



"In this book, Pete takes you to the edge of a cliff and pushes you off. But after your initial panic, you realize that your fall is a form of flying. And it's thrilling."

—**ROB BELL**, author of *Love Wins* and *Velvet Elvis*

INSURRECTION



TO BELIEVE IS HUMAN
TO DOUBT, DIVINE

PETER ROLLINS

INSURRECTION

PETER ROLLINS

 **HOWARD BOOKS**
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Introduction

There Is a Fire inside the Building; Please Step Inside

Each epoch in the life of the Church arises from the white-hot fires of a fundamental question, a question that burns away the husk that was once thought to be essential in order to reveal once more the revolutionary event heralded by Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection. Such questions do not address the vast sea of disagreements that exist within the shared theological horizon of an era but challenge the very horizon itself. They place into question the various assumptions that these groups all take for granted. They cut across what is assumed, short-circuit what is hallowed, and, in so doing, appear on the scene as a profound threat to the very essence of Christianity. They offer us a unique opportunity to rethink what it means to be the Church, not merely critiquing the presently existing Church for failing to live up to its ideals, but rather for espousing the wrong ideals.

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The first question of this kind was related to the issue of circumcision. At the very founding of the Church, a heated debate broke out concerning whether or not this outward sign was a requirement for Gentile converts. This was a controversial issue at the time, but when the dust finally settled, a decision had been made. New converts would not need to undergo circumcision in order to participate in the full life of the Church. This decision, known as the “Apostolic Decree,” was revolutionary and helped to establish the unique identity of the Christian community. More than this, it helped bring to light the idea that faith concerned a total life transformation rather than some outward mark.

There have been various pivotal debates like this one over the life of the Church, debates that gave rise to monasticism, that provoked the split between Eastern and Western branches of Christianity, and that spawned the Protestant Reformation. Like the discussions concerning circumcision, each of these historical debates marked a radical transformation in the Church of its day. As such we may link them directly to what gave rise to the Apostolic Decree by calling them “Circumcision Questions.”

Giving them this name not only links them directly to the first fundamental question that arose in the Christian community but also refers to the nature of these questions as such, for they are never concerned with addition (working out what needs to be added to the message as it currently stands) but with subtraction (debating what needs to be cut away). A circumcision question asks us to remove something previously thought of as vital in order to help unveil, in an apocalyptic way, the central scandal of Christianity.

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In this book I suggest that we stand once more at the threshold of such a question, a question that houses the power to provoke a rupturing and re-configuring of the present manifestation of Christianity. It is an incendiary question that houses the very power to set the Church alight, burning away the rot to reveal that which cannot be consumed. This is why the task of working through a circumcision question can never be described as some project in constructive theology; it is a work of pyro-theology.

While circumcision questions attempt to bring us back to a central truth-event of faith, we must not confuse them with the reactionary movements that seek to return to the early Church—the Church in some more ancient, and supposedly purified, form. There are those who want to go back to the way the Church was before Constantine, when it is thought that religious authorities became extensions of the State. There is an attempt to return to the Church before the influence of Neo-Platonism when, those people say, Greek philosophy perverted the message. And there are even those who want to return to the Church before Paul—who some believe reduced the message of Christ to a set of rules and dogmas. Such moves, however, fall short, not because they go back too far, but because they fail to go back *far enough*.

The truly revolutionary move is not to chart a return to the early Church, but to *the event that gave birth to the early Church*.

The return called for by circumcision questions is not concerned with some stretching back into the past, for the event that gave birth to the early Church is present *now*. It is not lost in some long-forgotten era to be unearthed anew but rather dwells as an ever-present

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potential that we are invited to make actual in our bodies. In the aftermath of a circumcision question, an expression of Church life arises that may look utterly different from anything that went before it, yet it is fed by the same blood that pulsed through the old, remaining true to it by advancing boldly into the new.

So what is the question that presents itself at this time in the history of Christianity? What is this point from which we may gain the leverage to overturn the Church as it presently stands (in its conservative, liberal, evangelical, fundamentalist, and orthodox forms)?

The theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer succinctly articulated the answer shortly before his execution by the Nazis. In a compilation of his personal correspondence entitled *Letters and Papers from Prison*, he wrote of how the question for us today is whether or not *religion* is necessary in order to participate fully in the life testified to by Christ.²

For Bonhoeffer, religion at its most basic defined a particular way of thinking about and relating to God, a way of approaching God as the solution to problems such as fear, ignorance, or despair. He wrote of the next epoch in Church life as one that would utterly transcend this impotent God whose only job is to provide us with a psychological crutch (what we will call the God of religion, or the religious God) and usher in what he called “religionless Christianity.”³ Bonhoeffer was executed before he was able to develop his project, and we are left with only fragments of his vision, fragments that are pregnant with possibility.

In *Insurrection*, I endeavor to outline what this radical expression of a faith beyond religion might look like and how it has the

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power to give birth to a radically new form of Church, one with the power to renew, reform or even transcend the present constellation of conservative, liberal, evangelical, fundamentalist, and orthodox communities.

This work of pyro-theology will involve outlining the present understanding of God, exploring the way Crucifixion and Resurrection open up a different reality, and charting what might arise should we be courageous enough to step into this reality.

The following will not be an easy read; many will find it disturbing, for some of the things we hold precious will be attacked from the very outset. But it is written with a firm conviction that we must not be afraid to burn our sacred temples in order to discover what, if anything, remains.

Indeed, perhaps it is not what remains after the fire has died that is true, but rather the fire itself. If so, then we need to take the words of Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durruti seriously when he boldly declares: *The only church that illuminates is a burning one.*⁴

C H A P T E R O N E



I'm a Christian! I'm a Christian!

Every Sunday the pastor would stand at the front of his Church and with a booming voice finish his rousing sermon with a plea:

"Each week I go to a nearby town and serve the poor, the oppressed, and the downtrodden; what do you do? How do you show your compassion to those in need?"

People would applaud the minister's closing remarks and everyone would wave him off at the end of the service as he hurried away in his little car.

The truth, however, was that each week he would go to a golf course and play a leisurely eighteen holes away from his congregation, family, and friends.

This deception had been going on for years, but eventually it came to the attention of some angels. They were furious at his lies and reported the situation directly to God.

After a little consideration, God said to the angels, "I will visit with this minister on Sunday and teach him a lesson he'll never forget."

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Sure enough, next Sunday, God showed up at the Church. Yet again, the minister informed his congregation that he was going to go serve the poor before leaving for the golf course.

This time however, God intervened. When the minister took his first shot, the ball took off, flew through the air, bounced onto the green, and dropped into the hole.

The minister was amazed. At the second hole the same thing happened. And the third. And the fourth. Right through to the last hole.

With his last stroke, the minister sliced the ball badly, but still it curved around and, like all the others, found the hole in one.

All the while the angels in heaven watched what took place in utter disbelief. By the time God returned they shouted, "I thought you were going to punish the minister for all his lies, but instead you gave him the perfect round of golf!"

"That may be true," replied God with a smile, "but ask yourself this: Who is he going to tell?"

I Desire Your Desire

Believing that there is some Supreme Being above and beyond the world we experience, a Being who loves us and cares about what happens in our lives, is natural. We want to believe. To understand this let us reflect upon the nature of desire.

Most of us will agree that the things we love are not as important to us as the people we love. We desire a myriad of things in life

(such as wealth, health, and longevity), but in the midst of these, we will be quick to point out that our loved ones stand over and above them all. Those few individuals who bring life and light to the very depths of our being elicit the most profound and intense longings in our heart.

And yet, true as this description may be, it is also incomplete and inadequate. For when we speak of those we love as more desirable than everything else that might capture our attention, we end up subtly placing them on the same level as everything else we desire.

If we simply long for our partner in a more intense and inflamed way than a promotion at work, a holiday in the Bahamas, or a home by the beach, we end up treating them in much the same way—as one more thing we want. Such a description of those we love, while disguising itself as a compliment, does them a profound injustice, failing to delve into their unique and transcendent place in our life. For our desire for those we love is not merely superior to all other desires, it is of a fundamentally different kind.

Imagine that most painful of experiences, the loss of our beloved: Most of us know what it is like to be scorched by that black sun, to lose someone for whom we would gladly lose everything to save. If we take a moment to reflect upon such a loss in our own life, we find that when we lose the one we love more than life itself, we do not simply lose something we desire; we begin to lose *the very ability to desire*.

In other words, when we lose our beloved, we find that the other things that once tempted us lose their seductive power. Thoughts of promotions, vacations, and new homes lose all of their glittering

appeal. A chilling melancholy slowly envelops us, fading our once vibrant world into various shades of gray.

In these times, we discover that our beloved is not simply the object of our desire, but the very source of it. In that dark dungeon of despair, we find that the other is the one who invests our activities with meaning and significance. Any of our achievements, while once meaningful to us, now signify nothing.

What we learn from this traumatic experience is that the loss of our beloved results in our world being cut adrift from its sun and descending into ever-greater darkness. For more than being the mere objects of our deepest desire, those we love are the ones who birth and sustain our very ability to desire.

It is not then our beloved's mere existence that lights up our life with meaning; it is our beloved's desire for us that has this luminous effect. We might even still be with the one we love, but if we feel that they no longer love us, we experience the profound pain and suffering described above. In contrast, the one we love may be far away, and yet their longing and desire for us can sustain us in their absence. So then, what we really desire, what I really desire, is the desire of those I desire.

Ever Get the Feeling That No One Is Watching You?

The idea that what we desire is the other's desire is succinctly captured in the story that opens this chapter. Here we are

confronted with the initially counterintuitive idea that something we would assume to be a reason for personal delight (the perfect golf game) could actually lead us into a state of profound despair (by being witnessed by no one).

The pastor's punishment lay not in what actually took place but in the fact that he was unable to share it. He was punished not with a direct misfortune but with the indirect misfortune of being unable to share something fortunate. This story presents to us the psychological reality that our pleasure is intimately interwoven with the pleasure (or pain) of those around us. Understanding this can help us unlock something fundamental about the nature of human desire—namely, that the most sought after material in the universe is not some precious metal or limited resource but rather the attention of those whom we desire. We long to be seen by the other and acknowledged by them in some way. Yet this most precious of materials proves to be frustratingly ethereal, elusive, and fleeting.

When we take a moment to understand this, we can begin to perceive how even our most intimate and private fantasies are never really for us alone but are indirectly addressed to another. In the theater of our mind, we may stage a scene in which we are a great musician, a world-famous celebrity, a powerful secret agent, or a beautiful model, but we must remember that there is also an audience watching what we have produced and directed—those for whom we are staging this fantasy.

If we ask ourselves who this spectator is, we may find that it is someone who bullied us in school, a parent who didn't think

we would amount to anything, or some individual we are attracted to and yet who seems utterly oblivious to our existence. This is something we see in the film *The Social Network* where Mark Zuckerberg's (Jesse Eisenberg) motivation for setting up Facebook is directly connected to a failed relationship with Erica Albright (Rooney Mara). This spectator is often little more than an image we have in our mind (for instance, this person could be long dead in reality), but he or she is the one who invests our fantasies and achievements with their excessive pleasure (i.e., the pleasure we get that is beyond the mere satisfaction of basic needs). Whether it is that person's love, affection, regret, or jealousy we seek, these are all evidence of us evoking and colonizing the other's desire.

Early in our lives, we learn that we can never fully capture other people's desire, at least not for any sustained and prolonged period of time. As infants we quickly discover that our parents have interests that lie far beyond us. In a typical family environment, we are faced with the reality that we are not the center of our parents' universe. They have jobs, friends, and other interests that draw their gaze away from us and steal their attention. It may be painful, but accepting this is a vital part of growing up. Indeed a myriad of problems are known to arise if the desire of our parents is too intense and focused upon us. We must be weaned off our obsessive desire for our parents' desire in order to mature and find other relationships outside the closed circuit of the family.

This process of desiring our parents' desire is mirrored as we begin to develop serious relationships beyond those of our

immediate family. Our partner comes to partially replace our parents as the one whose desire we desire, and yet we again discover early on that we can never be the only one that our beloved's gaze alights upon. In the initial stages of a relationship, the two individuals may feel that all their wants and needs are met in the other. But as time goes by, the exigencies of daily life impact the relationship, and both find other activities they want to pursue. In a healthy partnership, this transformation can help to bring about a more well-rounded and mature union, but it can also be a painful process, one that we often try desperately to avoid.

In light of all this, it is perfectly understandable that we would find ourselves desiring someone who would love us unconditionally and absolutely. An individual who would never cease caring for us, who would never leave our side, never die, and never tire of our presence. If it is true that we find meaning through the loving gaze of another and that the loss of this love leads to great suffering, then it is only natural that we would desire the gaze of one who would forever cradle us and never forsake us.

Regardless of *whether or not such a being actually exists*, the desire is then a perfectly natural one. We find great solace in the idea of someone presiding over the world who guarantees that our small and seemingly insignificant lives are being seen and cherished. To believe is human.

It is in light of this that we can appreciate the power of Voltaire's famous statement, "If God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent him." In short, God is rendered into a psychological crutch, a being we affirm in order to sleep better at night.

Making Myself Believe

This does not mean that people's belief in God always arises from a psychological need. But while, in theory, we can make the distinction between a belief in God that does not function as a crutch and one that does, it is much more difficult to work out the distinction in the reality of people's lives. Part of the difficulty relates to the way that belief itself is formed and transmitted. Something that is expressed in the following anecdote from Northern Ireland that was told during the Troubles:

At the height of the conflict in Northern Ireland, a major piece of funding was secured from the European Union in order to help train the police force (the RUC). As a result, some of the RUC's top officers were sent over to America to work alongside the FBI and the CIA in a series of team-building exercises.

When they arrived, the officers met with their counterparts and were then driven to a large forest for some team-building exercises. Each group was given instructions to go into the forest and retrieve a rabbit.

The FBI went first. Ten men, fully armed, threw canisters of tear gas into the forest before storming through the trees. After about ten minutes of intense shouting, the sound of a single gunshot rang through the air. Moments later the FBI returned with a small rabbit, a bullet hole through the center of its head.

Next the CIA had their opportunity to prove themselves. In contrast to the FBI, they disappeared into the forest without a sound.

I'M A CHRISTIAN! I'M A CHRISTIAN!

Thirty minutes passed without any sound. Eventually the faint echo of a single twig snapping broke the silence. Shortly afterwards the CIA emerged from the undergrowth with a lifeless rabbit, not a mark on its body.

Finally it was the RUC's turn. The men put on their flak jackets, loaded their weapons, and charged into the forest with batons raised. Eventually they emerged from amidst the trees dragging behind them a huge bear. The instructor shook his head in disbelief and said, "Firstly, you were in there for three weeks; and secondly, that's not a rabbit, that's a bear."

But the largest RUC man simply smiled at the instructor, then turned to the bear and looked deep into its eyes. Immediately the bear began to tremble, looked at the instructor, and shouted, "I'm a rabbit! I'm a rabbit!"

It is, of course, clear that the bear's claim is not the outcome of some intellectual conviction but rather arises as the result of external force, a strategy that is mirrored throughout history in the acts of various powerful political and religious groups. History is sadly littered with examples where the Church has used physical pressure to evoke belief. At its most horrifying there have even been times when religious authorities sanctioned the use of torture and execution in order to bring about confessions of belief. For example, during the Inquisition, which began around the late fifteenth century, whole communities were forced to change their religious allegiance or face severe persecution.

Unfortunately such examples of outward cruelty are simply the

most extreme and perverse expression of techniques that we still witness in more clandestine forms today. It is not unusual to find people who have undergone intense forms of psychological coercion in church—those who have been bombarded with fiery sermons detailing vivid images of eternal punishment for those who would refuse to accept Christ. In more contemporary evangelical churches, this approach has largely been replaced by a type of apologetics designed to convince listeners that, without God, there is no meaning to life, no moral code to live by, and no reason to value one's existence. This is no argument that hell awaits those who do not believe, but rather that those who do not believe already dwell in a type of hell.

This technique can prove particularly effective when deep suffering and desperation strike a person; it is not uncommon for someone to be coaxed into a confession of faith on his or her deathbed or upon his or her return from the deathbed of one they love.

There is, however, an important difference between the religious confession that is wrought through persecution and the religious confession that is evoked through images of a world without meaning. For while the former, like that of the bear in the above story, is addressed to other people, the later is addressed to the self. That is, the person who affirms God through fear of persecution makes the claim in order to convince another, while people who affirm God through fear of hell or meaninglessness seek to convince themselves.

It might seem strange that someone can be convinced of an idea as a result of external force, but this is actually one of the primary

ways that we come to hold any belief. There is a famous experiment in which someone was hypnotized and then told to carry an open umbrella around the room. When they were taken out of hypnosis, they were asked to explain why they had performed the act, and in response, the individual offered up a number of explanations, all of which betrayed the fact that they thought the desire was an internal one, not caused by external factors. This process, which has since been proven time and time again, is called *rationalization*. Rationalization involves an individual making up reasons for a behavior or belief that covers over the real (often external) cause.

We see this process most clearly in children, for they are less able to hide the process of rationalization than adults. Children will think up a lot of false reasons to justify their actions when they have been caught doing something that they were not supposed to do—reasons not only designed to justify their actions to their parents, but also to themselves.

We also see this play out in the way that we tend to read books and watch programs that agree with our already existing worldview. We often use the information we have just learned to pretend to others and ourselves that we have chosen our beliefs because of that information, instead of admitting that we believed beforehand and simply used the information to back it up.

We should not get too caught up here in trying to work out the extent to which one believes because of evidence, socialization, or psychological need. At this point we should simply take a little time to reflect upon how the idea of a Supreme Reality (which will manifest itself in a multitude of different ways—including

post-theistic forms, such as claims to Destiny, Fate, or a Cosmic Principle) provides great psychological comfort, and therefore is easy to spread and difficult to question.

God As a Function

Near the end of his life, the theologian and activist Dietrich Bonhoeffer became concerned that the Christian understanding of God had been largely reduced to the status of a psychological crutch. He described this understanding of God as *deus ex machina*.

This phrase, which literally means “God out of the machine,” originally refers to a technique used in ancient Greece in which a person would be lowered onto the stage via a mechanism in order to signify the introduction of a supernatural being. The process, however, got a bad name whenever many second-rate playwrights used this device in a rather lazy and arbitrary way. If they wanted to kill off a character, create a new challenge for the main antagonist to overcome, or resolve a conflict in the plot, they would simply wheel in a god to make it happen. In this way, the supernatural being was not an organic part of the story but rather an intrusive presence employed purely to move the plot along or resolve an issue.

As a result of this, the term *deus ex machina* came to mean the introduction of something that was not part of the internal logic of an unfolding story but instead a clumsy device dropped into the narrative purely to perform a specific role.

One of the most infamous examples of deus ex machina in television history is from the long-running soap opera *Dallas*. At the end of season six, Patrick Duffy, who played the character Bobby Ewing, wanted to leave the show. As a result, the writers, as one might expect, killed off the character. However, after the death, it became obvious that he was one of the most popular characters on the show, and the ratings quickly began to suffer. After convincing Patrick Duffy to return, they ended season seven with one of the most surreal cliffhangers in television history. Moments before the credits roll, we see Bobby Ewing's widow wake up and approach the bathroom. When she opens the door, she is shocked, as are the viewers, to find her husband alive and well, standing in the shower. The reason? Season seven was nothing but *his wife's dream*.

Here the dream sequence functions as a device that has nothing to do with the internal logic of the story. The dream sequence was “dropped” into the *Dallas* narrative simply to help resolve a problem in the story. Contrast this with Christopher Nolan's film *Inception*. Unlike the dream sequence in *Dallas*, which was not part of the structure of the overarching narrative, dreaming is central to the logic of *Inception*. While in *Dallas* it is a foreign notion imposed upon the soap opera's universe, in *Inception* the dreaming is an integral part of the universe.

For Bonhoeffer, the Church approached God as a deus ex machina. God was merely an idea clumsily dropped into our world in order to fulfill a task. God was introduced into the world on our terms in order to resolve a problem rather than expressing a lived reality. The result is a God who simply justifies our beliefs and

helps us sleep comfortably at night. God is brought into the picture only when we face a problem of some kind that doesn't lend itself to solution by other means. In Bonhoeffer's view, this God plays the same meager role as the supernatural beings in third-rate Greek plays.

The God of Philosophy

When faced with the idea that everything is fleeting, that our lives are insignificant, that everyone we know will turn to dust, that no one will remember us, and that everything we have accomplished will be forgotten in the unending march of time, we can despair. The thought that our cosmic golf game, no matter how beautifully played, is being observed by no one can prove too much for us to bear.

In order to protect ourselves from this experience, we are tempted to relate to God as the cosmic spectator who gives life meaning.

Consider how many of us turn to the religious life in times of trouble. Here the *deus ex machina* is something that comforts us in moments of crisis or when we are faced with a phenomenon we cannot describe. This is perfectly natural. We desire a being that can be wheeled in to either protect us in a way that our family, friends, and community can't, or to give a supernatural explanation for what we cannot understand. This God is, however, a concept that we create—what Pascal called “the God

of philosophy.” Such is the temptation to embrace this God of human thought that the apostle Paul wrote,

See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.¹

This God of philosophy is ultimately impotent. When it takes center stage, faith is reduced to an idea that helps us cope with life, and theology is reduced to a form of theodicy (the discipline that seeks to provide reasons why God allows suffering and evil). As a result we are left with nothing but a hollow and deceptive philosophy. Here the God of philosophy—the *deus ex machina*—rises to the ascendancy, and we lose sight of the world-transforming message of Christianity.

Because of our natural fears concerning life and its impending end, convincing people to embrace God as a crutch can be so very easy. It is no surprise that those preachers with perfect smiles and white suits fill stadiums week after week with their slick sales talk concerning a being that ensures everything will work out well in the end. It's easy to convince us to believe because we want certainty. We have a deep-seated longing to confirm our desire for an ordered universe: a universe that makes sense, a universe in which we are special, valued, and eternal. And on top of it all, like the child who rationalizes her behavior, we have a deep desire to convince ourselves that we believe for reasons other than mere psychological need. Hence we will often

seek out evidence to support the already existing belief and then pretend that our belief arose from the evidence.

But the result is a faith that exists only at the very margins of our life, a faith that only has something to offer when we feel depressed, or scared, or when we face death. But what if someone actually enjoys life and embraces it? God as a psychological crutch would seem to have nothing to offer at all. The only option left for the apologist who is confronted by someone who actually enjoys life is to attempt to show that they are really in denial and crying out for this God in a disavowed way. If they cannot succeed in convincing the happy person that they are really unhappy, then they have nothing left to offer and must reject them as one caught up in rebellion, deception, and defiance.

While Bonhoeffer believed that the God of religion had run its course, the reality would appear somewhat different. Some of the biggest organizations in the world are religious, and there would seem to be no end to people filling the collection plates of those who claim to have the solution. There is an army of individuals who eagerly support their ministries, buy their books and fill their pews. Getting people to believe in some form of deus ex machina is as easy as getting children to believe in Santa Claus.

In contrast, inviting people to open up to the experience of doubt and unknowing is much more tricky: The religious God provides us with such stability that the experience of losing it involves nothing less than the horrifying experience of being forsaken. Such a journey into darkness can be so unnatural and frightening that we

avoid this narrow path at all costs, even turning violently on anyone who would encourage us to do so.

The one who commits themselves to the task of helping people really enter into doubt, unknowing, and ambiguity needs to be ten, twenty, even a hundred times better than those who sell certainty. They have got to be prepared to walk a difficult and often dangerous path if they wish to invite people into this murky and uncertain world, for in doing so they bring to the surface a whole host of anxieties that we spend so much of our time and resources repressing. It is understandable that certain pastors fill stadiums with people longing to solidify their already established desires, reconverting people to what they have converted to so many times before. Getting people to believe is easy precisely because it is so natural for us. Any persuasive human can do it—and even make some money in the process. But to truly unplug from the God of religion, with all the anxieties and distress this involves, takes courage.

Indeed, one could say that it takes God.