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Gladys GANIEL & Gerardo MARTI

Northern Ireland, America and the Emerging Church Movement: Exploring the Significance of Peter Rollins and the Ikon Collective

ABSTRACT: The Emerging Church Movement (ECM) is a primarily Western religious phenomenon, identifiable by its critical 'deconstruction' of 'modern' religion. While most prominent in North America, especially the United States, some of the most significant contributors to the ECM 'conversation' have been the Belfast-based Ikon Collective and one of its founders, philosopher Peter Rollins. Their rootedness in the unique religious, political and social landscape of Northern Ireland in part explains their position on the 'margins' of the ECM, and provides many of the resources for their contributions. Ikon's development of 'transformance art' and its 'leaderless' structure raise questions about the institutional viability of the wider ECM. Rollins' 'Pyrotheology' project, grounded in his reading of post-modern philosophy, introduces more radical ideas to the ECM conversation. Northern Ireland's 'Troubles' and 'marginal' location provides the ground from which Rollins and Ikon have been able to expose the boundaries of the ECM and raise questions about just how far the ECM may go in its efforts to transform Western Christianity.

KEYWORDS: Emerging Church Movement, Ikon, Peter Rollins, Evangelicalism, A/theism, Transformance Art

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Introduction[1]

At the 2011 Greenbelt Festival in Cheltenham, the Ikon collective from Belfast, Northern Ireland,[2] staged a performance titled 'Based on a ~~True~~ Story.' It was held in one of the larger venues, a testament to Ikon's on-going popularity at Greenbelt. Greenbelt is an annual 'faith, arts and justice' festival that appeals primarily to people from evangelical and increasingly 'post-evangelical' or 'Emerging' Christian perspectives. It is a place where such Christians go to worship, network with like-minded people, and explore new ideas about their faith. While primarily attracting participants from the UK and Northern Ireland, there is significant attendance from North America, which often provides marquee speakers with the likes of Jim Wallis ('spiritual advisor' to Presidents Obama and Clinton), Brian McLaren, Rob Bell and others having featured on past programmes.

The visual centrepiece of Ikon's event was a woman in a spectacular, flowing paper dress, pecking away at an old-fashioned typewriter. Her costume, and that of other participants, had been painstakingly constructed out of paper, featuring carefully chosen texts and images to go along with the stories that each performer would tell. The striking visual images of characters dressed in paper clothes conveyed that all of us are stories, with stories to tell. The performance was divided into five acts or 'chapters,' which enticed people to reflect on themes such as God as a story, what happens when people believe opposing stories about the past or religion, and that the 'truth' of the Christian story is found not in doctrines, but in lives well-lived. It concluded with a ritual, where people in the audience were asked to stand up in silence, turn to look at a stranger, and hold their gaze. They were instructed: 'Like in a library of stories, be silent. Hold the person's gaze. Imagine their story.' Slowly, they were asked to take one silent step towards the stranger, then another, holding their gaze, until they were close enough to reach out and hold their hand. They were asked to lean forward and 'Whisper your name, which is part of your story.' The final liturgy again located the sacredness of story in a life well lived, even among 'strangers' (a term often used in the bible to describe traditional enemies) with the words:

> May we embrace our INCARNATION in capital letters. For our chief end, perhaps, is to storify God and enjoy each other forever.
>
> God is a story that loves to be told. Once upon a time …

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[1] The research for this article included interviews and participant observation of Ikon and its activities, primarily 2003-2005 and 2010-2012, and informal involvement with Ikon 2006-2009, 2013. It is part of our wider, Trans-Atlantic research on the ECM. We are grateful for comments received on an earlier version of this paper at the conference of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions, 10-12 May 2013, Dublin, and further comments from Graeme McKibbon and Graham Dean. We thank Ikon for their ongoing feedback.

[2] We refer to Ikon as a product of the Northern Ireland context. Northern Ireland, which is a part of the United Kingdom, is a contested geographical space and the use of the term Northern Ireland also is contested. Many people from 'Catholic, nationalist, and/or republican' (and a very few from 'Protestant, unionist, and/or loyalist' backgrounds) identify with the Republic of Ireland and advocate a 'united Ireland.' They would often rather refer to the 'north of Ireland' rather than 'Northern Ireland.' While using the term 'Northern Ireland,' we acknowledge that it is important to locate Ikon within both UK and Ireland developments in religion.

A performance like 'Based on a ~~True~~ Story' is an example of Ikon's now-signature 'transformance art,' a genre of expression that exists on the fringes of the Emerging Church Movement (ECM). Ikon participants smile wryly when they tell their own story about when they took their performances out of pubs and other small venues in Belfast onto the big stage at Greenbelt, and how they were told that 'there is an emerging church movement, and Ikon is at the forefront of it.' They tell this story to emphasize that despite the feedback they receive at Greenbelt – and from scholars of religion like us – they see themselves as outside of the emerging church. Indeed, Ikon participants are somewhat bemused and occasionally annoyed when they are expected to assume an 'emerging' label.

The ECM is primarily a Western Christian, Trans-Atlantic phenomenon that is most visible in the United States.[3] One of Ikon's primary founders, Peter Rollins, is readily identified with the ECM in the US, especially after his emigration there in 2009 – though his work is less known on the island of Ireland. A founding editor of the religion department of *Publisher's Weekly* has described Rollins as 'singularly well-equipped to be one of the outstanding thinkers and theologians of the twenty-first century' (Tickle 2012, 222). We see both Rollins and Ikon as inextricably bound up with wider sociological and religious trends that have created fertile environments in the West for the development of the ECM, a phenomenon we explore in depth in our book, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (Marti and Ganiel 2014). But we also see Northern Ireland as a distinctive place, emerging from a generation of conflict known as the Troubles, which has given birth to a unique religious group and founder. In an interview with Rollins in 2004, he described Belfast as a city 'haunted' by religion, and people involved with Ikon invariably refer to the violence and social segregation in Belfast when they talk about Ikon's formation, and what they see as Ikon's attempts to create 'non- sectarian' religious 'space.' People involved with Ikon generally hold to a common sense view that religion has had something to do with the violence in Northern Ireland, and that the institutional churches have not done enough to transcend sectarianism. It is Ikon and Rollins' origins in this unique context that has helped make it so distinctive from most expressions of the ECM, especially in the US. Below, we define the ECM and explore its Trans-Atlantic reach, comparing its presence in the religious landscapes of the US and the UK/Northern Ireland/Ireland. We explore how Ikon's development of transformance art and its leaderless structure not only reflect its Northern Ireland context, but also raise questions about institutional viability for the ECM. We then examine Rollins' body of written work, showing how he has introduced more radical ideas to the ECM conversation. From their positions on the margins of Emerging Christianity, Ikon and Rollins expose the potential and the limitations of the movement.

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[3] Tickle (2012) has argued that there are expressions of 'emergence Christianity' in the Global South. But we see the ECM as predominantly a Western phenomenon. The ECM is a distinct response to the wider social, political, economic, and religious forces that have shaped modernity in the West. The ECM both reacts *against* modernity, and simultaneously *draws on* modern Western conceptions of the self and community to produce a form of religiosity that is well-suited to our era. We do not rule out the possibility that ECM-type congregations could develop or are developing in other parts of the world. In fact, many of the anti-institutional and anti-hierarchical aspects of the ECM bear similarities to global Pentecostalism. But for now, the evidence locates the ECM firmly in the West.

Defining the Emerging Church Movement

The ECM is notoriously difficult to define, not least because its participants deliberately resist definition. Observing that many of the most prominent leaders and participants come from evangelical backgrounds, it has been characterized variously as a reform movement within evangelicalism or as 'hipster Christianity' (McCracken 2010), a sort of evangelicalism in disguise which attempts to reach a younger generation with 'cool' alternative worship experiences. Critics have claimed it is a rehashed liberal Protestantism or a 'pick n' mix' form of religious consumerism where participants draw from a variety of Christian traditions what seems right to them (Carson 2005). Social science and religious studies scholars have preferred to situate it as a viable response to modern or post-modern social and religious trends (Marti and Ganiel 2014, Moody 2014, Packard 2012, Tickle 2012, Bielo 2011, Gay 2011).

Participants often refuse to define the ECM outright and prefer to refer to it as a 'conversation' that embraces irony and contradiction rather than a network of new churches or a new movement (Gibbs and Bolger 2005). Key thinkers and leaders such as Rollins, Bell, and McLaren have portrayed faith itself as a conversation. Participating in the conversation is seen as a quest not to arrive at final answers about faith, but rather to keep the conversation going – raising 'unanswerable' questions is a means of expressing faith or experiencing God. Social scientists observing this emphasis on 'faith as conversation' argue that it is an effective strategy whereby congregations, groups and collectives within the ECM resist 'institutionalization' (Marti and Ganiel 2014, Packard 2012, Bielo 2011, 2009). Maintaining the conversation means that participants are not urged to assent to creeds or a check-list of beliefs and behaviours – all strategies that more long-standing religious institutions use to encourage conformity. Moreover, manifestations of the ECM—including Ikon—are fleeting and impermanent. As John Caputo writes, "Ikon is hardly an institution at all, a more literally and visibly deconstructive quasi-institution. It is relatively new and no one knows how long it will be around" (Caputo 2007, 129).

We have chosen to refer to the 'Emerging Church Movement' rather than use other terms in common use in both popular and scholarly literature, such as 'emergent Christianity,' 'emergence Christianity' (Moynagh 2012, Tickle 2008, 2012, 112), the church: emerging (Gay 2011, xiii) or the 'emerging church milieu' (Moody 2012). In this we agree with Tony Jones, who compares networks of emerging congregations to new social movements (Jones 2011). Like Jones, we have observed how the activities of Emerging Christians resemble those of social activists in other social movements. We also think the term 'movement' captures the fluidity and dynamism of emerging congregations. But quite apart from people in Ikon, many participants in the ECM have not heard of it by name or choose not to identify with it.

For scholars of religion, this lack of identification creates a dilemma. We have addressed this by conceiving of Emerging Christians as sharing a *distinct religious orientation built on a continual practice of deconstruction*. This practice of deconstruction encourages individualism and deep relationships with others; explores new ideas around the nature of truth, doubt, and God, and has led to innovations in preaching, worship, Eucharist, and leadership. For us the term *orientation* rather than identity allows us to convey that there is a wide spectrum of beliefs and practices within the ECM. While people may disagree, they can still

be considered part of the *movement* or *conversation.* The concept of orientation also allows us to recognize that people within the ECM hold multiple identities simultaneously, and that identification as 'Emerging' may be only occasionally important in their everyday lives (if ever). This leads us to characterize the ECM as an *institutionalizing structure,* made up of a package of beliefs, practices and identities which are continually deconstructed and reframed by the *religious institutional entrepreneurs* who drive the movement (Marti and Ganiel 2014). But Emerging Christians are somewhat unique institutional entrepreneurs, in that one of their primary purposes is to resist the institutionalization of their faith, rather than to reform or create new institutions (Packard 2012). As such, the conversations and activities of the ECM take many institutional or quasi-institutional forms, including independent congregations (large and small), pub churches, conferences, online networks, neo-monastic communities and arts collectives.

The Trans-Atlantic Reach of the Emerging Church Movement

The ECM has its primary origins within Protestant evangelicalism. One of the most cited definitions of evangelicalism focuses on four key characteristics: the need to have a conversion experience or be 'born again,' the belief that the bible is the inspired (or literal) word of God, the belief that Christ's death and resurrection were historical events necessary for salvation, and an emphasis on evangelism (converting others) and/or socio-political action through serving others or influencing public policy (Bebbington 1989). Evangelicalism has a significant presence within Protestantism in both the US and Northern Ireland. Based on the Angus Reid survey of 'True Believers,' 28 per cent of American Protestants could be considered evangelicals (Noll 2001, 32-36, 41). Northern Ireland was not part of the Angus Reid survey, but estimates put evangelicals at 25-33 per cent of the Protestant population (Mitchell and Ganiel 2011, Ganiel 2008, Mitchell and Tilly 2004, Boal et al. 1997). With so much of the energy of the ECM coming from its critique of evangelicalism, it is not surprising that the US and Northern Ireland provide fertile ground for the ECM.

Emerging Christians' critique of evangelicalism and other expressions of Christianity is often associated with personal struggle, pain and 'de-conversion' experiences where old beliefs, practices and friendships are left behind (Harrold 2006, chapter 3). Because of the lack of agreement within the ECM, encouraged by its conversational approach, it is not appropriate to compile a list of ideas and practices in the 'conversation' as typical. But there does seem to be a general consensus, at least in the published writings of public figures associated with the movement, that:

- The substitutionary theory of the atonement, that God the Father *required* Jesus to die to pay the debt for our sins, is wrong. Emerging Christians see this theory as promoting a kind of 'cosmic child abuse,' to use the terminology of the UK's Steve Chalke (Chalke 2003). The substitutionary theory has been the preferred interpretation of the crucifixion among evangelicals both in the US and Northern Ireland. In contrast, Emerging Christians have preferred to conceive of the crucifixion either in terms of scapegoating (drawing on Rene Girard's

theories) or as Christ's voluntary identification with our suffering, particularly the suffering of the socially and politically marginalized.

- 'Truth' is not objective and verifiable, something that can be discovered through reading the bible at face value or simply observing the world around you. Emerging Christians see such an approach to truth as rooted in the thinking of the Enlightenment and reflected in expressions of Christianity birthed out of the Enlightenment, such as Reformed Protestantism and evangelicalism. By way of contrast, Emerging Christians think of truth as being revealed through stories in which it is not 'objective facts' which matter, but rather how the story may transform the readers or listeners for the better. Emerging Christians also see truth as embodied in the life of Jesus on earth.

- It is okay to have doubts and questions about your faith; indeed, the absence of doubt means that you are probably sleepwalking in your faith. The embrace of doubt is contrasted to what is seen as an evangelical response to doubt – doubt is to be resisted, as it is a sign of your own weakness or a temptation from the devil.

- The all-powerful, judgemental 'God the Father' has been emphasized at the expense of the other persons of the Trinity: the earthly Jesus who identifies with the marginalized and calls Christians to live in solidarity with them, and the Holy Spirit who guides Christians on their individual spiritual quests.

Evangelicalism and its relatively close cousins, Pentecostal and charismatic Christianity, remain numerically much larger expressions of Christianity than the ECM. Using an internet search of Western countries that combined googling key words with contacting leaders of emerging congregations and asking them to identify other groups in their networks, Eddie Gibbs and Ryan K. Bolger (2005) estimated there are about 200 communities in the US and UK. James Bielo (2011) estimated over 700 communities in the US. Josh Packard's 'indicators' for 'the reach of the movement' are the Emergent Village cohorts, found in more than '60 cities in the U.S. and … in Japan, Ghana, and South Africa.' The Ginkworld database of 'self-identified Emerging Church congregations,' includes '300 in 39 U.S. states and Washington, D.C., 6 Canadian provinces, and 10 European countries along with New Zealand and Australia' (Packard 2012, 9). Apart from Ikon, the Dock (an experimental community in Belfast's Titanic Quarter), a now-defunct Emergent Cohort in Newtownards, and a handful of house groups and neo-monastic communities – of which the relatively prominent Corrymeela Community could be considered an example– the presence of the ECM in Northern Ireland remains small. In the still predominately Catholic Republic of Ireland, Emerging Christianity is almost unheard of, although there is a nascent neo-monastic movement.

Our description of the low numbers and lack of awareness of the ECM could lead to the conclusion that its Trans-Atlantic reach is quite limited, even so small as not to merit substantial scholarly research. But the influence of the ECM is greater than the numbers of explicitly identified groups. Its significance derives from the way it is contributing to the development of a distinct religious orientation, which we describe more fully in *The Deconstructed Church*. That this orientation can be found transnationally – in independent groups, in sub-groups

within congregations and denominations, and among individual Christians in traditional congregations and denominations – is significant. It is also an orientation that we expect to continue to appeal to Western populations that seem to be growing inexorably 'spiritual, but not religious' (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, Beck 2010).

Ikon

Ganiel (2006) has written previously that Ikon is an embodied critique of Northern Irish evangelicalism. Ikon emerged out of a volatile environment in which religion had a long history of helping to construct strong boundaries against those who were different. Historically, Calvinist and evangelical ideas justified the dominance of one group over the other, the resort to violence, and the mixing of religion with political goals. The emphasis of some evangelicals on the regulation of friendships and adherence to strict moral codes added further social pressure to identify with the ethno-religious community. While the ECM can be considered to be on the margins of the 'church' more generally, the Northern Irish context of religiously-tinged violence and churches that did not seem to be doing enough to contribute to peace may help explain why Ikon and Rollins can be considered to be on the margins of the ECM. Perhaps more than their North American counterparts, they have witnessed the real-world destructiveness of the religion they critique. This may make their critique more radical and in that sense even more 'marginal' than that of the wider ECM.

But Ikon participants do not claim that the Northern Ireland conflict has been *essentially* a religious one – and neither do we. The most recent phase of the conflict, the three decades of Troubles that culminated in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998, was not about religious doctrines or rooting out heresy. But religion played important roles in structuring oppositional Catholic and Protestant communities, as well as providing ideological/theological justification for dehumanization of the 'other,' and violence. Claire Mitchell's *Religion, Identity and Conflict in Northern Ireland* (2005), is the most sophisticated interpretation of the roles of religion in the conflict. Like Mitchell, we do not discount the colonial, economic and ethno-national interpretations of the conflict, and we especially recognize the inequalities of power that fuelled it, such as the historic dominance of Protestants over Catholics, and the historic dominance of the British state in Ireland (Ruane and Todd 1996). But allied to this, Mitchell explains how Catholicism and Protestantism function differently within the so-called communities that identify with them (see also Ganiel and Jones 2012). The Catholic Church, she argues, structures community life through shared rituals and practices, reinforcing a strong network of Catholic schools and the activities of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA). Protestantism, on the other hand, has supplied the raw materials for a strong ideology that justifies the dominance of honest, hard-working, freedom-loving Protestants over devious and superstitious Catholics. The inherently divided nature of Protestantism in Northern Ireland – the largest denominations are Presbyterian, Church of Ireland (Anglican) and Methodist but there are hundreds of smaller independent and evangelical churches – means that these religious ideas have worked to unify the so-called Protestant community over and against Catholics.

The subtitle of Mitchell's book is 'Boundaries of Belonging and Belief.' This provides a helpful framework for highlighting the aspects of Northern Irish religion which Ikon has critiqued, demonstrating how Ikon can be understood as de-constructing Northern Irish religion. The first word of her subtitle, 'boundaries,' captures the sense of a closed, inward-looking religious community. Especially in the work of Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, we see how both mental and physical boundaries (such as segregated cities, towns and villages, at times divided by imposing 'peace walls') have contributed to division and conflict. The next word, 'belonging,' emphasizes how important it is for people in Northern Ireland to identify with one of the 'two communities.' As Mitchell and Ganiel (2011) have explained, even people who resist this type of identification are usually forced into it by others. This makes identification with either of these two communities seem, for many, to be the only way that Northern Ireland's social and political worlds make sense. The final word, 'belief,' focuses on the content of Northern Ireland's opposing religious ideologies. As previously mentioned, Mitchell focuses on the importance of belief (ideology) for the Protestant community, building on earlier work by Wright (1973), Brewer and Higgins (1998) and Liechty and Clegg (2001). Ganiel (2008), Mitchell and Ganiel (2011), and Bruce (2007, 1986) have linked these ideas with Calvinist theology and the spread of evangelicalism, in effect arguing that a Calvinist-tinged evangelicalism has formed the 'core' of Protestant ethnic identity (Bruce) or that it has been integral to a distinct yet socially and politically influential evangelical subculture (Mitchell and Ganiel). Bruce goes so far as to say that the central importance of evangelicalism to Protestant ethnic identity is what explains the remarkable career of the Rev. Ian Paisley – a man unique in modern Europe for establishing his own Christian denomination (the Free Presbyterian Church) and his own political party (the Democratic Unionist Party - DUP). Patrick Mitchel (2003) has argued that a Calvinist-tinged evangelicalism eventually developed a privileged relationship with the political power of Ulster unionists, especially during the period of unionist-dominated government between 1921 and 1972, until 'direct rule' from Westminster was imposed as a reaction to the by then on-going Troubles.

While Northern Irish evangelicalism has been a political religion, it also has a strong social element. Many of Northern Ireland's smaller evangelical denominations are 'apolitical' in the sense that members are encouraged to keep out of politics and focus on their personal salvation and morality – the classic 'pietist' stance. Mitchell and Ganiel (2011) show how many evangelical churches strive to provide the main social relationships or 'community' for their members, often reinforcing or even replacing family life. Evangelicals in such churches are urged to *belong*, and belonging means limiting their friendships and romantic relationships to others who have been 'born again,' participating in a full schedule of church events, and adhering to moral codes around sexual behaviour, drinking, smoking, and so on. Many of these churches are male-dominated, with a charismatic male pastor. Finally, Northern Irish evangelicals often define themselves in terms of *what they believe,* rather than defining themselves in terms of how they live or what religious practices they engage in. For evangelicals, beliefs trump practices and an enormous amount of energy is spent on identifying and articulating 'right belief.' One of the main aspects of Rollins' project has been deconstructing the ideal of right belief (what we believe) in favour of right behaviour (how we believe).

So Ikon began life in 2000 with a core group, many of whom were students at Queen's University Belfast. They began staging monthly gatherings in the Menagerie, an Irish nationalist pub near the university, where people were invited to experience faith in a different way and to ask the difficult questions that Northern Ireland's closed religious communities often suppressed. Over time, the perceptions of people involved with Ikon about 'what Ikon is' have changed. In Ganiel's (2010, 2008, 2006) earlier research, conducted between 2002-2005, an Ikon participant called it and Zero28, a now defunct organization with which many Ikon participants were also involved, a 'support group for misfits.' She seemed to conceive of Ikon as an alternative church. Just like the evangelical churches she had attended in the past, Ikon and Zero28 provided her with spiritual and emotional support, as well as a sense of belonging. Ikon *was* her religious community. Ganiel (2010) argued that Ikon served as a 'haven' for people to explore ideas and experiences that were off-limits in other religious traditions, reflecting or leading to a loosening of ethnic and political identities, while Mitchell and Ganiel (2011) concluded that it was 'post' evangelicals' involvement in the communal aspect of groups like Ikon that kept those who were questioning their faith from abandoning it altogether. Ganiel had estimated that about half of the people who attended Ikon also attended an institutional church. In the intervening years, some of those who had left an institutional church have now returned, especially people on the Cyndicate, Ikon's planning group.[4] In Ganiel's more recent interviews (2011-2012), people involved with Ikon described how the group has wrestled with whether or not to describe itself as a community, an emerging church, or a church at all.

The term that most people now seem most comfortable with is 'collective,' which captures for them the cooperative and creative aspects of Ikon. The collective rather than community ideal is neatly summed up by Ikon's 'non membership' cards, mentioned by several of Ganiel's interviewees. For people in Ikon, 'community' seems to imply the structured mechanisms of mutual support that one might find through attending a conventional congregation or living in an intentional neo-monastic community, and this is not what Ikon is about. Some participants who at one point had left an institutional church and were attending only Ikon, admitted that previously they had thought of Ikon as an alternative church, but now realized that this was not 'healthy.' Jon Hatch, who never left church but who became Catholic after being raised and spending much of his adult life in Protestant churches, said:

> Is Ikon a church? Is it not a church? … I like leaving Ikon very uncategorizable. I think one time [people asked] Pete … is Ikon Christian? And he said, 'What an absurd question. Of course it isn't, because we don't feed the poor, we don't clothe the naked, we don't visit the prisoners, we don't do any of those kinds of things – of course it isn't Christian. And if you don't do any of those things neither are you.' … You'd have to ask everybody [within Ikon if it was their church] but if it were somebody's church I would be very alarmed because I don't want that responsibility of telling you how to feel, how to think, how to believe, or how to act. And there are atheists at Ikon and I want to protect their ability to be there too.

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[4] The term 'Cyndicate' reflects 'both the self-organization, diversity and common purpose of a syndicate, and the counter-culturalism of the Greek cynics' (Moody 2012, 188).

A playful 'FAQ' section on Ikon's website includes questions such as – Is ikon Christian? Is ikon a church? Does ikon believe in god? Who is in ikon? Who's in charge? – but no answers.[5] In 2001, Ikon's self-described 'non-definition' of itself included five 'coordinates': Iconic, Apocalyptic, Heretical, Emerging and Failing. These were listed on its original website (now retired). They feature on its current Facebook page and the Pyrotheology website[6] with fuller descriptions of what is meant by each term. As Rollins explained to Ganiel in 2004:

> Iconic is the first part of the mission statement and is again central to who we are. ... There are two ways to perceive something – you can perceive it as an idol or an icon. Idol ... means to get the essence of the thing ... In a sense we're saying a lot of Enlightenment religion is about making conceptual idols of God, domesticating him via our discourse, our linguistics. And the other way of perceiving is an icon. An icon is that thing that seduces your gaze beyond the visible. The icon brings your gaze into another realm. ... If you lust after somebody, you reduce them to an idol. But if you love somebody, they become an icon. ... Instead of trying to know everything about what we believe, we try to create a space, an iconic space, where we can open ourselves to the possibility of somehow touching the divine.

Apart from its main gathering, Ikon has developed small group events such as the Last Supper (where invited speakers are questioned by a group of 12 over a meal), the Evangelism Project (where people from Ikon go to the services or special events of other religious groups and ask to be 'evangelized,' or to learn more about them), and the Omega course (a small group anti-'Alpha' course on how to 'exit' Christianity). During Ikon's earlier years people often discussed if they were 'a community.' Several interviewees spoke about tension around the idea of community, with Jonny McEwen saying, 'There was tension around the whole idea of community and I think for awhile we thought we might be becoming a community.' People within Ikon also questioned whether Ikon should try and build community in a more intentional way, similar to the intentional communities of the neo-monastics. However, refusing to become a 'community' frees them from the restraints associated with Northern Ireland's ethno-religious 'communities' or the highly socially-regulated 'communities' of some evangelical churches. It also frees them to focus on the *process* by which they plan and enact the gatherings. This process is dialogical and artistic, based on 'think tank' type sessions where people play with ideas around certain themes over time, attempting to reflect the diverse perspectives of the group through theatrical enactments, art, music and the spoken word. Several interviewees mentioned that they hoped that their planning sessions were as open as possible. Stephen Caswell described the Ikon process this way:

> My experience of Ikon is this melting pot of all the ideas, and people asking these great questions, and being really creative. It's just a fabulous group to be a part of. … I care about people in Ikon and I know they care about me, we do things for each other and all the rest, but it's not really

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[5] http://ikonbelfast.wordpress.com/faq/. Accessed September 17, 2013.
[6] http://pyrotheology.com/

the hub – it's not really my community day to day or in the way some churches might be.

Over time, Ikon has settled on the term 'transformation art' to describe its gatherings. The 'About' section of Ikon's current website explains it this way:[7]

Inhabiting a space on the outer edges of religious life, we are a Belfast-based collective who offer anarchic experiments in transformation art. Challenging the distinction between theist and atheist, faith and no faith our main gathering employs a cocktail of live music, visual imagery, soundscapes, theatre, ritual and reflection in an attempt to open up the possibility of a theodramatic event.

Ikon participants see theodramatic events as creating spaces where people are free to explore ideas and experiences that might be out of bounds in other religious communities or events. Rollins' (2006) *How (Not) to Speak of God* included examples of ten Ikon performances and three of these are described on the Pyrotheology website.[8] Our introduction featured Ikon's 2011 Greenbelt performance, while Moody's account of memorable Ikon moments provides a further flavour of how transformation art 'works' (Moody 2012, 194):

Often gatherings directly signal the wider theme of change and transformation. A film loop plays video of a Bible being ripped up, a knife slicing at the pages and a black marker pen blotting out verses, with another showing the pieces being pasted into a blank book with no attempt to recreate the original whole out of the fragments. A webpage displaying the Apostles' Creed is projected from a laptop and those gathered are invited to edit the text. ...

Other elements within the gatherings seek to themselves be the mechanisms through which a transformative event occurs. One Ikon interviewee recalls his reaction to a "gorgeous" sermon read out by a woman with a "mellifluous" Dublin accent that almost made him cry, only to be confronted with his own prejudices when it was revealed that the sermon is from Ian Paisley, his voice "booming out," raising the question of why the words are no longer "beautiful," and forcing him to think about "issues of truth and beauty." When it is her turn, a woman takes her position on a soap box, holding an open Bible as if she is about to read from it, looking up as if she is about to speak, and then lowering her head again to the pages in her hands. There is no ambient music and the silence is jarring after the long monologues given by the men before her. She turns a page and looks back up, again as if to speak, but there is still silence. Then, on the black screen behind her, are the words "Women should be silent in church, 1 Cor. 14:34," and there is a palpable ripple of profundity around the room.

Ikon events illicit various reactions from participants and attendees, but rarely are they comforting or reassuring in the way that some religious services are designed to be. Even though Ikon strives to create safe spaces, some

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[7] http://ikonbelfast.wordpress.com/about/. Accessed September 17, 2013.
[8] http://pyrotheology.com/practices/transformative-art-experience/format/. Accessed September 17, 2013.

participants thought that Ikon could be upsetting people and then leaving them without any means of support to work through difficult issues. Sarah Williamson admitted that her frustration around the lack of pastoral concern from Ikon with regard to members of the Cyndicate and attendees at gatherings even led to her leaving the Cyndicate for a period. Williamson explained her concern about the lack of pastoral consideration in Ikon activities by referring to the donut analogy that Rollins uses to explain Ikon.

> Ikon is a gravitational force which kind of brings people together and is nothing in itself. So people in Ikon, they care for each other, but Ikon as an organization does not care for you. I totally understand philosophically why that's a very interesting point. But I think I have significant reservations about it in terms of... people who are coming along to the type of event we were doing.

The 'donut analogy' captures the 'leaderless' ideal shared by some other groups within the ECM. At the least, most emerging congregations see non-hierarchical leadership as desirable, rather than entrusting the direction of the group to a pastor, cleric, or denominational structure. Strategies to foster non-hierarchical leadership include leadership teams made up of both the ordained and the non-ordained, employing the ordained on only a part-time basis, co-written sermons, eliminating expository sermons in favour of dialogical discussions about the bible, encouraging congregants to start their own initiatives, and so on. The extent to which congregations are able to achieve non-hierarchical leadership varies, and as Packard (2012) has observed, even supposedly non-hierarchical structures can still produce inequalities of power. This participatory ideal is important for people who feel that they have been overlooked or abused in previous congregations. Despite the assumption, especially in the US, that Rollins is a leader or even a pastor for Ikon, this is never how the collective has viewed his role. In an interview with *Christian Century* (2009), Rollins put it rather starkly when he summed up the way Ikon work:

> Paradoxically, I say, "Ikon doesn't care about you. Ikon doesn't give a crap if you are going through a divorce. The only person who cares is the person sitting beside you, and if that person doesn't care, you're stuffed." People will say, "I left the church because they didn't phone me when my dad died, and that was really hurtful." But the problem is not that the church didn't phone but that it promised to phone. I say, "Ikon ain't ever gonna phone ya." Pete Rollins might. But if he does, it will be as Pete Rollins and not as a representative of Ikon. Ikon will never notice if you don't come. But if you've made a connection with the person sitting next to you, that person might.

> Ikon is like the people who run a pub. It's not their responsibility to help the patrons become friends. But they create a space in which people can actually encounter each other.

Here, Rollins shifts responsibility from an institutional church, which is somehow seen as having a duty to support people during times of trauma and stress ('the church … promised to phone') to individual Christians who should love each other enough to offer their personal support during times of trauma and stress. When Rollins compares Ikon to 'the people who run a pub,' this can

be understood as an intentional strategy to remove the responsibility for care from institutional churches to *individual Christians,* who are expected to live as Christ did without needing the crutch of institutions and professional clerics to love on their behalf.

Unlike other groups within the ECM, Ikon's emphasis on 'transformance art,' coupled with its attempts to create a 'leaderless' structure, produces a collective that resonates more with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's nascent ideas around 'religionless Christianity' than the congregations of the ECM in the US. It is possible that the Northern Irish evangelicalism that many Ikon participants experienced as ritually stifling and authoritarian (with its dominance of charismatic male pastors) has had its part in pushing Ikon to the edge in these areas. As Rollins explores in a blog post[9]:

> I am sticking my neck out here, but I believe that we are beginning to witness the development of dynamic faith collectives which Bonhoeffer would have recognised as concrete manifestations of his lonely prison thoughts (though there are fewer of these groups than one might imagine – for instance I do not include the vast swarm of neo-evangelical, crypto-evangelistic communities which so often cloud the horizon). While ikon, the group of which I am a part, is not in any way perfect I see it as a key experiment in this new movement (others include *Aldea* in Tuscon and *The Garden* in Brighton).

What is important for Ikon and for Rollins is that 'religionless Chritianity' helps people to live after the death of God, or to live even as if there were no God. This means participating in gatherings where the failures of humanity and the darkness of crucifixion, doubt and abandonment by God are unflinchingly explored – and where people are urged to love and help one another rather than to hold out for God's magical, cosmic deliverance, or the intervention of a cleric or senior pastor. Influenced by its Northern Irish context, Ikon's significance to the wider ECM can be found in how its practices of transformance art and leaderless-ness unleash participants' creativity and force them to take responsibility for their own spiritual quests.

Peter Rollins

Unlike many of the leaders of the ECM in the US, Rollins has not been a pastor or studied theology formally. His academic background includes a BA in Scholastic Philosophy, a Master's in Political Theory and a PhD in Post-Structural thought, all from Queen's University Belfast. Rollins' contributions to the ECM conversation can be discerned through a reading of his books (2006, 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012), blog posts (peterrollins.net), Pyrotheology website, and interviews at conferences or in conventional media, often available online. Rollins has characterized his work as a 'Retroactive Justification' of Ikon (Moody 2012: 189). This was confirmed by some Ikon participants, who noted that Rollins' philosophical work provided them with a vocabulary to explain Ikon, as Stephen Caswell said:

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[9] 'Toward Religionless Christianity.' http://peterrollins.net/?p=51, posted June 20, 2008 and accessed September 17, 2013.

> I don't read continental philosophy. No more than maybe a few articles.
> […] I think Ikon primarily has been driven by people's experience, and
> then we've realized, largely with the help of Pete, spending all this time
> reading these books, that our experience fits these ideas rather than the
> other way round.

Compiling a formidable list of the main influences on Rollins (Friedrich
Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, Emmanuel Lévinas, Dietrich
Bonhoeffer, Meister Eckhart, Jean-Luc Marion, John D. Caputo and Slavoj
Žižek), Moody (2012, 188) concludes that, '… the originality and import of
[Rollins'] work comes from Rollins' theological engagement with continental
philosophy of religion and speculative philosophies like Žižek's dialectical
materialism specifically as a spur for religious practice.' We agree with Moody
that Rollins has taken philosophy much more seriously than leaders in the ECM
in the US. Since 2009, Rollins has increasingly used the term Pyrotheology to
'represent the overall project' of Ikon, as well as his own work. The Pyrotheology
website, launched in 2013, provides tips for other groups who wish to begin
practices similar to Ikon's. It includes audio testimonials from people involved
with Ikon, as well as videos of Rollins. Around the same time Rollins encouraged
the development of an Ikon New York City group, which organizes its own
gatherings. On the site, Pyrotheology is explained this way[10]:

> The word "pyrotheology" was first coined by Chris Fry, a member of
> Ikon, in 2009 for an event they ran at the Greenbelt Festival in the UK…
> Through a rich blend of live music, visual imagery, soundscapes, ritual,
> interrogative practices, discussion and personal reflection, the theory and
> practice of pyrotheology aims to help free people from the twin tyrannies
> of seeking certainty and satisfaction. Helping participants celebrate
> unknowing without anxiety and embrace the traumas of life without fear.

Though there is as yet little evidence that the term Pyrotheology has
gained momentum, we have identified four main areas in which we see Rollins'
ideas pushing the boundaries of the ECM. There are other aspects of his work
that could be investigated, but we focus on: 1) the limits of language, 2) mission,
3) doubt, and 4) a/theism. In all of these areas, Rollins is articulating critiques
which could be applied specifically to Northern Irish religion (especially
evangelicalism). In his forward to *How (Not) to Speak of God*, Brian McLaren also
recognized the distinctiveness of Rollins' thought – and linked it to his Northern
Irish context (2006, vii-viii):

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

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[10] http://pyrotheology.com/about. Accessed September 17, 2013.

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

But Rollins rarely refers to Northern Ireland's violent and religiously-divided context in his work. His ideas and critiques are always grounded in wider Western, American and Continental discussions, and his acceptance as a valued conversation partner in the North American ECM confirms that his work resonates beyond Northern Ireland.

The Limits of Language

The title of Rollins' first book is *How (Not) to Speak of God* – ironic, he acknowledges in his introduction, when he admits that maintaining fidelity to the title would have required leaving the book blank. *How (Not) to Speak of God* is Rollins first sustained attempt to argue that the 'right belief' or 'right doctrines' ways of understanding God and faith is not inherently Christian, but rather derives from a modernist way of looking at the world which sought to define reality in terms of objective truths. For Rollins, modernist thought created the impression that our finite minds could understand an infinite God, based on our 'rational' interpretations of scripture and the world around us. This critique echoes that of many post-modern philosophers. At the same time, Rollins draws on Hebraic thought and medieval mystics such as Meister Eckhart to argue that *what* we believe is not of primary importance – but *how* we believe is. A Christian, accordingly, should believe in the right way: loving unselfconsciously and without pretension. When this happens, contradictions make sense. Seeking and finding become one and the same; as does simultaneously saving your life and losing it. For Rollins this has practical implications for many areas of Christian life, such as engaging in ecumenical dialogue, evangelism and the way we handle biblical texts. Ecumenism becomes a way of discovering how different Christian traditions deal with the mystery of God. Evangelism becomes two-way dialogue in which the 'missionaries' are converted by those to whom they go. The bible is not read like a history text or newspaper, but as a collection of narratives that can speak to different people in different ways. Finally, Rollins emphasizes that there is much of God that remains unknowable, and our attempts to name him (in Hebraic thought to name God is to control him) are merely faintly disguised efforts to use him for our own purposes.

Rollins' 2009 book, *The Orthodox Heretic and Other Impossible Tales,* could be considered an effort to model alternative ways of speaking about God. The book features 33 of Rollins' original short 'tales,' followed by his interpretations of what these stories mean. Rollins is well-known for these stories in his public lectures, and they are often the parts of his talks that listeners remember after events end. In the introduction, Rollins likens his tales to parables. For him, 'the parable facilitates genuine change at the level of action itself.' Parables, then, are not concerned with revealing factual or objective truth, but transforming the listeners so that they become better people. But Rollins hesitates to claim the term 'parable,' as he is not ready to assert that his tales will have truly transformative effects on his readers. The use of tales, parables or stories is common within the ECM, and Rollins' ready adoption of them signals his appreciation of the

simultaneous limits and limitlessness of language. The parable, like an icon, points the reader or listener to something beyond, but without using *direct* words to dictate specific courses of action.

In 2009, BBC journalist William Crawley interviewed Rollins at an Ikon gathering in Belfast. He later blogged about his experience[11]:

> ... it was one of the oddest public interviews I can remember in a very long time. I was expecting conversation, but what emerged (sorry ...) was closer to a visit I might have made to a Sufi wise-man. I would ask a question, like, "Do you believe in God?", and Peter's answer would involve saying "Yes and No", followed by a parable, an illustration, a story, or a cryptic quotation. ... . If God is real, why would we expect to be able to talk for thirty minutes about that Reality in an ordered, neat conversation, using sentences with subjects, objects and predicates in self-evidently "correct" places. The philosopher Wittgenstein, in another context, spoke of language "going on holiday". That's what language did last night when I listened to Peter Rollins answering and not-answering my questions.

Crawley's description of the interview captures how Rollins talks in his lectures or 'performances,' a way of communicating that, as Crawley implies, can be frustrating for people who expect clear or direct answers. Rollins, more than public figures associated with the ECM in North America, seems willing to embrace such ambiguous ways of speaking about God. For him, it is the most appropriate way to exploit the limits and limitlessness of language, and to communicate about Christian experience.

Mission

We have already described how 'mission' has been a significant concern within the ECM. Almost all Emerging Christians cringe at the thought of what they consider old-style evangelical attempts to 'convert' people, such as open air preaching, sandwich boards, tracts, altar calls, roadside signs and church notice boards warning people that 'ye must be born again,' and so on. But Rollins takes what we would call an anti-conversionist approach to mission, best exemplified by Ikon's Evangelism Project, in which Ikon invites others to evangelize them. Anti-conversionism is an attempt to give up the position of power usually assumed by missionaries, and to break down boundaries between 'us' and 'them.' To illustrate this, Rollins often returns to the passage from Galatians 3:28: There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. He has rewritten it this way[12]:

> You are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither high church nor low church, Fox nor CNN, citizen nor alien,

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[11]'Peter Rollins and the God Question,'
http://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/ni/2009/10/peter_rollins_and_the_god_ques.html, posted October 5, 2009 and accessed September 17, 2013.
[12] 'Beyond the Colour of Each Other's Eyes.' http://peterrollins.net/?p=128, posted January 5, 2009 and accessed September 17, 2013.

> capitalist nor communist, gay nor straight, beautiful nor ugly, East nor West, theist nor atheist, Israel nor Palestine, hawk nor dove, American nor Iraqi, married nor divorced, uptown nor downtown, terrorist nor freedom fighter, paedophile nor loving parent, priest nor prophet, fame nor obscurity, Christian nor non-Christian, for all are made one in Christ Jesus.

This anti-conversionist approach to mission strives to create a Christianity that breaks down all barriers and the power relationships that sustain them. It favours a relationship-centred approach in which Christianity is already open to all. As such, traditional 'mission' is superfluous. It follows that the best form of mission is living out a model of loving community that is so compelling that others cannot help but be attracted to it. Rollins believes traditional approaches to mission or evangelism have prevented this kind of Christianity from flourishing. Here, Rollins departs quite far from the wider ECM in North America, particularly from Emerging Christians who conceive of their congregations as 'missional' and see mission as including converting others to their own or a similar Christian community.

Doubt

The freedoms to ask difficult questions and to express doubts about one's faith are hallmarks of the ECM. Emerging Christians' embrace of doubt can be considered a reaction to what they see as 'modern' Christianity's conception of doubt as an enemy of faith that should be resisted. Rollins has been developing ideas around doubt since *How (Not) to Speak of God.* But in an interview with Rob Bell, Rollins explained that a 'fundamental problem with my first book,' is that while it encouraged people to embrace doubt, it did not develop what it would mean to live with these doubts.[13] Rollins remedied this in the chapter of *Insurrection* titled 'I don't have to Believe, My Pastor does that for Me,' where he claims that when people affirm that doubt is okay, it does not necessarily lead to any changes in their behaviour. People still go to church and sing songs and hear sermons that affirm belief, providing security that everything will be okay. But Rollins sees this as people using the structures of religion to prop themselves up. His assessment echoes Bonheoffer's thesis that Christians have created a 'God of religion' who functions more like a psychological crutch to give them what they want and to make them feel good about themselves. But Rollins wants his readers to 'get rid of the need to believe' (Rollins 2011, 76). Drawing on the example of Mother Teresa, Rollins says that she lived as a Christian even though her private writings have now revealed how she spent most of her life 'beneath the shadow of a profound sense of God's absence' (Rollins 2011, 77). As developed in *Insurrection,* the ability to embrace doubt and enter into an experience of the absence of God is what it means to identify with Christ's crucifixion. For Rollins, embracing doubt enables Christians to live as if God does not exist, which should result in a life of love lived fully in the here and now, not necessarily in the hereafter. Rollins does not want people to see doubts as things that come and go; rather doubt is required if Christians are to live authentically, or as Rollins puts it, a/theistically. Because it occupies such a central place in his

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[13] "Changing the Structure," http://vimeo.com/26423428. Accessed September 26, 2013.

development of a/theism (explained below), doubt is much more important for Rollins' ideas about how to live like a Christian than it is for Emerging Christians in North America.

A/Theism

Rollins' debt to Continental philosophy is most obvious in his development of a/theism, a concept commonly associated with Žižek. Moody emphasizes Žižek's importance to Rollins, identifying the 'key elements of a Žižekian atheology' as (2012, 85):

> the double *kenosis* [self-emptying] of the divine, the "Holy Spirit" as the community of believers, the Pauline character of that community of love, and the revolutionary political collective as the possibility today of a "really existing" community of believers.

Žižek, Moody admits, claims that the only genuinely Pauline communities that exist today are outside of the boundaries of the institutional church – for Žižek, it is atheist communist collectives that are living out Christianity. Moody wants to argue that emerging collectives like Ikon are also genuinely Pauline, i.e. living out Christianity. It helps Moody's case that Rollins is articulating this argument as he attempts to explain Ikon, though she acknowledges that further social research is needed to confirm whether collectives like Ikon change the way people live, for example in terms of the socio-political identities they assume or the economic decisions they make.

Rollins' own definitions of a/theism seem to have changed over time. *How (Not) to Speak of God* includes a description of the Ikon gathering titled 'A/theism,' where the concept is explained like this (Rollins 2006, 98):

> This a/theistic approach is one that understands how our questioning of God is never really a questioning of God but only a means of questioning our understanding of God. … This approach … allows us to maintain an unflinching belief *in* God (as one believes *in* a person one trusts) while maintaining humility when attempting to describe *what* exactly God is. … 'A/theism' was designed to offer us a greater appreciation of God's greatness, a renewed openness to learning from other people's understanding of God and a deeper commitment to a faith that is enhanced, rather than enslaved, by a particular Christian tradition.

This is a rather tame articulation of a/theism when compared to *The Fidelity of Betrayal,* where Rollins urges readers to seek the transformative *event* of God rather than to worry about making a case for the *existence* of God; or *Insurrection* and *The Idolatry of God*, where he emphasizes the felt *absence* of God, and argues that to live authentically as Christians means to live *as if God does not exist.* In a blog post, Rollins writes about this as 'incarnational a/theism'[14]:

> By "Incarnational a/theism" I am referring, not to an intellectual disavowal of God, but to the *felt experience of God's absence*; an experience that must be distinguished from the idea of a mere absence of experience.

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[14] http://peterrollins.net/?p=2428. Posted March 15, 2011 and accessed September 17, 2013.

> To understand the difference take a moment to think about the difference between the absence that exists before you meet someone you later come to love and the absence you experience once they are gone.

For Rollins, Christ experienced the absence of God on the cross when he cried out, 'my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This was a moment when Christ became an atheist. Rollins fears that the churches have denied this experience of the absence of God, and have urged believers to view God like a cosmic vending machine, spreading the 'good news' that God fulfils our wishes and only wants to make us happy and satisfied. But for Rollins the good news of Christianity, summarized on the back cover of *The Idolatry of God*, is: 'You can't be satisfied, life is difficult, and you don't know the secret.' In this book, Rollins argues that in a capitalistic, market-driven world, the churches have made God just one more product to satisfy our needs. Rollins says this view of God is idolatry, writing in a section titled 'God does not exist, is not sublime and has no meaning' that we experience God's existence when we are able to love the world, which then 'renders the world meaningful' (2012, 130). Along with this, Rollins shifts discussion of the resurrection from debates about whether it was a verifiable historical event, to redefining resurrection as a 'mode of living.' He links this interpretation to his understanding of a/theism, as he explains (2012, 160-161)*:*

> In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus forsakes everything for God (the highest religious gesture) but, on the Cross, we bear witness to Christ being forsaken by God (the atheistic moment). Then, in the Resurrection, we discover that God remains, *dwelling in our very midst through the embrace of life.* This is where the radical doubt of the Crucifixion is rendered sublime, where a new understanding of God is born and a type of a/theistic Christianity is glimpsed. We may call this new opening a/theism insomuch as we witness the move from traditional theism, through atheism to something that unifies and transcends them. A place where, 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.

Now, it seems, Rollins' conception of a/theism is dependent on his definitions of crucifixion (experiencing and embracing doubt) and resurrection (an authentic mode of living, as if God does not exist). The way Rollins describes a/theism asks Christians to push what they think about God and what it means to live like a Christian further than most public figures in the ECM in North America have been willing to go.

Concluding Reflections

Institutionally, Ikon's practices push the ECM to ask questions about how far it is willing to go in developing what could be described as a 'leaderless' or an 'anti-institutional' Christianity. Ikon strives for a leaderless structure and mode of organizing. Its transformance art gatherings are not thought of as devotional nor are they necessarily meant to facilitate a worshipful response. Rather, Ikon gatherings create 'spaces' where people ask questions, explore the complexities

of faith with all its doubts, and support people on their individual spiritual quests. Ikon does not see itself as 'church' or as replacing church. Yet Ikon's very existence forces those involved in the Emerging conversation to question just what sort of 'church' institutions are needed to sustain Christianity.

Ideationally, Rollins' work on language, anti-conversionism, doubt and a/theism takes Emerging Christians further into conversation with Continental philosophy than is usual in the North American ECM, although McLaren, Bell, Jones and others will refer to post-modern thinkers to demonstrate that we have moved into a post-modern era and to argue that Christianity therefore needs to change. By way of contrast, Rollins' Pyrotheology project plays with language to expose its inadequacies when speaking about God, eschews 'mission' in favour of 'living as if God does not exist,' sees doubt as central to Christian experience, and develops an overarching conception of a/theism in which crucifixion and resurrection are redefined.

In our wider research for *The Deconstructed Church*, we found that most within the North American ECM, particularly anonymous participants rather than public figures, do not follow Rollins' thinking in these areas to its conclusion. People still strive to 'name' God or describe their experience of him in relatively concrete terms, conceive of Christianity as a 'missional' religion which involves more than learning from others without trying to change them, and think of doubt as something that comes and goes and that may be helpful – but that is not as central to the way they live as Christians. Few Emerging Christians could wax lyrical about Pyrotheology or a/theism, and would not commonly think of crucifixion and resurrection in the ways Rollins advocates. But Rollins pushes Emerging Christians to think about what is happening beyond superficial nods to post-modernism. His critiques of Christianity, including critiques of its most 'dysfunctional' forms, like the ethno-religious ideologies of Northern Ireland or the religious patriotism of the 'American Empire,' are not always developed within the North American ECM conversation. So like Ikon, Rollins asks the ECM how far it is willing to go. Is it satisfied to reform or create quasi-institutional structures, or is a more wholesale reworking of Christian institutions and theology required? Is it satisfied to emphasize individual spiritual quests, or will it seek to develop a 'religionless' Christianity that operates outside the reach of ideologies and empires? Northern Ireland's 'Troubles' and 'marginal' location provides the ground from which Peter Rollins and Ikon have been able to expose the boundaries of the ECM and raise questions about just how far the ECM may go in its efforts to transform Western Christianity. The Northern Irish context may make it seem 'obvious' that Rollins and Ikon should develop critiques of politicized Christianity – but can Emerging Christians in the US do the same?

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