

Rob Bell Interviews Peter Rollins

In 2009, Rob Bell invited Peter Rollins to participate in a three-day conference entitled Poets, Prophets and Preachers. During this time Rob interviewed Peter about some of the themes that would later find expression in this book. As such we have included the full interview for you to watch and share.



Use your Smartphone to scan this code to unlock the full-length video of Rob Bell interviewing Pete Rollins



Notes

INTRODUCTION: THERE IS A FIRE INSIDE THE BUILDING; PLEASE STEP INSIDE

1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Witness to Jesus Christ*, ed. John De Gruchy (San Francisco: Collins, 1987), 278.
2. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New York: Touchstone, 1971), 280–82.
3. *Ibid.*, 282.
4. Slavoj Žižek, “Soul of the Party,” *New Statesman*, April 1, 2010.

CHAPTER 1: I’M A CHRISTIAN! I’M A CHRISTIAN!

1. Colossians 2:8.

CHAPTER 2: TO BELIEVE IS HUMAN; TO DOUBT, DIVINE

1. Adapted from an Islamic parable.
2. Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34.
3. Matthew 26:36–46.
4. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 62.
5. Elizabeth Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus* (London: Harper & Row, 1959), 151.
6. p. 36 The Prisoner.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1969), 103.
8. Luke 14:26.
9. Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 115.

CHAPTER 3: “I’M NOT RELIGIOUS” AND OTHER RELIGIOUS SAYINGS

1. Richard Woods, *Meister Eckhart* (London: Continuum, 2011), 130.
2. As I remember from hearing him share the story in person.

CHAPTER 4: I DON’T HAVE TO BELIEVE; MY PASTOR DOES THAT FOR ME

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1992), 43.

NOTES

2. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater, eds., *John Wesley's Sermons* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 69–84.
3. Brian Kolodiejchuk, M.C., ed., *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 210.
4. 1 Corinthians 15:19.

CHAPTER 5: STORY CRIME

1. Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (London: Granta Books, 2006), 58.
2. *Homes and Gardens*, November 1938, 193–95.
3. Matthew 6:24.
4. Bonhoeffer, *Witness to Jesus Christ*, 288.
5. *Ibid.*, 289.
6. Mark 14:27–31.
7. Mark 14:66–72.
8. 1 Corinthians 6:12.

CHAPTER 6: WE ARE DESTINY

1. Ancient Hindu parable.
2. 1 Corinthians 15:55.
3. *Journals and Papers of Søren Kierkegaard*.
4. Bonhoeffer, *Witness to Jesus Christ*, 112–13.
5. *The Gay Science*, section 341.
6. Matthew 18:19–20.

CHAPTER 7: I BELIEVE IN THE INSURRECTION

1. Ephesians 6:12.
2. For more about Pirate Islands and faith see Kester Brewin, *Other: Loving Self, God and Neighbor in a World of Fractures* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010).
3. Thomas Merton, *The Hidden Ground of Love*, William H. Shannon, ed. (Toronto: Collins, 1985), 111.
4. Brian Kolodiejchuk, ed., *Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 349.
5. *Ibid.*, 5–6.
6. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 131.

CHAPTER 8: NEITHER CHRISTIAN NOR NON-CHRISTIAN

1. Adapted from an ancient Buddhist parable.
2. Galatians 3:26–28.
3. Philippians 2:5–7a.
4. John 15:19.
5. 1 Corinthians 7:29b–31.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1969), 59.
7. Pádraig Ó Tuama, *Hymns to Swear By* (Proost: 2010).
8. Bonhoeffer, *Witness to Jesus Christ*, 294.

Reading Group Guide

INTRODUCTION

In striking contrast to many of today's feel-good evangelists, author Peter Rollins asserts that the traditional church has become little more than a security blanket for the faithful—comforting but ultimately meaningless. To move beyond this infantile kind of faith, Rollins invites Christians to participate fully with Christ on the cross and his deeply authentic cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Only in doing so, Rollins says, can Christians bring about the radical changes sorely needed for the church to bring God's love to a hurting world.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Reflect a moment on your personal beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, and religion in general. How did you come to hold these beliefs? Where did they originate?
2. Peter Rollins discusses what he calls “Circumcision Questions.” (p. xii) What is the meaning of this term and how does it impact the life of the church? What do you think is the Circumcision Question set forth in *Insurrection*, and what potential effect do you think it could have on the church as you know it?
3. Rollins builds on the late Dietrich Bonhoeffer's idea of “whether or not *religion* is necessary in order to participate fully in the life testified to by Christ.” (p. xiv) How would you answer this question and why, based on your own experience?
4. What is meant by “pyro-theology”? (p. xv) What purpose does pyro-theology serve? In your opinion, do the ideas expressed in *Insurrection* qualify as pyro-theology? Why or why not?
5. Concerning God, Rollins writes that “(w)e find great solace in the idea of someone presiding over the world who guarantees that our small and insignificant lives are being seen and cherished.” (p. 7) To that end, he quotes Voltaire: “If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him.” What do you think of these ideas? Do you agree or not? Explain your response.
6. Thinking back over your current and/or past church experiences, do you agree with

the author that the church performs the same function as a child's security blanket? (p. 48) Why or why not?

7. What is meant by Rollins's statement, "humans are able to affirm one thing consciously while affirming the opposite thing in the way they live"? (p. 44) To what extent do you think that this is true of the church today? If you can, describe a time when you've seen this principle in action.

8. Explain how it might be possible that someone could hold no personal religious beliefs, and yet find comfort and solace in the beliefs of someone else. (p. 57)

9. Describe what you think it means to participate in Christ's Crucifixion. Is your view of this participation in sync with the author's? (p. 23) Explain.

10. What is meant by a God who operates "deus ex machina"? (p. 12) Do you believe that God acts in this way? Provide an example to support your answer.

11. What does it mean to "ridicule the religious view of God while affirming this God in our practice"? (p. 50) To what extent, if any, does this describe your own faith experience?

12. The author says that "When we are directly confronted by what we know, but have refused to admit, we can no longer pretend that we are ignorant." (p. 68) Did this book confront you with anything you already knew, but chose not to see? If so, explain.

13. The author states, "Paul deeply understood that a community founded in the aftermath of Christ does not stand or fall on the teachings or miracles ascribed to Jesus." (p. 164) Do you agree? What else would such a community be founded on?

14. Rollins equates affirming the Resurrection with "times when we embrace life, face up to our pain, allow ourselves to mourn, . . . meet our neighbor, look at ourselves without fear, take responsibility for our actions, find joy in the simplest of things, and gain pleasure through embracing the broken world." (p. 180) To what extent does this view reflect your own understanding of the Resurrection?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK GROUP

1. Brainstorm as a group what a truly post-religious church would look and sound like. Who would attend and why? What kinds of songs would be sung? What would the preaching be like? List as many details as you can.

2. When you've finished brainstorming, share whatever thoughts and feelings came up during the process. Did you find the exercise easy or difficult? Did envisioning a new kind of church make you feel optimistic? Pessimistic? Anxious? Hopeful? All of the above? Why?

3. Discuss whether, on the whole, you think that this type of faith community is a worthy goal to work toward. Why or why not?

4. If you favor the idea of a radically different kind of church, think of some ways that

you, as an individual and as a group, could help bring it about. Is there a specific action that you can take this month? This week? Today?

5. Visit peterrollins.net to learn more about the author and his work.

A CONVERSATION WITH PETER ROLLINS

How does the title, *Insurrection*, relate to the central question or concept presented in your book?

I am interested in playing with and drawing out the similarity that exists between the words “Insurrection” and “Resurrection.” At a very basic level, one describes an uprising and the other a rising up. My desire is to show the reader that there is a close link between the theological idea of Resurrection and the idea of an Insurrection: in other words, the core proclamation of Christianity is that we can live in a radically different way. This is the way of love, and it is a way that embraces others and says “yes” to life and births within us a courage to take responsibility for our existence. This book is about saying that Christianity invites us to embrace a life before death, a life that is rich, beautiful, and so free that its very existence is a challenge to any system of oppression.

What factors inspired or compelled you to write *Insurrection* at this time? Do you feel it contains a message of particular significance “for such a time as this” in the history of the church?

The short answer is “yes.” I believe that the church is a living community that ought to be involved in perpetual revolution and that this will manifest itself in different ways at different times in its historical life. I believe that this is a moment in history when we need to challenge the way in which church in all its forms (Orthodox, Evangelical, Catholic, Liberal and Conservative and Fundamentalist) employs the idea of God and understand the meaning of faith. This is a huge task and one that will prove very difficult, but I believe it is essential if the church is not only to survive, but become an instrument of positive change in the world.

Have you experienced any kind of resistance when you’ve shared the idea of pyro-theology with others?

Perhaps first and foremost I have experienced resistance from myself. The idea that I need to radically interrogate the things that I hold dear and encounter my own brokenness, darkness, and vulnerability is terrifying. My religious narrative gives me a sense that I am right, that I am master, that I know the secret meaning of the universe. I don’t want to give that up, I don’t want to encounter the truth that I am human, all too human. I know that others feel resistance to the idea, but I speak first and foremost to myself. If I am not prepared to place myself into the fires of pyro-theology, then I cannot expect anyone else to. Most of the resistance that I experience is not from people who simply write me off but actually people who say that they are frightened. I know what they mean. It is frightening. All I can say is that I walk the same path, that I have found liberation there, and that I believe it is this path that remains most faithful to the heart of Christianity.

Did the process of writing this book uncover any surprises for you, or take you down a path you didn't expect?

In my experience the first person a book educates is the author herself. Writing feels to me like cutting a path through a landscape. It seems like you could go in any direction at first but there are blockages all around. These not only curb the direction you take but mean that you might not end up where you initially wanted. The blockages in the landscape are the places that reason, logic, and reflection cannot take you. As you cut through the undergrowth, it becomes clear that you have to make twists and turns you could never have anticipated before embarking on the journey. Sure, I have an idea of where it might go, and I will have spent months reading and reflecting before I begin to put pen to paper, but for me, one of the most exciting things about writing is the way it brings me to places I could never before have imagined.

What changes do you hope to see in the church as a result of this book? What impact might these ideas have on the practice of worship, ministry, and community?

I would love to see churches take seriously the idea that mystery, unknowing, brokenness, doubt, and mourning should be expressed in the very structure of the church itself. Religion is a system that gives us a sense of being right, of having the answers and knowing how to stay on the right team. I want to see churches that break religion open through the sermons, music, and prayers; churches that bring us face-to-face with the truth of our unknowing and pain. Not so that we despair, but so that, in bringing it to light and sharing it, we can find healing and light. I would love to see churches emphasize that the highest principle is not some object that we need to love, but rather the act of love itself. That in loving we break open the depth and beauty of what we mean when we say "God."

This will be difficult for churches to do because people often go there to escape their suffering and darkness rather than have it exposed. But the church should be like the singer-songwriter we might listen to when we are working through a difficult situation. They sing their sorrowful song, and, in doing so, we confront our own suffering in a way that is painful without being overpowering. As we sit there and listen to the music, we are invited to work through our pain, engage in the act of mourning, and find strength in the midst of our weakness. Then when we leave, we are in a better state than when we arrived. Sadly, the church is too often like the most inane kind of pop music. Here the music makes us feel strong and powerful, effectively obscuring the sadness within us. Yet when we leave the concert we realize that we have not worked through our pain but merely avoided a direct confrontation with it for a while.

Do you think that the post-religious church will resemble the first-century church more closely than most modern churches do? If so, in what ways?

No. In fact I think that the desire to resemble the first-century church is fundamentally misguided. This desire comes from the idea that they were somehow closer to the event housed in Christianity than we are; that this event lies in the distant past and that we need to resemble that past in order to recover that event. The fact is that the event that birthed the Christian faith does not lie in the past but is right here, right now.

This event is so powerful that, when incarnated, this reality will give birth to radically new communities that may not look anything like what went before them, even though they are fed by the same blood. The task is not to return to the early church, but rather to return to the event that gave birth to the early church.

What do you see as the role of the Bible in the post-religious church?

The Bible is the central text for Christians just as other texts are central to other groups (the writings of Marx for Marxists etc.). The Bible describes a way of living and being that those who love that book believe gets at a fundamental truth. Like all communities with central texts, Christians will continue to do what they have always done: read it, wrestle with it, argue with it, systematize it, interpret it, deconstruct it, and find meaning within it. Sadly this kinetic, dynamic, and living relationship with the text is something that religion condemns, because its closed system of belief is threatened by such a fluid relationship with the text.

What is the primary message you hope readers will take away from *Insurrection*?

I guess that life before death is possible; that you don't need to hide from yourself, pretending that you are not unhappy, broken, and fearful of various things. That you can face up to these things and learn to live with them and that you can say yes to life. I want people to know that beyond the naïveté of believing we can be fulfilled and that beyond the despair of knowing we cannot is a Resurrection road. A narrow path along which we learn to travel together, making space for our darkness and humanity, finding healing in the very embrace of our wounds and sustenance in the very acceptance of our hunger.

What would you say to the reader who is deeply moved by *Insurrection* and wonders “what’s the next step” toward changing the way church happens?

I would encourage the reader to be part of a revolution that is attempting to change the structure of the church itself. If they write music, I would encourage them to pen deeply human songs for worship. If they preach, I would ask them to be honest about their doubts in front of those they stand before. If they write prayers, then I would invite them to include anger, unknowing, and lament in the constructions. I would encourage those who attend church to let their leaders know that they want them to express their humanity in public, that they want to be part of a church that has humility and self-critique at its heart. And perhaps most of all, I would encourage the reader to seek out others on this journey, because the path can be a lonely one.

Do you have another book project in the works?

Yes. I have a few actually. Currently I feel that I am in a very fertile period in my writing. I have been experimenting with writing philosophical fairy tales, a book exploring what I believe to be the core message that runs through the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, and also a book that looks at how we put some of the ideas found in *Insurrection* into practice. As time goes on, some of these projects may merge together. Watch this space . . .