

The Divine Magician: The Disappearance of Religion and the Discovery of Faith

By Peter Rollins

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In this mind-bending exploration of traditional Christianity, firebrand Peter Rollins turns the tables on conventional wisdom, offering a fresh perspective focused on a life filled with love.

Peter Rollins knows one magic trick—now, make sure you watch closely. It has three parts: the Pledge, the Turn, and the Prestige. In *Divine Magician*, each part comes into play as he explores a radical view of interacting with the world in love.

Rollins argues that the Christian event, reenacted in the Eucharist, is indeed a type of magic trick, one that is echoed in the great vanishing acts performed by magicians throughout the ages. In this trick, a divine object is presented to us (the Pledge), disappears (the Turn), and then returns (the Prestige). But just as the returned object in a classic vanishing act is not really the same object—but another that looks the same—so this book argues that the return of God is not simply the return of what was initially presented, but rather a radical way of interacting with the world. In an effort to unearth the power of Christianity, Rollins uses this framework to explain the mystery of faith that has been lost on the church. In the same vein as Rob Bell's bestseller *Love Wins*, this book pushes the boundaries of theology, presenting a stirring vision at the forefront of re-imagined modern Christianity.

As a dynamic speaker as he is in writing, Rollins examines traditional religious notions from a revolutionary and refreshingly original perspective. At the heart of his message is a life lived through profound love. Just perhaps, says Rollins, the radical message found in Christianity might be one that the church can show allegiance to.

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Editorial Review

Review
This book is unsettling, as intended, but anyone who wrestles with big theological questions in a post-secular world will find Rollins' work as exhilarating as it is disquieting. (Publishers Weekly,)

About the Author
Peter Rollins is a widely sought after writer, lecturer, storyteller, and public speaker. He is the founder of Ikon, a Belfast, Northern Ireland, faith group that has gained an international reputation for blending live music, visual imagery, soundscapes, theater, ritual, and reflection. He currently resides in Greenwich, Connecticut.

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Divine Magician

CHAPTER 1

Conjuring Something from Nothing

The word Christianity has largely come to refer to a particular way of viewing the world. It involves a set of beliefs and practices that can be compared and contrasted with other worldviews. Both its advocates and its critics see Christianity as making certain claims about the existence of God, the nature of the universe, and the ultimate meaning of life.

Countless books attempt to work out how the beliefs of Christianity should sit in relation to theories put forth by sociologists, psychologists, and natural scientists. A mammoth amount of time and energy is spent on the question of whether Christianity offers a perspective that complements contemporary theories of the world, conflicts with them, or deals with a different set of issues entirely.

But despite which view one picks, the shared understanding is that Christianity offers a concrete way of understanding the world and our place within it. It is one of the few things that both religious apologists and their adversaries actually agree on—both accept that Christianity makes certain knowledge claims and both accept that these claims attempt to reflect the nature of reality in some way. The only difference is that religious apologists attempt to prove them true, while their adversaries strive to expose them as false.

Whether we accept or reject Christianity, we all seem to know broadly what we mean when we use the term: a worldview that makes certain knowledge claims. Christianity is thus a term that is used to describe a tribal identity; a grouping within society bound together by shared beliefs, traditions, and history.

Of course, within this shared horizon there are legion conflicts regarding what exactly constitutes a Christian belief. Depending on whether one is Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant (and whether of the conservative or

liberal leaning), one will get different answers about which beliefs and practices are debatable and which are nonnegotiable. Some people might only hold a few beliefs as essential, while others might list volumes of things—from the sublime to the utterly ridiculous—that they think we need to affirm in order to warrant the title. All of these different factions, though, agree that Christianity makes at least some claims. Any debates, then, that revolve around what beliefs or practices might be correctly "Christian" continue to operate within the same horizon of meaning.

This belief-oriented understanding of faith causes certain problems for those who find the beliefs unconvincing, who have legitimate doubts, or who suffer from mental health issues that make the forming of such beliefs too difficult. Regarding this last issue, some religious leaders might claim that there is a divine get-out-of-jail-free card for such circumstances, but this very view hints at the idea that belief might not be of central importance.

It suggests that Christianity might concern something deeper than intellectual belief.

Or rather, that something might be happening within Christianity that doesn't rest on the affirmation of some church doctrine. Christianity has indeed become another system. It's been reduced to a way of viewing the world and marking out a particular social grouping. However, while Christianity as a system might be of interest to social scientists on one side and systematic theologians on the other, the aim of this book is to chart a different path.

I wish to argue that this founding event—which I will explore as we go along—is not concerned with a set of beliefs concerning the world, but rather calls us to enter into a different way of existing within the world. The good news of Christianity—that is to say the life-giving event harbored within the tradition—is not an invitation to join an exclusive party. Indeed, as I hope to show, this good news involves discovering that those parties aren't all they're cracked up to be, and that there is a way of celebrating life that is more authentic, enriching, and healing than anything we might find through membership to some special club. A way that is not limited to a conservative or liberal, optimistic or pessimistic, theistic or atheistic worldview, but rather one that can operate happily in and through them all.

In order to provide a dim sense of what this event is—or different way of being in the world—I have opted for comparing the good news of Christianity to a magic trick. This is not an arbitrary decision, though there are no doubt other approaches that can be taken. For this reading provides a clear and precise way of understanding how the event of Christianity is not an intellectual position we take with regard to the world, but a way of immersing ourselves in the world.

I hope to show that by approaching it through the lens of a great vanishing act, the ubiquitous idea of Christianity as a confessional system of belief, i.e., as involving the affirmation of various doctrines, actually obscures the liberating call that gave birth to this system, a call that encroaches on all religious and secular encampments.

The Creation of the Sacred-Object

In order to understand what this event harbored in Christianity might be, we must begin by outlining a particular type of suffering that we are all prone to. We all face numerous difficulties in life, difficulties that require medical, political, and economic solutions. However, there is one difficulty that would seem to require a different response, one that is expressed and addressed in, among other things, the biblical narrative.

This difficulty can broadly be described as the experience of a lack in our lives—a lack we believe can be filled by a particular thing or set of circumstances. For the remainder of this book we shall use the term sacred-object to describe whatever it is we think will fill this lack, whether that be money, health, a relationship, or religious practice. Before looking more deeply into the problem faced by this sense of lack, we must spend a little time looking at what makes up this sacred-object, or rather why we would think that some mundane thing would have this magical quality. We can begin by taking a look at the genesis of human beings as described in the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Story of Adam and Eve

In the book of Genesis, we read how Adam and Eve lived in a type of primordial paradise where everything was freely available—everything, that is, except for the fruit of a particular tree: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die'?" (Genesis 2:15–17).

Here, we are immediately confronted with a series of puzzles. For instance, what could possibly make the fruit of this tree so special, and how could it possess the power to bestow moral knowledge? Some readers might be tempted to close the book at this point and dismiss it as mere prescientific nonsense.

However the story is not as esoteric and bizarre as it might initially appear.

In response to the question What makes this fruit so special? the answer might be deceptively simple. In my previous book, The Idolatry of God, I explored how prohibition can work in relation to a parent and child: if a child is denied a toy, the denial generates an excessive desire in the child for the prohibited object.

The no of the parent doesn't extinguish the desire of the child, but acts as a mechanism that redoubles the intensity of the original desire. It thus serves to evoke the very thing that it's attempting to quash, transforming an otherwise mundane toy into an object of singular value and importance. What we see in the story of Adam and Eve is the same structure, a prohibition that generates an excessive attachment.

The fruit takes on a special and excessive value because Adam and Eve experience the fruit as barred. Of course objects that are withdrawn in this way don't change in any physical way. But they're off-limits and therefore transformed into a type of sacred-object.

In the example of the prohibited toy, the no bestows upon the toy a sacred property that is not an inherent part of the toy, causing the child to find herself deeply attached to it. What was previously only of passing interest now becomes infused with a seductive power. The prohibition can make a mundane object appear sacred, i.e., as something that has the power to satisfy us and render our existence meaningful.

In Robert Duvall's film The Apostle, we see a fascinating example of this mechanism at work. In one scene, a racist construction worker drives a large construction vehicle up to a small church with the intention of knocking it down. The pastor of the church, Sonny (played by Robert Duvall), comes out of the church and places a Bible in the direct path of the vehicle. Being raised in the Deep South, the construction worker shows a certain respect for the leather-bound book and gets out to remove it. But Sonny tells him solemnly and with great authority not to touch the book. When he gets closer Sonny asks his parishioners to repeat the words, "No one moves that book."

This prohibition begins to affect the construction worker as he bends down to cast it aside, and at the last

minute he finds himself kneeling before the Bible and crying. The prohibition was subjectively inscribed into the construction worker and thus had the effect of transforming the book into a type of magical object before which he crumbled.

Stealing a Masterpiece That Never Existed

Adam and Eve were not forbidden to eat something that would satisfy them, but were faced with a prohibition that made them think that the fruit would satisfy them.

In order to understand this, consider the following story.

There was once an artistically talented teenager who felt unrequited love for a girl in his art class.

It so happened that his beloved's artwork was particularly bad, so bad, in fact, that it was often quietly mocked. One day the boy overheard two classmates laughing about how bad her artwork was. But just then she entered the room, and they quickly changed the subject. After a couple of minutes, the two classmates started playing a cruel game where they praised her for her artistic abilities.

She protested, but the classmates kept insisting that she had real talent and should think about exhibiting something in the end-of-year art show.

A week later she pulled the lovelorn boy to one side and asked for some advice about a painting.

He jumped at the chance to talk with her, and while the work was terrible, he praised it profusely. To his horror, the praise he lavished on it convinced her to enter the painting in the school art exhibition.

Because of his love, he didn't want her to be humiliated, so the day before the show he went into the room holding all the submissions and stole her painting along with a couple of others.

Once the theft was discovered, the art teacher quickly worked out who was guilty and pulled the boy out of class. Before suspending him, the teacher asked why he'd stolen the paintings.

"That's easy," replied the boy. "I wanted to win the prize and so stole the best work."

News quickly spread around the school that the girl had created a masterpiece that might have won the prize if allowed to compete.

In this illustrative story, we can see how stealing the bad painting created the illusion that it was a great painting. The removal of a pedestrian thing generated the idea that it was extraordinary.

The subtraction of the painting from the competition effectively added an excessive value to it in the minds of the students, making it into an imagined masterpiece.

The imagined reality was:

• There was a masterpiece.

• It was stolen.

• It could have won a prize.

However the actual reality was:

• A terrible painting was stolen.

• This led to the idea that it was a masterpiece.

• This led to the fantasy that it could have won a prize.

In the beginning the girl may well have thought that she had created a good painting, but the subsequent theft caused her and her classmates to imagine that she had actually created a truly great work. The theft introduced the sense that something wonderful had existed.

With this belief, a new and obstinate sense of dissatisfaction enters the story. The idea that something truly wonderful was taken away initiates a sense of dissatisfaction in the girl. The problem, however, is that the object that promises to get rid of the dissatisfaction doesn't actually exist and so can never be possessed. Hers is not, then, the basic type of dissatisfaction that comes from wanting some mundane thing, but rather an insidious dissatisfaction that comes from wanting a seemingly sublime object that can't actually be grasped.

Both the painting and the fruit exist in a mundane, everyday sense, but the masterpiece is a fiction just as the idea of a superfruit that would make us gods is a fiction. The seeming inaccessibility of these sacred-objects is what gives them a special halo. But the halo is a lie; the sacred-object is inaccessible and impossible, not simply because access to it is blocked, but more fundamentally because it doesn't exist. The blockage is not what blocks access to the sacred-object, but rather what helps to create the fiction that it actually exists.

Virtual Reality

This idea of an object holding an excessive value only in its prohibition or loss forms within us a pleasurable pain (something that is called jouissance in philosophy).

It's this very logic that we bear witness to in the story of Adam and Eve. Instead of Adam and Eve first being dissatisfied with the Garden of Eden and imagining that they will be satisfied through transgressing the prohibition (and gaining the fruit), we see that the prohibition is the very thing that creates their sense of dissatisfaction in the first place. When a mundane piece of fruit is experienced as prohibited, it takes on a special value and turns into a sacred-object for the ones who are barred from it. The prohibition thus creates a sense of dissatisfaction. Not an everyday type of dissatisfaction, but a deep sense of gap in the heart of our being that marks every part of our lives.

This ancient story of Adam and Eve, then, offers us a mythical description of how sacred-objects are formed and how their very formation creates within us a sense of painful longing. We (falsely) believe that the sacred-object can offer us wholeness and lasting pleasure; but in actuality, it is responsible for birthing our sense of dissatisfaction. The sacred-object does not exist, yet it cannot be said to simply not exist, since our desire for it influences our behavior and drives us to certain actions.

In this way, it is neither actual nor completely fictional.

It is virtual.

In philosophical terms, the virtual is a type of reality that cannot be adequately grasped in the terms existence or nonexistence. Rather, virtual objects insist. For example, fascism doesn't exist in the sense that it would be found in a universe where all people were removed. Yet it still makes its presence felt in society in very real ways.

Whether or not someone is actually a racist, racism can still affect how one behaves. For instance, it might influence where one buys a house, takes a job, or sends one's children to school. Racist ideology can still regulate people's everyday activities, even if they aren't directly aware of it. In this way, a virtual reality doesn't have to be consciously embraced to be effective.

Grammar also operates as a type of virtual reality in that it regulates how we put words together, yet it doesn't exist in our conscious minds (unless we are studying it). Grammar was there before we arrived on the scene and will be there when we leave. It is something that comes from us and that we are immersed in, yet it is not reducible to us.

This is why one can say that virtual realities insist—for they exert force upon us whether we know it or not.

The sacred-object is thus a virtual reality in that it does not actually exist, but makes an impact on us. The sacred-object, as a virtual object, appears actual to us in, and only in, the act of taking it seriously. A virtual reality only begins to dissolve when people stop acting as if it is real.

The creation of the sacred-object can be described in the following diagram. Here we see how the barrier between Adam and Eve and the tree creates an excessive drive by making the fruit of the tree into something excessively desired. While Adam and Eve can try to content themselves with substitute objects, they remain enchanted by the illusion of what lies out of reach.

Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden1

I Want What You Want

How we decide which objects are sacred is deeply connected to the desires and interests of the people around us. We find ourselves wanting the things that the people we desire want. If we fall in love with someone, for instance, we find ourselves with desires for a whole range of new things, desires that reflect the interests of the one we are with. If our partner is interested in film, travel, or the piano, we'll often find ourselves taking on these interests for ourselves. In this way we tend to mimic the other's desires and come to experience those desires as our own. This process simply reflects how we constructed desire at an early age within the home.

This means that the things we want, while deeply personal, actually arise and shift in relation to our interactions with others. We can compare this process with something we witness in the 1987 romantic comedy The Princess Bride. In one famous scene, a criminal genius called Vizzini (played by Wallace Shawn) gets into a game of wits with the mysterious hero, the Man in Black.

Vizzini fancies himself one of the smartest men in the world and is thus confident when challenged by the hero to a game of wits. The game proposed by the Man in Black is a simple but deadly one in which he places one glass of wine in front of Vizzini and one in front of himself. The Man in Black goes on to explain

that Vizzini must choose which glass to drink from and which he wants the Man in Black to consume. However, before the game begins, the Man in Black takes the drinks and hides them from sight for a moment before returning them to the table. He then tells Vizzini that he has added a small amount of iocaine powder, a deadly poison, into the game, one that is both odorless and tasteless.

In response, Vizzini arrogantly states, “All I have to do is divine it from what I know of you. Are you the sort of man who would put the poison into his own goblet or his enemy’s? Now, a clever man would put the poison into his own goblet because he would know that only a great fool would reach for what he was given. I am not a great fool, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of you . . . But you must have known I was not a great fool; you would have counted on it, so I can clearly not choose the wine in front of me.”

What ensues is a dizzying monologue as Vizzini works out what he envisions as inspired logic to determine which glass has the poison in it.

Vizzini finally makes his choice, they both drink, and he quickly falls dead.

The scene itself gains its comic effect by enacting an infinite loop in which the criminal gets caught up in a game of “you think that I think that you think . . .” The decision as to which glass to drink is directly connected to what Vizzini thinks is going on in his adversary’s mind (the final twist being that the hero actually poisoned both glasses, having previously built up immunity to the poison).

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan drew out how our own thinking is connected to what we perceive the other is thinking in an analogy concerning animal tracks. To understand the analogy we can imagine a hunter who is faced with interpreting the meaning of some animal tracks. The initial challenge faced by the hunter is to uncover these tracks and use them as a means of discovering where the animal might be.

However, we can easily imagine a species that masks its true tracks when feeling threatened and makes false ones, so that a less experienced hunter might be misled by the marks on the forest floor. In contrast, the more seasoned tracker will know that the visible tracks are misleading and instead attempt to uncover the true ones.

Yet Lacan notes that there is at least one species we know of that is able to leave true tracks that are intended to be read as false ones: humans.

If I am the one being tracked, I need to judge whether or not the predator is inexperienced. If she is, I might simply run, attempting to gain as much distance as possible from my pursuer, knowing that she likely won’t be able to track me. If, however, I know she is more experienced, I might try to cover over my tracks and leave false ones to throw her off the scent. However, I can also take into consideration what she might think of my experience. Does she think that I’m well versed in survival techniques? If so, then I might decide to leave real tracks hoping that she assumes them to be false and wastes time looking for nonexistent, camouflaged ones.

My reflections could get caught up in a type of infinite loop and must be disrupted by a decisive action if I am to move at all. In the terms of philosopher Jacques Derrida, this would constitute a real decision, for it is a choice that happens when the right move is not obvious. If the right move were obvious, it wouldn’t really be a decision at all, because there would only be one true option available.

If I choose to leave true tracks with the hope that my hunter interprets them as false, I am doing the equivalent of telling the truth precisely in order to lie.

Just as our actions are related to other people, so too are our desires. So when asking why a piece of fruit would occupy the space of the sacred-object for Adam and Eve, we can approach an answer by saying that it comes about because each interprets the other as wanting the fruit. The fruit itself isn't a sacred-object because of some inherent property, but rather because of the prohibition combined with an interpretation of what the other desires.

The Adam and Eve story can thus be read as a reflection of our own situation: we are caught in the gravitational pull of things that we excessively want—things that are forbidden to us in various ways (by parents, by society, by etiquette, by inability, etc.) and things we think (correctly or incorrectly) others want as well.

The story of Adam and Eve is our story; what it describes is not some outdated origin myth, but rather something that mirrors our contemporary situation caught up, as it is, in wanting to find something that removes our lack.

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