology of the 1960's but which is a prophetic utterance concerning a much more virulent strain of theology that is vibrant and historically significant. ... It has been left to others to explore what this alternative is.'³⁰

Who are these others and what do they stand for?

In his (unpublished) PhD (*His Colour is Our Blood: A Phenomenology of the Prodigal Father*, Queens University of Belfast 2005) Rollins engages with Martin Heidegger's critique of onto-theology and explores the religious significance of Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, postmodern thinkers who represent the so called 'theological turn' in continental philosophy. Rollins looks for philosophical allies who no longer understand the transcendence of the divine in terms of being and essence, reminding Bonhoeffer's critique at the idea of the *aseitas* of God and his assertion that Christ is the God-for-us in *Act and Being*: 'Einen Gott den "es gibt", gibt es nicht.'³¹

In an ikon performance about 'the secret', Rollins says: 'I heard an inner voice calling my name. I stood still and listened intently to what I took to be nothing less than the sole voice of God. As I stood there rooted to the ground, God spoke to me, repeating four simple words: "I do not exist." "God does not exist." What could this possibly mean? One thing for sure was that this was not a simple atheism, for it was God who was claiming God's non-existence. In that wasteland, I was confronted with something different, I was confronted with the erasure of God by none other than God.'³² In his first book, *How (Not) to Speak about God* (2006), Rollins stays close to Marion's rediscovery of the negative theology and apophatic mysticism, praying, with Meister Eckhart, to God to rid us of God. God is not presence, but elusive hyper-presence. However, Rollins is not interested in mere philosophical God talk. He aims at communal practices of – what he coins - 'transformance art' in which the experience of a non-existing God are embodied. The second part of his book he therefore dedicates to a description of services of the ikon collective, the a/theistic community he established in Belfast. Radical Christian faith, as Rollins understands it, is not a belief system or a philosophical thought experiment, but a way of being, a mode of life, a participation in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Though references are few, and Rollins develops his thoughts quite independently, in the acknowledgement of his second book *The Fidelity of*

³⁰ <http://peterrollins.net/2008/06/religion-fundamentalism-and-christianity/>

³¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Akt und Sein. Transzendentalphilosophie und Ontologie in der systematischen Theologie* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Werke Band 6), München 1988, 112.

³² Quoted by Katherine Sarah Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity. Deconstruction, Materialism and Religious Practices*, Farnham: Ashgate 2015, 181, note 31.

Betrayal (2008), he explicitly mentions the names of John D. Caputo and Slavoj Žižek ‘for helping to give me a language for this particular work’.³³ I think these two radical thinkers still lead him in the direction of a radical immanent theology, fleshed out in books like *The Idolatry of God* (2012), *Insurrection* (2011) and - his latest, strongly influenced by Žižek and the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan – *The Divine Magician* (2015). Though both can be labelled radical theologians, on a substantial level, they disagree. Depending whose side he will be on, Rollins’ reception of the late Bonhoeffer will lead him to a radical materialist death-of-God theology as in the 1960s, or to a more messianic ‘religion without religion’ and God as an event-otherwise-than-being, as Caputo defends.

To start with John Caputo, Rollins confesses that ‘he has long been a monumental influence in my life and work.’ ‘He has been a constant guide, mentor and conversation partner.’³⁴ Their ongoing dialogue circles around the project of a religionless Christianity - inspired by Bonhoeffer, but at the same time moving beyond. Let me refer to a couple of thoughts they both share in strong affinity with Bonhoeffer.

1. Both Caputo and Rollins continue to criticize the *two worlds metaphysics*, reminding Bonhoeffers *Ethics* and, at the same time, moving beyond. They radically think through what it means to live without a double, second world behind or above this world, and – a thought not developed by Bonhoeffer - without the perspective of an eternal ‘afterlife’ therein. Their cosmological imagination is fuelled by contemporary evolution theory, and no longer by the dualism influenced by traditional Neoplatonism. As Caputo writes: ‘Instead of wanting to live as we did not die, as in two-worlds theology, I think we should live as if we did not live, as if we have life only for a while. If die we must, we want to die of love, to die in love.’³⁵
2. ‘God’s *transcendence* has nothing to do with epistemological transcendence,’ Bonhoeffer writes in his letter from April 30, 1944.³⁶ Both Rollins and Caputo try to create new conceptual space in theology in arguing that the transcendence of God should be coined no longer in terms of ontological being but rather as a call, an event, an insistence (Caputo), or - as in Rollins puts it in his early work - an elusive hyper-presence.³⁷
3. Both authors plea for a ‘religion without religion’ (Derrida). Religion is a worldview, a cultural form of life, an accident of birth, distinct from faith as a transformative life praxis (Rollins), as a mystical ‘living

³³ Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, 18.

³⁴ ‘From the first time I randomly picked up one of his books (*On Religion*) in a little bookshop in Belfast back in 2000, to the present day where I’m working through his stunning philosophical memoir *Hoping Against Hope* (I’m honored to be writing the fore word), he has been a constant guide, mentor and conversation partner. Not only this, but over recent years I have been able to get to know him personally and come to know him as a friend.” (<http://peterrollins.net/youre-looking-for-nothing-john-caputo-responds-to-my-work/>)

³⁵ John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God. A Theology of Perhaps*. Indiana University Press 2013, Bloomington IND 2013, p. 227. Cf. also his *Hope against Hope*, pp. 32, 36, 52.

³⁶ Bonhoeffer, LPP (DBW 8), 367.

³⁷ Caputo, *The Insistence of God*. Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, resp. 23f., 46, 21.

without why' (Caputo). Their approach transcends the one-dimensional secularism of both 20th century secularization theology and recent New Atheism, defended by authors like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. A religionless Christianity aims not at the 'destruction' of religiosity, but towards its deconstruction, its creative repetition, as it is emphasized by both authors. For in the name of religion, Caputo like to say, is something going on that religion cannot contain. Both share Bonhoeffer's aversion against 'the shallow and banal thisworldliness of the enlightened, the bustling, the comfortable, or the lascivious'.³⁸

4. Both Rollins and Caputo radicalize the distinction between *faith* as a risky way of embracing life unconditionally on the one hand (Caputo speaks of the 'nihilism of grace'), and *belief* as a set of epistemological claims to give the world meaning and purpose, on the other. They both remind of Bonhoeffer, describing faith as a 'living in the full this-worldliness of life', 'in the midst of life's tasks, questions, successes and failure, experience and perplexities' in distinction to religion as a beliefs system.³⁹ Though classical theology valued both *fides qua* and *fides quae*, radical theology relativizes the importance and reliability of the latter. Faith, hope and love are the only 'stuff of religion' (Caputo), belief systems do not have epistemological value. Faith is just as a risky business as love between persons, it depends on trust in an unknown, impossible future, not on factual knowledge. With the subtitle of one of Rollins' books: 'To believe is human, to doubt, divine.' Doubt, ambiguity, and complexity are 'important aspects of a mature Christianity'.⁴⁰
5. Caputo and Rollins both share with Bonhoeffer, a strong Nietzschean *life-affirming* fidelity to the earth and a deep-seated suspicion of religion as an escape of responsibility. Faith is saying "yes" to life, embracing all its sufferings and joy. He clearly reminds here Bonhoeffer's 'Jesus calls not to a new religion but to life.'⁴¹ Rollins translates this passage as follows: 'The question *Do you believe in God?* is transformed and now involves the very being of the one asking the question. As such it can be rendered in this way: *Is your entire being caught up in a commitment to embracing the world?*'⁴² Believing the resurrection is synonymous to '*becoming the resurrection*'.⁴³

ŽIŽEK AND THE DEATH OF GOD

Rollins' project aims at a religionless *Christianity*. His theology is specifically Christian by contrasting, on the one hand, religion as irresponsible escape to,

³⁸ Bonhoeffer, LPP (DBW 8), 485 (Letter from July 21, 1944).

³⁹ Bonhoeffer, LPP (DBW 8), 486 (letter from July 21, 1944).

⁴⁰ Rollins, *Insurrection*, 42.

⁴¹ Bonhoeffer, LPP (DBW 8), 482 (Letter from July 18, 1944). Cf. also Rollins' references to the *metanoia* passage in his letter of July 21, 1944 (LPP, 485) in *Idolatry of God*, 79 and *Insurrection*, 178.

⁴² Rollins, *Insurrection*, 127.

⁴³ Rollins, *Insurrection*, 179f., italics fdl. Cf. Caputo's account of resurrection in *The Insistence of God*, 230 - 238. 'What is resurrection? Resurrection means 'more life, perhaps'. 'Faith thus means faith in more life, in life/death, in the grace of the moment, of the hour, of the day, of the life-time. (...) This faith is "believing in life"'. (*Insistence of God*, 231)

on the other, Christianity as the affirmation of bare life itself, in all its extremities. In Caputo crucifixion and the resurrection tend to become general, 'deep and overarching symbols of the rhythmic birth and death that we call our lives.'⁴⁴, while Rollins considers the crucifixion as a unique event, the breakdown of all religious symbolization. 'To participate in the Crucifixion is to experience the breaking apart of the various mythologies we use to construct and make sense of the world. The Crucifixion is nothing less than the taking place of the Real', Rollins writes.⁴⁵

Christianity is rooted in the traumatic experience of the confrontation with the harshness of life without its imaginary garments. The cross is a scandal because it means the defeat of religion as the supernarrative of cosmic meaning. Here, Rollins is deeply inspired by the late Paul Hessert and his 1993 book *Christ and the End of Meaning*. Hessert opposes, what he calls, 'meaningful Christianity' as a symbolic safety net, to the absurdity of faith in 'Christ crucified'. What we witness in the godforsakenness of the dying Jesus (Mark 15:34; Math. 27:46) is a form of personal, painful, and existential atheism, a felt loss of God.⁴⁶ In the construction of 'meaningful Christianity' the cross is put within larger frameworks of, for example, a cosmic plan of God, a theory of atonement, or corrected or overridden by the resurrection.⁴⁷ In this manner, religious Christianity domesticates Christ's Cry. On the cross, however, religion is sacrificed. Participating in Christ's death means losing the God of religion and giving up everything *including* God as the guarantee of meaning. 'Here, right at the heart of Christianity, God despairs of God.'⁴⁸ The term 'participation in the "Crucifixion"' thus names the profoundly Christian moment of undergoing the death of the *deus ex machina*, experiencing the destruction of all cosmic security.⁴⁹ 'Faith' is another word for participating in the cross. Faith is, with Tertullian, not the victory over the absurd, but saying yes to the absurd; faith is loving a life without purpose or meaning. *Credo quia absurdum*. Love of God therefore is not directed towards a big Object somewhere out there, but consists of a passionate act of commitment towards life. God is not a Being, God is love. And in loving others, loving life, loving ourselves, loving the world, we experience the presence of God.

The resurrection, according to Rollins, should therefore be interpreted in an religionless way: not in the sense of a physical victory over death or the reward of an eternal afterlife, but as a new way of being. Undergoing the experience of the cross, we learn to love life unconditionally. 'In the very experience of being forsaken by God (Crucifixion), we find God in the very affirmation of life itself (Resurrection).'⁵⁰ Rollins confesses a radical *theologia crucis*: resurrection does not overcome or eradicate the cross, but reveals its true reality as the divine expression of an unconditional love of this-worldly life. In a formula: Resurrection = crucifixion + faith, hope and love. Consequently, resurrection

⁴⁴Though Caputo affirms: 'in the end I'm just proposing a theology of the cross', his theology is more oriented towards 'the hermeneutics of the kingdom of God'. (John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God. A Theology of the Event*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 2006, resp. 41, 84, 118)

⁴⁵ Rollins *Insurrection*, 23.

⁴⁶ Hessert, *Christ and the End of Meaning*, 21.

⁴⁷ Hessert, *Christ and the End of Meaning*, 23.

⁴⁸ Rollins, *Insurrection*, 25, cf. 27, 30.

⁴⁹ Rollins, *Insurrection*, 82f.

⁵⁰ Rollins, *Insurrection*, 129.

leads – I allude to Rollins’ book title - to *insurrection*, to the defiance of the powers of death and despair.⁵¹

Religion offers imaginary worldviews and symbolic systems of meaning; the event of the cross reveals the Real. Here we have Rollins’ religionless Christianity in a nutshell. We now can understand why Rollins – contrary to Bonhoeffer who was quite sceptical about psychology and psychotherapy⁵²— feels attracted to the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, for whom how to deal reality without illusionary imagination is the most important existential question. Lacan shows how deeply rooted our desires for wholeness and meaning are. He offers a theory that explains how we become ‘subjects’ by constructing a symbolic world that protects us from a direct confrontation with the absurdity of the real. In developing a sense of selfhood, we simultaneously experience a sense of loss and separation from an apparent symbiotic unity, which we try to compensate with symbols of wholeness and completion, provided by some ‘big Other’. The loss we experience, however, is a loss of ‘*something we never had in the first place*’.⁵³ Rollins connects the experience of participation in the cross theologically with the disclosure of the original unity as an illusion in Lacan’s psychoanalysis. ‘To go through the event of crucifixion does not then mean that we are unified with that which will make our lives complete (...) but that *we can live without being complete* and can celebrate mystery instead of being afraid of it.’⁵⁴ In faith we can live and love our fragmentary lives without longing for completeness. Religion, at the contrary, presumes somewhere in us a ‘God-shaped hole’ and promises to fill that gap with God.⁵⁵ But Christianity reveals that there is no gap, that life nevertheless is worthy to be embraced, and that we have to take responsibility for it, in order to live up to the Real as mature human beings.

In his recent work, Rollins gradually seems to move in the direction of Slavoj Žižek, who puts Lacan’s psychoanalysis in a theological framework that is heavily marked by the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel. In his conception of history Hegel interpreted Christianity as the religion of the death-of-God, as it culminates in the event of Calvary. He does not leave room for Christ’s resurrection. God’s story ends in the community of believers. Žižek takes over Hegel’s view but vigorously rejects any metaphysical interpretation of Hegel’s Spirit. He concludes: ‘Christ’s death on the Cross thus means that we immediately should ditch the notion of God as a transcendent caretaker who guarantees the happy outcome of our acts, the guarantee of historical teleology – Christ’s death is the death of this God.’⁵⁶ In his radical materialist interpretation of Hegel’s philosophy of history, Žižek considers redemption as part of the crucifixion itself. The reality of the Cross is the only reality there is. The cross does not lead us to, but is in itself synonymous with salvation. Žižek

⁵¹ Rollins, *Insurrection*, 132; cf. 1 Corinthians 15: 55.

⁵² Bonhoeffer, LPP (DBW 8) 457 (Letter from July 8, 1944).

⁵³ Rollins, *Idolatry*, 13.

⁵⁴ Rollins, *Idolatry*, p. 136, italics fdl.

⁵⁵ Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 44 – 55.

⁵⁶ Slavoj Žižek & John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ. Paradox or dialectic?* (ed. Creston Davis), Cambridge MA: MIT Press 2009, 55, cf. 260: ‘The only way to redeem the subversive core of Christianity is therefore to return to death-of-God theology, especially Thomas Altizer: to *repeat* its gesture today.’

repeats Hegel: resurrection is nothing but ‘the universalization of the crucifixion.’⁵⁷ God lives on in the Spirit of Agape within the community of the faithful. According to Žižek, the Christian experience opens ‘the possibility of a mature, non-ideological form of social life, a sociality in which the non-existence of the “big Other” continues to resonate or reverberate.’⁵⁸ In his latest book *The Divine Magician* (2016), Rollins seems to be very much influenced by Žižek’s radical materialist theology.⁵⁹ We should experience the death of God in the very core of our being, Rollins writes. People will come for answers to Christian communities and come to realize that the answers are not there. ‘They will find, instead, a group of people attempting to love well amid the loss of the perfect answer. (...) the church reveals that it has no mystical power to grant us what will make us whole and that what we have, instead, is each other.’⁶⁰

AT THE CROSS ROADS

In my understanding, Rollins approaches here a decisive crossroad in the further development of his thought and in his relationship to Bonhoeffer. Though Bonhoeffer borrowed and modified in his *Sanctorum Communio* the phrase ‘Christus als Gemeinde existierend’ from Hegel (who spoke of ‘Gott als Gemeinde existierend’)⁶¹, his use of Hegel, however, was loose and eclectic. He never surrendered himself to Hegel’s philosophy of history nor to his interpretation of the event of Calvary as the representation (*Vorstellung*) of a speculative Good Friday in world history. Therefore, Bonhoeffer and death-of-God theology, in so far it depends on a consequent Hegelian line of thinking, don’t seem to go together quite well. If Rollins really wants to stay faithful to the late Bonhoeffer, he must be aware of this.

There also looms a critical point in his theological friendship with John D. Caputo. Rollins says he lets himself inspire both by Caputo and Žižek, but it is my contention that in the end they don’t match together. Caputo’s conception of God as - a living! - event misses, as Žižek rightly remarks, ‘the truly traumatic dimension of the Christian death of God’. For according to Žižek, ‘what dies on the Cross is indeed God himself, not just his “finite container,” a historically contingent name or form of God’.⁶² In a public email discussion between Caputo and Rollins, the first expresses the fear ‘that, under the influence of Žižek, his [Rollins’] audience will be narrowed to the radical death-of-God set and that will confine him to a narrower niche.’ With a ‘narrow preoccupation with the psychological fantasy of completeness’ he will lose a broad Christian audience. Lacan’s theory of the

⁵⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, quoted in *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 167.

⁵⁸ Quoted in: Moody, *Radical theology and Emerging Christianity*, 219.

⁵⁹ In his acknowledgments, Rollins writes: ‘This book in particular arises out of the philosophical and theological influences of Hegel, Jacques Lacan, Slavoj Žižek, and John D. Caputo.’ (184)

⁶⁰ Rollins, *Divine Magician*, resp. 165f., 168.

⁶¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio. Eine soziologische Untersuchung der Kirche*. (DBW 1, Kaiser München, hrsg. Joachim von Soosten, 1986, 76, 87, 126ff., 133, 139, 142, 144, 159, 180, 198. Bonhoeffer modified Hegel’s expression as he found it in Reinhold Seeberg, *Christliche Dogmatik*, II, 299. Cf also <http://www.dietrich-bonhoeffer.net/bonhoeffer-umfeld/georg-wilhelm-friedrich-hegel/>

⁶² Žižek, *The Monstrosity of Christ*, 257. For Caputo’s critique of and response to Žižek’s theology of the death of God, see his *Insistence of God*, 136 – 164.

experience of a primordial loss that has to be overcome, represents in the eyes of Caputo a kind of ‘crypto-Calvinism’, resembling the myth of the Fall. According to him, theology should overcome any metaphysics which offers ‘overarching stories or deep accounts of how things are’, whether religious or psychological, altogether.

I think Caputo, Rollins self-declared intellectual mentor, does have a strong point, and Rollins seems to be aware of it. ‘Jack is right that my influences at the moment do limit me somewhat.’⁶³ Is Rollins hesitating about the direction he is going to take? Will Rollins’ project of a religionless Christianity end up with Žižek’s death of God, or, will it side with Caputo, who writes: ‘The inexistence of God does not spell the death of God but sings of a God groaning to be born?’⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

The Letters and Papers from Prison is a dangerous book, Martin E. Marty writes, and Rollins courageously takes up the risk of thinking through its consequences.⁶⁵ There hardly seems to be a viable middle way between, on the one hand, avoiding and downplaying the radical questions and proposals Bonhoeffer develops in his letters, as contemporary Evangelical scholars seem to do, and, on the other hand, making a ‘creative misuse’ of them, as William Hamilton, the most outspoken of the death-of-God theologians in the 1960s, declared he himself was doing.⁶⁶ Is Rollins – as he tries to – faithful to what Bonhoeffer, in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*, was trying to do? It is hard to predict – Rollins’ dynamic, living theology is under full construction.

⁶³ <http://peterrollins.net/2015/07/youre-looking-for-nothing-john-caputo-responds-to-my-work/>

⁶⁴ Caputo, *Hoping against Hope*, p. 126. Cf. idem, p. 117: ‘God lives without being the end whom no one can see without dying, but by being a beginning, a synonym not for death but for giving birth.’ A similar discussion occurs between Richard Kearney’s project of atheism as a search for God *after* God, and Gianni Vattimo’s radicalization of kenosis as the death of God in Western history. Interpreting Bonhoeffer, Kearney concludes: ‘the death of God gives birth to the God of life. A God who resides at the “center of life”. (Richard Kearney, *Anatheism. Returning to God after God*, Columbia University Press New York, 69), whereas Vattimo, in a more Hegelian vein, states: ‘Now that God is dead we can love one another.’ (in: Richard Kearney, Jens Zimmermann (eds.), *Reimagining the Sacred. Richard Kearney Debates God*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016, 138).

⁶⁵ Martin E. Marty, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers from Prison. A Biography*. Oxford: Princeton University Press 2011, 218.

⁶⁶ Marty, *Bonhoeffer’s Letters and Papers from Prison*, resp. 163, 75.