Christianity after the Death of God

Christian Atheism and the Materiality of Absence

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ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, an increasing amount of (post-)evangelical Christians in North America and Europe sought to form communities in creative and innovative ways. Disillusioned with capitalist economies, Enlightenment thinking and conservative trends within Evangelical culture, these Emerging Christians, as they came to be called, desired to engage Christianity anew from a postmodern context. One notable group associated with this Emerging Church Movement is called 'Ikon', a small collective of artists and disillusioned Christians, agnostics and atheists located in Belfast, Northern Ireland that was active from 2001 to 2013.

Critical of Christians and atheists alike, Ikon is situated on the boundaries of what is conventionally meant by terms such as 'Christian', 'religious', and 'atheist'. Ikon embraces modern and postmodern atheist critiques of theism and religion while simultaneously rooting themselves in distinctively Christian traditions, practices, and objects. Indeed, Ikon takes its inspiration from the history of Christianity and atheism in order to live out a Christianity beyond theism. Because of this, research on communities such as Ikon provide promising pathways for the study of religion and non-religion, offering new insights on the dynamics and entanglements of religiosity, spiritual and everyday life in the twenty-first century.

This thesis explores the ways in which Ikon navigates between Christianity and atheism, religion and non-religion, and divine presence and absence. In particular, it asks how the death of God is conceptualized and mediated in Ikon's performances which centre transformation and disruption. By employing a grounded philosophical approach, the chapters provide extensive reflections on the experience and materiality of absence both for communities such as Ikon and for the academic study of religion.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, an increasing amount of (post-)evangelical Christians in North America and Europe sought to form communities in creative and innovative ways. Disillusioned with capitalist economies, Enlightenment thinking and conservative trends within Evangelical culture, these Emerging Christians, as they came to be called, desired to engage Christianity anew from a postmodern context.[1] The search for an authentic form of religious faith together with a focus on social justice are reflected in the sermons, services, and activities of the Emerging Church Movement (ECM).[2] Although the ECM has slowly faded (insiders have even spoken of the death of the ECM), its influences can still be observed in Western Christian spiritualities.[3]

One notable group associated with the ECM is called 'Ikon'.[4] Ikon is a small collective of artists and disillusioned Christians, agnostics and atheists located in Belfast, Northern Ireland

[1] For more on Emerging Christians, see: Hannah Steele, *New World, New Church?: The Theology of the Emerging Church Movement* (London: SCM Press, 2017); Cory E. Labanow, *Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church: A Congregational Study of a Vineyard Church* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Katharine S. Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity: Deconstruction, Materialism, and Religious Practices* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2015); Gerardo Marti and Gladys Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Josh Packard, *The Emerging Church: Religion at the Margins* (London: First Forum Press, 2012); James S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Doug Gay, *Remixing the Church: Towards an Emerging Ecclesiology* (London: SCM Press, 2011).

[2] Bielo (*Emerging Evangelicals*, 8) traces the origins of the ECM to the launching of the Evangelical Young Leaders Network in 1995. There are important precursors to the ECM such as the alternative worship movement in the UK and the post-evangelicalism movement both active in the 1980s and 1990s (Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, 12). For the importance of the concept of authenticity for Emerging Christians, see James S. Bielo, 'Belief, Deconversion, and Authenticity among US Emerging Evangelicals', *Ethos* 40, no. 3 (2012): 258–76.

[3] Marti and Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church*, 10; Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*, 203; Marti and Ganiel write that they expect the ECM to have a lasting impact on Western forms of spirituality because both within Emerging Christianity and in Western societies in general, they recognize a response to modernity that includes individualizing tendencies, a reappreciation for pluralism and a decreasing reliance on institutions for ethics, values, and beliefs (Gladys Ganiel and Gerardo Marti, 'The Emerging Church Movement: A Sociological Assessment', *Currents in Theology and Mission* 42, no. 2 (2015): 207–8). Another important reason is the lasting impact of Emerging Christianity on institutional forms of Christianity. Thus, they argue that "Emerging Christians influence the values and behaviors of Christians outside the movement, drawing others into this distinct religious orientation while remaining within traditional Christian institutions" (Ganiel and Marti, 111). Besides this, traditional Christian denominations have also started experimenting with congregations that take their inspiration from Emerging Christianity such as the 'Fresh Expressions' movement tied to Anglican and Methodist churches in the U.K. (Ganiel and Marti, 111–12). On the death of the ECM, see Kester Brewin, 'The Emerging Church Movement', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*, ed. Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 560.

[4] Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, 25; Gladys Ganiel and Gerardo Marti, 'Northern Ireland, America and the Emerging Church Movement: Exploring the Significance of Peter Rollins and the Ikon Collective', *Journal of the Irish Society for the Academic Study of Religions* 1, no. 1 (2014): 28.

that was active from 2001 to 2013. With its emphasis on existential anxiety, postmodern uncertainty, and the inability to believe in the existence of the traditional Christian God, it became well-known amongst Emerging Christians for its provocative performances.[5] As will become clear in the following chapters, Ikon is critical in its performances of Evangelical Christianity, not least for turning the Christian God into an escape mechanism.[6] Rather than helping people embrace the uncertainties that life entails, Evangelical churches help people cope by promising the certainty of an eternal afterlife. Ikon encourages its audience to let go of their traditional beliefs in God and embrace the uncertainty that it believes are necessarily part of life.

However, Ikon is also critical of notable new atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens for neglecting to seriously reflect on the implications of the absence of the Christian God, and by doing so for "not being atheistic enough."[7] Critical of Christians and atheists alike, Ikon is situated on the boundaries of what is conventionally meant by terms such as 'Christian', 'religious', and 'atheist'. Indeed, many Christian communities in the West would designate Ikon as heretical, an identity marker that Ikon has embraced.[8] At the same time, Ikon's performances are deeply rooted in the history of Christianity. In line with this, Peter Rollins, one of the main initiators of Ikon has said:

> Often I say that Ikon works only if you are rooted in a religious tradition. Ikon doesn't make sense if you are not located somewhere, because it is fundamentally a rupture and a provocation. We have to have something to deconstruct. Ikon has led some people to church, and it has led some people out of church.[9]

[5] Perhaps notorious would be a better word as Ikon tends to be more radical in their critique of contemporary Christianity than other groups that are part of the ECM. For this reason, Ganiel and Marti place Ikon at the margins of the ECM where it exposes "the potential and the limitations of the movement." ('Northern Ireland, America and the Emerging Church Movement', 28).

[6] Although Ikon targets their critiques at Christianity in general, they are mainly critical of evangelical churches as is the case with most of the ECM.

[7] *When Atheism Isn't Atheistic Enough: Radical Theology and the Death of God*, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MU5U9X1wsfk.

[8] The conservative, evangelical preacher Cecil Andrews for instance wrote in response to Ikon that he would "pray that God will be pleased to graciously enlighten many 'emergents' with His saving truth so that they will in consequence 'emerge' from Satan's grip and Kingdom into the 'faith community' of those redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ" (as quoted in Hunt 2008, 86). Andrews was then invited to participate in one of Ikon's projects called 'The Last Supper'. During this event, an influential and controversial person is invited to share a meal and their thoughts with twelve members of Ikon. The group then discusses the ideas and decide whether the guest has convinced them (Matthew Gallion, 'Ecclesiology After God: Materialism and Doubt in the Emerging Church Movement' (Master's Thesis, Missouri State University, 2012), 63–64).

[9] The Christian Century, 'Seeds of Doubt: Ikon's Peter Rollins', *The Christian Century* 126, no. 11 (2009): 22.

Ikon embraces modern and postmodern atheist critiques of theism and religion while simultaneously rooting itself in distinctively Christian traditions, practices, and objects. Indeed, Ikon takes its inspiration from the history of Christianity and atheism in order to live out a Christianity beyond theism. It is precisely this embrace of atheism that distinguishes Ikon from other Emerging Christian communities and places it amongst those groups that seek to construct a Christianity, or religiosity, after the death of God. In line with this, Rollins has expressed his wish for contemporary Evangelical churches to be transformed into death of God collectives.[10] Along with like-minded groups, Ikon takes inspiration from a branch of religious thought called radical theology. Although there is a large amount of variety and disagreement within radical theology, there is a general agreement that the traditional Christian conception of God, along with what is seen as its oppressive dimensions, should be left behind or actively deconstructed.[11] Hence, radical theology is perhaps best described as "radical departures from the monotheism of Christendom."[12] Radical theology originates in the death of God movement of the 1960s. In 1966, TIME magazine published a controversial article that highlighted the work of several American religious thinkers associated with the religious yet atheist death of God movement.[13] The article sparked a large public debate in the United States that resulted in the proponents of radical theology receiving a wave of criticism and death threats.[14]

Since then, various works have been published that have sought to analyse the theology of the death of God movement.[15] With the exception of Craig Nessan's piece, these publications

[10] Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, 26.
[11] Daniel J. Peterson, 'Introduction: Resurrecting the Death of God', in *Resurrecting the Death of God: The Origins, Influence, and Return of Radical Theology*, ed. Daniel J. Peterson and Michael Zbaraschuk (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014), 3–4.
[12] Katharine S. Moody, 'The Death and Decay of God: Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity', *Modern Believing* 57, no. 3 (2016): 253, cf. 256, https://doi.org/10.3828/mb.2016.19.
[13] "No longer is the question ['is God dead?'] a taunting jest of skeptics for whom unbelief is the test of wisdom and for whom Nietzsche is the prophet who gave the right answer a century ago. Even within Christianity, now confidently renewing itself in spirit as well as form, a small band of radical theologians has seriously argued that the churches must accept the fact of God's death and get along without him." John Elson, 'Is God Dead?', *TIME*, 8 April 1966. See also Lily Rothman, 'TIME's "Is God Dead?" Cover Turns 50', *TIME.Com* (blog), accessed 15 July 2022, https://time.com/isgoddead/.
[14] Peterson, 'Introduction: Resurrecting the Death of God', 1.
[15] Calvin D. Ullrich, 'Theopoetics from Below: A South African Black Christological Encounter with Radical Theology', *Black Theology*, 10 February 2021, 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1080/14769948.2021.1883350; Craig L. Nessan, 'Disposable People and the Death of Whitegod', *Dialog* 60, no. 3 (2021): 262–69, https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12689; John D. Caputo, *In Search of Radical Theology: Expositions, Explorations, Exhortations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020); Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller, eds., *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Ingolf U. Dalferth, *Radical Theology: An Essay on Faith and Theology in the Twenty-First Century* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016); Jeffrey W. Robbins, *Radical Theology: A Vision for Change* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2016); Daniel J. Peterson and Michael Zbaraschuk, eds., *Resurrecting the Death of God: The Origins, Influence, and Return of Radical Theology* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2014); Thomas J. J. Altizer,

approach the religious atheism found in the death of God movement as an intellectual and academic discussion. However, along with Ikon there have been various communities who have gathered around a profound experience of the death of God.[16] As these communities are difficult to categorize under common conceptions of religion and secularity, they have in general been understudied by scholars of religion. Yet to approach this movement as an intellectual debate only leads to an inaccurate portrayal of what the death of God means for adherents to this movement.

The focus of this research, then, is on a strand of contemporary Christianity that finds itself on the boundaries of what is generally meant by religion, secularity, and atheism that I will designate as Christian atheism. Within Christian atheist communities like Ikon, the absence or death of God is an important tenet in their Christian faith. Central in their practices and beliefs is the aim of living in a world devoid of supernatural beings, embracing the uncertainty that this position entails while simultaneously seeking inspiration from Christian practices, ideas, and history. The aim of this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, it offers a description and analysis of Ikon and its performances. On the other, it takes inspiration from Ikon to revert the lens back onto the study of religion, offering critical theoretical reflection on religious studies as an academic disciple and the concepts used therein. This method where both theory and religious phenomena are understood and analysed in light of each other Arvind Sharma calls 'reciprocal illumination'.[17]

In relation to the first aim, the main question that this thesis seeks to answer is how the death of God is conceptualized and made real in a sense-able manner in the performances and publications of the Christian atheist collective called Ikon.[18] Chapter one provides a general overview of Ikon, discussing its origins, members, audience, and main projects. The aim of this chapter is to familiarize the reader with Ikon and to provide important background information on which the following chapters build. It concludes with a reflection on two main important characteristics of Ikon: transformation and deconversion. Chapter two explores the ideas that

Lissa McCullough, and David E. Klemm, *Call to Radical Theology* (Ithaca: State University of New York Press, 2012).

[16] For example, the gatherings of VOID collective in Austin, TX and the activities held by the European Radical Theology Network which was established in 2019.

[17] Arvind Sharma, *Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology: The Case for Reciprocal Illumination* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005). Sharma distinguishes between different methodological uses of reciprocal illumination. Whereas in this thesis, it is employed to reflect on theory and a religious phenomenon, it could also be used to analyse two (or more) theories or two (or more) religious phenomena.

[18] 'Sense-able' refers to the ways that Ikon employs media such as technology and music to appeal to the senses and the body in general in their performances.

inform Ikon's performances, in particular the theology of absence that Ikon espouses. By doing so, this chapter aims to conceptualize how Ikon centres the experience of God's absence as a legitimate religious position over and against contemporary forms of Christianity that centre the experience of God's presence. Chapter three explores the performances that Ikon held between 2001 and 2013 where the experience of God's absence is a recurring theme. In particular, it asks through what means Ikon seeks to mediate God's absence in its performances. In light of the second aim of this thesis, chapter four reflects on the concepts of presence and absence in the study of religion. In addition, it reflects on the relationship between Christianity and non-religion, in particular atheism, in the study of religion and on the task of religious studies in general. The conclusion offers a discussion on the limits and potential of the research conducted for this thesis.

Relevance of Research

There at least three areas of research that this thesis contributes to. The intentional blurring of seemingly stable boundaries such as between Christianity and atheism is characteristic of Ikon, something that makes it a fascinating subject for research for the study of religion. Indeed, Ikon is reminiscent of recent developments in the study of religion that question the strong distinctions made between religion and non-religion as well as between religion and the secular.[19] Because of this, research on communities such as Ikon provide promising pathways for the study of religion and non-religion, offering new insights on the dynamics and entanglements of religiosity, spiritual and everyday life in the twenty-first century.

Firstly, this thesis contributes to secular and non-religion studies. Through the concept of divine presence, it may seem justified to make a strong distinction between religious theism and non-religious atheism. For instance, *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* uses the working definition of atheism as "an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods."[20] However,

[19] Ann Taves, 'From Religious Studies to Worldview Studies', *Religion* 50, no. 1 (2 January 2020): 137–47; Ann Taves, 'What Is Nonreligion? On the Virtues of a Meaning Systems Framework for Studying Nonreligious and Religious Worldviews in the Context of Everyday Life', *Secularism and Nonreligion* 7 (14 November 2018): Art. 9; Richard King, 'The Copernican Turn in the Study of Religion', in *Religion, Theory, Critique : Classic and Contemporary Approaches and Methodologies*, ed. Richard King (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 1–20; Gregor McLennan, 'The Postsecular Turn', *Theory, Culture & Society* 27, no. 4 (1 July 2010): 3–20; Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

[20] Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, 'Introduction: The Study of Atheism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2, https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199644650.013.043.

when the focus is shifted from presence to the concept of absence as this thesis does, the boundaries between religion and non-religion become increasingly blurred. Therefore, this thesis offers new insights into the entanglement of secularity and non-religion with spirituality and religion. Secondly, this thesis contributes to the study of contemporary Christianity in the West. From its very onset, Christianity has been polycentric, leading to diverse and dynamic Christianities throughout history and the globe.[21] Studying Christian atheism produces important and relevant information on the development of contemporary Christianity. Thirdly, this thesis contributes to the philosophy of religion. Amongst continental philosophers of religion, there has been an increasing awareness that atheism as a philosophical position can be congruent with Christianity in particular and with religion in general. For instance, since the 1990s, philosophers have analysed and critiqued the return of religious categories in 20th century continental philosophy.[22] In addition, various philosophers have argued and even embraced that atheism is inextricably linked to the history of Christianity.[23] Others have shown how continental philosophers who were interpreted as atheists were very much engaged with religious topics and language.[24] However, there has been little engagement with the lived experiences of religious adherents who embrace certain forms of atheism as a viable Christian stance. This thesis contributes to this discussion by offering philosophical reflections on Christianity and atheism that is grounded in multidisciplinary research on Ikon.

In addition, this thesis also contributes to the philosophy of religion through reflecting on the viability of philosophy as a method for the study of religion. Religious studies, most simply defined, is a multidisciplinary research field that takes as its research subject religious phenomena. However, the study of religion has been criticized for being fragmented, with little

[21] Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, *Christianity as a World Religion: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 270–71.
[22] Hent de Vries, *Philosophy and the Turn to Religion* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Dominique Janicaud and Jean F. Coutine, *Phenomenology and the Theological Turn: The French Debate* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001).
[23] Marc De Kesel, *Goden Breken: Essays over Monotheïsme* (Amsterdam: Boom, 2010); Slavoj Žižek and John Milbank, *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009); Han J. Adriaanse, 'After Theism', in *Post-Theism: Reframing the Judeo-Christian Tradition*, ed. Henri A. Krop, Arie L. Molendijk, and Hent de Vries (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 33–62.
[24] Erik Meganck, *Religieus Atheïsme: (Post)Moderne Filosofen over God En Godsdienst* (Damon, 2021). For an English overview of his argument, see Erik Meganck, '"World without End": From Hyperreligious Theism to Religious Atheism', *Journal for Continental Philosophy of Religion* 3, no. 1 (9 April 2021): 65–89. John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997); John D. Caputo, *The Mystical Element in Heidegger's Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1986).

to no dialogue between the disciplines.[25] I think this is especially true of the field of philosophy of religion. Whereas most disciplines in the humanities and social sciences take a descriptive approach to religious phenomena, philosophy of religion has tended to provide critical evaluations and normative positions on the claims of religious believers. Thus, the philosopher of religion not only describes the arguments that people use to justify their beliefs but evaluates them and proposes new arguments in favour or against such beliefs. Because of this, Thomas Lynch writes that philosophy of religion has often meant "analytic philosophy of theistic belief."[26] However, in the last ten years or so, there have been several publications dedicated to establishing philosophy as a viable method for the study of religion.[27] This thesis contributes to the methodological discussions in the field of religion, but also to the humanities in general by reflecting on the potential of philosophy for religious studies.

Method and Material

This thesis uses a philosophical approach to the study of religion. Different than anthropological or sociological research, this means that no original data has been produced. Instead, the focus of this thesis is on interpreting and reflecting on existing data and research in order to analyse and produce concepts that help push forward discussions in the study of religion. I understand the task of a philosopher of religion in an academic context to be to reflect on existing concepts and produce new ones to help us understand what is going on under the name of (the study of) religion. More specifically, this thesis applies a grounded philosophical approach (GPA) to religion.[28] Whereas philosophy generally tends to start with theoretical questions, using case studies and examples to illustrate arguments, GPA reverses this procedure. This approach starts with an analysis of what Bruno Latour has called a matter of concern. A matter of concern refers to anything that matters, or that is either made to matter or should matter around which people

[25] Thomas A. Lewis, 'Theory and Method and the Stakes of a Fragmented Discipline: Or, What Economics Taught Me About the Study of Religion', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88, no. 4 (1 December 2020): 981–1001, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfaa060.
[26] Thomas Lynch, 'Transcendental Materialism as a Theoretical Orientation to the Study of Religion', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 29, no. 2 (25 May 2017): 134, https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341387.
[27] Thomas A. Lewis, *Why Philosophy Matters for the Study of Religion—and Vice Versa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Kevin Schilbrack, *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto*, 1st edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014); Wesley J. Wildman, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010).
[28] GPA is the name that I find most accurate to describe this approach. Although I am certain that it has already been developed by others, I have not been able to find other resources on a similar approach. Therefore, I have developed my own version and have applied it in this thesis and elsewhere.

gather.[29] From this matter of concern, which in this case is the religious themes in the performances and art of Ikon, important concepts are derived, which are then explored. In this case, the main concept that is analysed is that of divine absence or the death of God. GPA takes inspiration from grounded theory approaches, but with a different aim, namely to think something through from a philosophical perspective and to contribute to theory on religion.[30]

There are three main sets of sources which inform the research of this thesis. The first is the material produced by Ikon. Although Ikon, as a collective was active for only around ten years, between its formation and disbandment, it produced a large amount of material ranging from texts and objects to recordings and events. This material has been gathered and published in a digital archive created for this thesis.[31] All references in this thesis to the material that Ikon has produced will therefore be referred to this digital archive. I would encourage the reader to become familiar with the digital archive beforehand in order to obtain a general understanding of Ikon's performances. A second set of sources are the publications by Peter Rollins, the main initiator of Ikon who sees his own work as a justification of the ideas and practices of Ikon. A third set of sources are the secondary publications about Ikon by scholars such as Gladys Ganiel, Katharine Moody, and Gerardo Marti.

[29] Bruno Latour, 'Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern', *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225–48; Bruno Latour, 'What Is the Style of Matters of Concern?', in *The Lure of Whitehead*, ed. Nicholas Gaskill and A. J. Nocek (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 92–126, https://doi.org/10.5749/minnesota/9780816679959.003.0004.
[30] Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss, 'Grounded Theory Research: Procedures, Canons and Evaluative Criteria', *Zeitschrift Für Soziologie* 13 (1990): 3–21.
[31] https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/

CHAPTER ONE UNDERSTANDING IKON: AN OVERVIEW

If there is one thing that characterizes Ikon, it would be its tendency to avoid self-definitions and shun classifications. Indeed, on the 'Frequently Asked Questions' section on the website of Ikon, questions are displayed such as "Is ikon Christian?" and "Does ikon believe in God" without any answers.[32] As will become clear in this chapter, this could be explained by the fact that the collective mostly consists of people who are disillusioned with the boundary policing and the construction of opposing identities that they encountered in their own religious and political backgrounds, often a Protestant, Evangelical, Northern-Irish one. More specifically, they are critical of the ways that religion has become one of many ways of drawing the boundaries between those who belong and those who do not. Thus, any description of Ikon should take seriously its desire to deconstruct existing identities in name of a more open, liminal, and dynamic understanding of identity. This makes it difficult to describe Ikon since, as a researcher, one of my first instincts is to classify, identify and clearly demarcate what 'counts' as Ikon and what does not, the very things that Ikon has identified as harmful due to the violent potential of classification. Of course, I am not the only one who has struggled with this. In the work of Gladys Ganiel who conducted fieldwork at Ikon for most of its existence and is close to many of its participants a friendly but serious struggle takes place between her attempts to classify Ikon and her respondents who continuously resist these classifications.[33]

However, the very attempt to resist classifications must be understood in relation to the places that Ikon seeks to leave behind and the spaces that it hopes to open up. There are then certain patterns and socio-historical factors that help understand Ikon precisely as a category-resisting phenomenon. Therefore, while avoiding strict and reductive definitions of Ikon, I do wish to establish a few coordinates on the way. This chapter first describes how Ikon was formed and how it relates to the broader ECM. Then it discusses the demographics of Ikon's members and audience. The closing section introduces some of the main practices and projects of Ikon. Through this general introduction to Ikon, this chapter seeks to lay the groundworks and provide the relevant context for the following chapters.

[32] Ikon, 'FAQ', Ikon, 1 October 2012, https://ikonbelfast.wordpress.com/faq/. In Ikon's own publications and in secondary literature both 'ikon' and 'Ikon' is used to describe the collective. For consistency's sake, I will use 'Ikon' along with most of the secondary literature and the later publications by members of the collective.
[33] See for example Marti and Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church*, 209n6.

The Origins of Ikon

Ikon was launched in 2001.[34] The main initiator of the collective was Peter Rollins, at the time a graduate student at Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Together with different artists, Rollins set up monthly meetings where the search for an authentic faith was combined with art and performance as well as with Christian liturgy and postmodern philosophy. On their website, Ikon members describe themselves in the follow manner:

> Inhabiting a space on the outer edges of religious life, we are a Belfast-based collective who offer anarchic experiments in transformance 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.[35]

Ganiel and Marti note that Ikon grew out of the thirty-year-long ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland known as 'The Troubles'.[36] This is seen for example in Ikon's close affiliation with the group Zero28. Zero28 was officially launched in 1999 by a group of Christian students at Queen's University in Belfast who participated in local and global peace and reconciliation initiatives.[37] They were especially disillusioned with the role of Protestant and Catholic Christians in the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland. Zero28 takes its name from the regional phone code for Northern Ireland as this is the only thing Protestants and Catholics seem to have in common.[38] Many of Ikon's members were also active for Zero28. In fact, Ganiel writes that "it was clear from my participant observation that people move fluidly between *Zero28* and *ikon*, and it was not immediately obvious why there are two groups instead of one."[39] Although there are in fact strong differences between Zero28 and Ikon, as Ganiel also acknowledges in her research, the former quotation illustrates that The Troubles as well as peace and reconciliation initiatives in Northern Ireland were a formative influence on Ikon.

Ikon seeks to be a category-resisting and an anti-institutional collective. Indeed, Ikon consistently resists the institutionalizing of its collective as seen for example in its use of non-definitions and non-membership cards. In this regard, John Caputo notes that "Ikon is hardly an institution at all, a more literally and visibly deconstructive quasi-institution. It is relatively

[34] Gladys Ganiel, 'Emerging from the Evangelical Subculture in Northern Ireland: An Analysis of the Zero28 and Ikon Community', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 1 (2006): 40.
[35] Ikon, 'About Ikon', Ikon, 19 September 2010, https://ikonbelfast.wordpress.com/about/.
[36] Ganiel and Marti, 'Northern Ireland, America and the Emerging Church Movement', 32–33.
[37] Ganiel, 'Emerging from the Evangelical Subculture in Northern Ireland', 40.
[38] Ganiel, 40.
[39] Ganiel, 41.

new and no one knows how long it will be around."[40] In line with this, Ganiel has proposed to classify Ikon as a de-institutional movement.[41] This has several implications for the way that Ikon's members organize themselves. Whereas early participants characterized Ikon as an alternative church, throughout the years most grew uncomfortable with this designation, preferring the term collective.[42] Thus, one member of Ikon told Ganiel and Marti:

> If [Ikon] 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.[43]

In line with this, Ikon resists being called a church or even a community. Instead, Ikon seeks to form alternative ways of organizing and gathering. In relation to this, Rollins has said that

> '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 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.[44]

This anti-institutional stance also has clear implications for the way that Ikon organizes its leadership. There is no doubt that Rollins plays a significant role in Ikon and is largely responsible for the international popularity of the practices of Ikon. Indeed, the importance of figures like Rollins for emerging Christian collectives is quite common. Accordingly, Marti and Ganiel write that in these emerging Christian collectives' beliefs, practices and identities are "continually deconstructed and reframed by the *religious institutional entrepreneurs* who drive the movement."[45] Rollins certainly falls into this category. Indeed, Moody writes that among

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[40] John D. Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?: The Good News of Post-Modernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 129.
[41] Gladys Ganiel, 'Secularisation and De-Institutionalised Religion: Future Directions', in *Foundations and Futures in the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Luke Doggett and Alp Arat (London: Routledge, 2017), 69–82.
[42] Marti and Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church*, 34.
[43] Marti and Ganiel, 34.
[44] The Christian Century, 'Seeds of Doubt', 21.
[45] Marti and Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church*, 8.

Emerging Christians in America, Rollins is often seen as Ikon's pastor.[46] However, members of Ikon claim that they seek to minimize organizational leadership.[47] Rollins himself, for instance, says

> I like to think of Ikon as a donut with a hole in the middle. Usually a church is more like a Danish pastry: you've got the jammy center, which is your leadership. We try to have a hole in the center so that we are all on the edges. To us, a priest is one who refuses to be a priest, who pushes back and creates a priesthood of all believers. A parallel example can be found in psychoanalysis: people think that the analyst's job is to analyze, but quite often the analyst is really there to refuse to be one, to make the patient into the analyst. My views are just as legitimate as everyone else's, but my job is to make sure that no one view colonizes the space.[48]

A group called 'the Cyndicate' meets each Monday to organize and plan new events. The Cyndicate consists of around ten committed members of Ikon although anyone is able to join the group.[49] On its website, Ikon writes that the name is an amalgamation of the terms 'syndicate' and 'cynic' and that it is supposed to designate "a group of disparate individuals who question religion precisely because we love religion so much, questioning our understanding of God only because we love God… Our cynicism is thus the outworking of prayers, tears and a passion for the incoming of God."[50] Although Ikon seeks a 'donut-hole' type of leaderships, some members of the Cyndicate have expressed their concerns about this approach. Ganiel and Marti report that at least one member left the Cyndicate for a while, arguing that

> 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.[51]

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[46] Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, 231–32.
[47] Marti and Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church*, 119.
[48] The Christian Century, 'Seeds of Doubt', 21.
[49] The Christian Century, 21. A list of the Cyndicate's members with a bit of biographical information of can be found on Ikon's website via the Wayback Machine: https://web.archive.org/web/20070513141349/http://wiki.ikon.org.uk/wiki/index.php/Cyndicate.
[50] Ikon, 'Cyndicate'.
[51] Ganiel and Marti, 'Northern Ireland, America and the Emerging Church Movement', 37.

The Members and Audience of Ikon

In an interview published in *The Christian Century*, Peter Rollins was asked what kind of people are involved in Ikon. He responded by saying: "Atheists and theists, liberals and conservatives, Protestants and Catholics, gays and straights – the whole works."[52] Although his answer certainly aligns with Ikon's ideals and desire to offer a safe space for all, it is not entirely clear whether Ikon is as diverse as Rollins claims. In this sense, Ikon is similar to the broader ECM. There, too, we encounter a tension between a desire for inclusive and diverse communities and a monolithic makeup of ECM communities. This desire for inclusive and diverse communities is seen for example in American clergy that identify as 'Emerging' who are more likely to emphasize inclusive rather than exclusive values.[53] However, in another publication, Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe argue that this emphasis on inclusiveness and diversity leads to communities that are mostly left-leaning and liberal, resulting in a lack of diversity within these Emerging Church communities.[54]

Ikon's audience consists mostly of emerging Christians. Indeed, so much so that Ikon was quickly understood to be at the forefront of the movement, something that members of Ikon strongly disagreed with.[55] This is seen for example in Ikon's participation at Greenbelt Festival, an annual Christian art and social justice festival where thousands of Emerging Christians have attended its theatrical performances.[56] Emerging Christianity is notoriously difficult to define as it is not linked to any particular denomination or practice. Marti and Ganiel describe the ECM as "a creative, entrepreneurial religious movement that strives to achieve social legitimacy and spiritual vitality by actively disassociating from its roots in conservative, evangelical Christianity."[57] In addition, they describe the ECM as a "distinct religious orientation built on a continual practice of deconstruction" in order to emphasize that Emerging

[52] The Christian Century, 'Seeds of Doubt', 21.
[53] Ryan P. Burge and Paul A. Djupe, 'Emergent Church Practices in America: Inclusion and Deliberation in American Congregations', *Review of Religious Research* 57, no. 1 (1 March 2015): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1007/s13644-014-0157-2.
[54] Ryan P. Burge and Paul A. Djupe, 'Truly Inclusive or Uniformly Liberal? An Analysis of the Politics of the Emerging Church', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 3 (September 2014): 636–51, https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12129.
[55] As alluded to at the start of this chapter, Ikon does not see itself as being part of the ECM and its members tend to be critical of the movement. Nevertheless, the theatrical performances created by Ikon and the books, blogs, and art published by its members have been formative for many Emerging Christians. This means that there may be a difference in self-identification between the members of Ikon (not ECM) and its audience (mostly ECM). Cf. Peter Rollins, Transformance Art at Wake Festival, interview by Gladys Ganiel, 2021.
[56] Ganiel and Marti, 'Northern Ireland, America and the Emerging Church Movement', 27; Hunt, 'The Emerging Church', 78. Most of the performances referenced in this thesis were performed at Greenbelt in front of thousands of Emerging Christians.
[57] Marti and Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church*, ix.

Christianity is not characterized by a set of beliefs but rather in a shared practice of deconstructing Christianity.[58] However, against Marti and Ganiel, Katharine Moody argues that the ECM does share a set of identifiable values, beliefs and practices against which its adherents negotiate their own and their shared identities.[59]

Arguably, Marti and Ganiel's definition of the ECM as well as that of Moody do not need to exclude each other. On the contrary, I argue that the ECM is best understood as a movement that is united in its shared disaffiliation from a set of values, beliefs and practices associated with conservative and institutional forms of Christianity. Thus, the current views of Emerging Christians may vary widely but their disapproval of what they are seeking to leave behind is what allows for a shared and identifiable frame. With Philip Harrold it is possible to designate the ECM as a religion of *posts*-, where moving beyond and turning from political, cultural and religious conservatism are central concerns.[60] Thus, rather than describing their shift in religious orientation as a move towards secularity, these 'post-evangelicals' emphasize a desire to turn away from forms Christianity that were dominant in their lives.[61] This active disassociation means that deconversion both in personal narratives as well as during official activities is an important recurring theme.[62] Consequently, rather than being defined by turning towards something new, Emerging Christians seem to identify themselves through a shared turning from conservative Christianity.[63]

In terms of demographics, a similar pattern can be found. As a survey data conducted in eight Emerging congregations shows, members of Emerging Church communities tend to have similar backgrounds.[64] Thus, Figure 1 shows that participants of the ECM are

[58] Marti and Ganiel, 6. Marti and Ganiel use a definition of deconstruction that was proposed by Stephan Fuchs and Steven Ward, namely as "a form of micropolitics in which actors establish competitive arenas in response to pressures for conformity." (Marti and Ganiel, 26). Cf. Stephan Fuchs and Steven Ward, 'What Is Deconstruction, and Where and When Does It Take Place? Making Facts in Science, Building Cases in Law', *American Sociological Review*, 1994, 481–500.
[59] Thus rather than describing the ECM as an orientation, Moody proposes the notion of a discursive milieu as a field of beliefs and aspirations. Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, 15.
[60] Philip Harrold, 'Deconversion in the Emerging Church', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 6, no. 1 (2006): 85. Marti and Ganiel make a similar observation, writing that their "connections do no come from what they are *joining* but rather from a shared sense of what they are jointly *leaving*" (*The Deconstructed Church*, 16).
[61] Lori L. Fazzino, 'Leaving the Church behind: Applying a Deconversion Perspective to Evangelical Exit Narratives', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29, no. 2 (2014): 249–66.
[62] Marti and Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church*, 23; Cf. James S. Bielo, 'Belief, Deconversion, and Authenticity among US Emerging Evangelicals', *Ethos* 40, no. 3 (2012): 258–76.
[63] Similarly, Bielo writes that "to be an Emerging Evangelical is to be someone taking the cultural critique of conservative Evangelicalism seriously and attempting to live a response." *Emerging Evangelicals*, 6.
[64] James Bielo conducted this survey in 2006 with 2020 respondents, all located in the US. Gladys Ganiel, Gerardo Marti, and Paul Olson have corrected the results by excluding minors and first-time visitors from the

predominantly white (93%), educated (65%)[65], Millennials/Gen Xers (68%) from a Protestant background (76%). In terms of race, the implications are that ECM communities tend to promote and maintain white spaces, despite their desire to form inclusive and diverse communities. Thus, at the conferences organized by the ECM, Gerardo Marti observes that "attendees were mostly men, mostly white, and mostly late twenty to early thirty-year-olds."[66] Meeting one of his respondents in a newly opened coffee shop in Cincinnati, Ohio, during his research on the ECM, James Bielo writes the following:

> From the second I walked in, it screamed of white, middle-class public space. Light, elevatoresque jazz played through the overhead speakers. Almost every patron was young, white, and quiet. I paid $11 for a soup and half-sandwich with Continental herbs and flavorings. During the interview, when discussing [the respondent's] mappings of [Over-the-Rhine] as a church planter, he said that people rarely mix across class and race lines, especially in public. He immediately drew attention to the space we were in. "Where are all the poor black people? They are walking past the front window." He was right. They were.[67]

This is consistent with Bonilla-Silva et al.'s research on whiteness in the US context that suggest that white people tend to flock together despite their views on race, finding it difficult to create and sustain relationships with non-white people if they did not grow accustomed to doing so as children.[68] According to Ganiel, Ikon's demographics is similar to that of the ECM in general, noting that members of Ikon were almost exclusively middle class.[69] However, as alluded to

data. This left 1771 respondents. For a more detailed discussion of the survey data, see Marti and Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church*, 204–6.

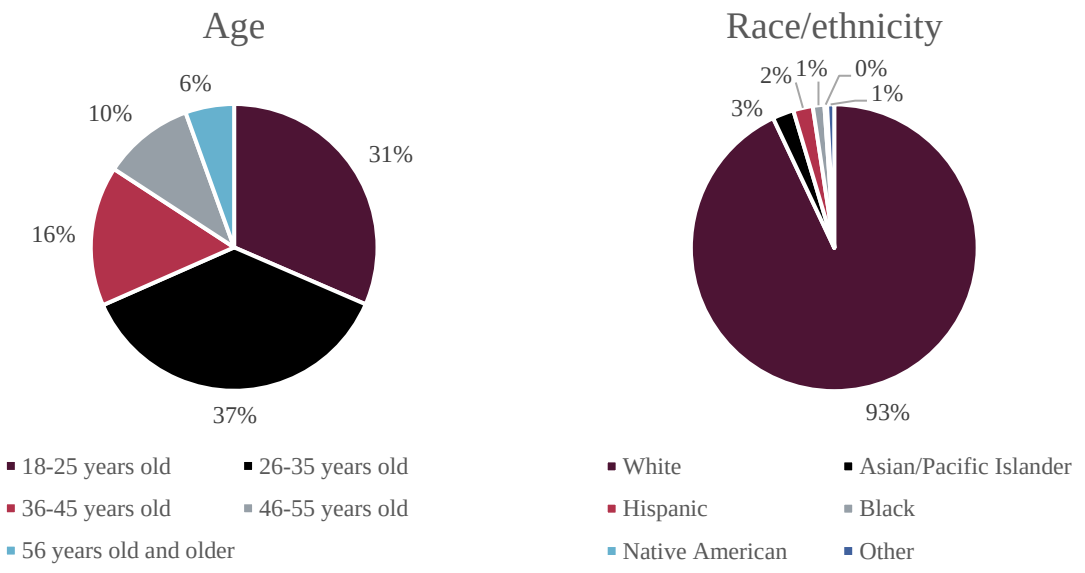
[65] Completed college degree or higher.

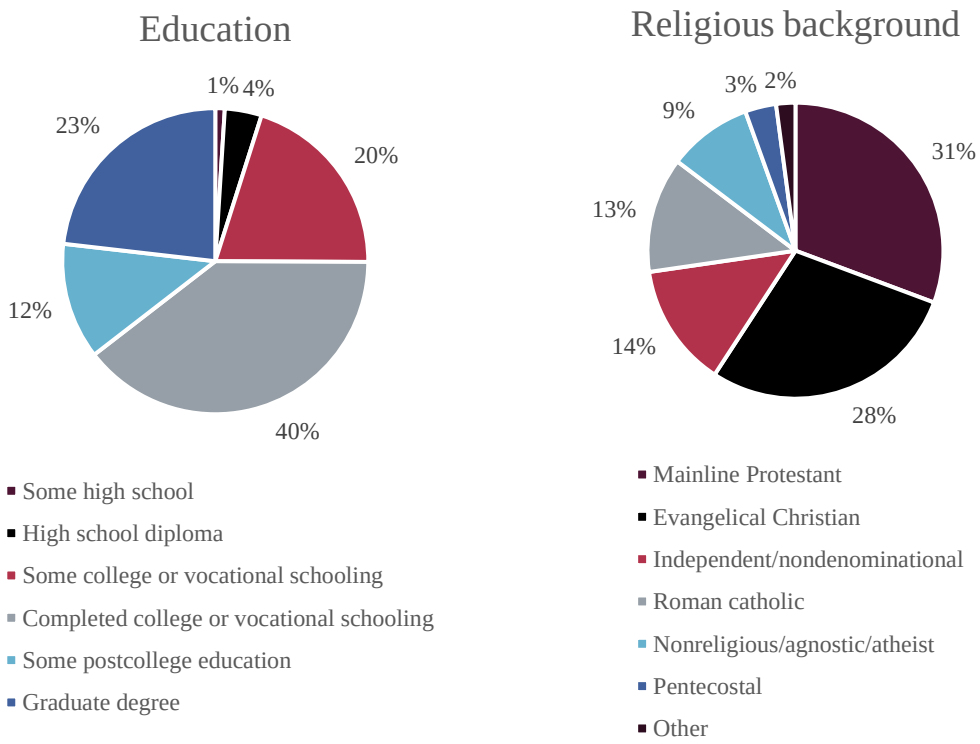
[66] Marti and Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church*, 15.

[67] Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals*, 171.

[68] Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Carla Goar, and David G. Embrick, 'When Whites Flock Together: The Social Psychology of White Habitus', *Critical Sociology* 32, no. 2–3 (1 March 2006): 229–53, https://doi.org/10.1163/156916306777835268.

[69] Gladys Ganiel, *Evangelicalism and Conflict in Northern Ireland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 160.





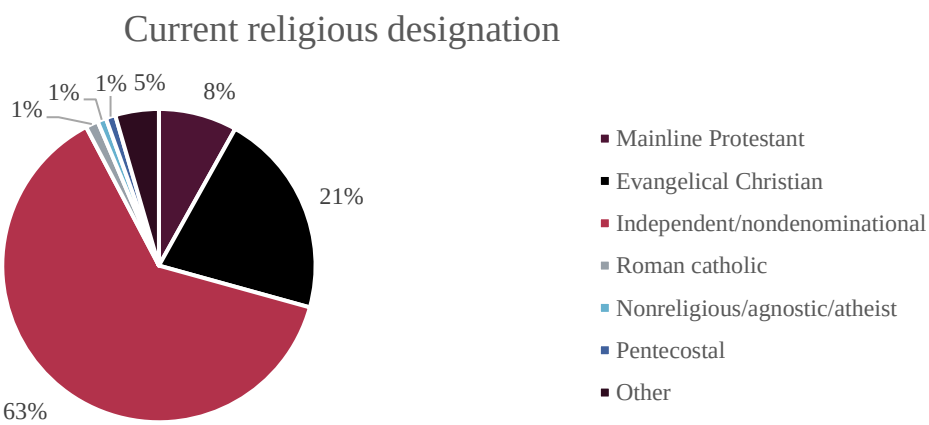


Figure 1 Demographic Data from Bielo, Ganiel, Marti & Olson's Survey on ECM. Source: Marti and Ganiel, The Deconstructed Church, 204-206

before, Ikon's members appear to be much more radical than other Emerging Christians in terms of theology as well as in relation to social justice issues.

The Projects of Ikon: Transformance Art and Decentring Practices

Between its creation in 2001 and its last event held in 2013, Ikon created various projects, events, and recurring gatherings. Each month, around fifteen to twenty people participated in Ikon's main recurring event.[70] Each event was designed to address a particular theme and were held at different locations throughout Belfast, moving between, for instance, 'The Menagerie', a Catholic bar and 'The Black Box', a live music venue (see Figure 2).[71] The members of Ikon describe the performances held at these thematic events as 'transformance art'. Transformance is a compound word, coined in order to combine the meaning of the words performance and transformation. Put simply, transformance art is characterized by a desire to evoke transformation in its audience through performance.[72] In an interview, Rollins emphasizes that at Ikon, "we put the experience of transformation at the center." Members of Ikon stress that their events create safe spaces that help people explore ideas and practices that our generally not discussed in their own religious and political groups.[73] Though this may be true, many of Ikon's events seek to transform its audience through disruption (see chapter three). A more accurate description would be that of 'suspended space', a term that Ikon uses to describe the act of temporarily leaving one's various identities at the door during Ikon's theatrical performances.[74] By doing so, Ikon attempts to create spaces that both allow for safe exploration of other ideas while simultaneously critically engaging with one's own beliefs. Indeed, during her fieldwork at one of Ikon's transformance art gatherings, Ganiel notes that "it took less than ten minutes for the young man to explain his vision, but even in that short period of time the people in the bar had transgressed an alarming number of the boundaries and cultural codes associated with evangelicalism"[75]

[70] Ganiel, 'Emerging from the Evangelical Subculture in Northern Ireland', 40.
[71] Ganiel, 38; Hunt, 'The Emerging Church', 75.
[72] Cf. Hunt, 'The Emerging Church', 75.
[73] Ganiel and Marti, 'Northern Ireland, America and the Emerging Church Movement', 36.
[74] Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, 195.
[75] Ganiel, 'Emerging from the Evangelical Subculture in Northern Ireland', 39.

The following text gives an example the transformance art events that Ikon has held. It is called *Prodigal*, one of the earliest pieces performed and it serves to give a general impression of its theatrical performances.[76]

Prodigal[77]

As usual, there is a rush to finish setting up the room before people arrive. As the doors open we are still struggling with the reliably unreliable PA system. But as people begin to order their drinks, the lights are finally dimmed and the PA kicks into life. The common purse is placed onto the bar (a basket that people can put money into and take money out of throughout the service) and the DJ begins to play.

Around the room dozens of Mills and Boon novels that we had purchased in a second-hand bookshop have been scattered around the various surfaces. It hangs from the ceiling in the centre of the room and is covered by a projection of Rembrandt's *Head of Christ*.

After a few more minutes have passed the music begins to fade and a man approaches the stage before waiting patiently for the room to go quiet. When the various conversations have come to an end he takes the mike and begins:

> There was once a rich and kindly father who lived with his two sons in a great gothic mansion. They had resided there together for many years until, late one evening, in the very dead of the night, the father mysteriously left.
>
> Each son dealt with the horror of this loss in a different way. The eldest son ignored and suppressed the midnight exodus of his father entirely and continued with his daily chores religiously. Through toil and rationalization he repressed the haunting knowledge that his father was gone, allowing it to fester silently in the depths of his being.
>
> In contrast, the younger son was openly overcome with confusion and fear. In desperation he withdrew his inheritance and also left. He too suppressed the terror in his heart, but chose to forget by using the amnesia offered by pleasure, spending his money and time on worldly distractions. Yet the path he chose was a lonely one that

[76] As described in the introduction, part of this thesis consists of a digital archive with texts and other media about Ikon's transformance art that may be accessed here: https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/
[77] https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/2022/07/31/prodigal/

Prodigal (continued)

led only to destitution and poverty. It wasn't long before he found himself without money or friends, working on a farm where he was forced to share the animal's food. After many years of this pitiful existence he gathered resolution in his heart and set about the return journey to his father's home. When he finally returned to the great mansion, he found his elder brother still caring for the property, still toiling on the land and still suppressing the memory of their father's departure.

The brother who had never left held resentment in his heart against the sibling who had squandered his inheritance only to return empty-handed and broken-hearted. However, the young man paid no heed to this animosity, for his gaze was set upon a higher concern. Each day he would ready a calf for slaughter and lay out his father's

favourite cloak in preparation for a great feast. Once he had completed this daily ritual he would sit by the entrance of the mansion and await his father's return.

He waits there still, to this very day, yearning for the homecoming of the prodigal father with longing and forgiveness overflowing his heart.

The parable is then followed by some poetry and music on the theme of loss and yearning. Between each piece somebody comes up to the front and shares a time in their own life when the absence of God has been most present to them. After this we are all encouraged to spend a few minutes sharing an experience of this kind with others at our table. About ten minutes pass before someone approaches the stage to speak:

We often think that desire arises from the absence of that which we seek. For instance, we long for food because we lack the nourishment that food brings and we are satisfied when we have eaten. However, in a loving relationship our desire for the other arises from their actual presence. In love the presence of the other does not fulfil our yearning, as food fulfils our hunger, but rather deepens it.

So too our religious desire is never satisfied in God but rather deepened there. We cannot grasp God, not because God is absent, but rather because God is always given in excess of our ability to grasp. It is because of this that the revelation of God is not

Prodigal (continued)

> to be thought of as the opposite of concealment but rather has concealment built into its very heart, for each revelation is so luminous that it cannot be reduced to the horizon of our sight. In this way the revelation of God is like a veil which both reveals and conceals the one whom we love.
>
> Behind me is a projection of Rembrand's *Head of Christ*. It is projected onto a permeable material so as to draw out how God's revelation is like a wedding veil – one which both exposes and conceals our beloved.

People are given some time to meditate on the project image; there is some poetry and an opportunity for people to talk among themselves. After 15 minutes someone approaches the stage and speaks:

> Pascal once wrote: 'Finally, let them recognize that there are two kinds of people one can call reasonable; those who serve God with all their heart because they know him, and those who seek him with all their hart because they do not know him.
>
> But what if these two people are really only reasonable when they are thought to be two different parts of one person? What if only those who truly serve God can really know what it is to yearn for God, and only those who truly desire God can really know what it is to serve God?

From elsewhere in the room the following verse is read from a large Bible:

> Everyone who asks receives; those who seek find and to those who knock, the door will be opened.

The Bible is closed and the person at the stage continues:

> Here we learn that in the very instant of asking, we receive; in seeking, we find; and in knocking, we enter. Here seeking and finding do not follow one another as day follows night but occur simultaneously, as heat emanates from light.
>
> Perhaps, then, the secret longing for God could be the sign that God is already among us in a way that is beyond our understanding and experience. Is this not what the

Prodigal (continued)

> psalmist hints at when he says that those who desire God lack no good thing? And is this not the message of the Gospels when we read that we must seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness? Here desiring and seeking are placed over and above having and possessing.

As the service draws to a close everyone is invited to take away a Mills and Boon book as a reminder of the evening's theme.

This piece contains a retelling of the parable of the prodigal son. The original parable is told by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (15:11-32). In the parable, the youngest of two sons asks his father for his share of the inheritance. The rest of the parable tells how the young son squandered the money before he returns to ask for his father's forgiveness, which he receives. Ikon retells this story and replaces the disappearance of the youngest son with that of the father. The father leaves mysteriously and the sons are left to deal with the horror of this loss. This brings us to an important pattern in Ikon's transformance art which will be elaborated on in chapter two, namely the experience of the absence of God. We also encounter a playful yet serious engagement with Christian traditions, a phenomenon that will be explored in chapter three in relation to the problem of presence.

Besides these monthly gatherings, Ikon has also organized different events and projects which it calls "decentring practices."[78] One of these is 'Atheism for Lent'. Lent is a 40-day fasting period in the Christian liturgical calendar before Easter. Inspired by this period that plays a prominent role in Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, the project Atheism for Lent seeks to offer its participants a transformative experience of the death of God. Each day, the participants receive excerpts of atheist critiques of Christianity as offered by thinkers such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud. They are then encouraged to think through the validity and the implications of these critiques for their own worldview. Although Ikon is no longer around as a collective, Atheism for Lent is still held each year led by Rollins. On Rollins' website the following description of the practice is given:

> *Atheism for Lent* invites the intrepid pilgrim to explore the philosophical import of this idea [of the death of God]. But this is not primarily an intellectual journey. More

[78] Cf. Rollins, Transformance Art at Wake Festival.

fundamentally, it is an existential one in which you will be invited to experience this liberating event.[79]

Another decentring practice that Ikon would host is 'The Omega Course'. This project takes its inspiration from the popular evangelizing tool 'The Alpha Course', a twelve-week course which is used throughout the world to encourage participants to think through the validity of Christianity and by doing so to become more involved in Christian communities. In a typical fashion, Ikon designed The Omega Course as a six-to-twelve-week course to leave Christianity and to question core Christian doctrines.[80] Another recurring decentring practice is the 'Evangelism Project'. In this project, Ikon invites different local religious communities (Russian Orthodox, Muslim, Scientologist, etc.) in order to let these communities evangelise the members of Ikon.[81] Matthew Gallion writes that the purpose of this project is for Ikon to become aware of one's own strangeness as seen through the gaze of the other.[82] In these different projects, transformance is the central theme. In the rest of this thesis, it will become clear how Ikon seeks to mediate this transformative experience.

When asked about the future of Ikon, Rollins told Moody that "If Ikon tried to go on indefinitely, it would be against the very message that it's trying to communicate."[83] Although Ikon is no longer officially organizing events, many of its members still meet each other at Wake, an annual festival held at The Menagerie and open to anyone interested in the ideas and practices of Ikon.

[79] Peter Rollins, 'Atheism for Lent', peterrollins.com, n.d., https://peterrollins.com/atheism-for-lent-welcome-2022.
[80] Gallion, 'Ecclesiology After God', 64; Hunt, 'The Emerging Church', 83.
[81] See for a brief description by Rollins and a video of this practice.
[82] Gallion, 'Ecclesiology After God', 63.
[83] Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, 212.

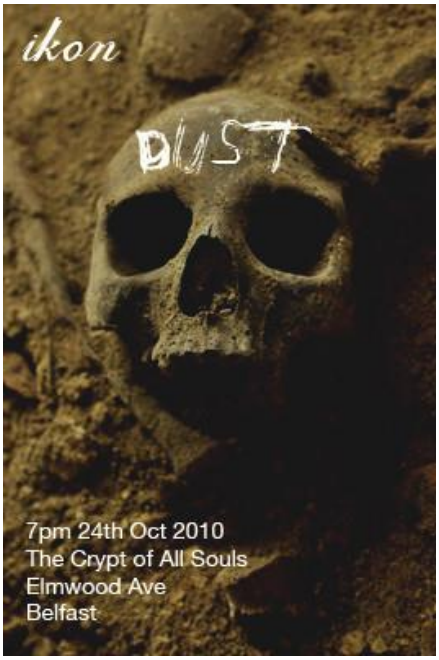


Figure 2 Three posters promoting Ikon's thematic events. Source: https://twitter.com/ikonbelfast

Conclusion

This chapter provided a general introduction to the Ikon collective, highlighting its origins, members, audience, and main projects. The two main themes that run as threads through this chapter are deconversion as a turning from and transformation. The emphasis on turning from leads to a certain paradoxical situation where the ECM is both incredibly diverse (in terms of current beliefs and practices) and monolithic (in terms of demographics) at the same time. What connects Ikon's members, and their Emerging Christian audience is their shared desire to turn away from conservative forms of Christianity. Thus, the set of beliefs and practices that they seek to leave behind is similar.[84] Marti and Ganiel note that the ECM is characterized by a 'belonging without believing' and 'multiple believing with belonging', meaning that the emphasis at ECM communities such as Ikon is on belonging rather than affirming a set of beliefs.[85] Yet I would argue that Ikon is characterized by a 'belonging through disbelieving', where the emphasis is placed on what one no longer can or should believe. At the end of a performance called *The God Delusion,* which was performed by Ikon at Greenbelt in 2007, a poem is read by a man on stage through a megaphone. The piece asks the audience if their faith lies in young earth creationism, or in scientific rationalism, or in the free market, etc. After repeatedly asking this question in relation to various topics, the poem ends with the question: "Where does your faith… lie?"[86] Here the word 'lie' obtains a different meaning, changing the question from "what do you belief?" to "in what ways are your beliefs untrue?" Indeed, it is my contention that this turning away from shared beliefs is what binds Ikon together as a collective. In chapter three it becomes clear that one of the main aims of Ikon's transformance art is to encourage deconversion as turning away. There, the techniques that Ikon employs in its transformance art to do so, and the importance of materiality therein are explored.

This emphasis on turning away might be an important observation for conversion studies in particular and for the study of religion in general, namely that the influence of beliefs and practices that people have left behind on their contemporary religious, or non-religious identities should not be underestimated. It could be argued that religious identities have become increasingly complex in late or liquid modernity.[87] Indeed, there have been various proposals

[84] See the interviews held by Marti and Ganiel (*The Deconstructed Church*, 57–77).
[85] Marti and Ganiel, 92; Ulrich Beck, *A God of One's Own: Religion's Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010), 140.
[86] https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/2022/06/09/the-god-delusion/
[87] Whereas heavy capitalism or 'solid modernity' was characterized by (a desire for) durability, capitalism and culture under liquid modernity is characterized by fast change and short-term thinking. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Oxford: Polity, 2000), 126–27, 188.

to understand religious identity in more dynamic and fluid terms.[88] Yet one hypothesis that the study of Ikon and the ECM at large generates is to what extent past religious identities are formative on contemporary complex identities. Rollins writes that "there are as many atheisms as there are theisms. There is, for example, Jewish atheism, Buddhist atheism, Christian atheism, and Islamic atheism. All of which are slightly different, for each rejection is specifically geared to that which it is in opposition to."[89] Indeed, it may be precisely a shared turning from that leads to identifiable similarities.[90] Through its radical critique of organized religion, Ikon could certainly be understood as a new form of religious anti-institutional organizing that seeks to go beyond traditional forms of Christianity. As will become clear in the coming chapter, however, Ikon is still very much shaped by these same tradition forms of Christianity that it seeks to go beyond. This makes sense in light of the theory discussed surrounding deconversion where it is characterized by a shared turning-from.

[88] Thomas A. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); Daan F. Oostveen, 'Religious Belonging in the East Asian Context: An Exploration of Rhizomatic Belonging', *Religions* 10, no. 3 (March 2019): 182, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030182.
[89] Peter Rollins, *The Idolatry of God: Breaking Our Addiction to Certainty and Satisfaction* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 164.
[90] Marti and Ganiel (*The Deconstructed Church*, 57) mention a humorous and ironic blogpost by an emerging Christian titled "You Might Be an Emergent Christian if…" that lists things like drinking fairtrade soy latte's, quoting Jacques Derrida, wearing hipster glasses, calling someone a 'post-' or even a 'post-post-'something as a compliment. The post ends with the ironic statement "whatever you do, for The Event's sake, don't actually call yourself an emergent. No self-respecting emergent would ever do such a thing." The original blogpost can be found here: Christian Piatt, 'You Might Be an Emergent Christian If …', Sojourners, 29 March 2012, https://sojo.net/articles/you-might-be-emergent-christian-if.

CHAPTER TWO IDOLS AND ICONS: RESPONDING TO THE PROBLEM OF PRESENCE

Turning from conservative forms of Christianity, Ikon attempts to occupy a liminal space between (or, more precisely, beyond) Christianity and atheism in its theatrical performances. Yet its category-resisting tendencies situates Ikon within one of the central debates in the history of Christianity, namely how God's presence should be understood and experienced. This concern with divine presence, or more precisely absence, is central in the works produced by Peter Rollins, the main initiator of Ikon. Indeed, Rollins has been an important influence on Ikon's course throughout the years. Rollins was seventeen years old when he converted to a fundamentalist type of evangelical Christianity due to a street evangelism project.[91] Throughout his years as a member of an evangelical church he became increasingly interested in the mystical traditions of Christianity. This interest in mysticism eventually led him away from the Christian community he had been involved in and set him on a different path. On this new path, Rollins sought to re-envision the Christian message with the help of mysticism. At a certain point, Rollins had a dream in which he felt that God appeared to him and told him: "I do not exist."[92] Although he did not understand it at the time, it was a key step towards him adhering to what he calls a religion after the death of God or religionless Christianity. His thinking goes under the name of 'pyrotheology' and there are several communities both online and offline that centre their practices around the ideas of Rollins.[93] He currently resides in Los Angeles in California where he provides online lectures and events for those who are interested in his work.

Rollins, who is now known for his philosophical and theological work that combines Christian mysticism, postmodern philosophy and psychoanalytic theory often emphasizes that his work grew out of Ikon. In an interview with Gallion he states that "Ikon, before I intellectually got there, was living out a faith community with theists and atheists fully

[91] Peter Rollins, A Chat With Peter Rollins, Postmodern Barroom Philosopher, interview by Becky Garrison, 2008, http://www.wittenburgdoor.com/peter-rollins-interview.html. Fundamentalist is the term used by Rollins to describe this church.
[92] 'Personal Correspondence of the Author with Peter Rollins', 2020.
[93] Along with the VOID collective and European Radical Theology Network already mentioned, each year a creative retreat called Spark is held to educate and support those who are interested in pyrotheology. The name pyrotheology refers to a fiery theology that seeks to burn down what already exists while simultaneously kindling new ways forward. Caputo writes: "I would say Pyrotheology results from holding the feet of theology to the fire of deconstruction [in the Derridean sense]… it both burns off and enkindles." John D. Caputo, 'Let It Blaze, Let It Blaze: Pyrotheology and the Theology of the Event', *Modern Believing* 57, no. 4 (2016): 336, https://doi.org/10.3828/mb.2016.23.

involved… And, as I say, [Ikon] was doing it before I could conceptualize the doing of it."[94] Similarly, Moody writes that Rollins prefers to be seen as a practitioner rather than a philosopher and that he views his writings as a retroactive justification of Ikon: "People started asking me why I was doing what I was doing, so I had to start making up reasons."[95] Indeed, Rollins' first book was published in 2006 to popularize the ideas and practices of Ikon. Because of this, Rollins' books are an important source for engaging with Ikon.[96]

This chapter draws attention to the theologies of absence that Rollins espouses. These theologies of absence seek to provide answers to questions that have played a prominent role in the history of Western Christianity. By doing so, this chapter shows how Ikon functions as a *post-Christian* community that draws from its Christian roots while simultaneously going beyond contemporary and historical expressions of Christianity into non-religious and even anti-religious territory (in a peculiarly Protestant Christian manner). The first section introduces the problem of presence and some of the main discussions it evokes. The second section describes two responses that Ikon offers to the problem of presence as found in the books of Peter Rollins.

The Problem of Presence in Christianity: Implications and Responses

In the dark of the early morning, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb where Jesus had been buried. On arrival, Mary found the tomb empty with the body of Jesus no longer present (John 10:1). Later, the disciple Thomas refused to believe that the same Jesus who died has appeared to his friends. When Jesus appears to him, he urges Thomas to place his fingers in the wounds of his body (John 20:24-29). Later still, Jesus appeared in bodily form to his disciples. The gospel of Matthew notes that "when they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted" (Matt. 28:17). These brief examples illustrate a basic problem that has been central in the history of Western Christianity, namely, how to experience and conceptualize God's presence and how to relate to God's absence. In light of Matthew Engelke's research, this could be called the

[94] Gallion, 'Ecclesiology After God', 62. See also Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, 25–26.
[95] Rollins as quoted in Katharine S. Moody, 'Pyrotheology: Living the Afterlife of the Death of Theology', *Modern Believing* 57, no. 4 (2016): 325, https://doi.org/10.3828/mb.2016.22.
[96] Although Rollins prefers framing it in this manner, I think the relationship between practice and ideas was a bit more dynamic. Thus, chapter one notes that one member of the cyndicate disapproved of the ideas that were put into practice around leadership. Similarly, in an interview from 2008, Rollins says that "I started Ikon when I began my PhD, so I could work out my theories in practice." Rollins, A Chat With Peter Rollins, Postmodern Barroom Philosopher. Even if this would be the case, then Rollins' books would still be important for understanding Ikon's ideas and values.

problem of presence in Christianity. In his study of a group of Christian Masowe apostolics in Zimbabwe, he writes

> How is God present? This is a central Christian question, to which the answer is Christ. And yet, with his passing, the answer becomes conditioned by an absence. Christ is the definitive presence; what comes after him is only ever a mediated one.[97]

The problem of presence provides an important theoretical starting point for the study of Christianity.[98] With Robert Orsi, it is possible to approach Christianity in terms of a "practice of rendering the invisible visible."[99] Indeed, as the discussion on how and when absent beings and things are rendered present is broader than Christianity, Engelke writes that the problem of presence may be an important thread for the study of religion in general.[100]

The problem of presence can be broken down to two fundamental areas of tension. The first is whether and how God's presence can be experienced and conceptualized. The second is what available means or channels may be used to mediate such an experience God's presence. In case of the first, Orsi has argued that the presence of invisible beings and forces is often simply given in the everyday experiences of religious adherents. Thus, when St. Jude refuses to listen to prayers addressed to him, he may be placed in the back of the car to rethink his actions.[101] Although it is certainly true that divine presence may be experienced as immediate, there are crucial material processes and embodied practices that make this experience of simply-given-presence possible. Thus, in response to Orsi, Tanya Luhrmann writes that "if a man born Catholic never prays, never confesses, never goes to Mass, that man will be much less likely to

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[97] Matthew Engelke, *A Problem of Presence: Beyond Scripture in an African Church* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 13. To be clear, the 'problem of presence' is a second order concept that helps shed light on the different views on human-divine relationships in the history of Christianity. It is not an indigenous term but rather one created by scholars of religion. Nevertheless, I think it sheds light on a central concern for Christians both in the past and the present. Therefore, I follow scholars such as Bielo who has operationalized Engelke's notion of the problem of presence to describe a central tension in both historical and lived Christianity. James S. Bielo, '"Where Prayers May Be Whispered": Promises of Presence in Protestant Place-Making', *Ethnos* 85, no. 4 (7 August 2020): 730–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2019.1604559. As Engelke shows, the term is also used by Robert Orsi and Webb Keane. Cf. Robert A. Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), 74; Webb Keane, 'Religious Language', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1997, 51.

[98] Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 27–28.

[99] Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 74. Although Orsi's research is mainly aimed at Catholic Christians, the case can be made that this is also the case for Protestant Christians. Indeed, in Luhrmann's work this becomes clear. Tanya M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (Knopf, 2012). See also Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity. Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).

[100] Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 29.

[101] Robert A. Orsi, 'The Problem of the Holy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, ed. Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 98, https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521883917.006.

think that St. Jude gets the message when the man throws his statue to the floor."[102] Here it becomes clear that for most, experiencing God's presence takes sustained effort and practice.[103] Because of this, Luhrmann emphasizes in her study of practices of presence amongst American evangelicals the following:

> The priest says, *this is my body*, but it looks like a dry cracker. The sermon insists, *my God can do anything*, but God didn't stop the divorce. And so faith is hard—particularly when an invisible other is supposed to love you, care for you, and keep you safe.[104]

Because of this discrepancy between a desire for God's presence and once lived experience where a conscious sense of this presence is difficult to maintain, there tends to be a large contrast between "the language of presence and the dynamics of lived faith, in which that presence is often uncertain."[105]

A second discussion which is intricately linked to the first is about which practices and objects are valid for rendering the divine present. In the last twenty years, scholars of religion have become increasingly aware of the mediation processes that underlie religious experiences. Thus, in his introduction to *Religion and Media,* Hent de Vries argues that processes of mediation are central to religion and that religion would not be able to manifest itself without them.[106] Similarly Birgit Meyer has argued that shared worlds that are taken to be real and experienced as immediate by and for religious adherents are shaped and condition by mediation processes.[107] Mediation processes, then, refer to the application of artefacts, buildings, embodied practices as well as other material means to produce a shared, real, and immediate world where the unseen is rendered present and perceived through the senses.[108]

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[102] Tanya M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 181.
[103] Pascal Boyer, 'Why "Belief" Is Hard Work: Implications of Tanya Luhrmann's When God Talks Back', *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 3, no. 3 (2013): 349–50. Tanya Luhrmann amongst others has argued that some may have a natural proclivity for non-ordinary or supernatural experiences (see Luhrmann's discussion on absorption in 2020, 70–72). However, for most Christians, it takes sustained practice to experience the presence of invisible beings.
[104] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*, xiii.
[105] Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 15.
[106] Hent de Vries, 'In Media Res: Global Religion, Public Spheres, Ad the Task of Contemporary Comparative Religious Studies', in *Religion and Media,* ed. Hent de Vries and Samuel Weber (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 28.
[107] Birgit Meyer, 'Material Mediations and Religious Practices of World-Making', in *Religion Across Media: From Early Antiquity to Late Modernity*, ed. Knut Lundby (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 5.
[108] Birgit Meyer, 'Religion as Mediation', *Entangled Religions* 11, no. 3 (20 January 2020): 6, https://doi.org/10.46586/er.11.2020.8444; Birgit Meyer and Terje Stordalen, 'Introduction: Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam', in *Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in*

However, these mediation practices do not only offer a bridge between humans and the unseen but also shape the unseen in the process. The different media that are employed in practices of mediation condition the unseen. Humans, then, "help to fabricate the beings in which we believe."[109] Or, to put it less strongly, humans and material means are both caught up in practices of mediation that condition that which is rendered present. To give an example, it matters whether someone witnesses a miracle in person, through a TV-screen or through a radio broadcast. These different media will shape one's experience of the miracle. To be clear, this does not mean that divine presences lack agency. Neither does this mean that divine presences are conjured up and manipulated through mediation practices (although this may also happen). Divine presences speak back, disrupting the (un-)believers' preconceived understandings of the world and of God. Orsi has emphasized this, arguing that divine presences also speak back to existing power structures. Thus, he writes:

> Presence is a fearsome thing. Objects that hold sacred presence, such as relics or statues, may be moved, stolen, and misused. What the Virgin Mary or the saints have had to say to ordinary people has often challenged the authority, behaviour, and, less often, the teachings of the Church.[110]

Because of the previously discussed factors, the problem of presence also entails concerns around what forms of media should be authorized and which should be prohibited. As Hans Belting points out:

> "[material images] came into being because they were to provide a visual likeness of what they stand for. In our case they represent persons who cannot be seen because they are absent (the emperor) or invisible (God). If they were visible, veneration of their image would not be necessary."[111]

This means that representation through images implies both mediated presence but also an implicit absence. Because of this, images and other media entail a certain uncertainty about what is being mediated. In line with this, Birgit Meyer writes that

Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Contested Desires, ed. Birgit Meyer and Terje Stordalen (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 5; Jeremy Stolow, 'Religion and/as Media', *Theory, Culture & Society* 22, no. 4 (2005): 125.

[109] Bruno Latour, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 39.

[110] Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 29.

[111] Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 1994), 42.

> pictures and other media (for instance, relics) are indispensable to express—indeed, materialize—the religious imagination and its inner, mental images, yet are at the same time vested with insecurities and anxieties about their capacity to re-present truly and truthfully."[112]

Similarly, Engelke writes that "even for those to whom God speaks directly—and what could signify presence more definitively than the voice?—there is often a background noise of doubts"[113]

Besides this uncertainty, there is an additional problem for representation which Stordalen has formulated as follows: "How does one represent that which is conceived to be non-representable or not suitable for exposure?"[114] This is seen, for instance, after the Protestant reformations in the Low Countries, where different conceptions of presence and materiality were central in (violent) conflicts between Catholics and Protestants as seen in the veneration of saints as well as understandings of the eucharist.[115] Webb Keane has theorized how such conflicts are related to diverging semiotic ideologies. Semiotic ideologies are "people's underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs do or do not serve, and what consequences they might or might not produce."[116] This includes language but also "sound, smell, touch, muscular movement, pain, affect, and other somatic phenomena."[117] The difference, then, between a sacred object and an idol or a fetish is very much linked to which semiotic ideology is taken for granted or understood to be valid. A compelling argument can be made, as Engelke for instance does, that the different semiotic ideologies within global Christianity are shaped by the language of presence and absence.[118]

In sum, the problem of presence has four relevant implications for the study of Ikon as a post-Christian collective: 1) experiencing divine presence takes sustained practice, 2) experiencing divine presence requires mediation practices, 3) these mediation practices condition divine presence which leads to 4) a concern in the history of Christianity with the authorization and prohibition of certain mediation practices over others.

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[112] Birgit Meyer, 'Mediating Absence — Effecting Spiritual Presence: Pictures and the Christian Imagination', *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (2011): 1037–38.
[113] Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 81.
[114] Meyer and Stordalen, 'Introduction: Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam', 21.
[115] Cf. Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016).
[116] Webb Keane, 'On Semiotic Ideology', *Signs and Society* 6, no. 1 (2018): 65.
[117] Keane, 65.
[118] Engelke, *A Problem of Presence*, 28.

Ikon's Theologies of Absence

The notion of God's presence is important to Rollins' thought. In fact, I argue that the problem of presence is one of the key problems to which he is responding. In order to show this, this section lays out two theologies of absence that are found in Rollins work. The first is more prominent in Rollins' first two books, *How (Not) to Speak of God* and *The Fidelity of Betrayal* which deal directly with conceptions of God's presence and problematic implications thereof.[119] In these books, Rollins understands the experience of God's absence as a necessary component of Christian spirituality by conceiving of the experience of God's absence as a result of God's hyper-presence. The second theology of absence is found in his later works, especially in *The Idolatry of God* (2013) and *The Divine Magician* (2015), where Rollins shifts from an emphasis on hyper-presence towards a foregrounding of the experience of God's absence.[120] Both of these responses are related to the notion of idolatry, a concept that is both central in historical discussions on the problem of presence as well as in Rollins' work.

Idolatry and God's Hyper-presence

Before the publication of Rollins' first book, Ikon was relatively unknown among Emerging Christians. Brian McLaren, a prominent figure in the ECM, writes in the foreword of the book that it is one of the most profound books he has read and that this is

> more significant still because the author of this book is a young – and I think it's safe to say up-until-now *unknown* – emerging theologian. But as this book makes clear, he deserves to be known and appreciated, especially when one thinks that this may be the first of many contributions he makes in the years to come.[121]

Rollins' first book contains a detailed discussion on the problem of presence. This is especially seen in his discussion on two approaches to Christian faith: the idolatrous and the iconic approach. These two approaches are closely linked to the distinction that Rollins makes between 'understandings of God' and 'God as God really is'.[122] Inspired by the mystical traditions in Christianity, Rollins critiques contemporary Christianity for conflating the two. Contemporary Christianity thinks that it has understood God as God really is and has therefore become too

[119] Peter Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God* (London: SPCK, 2006); Peter Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal: Towards a Church beyond Belief* (London: SPCK, 2008).
[120] Rollins, *The Idolatry of God*; Peter Rollins, *The Divine Magician: The Disappearance of Religion and the Discovery of Faith* (New York: Howard Books, 2015).
[121] Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, vii.
[122] Rollins, 13.

preoccupied with creating theological systems that tie the divine down to a certain portrayal. This is what Rollins calls the idolatrous approach to faith which is problematic for him for two main reasons.

Firstly, Rollins is convinced that rendering God as a known presence is an impossible endeavour, and that God can only be known or experienced as an unknown. In *The Fidelity of Betrayal,* Rollins makes a similar argument, writing that God is experienced "not as one who is distant and thus *unknown,* nor as one object among other objects that can be rendered *known*: rather we find an expression of God as *un/known.*"[123] The reason that God's presence cannot be reduced to understanding is that God's presence constitutes a type of overwhelming and excessive hyper-presence. By hyper-presence, Rollins means that God's presence is so expansive that it cannot be rendered present as other beings and things can. He writes that it refers to "a type of revelation that cannot be reduced to pure presence precisely because there is too much to grasp: there is an absolute excess of information."[124] Just as staring into the sun will damage one's eyes, experiencing God does not render God known but rather unknown, precisely due to this hyper-presence. Therefore, "fidelity to the divine (hyper)presence forever requires a readiness to betray the names we bestow upon it."[125] In a practical sense, this means that it becomes difficult to distinguish between God's hyper-presence and God's absence, a situation that cannot be resolved according to Rollins.[126] Intellectually, it may never be known whether God is experienced as unknown because God is absent or because God is hyper-present. Indeed, Rollins calls this "existing in the void of hyper-presence."[127] Because of this, Rollins is able to introduce a re-appreciation for doubt, ambiguity, complexity, and mystery around the Christian experience of God, something that Rollins had missed in his own interactions with Christianity.[128]

The second reason why the idolatrous approach is problematic for Rollins is that mistaking understandings of God for God gets in the way of any actual transformative experience of God. This case of mistaken identity is what Rollins calls idolatry. One definition he gives for idolatry is

[123] Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, 111.
[124] Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 87.
[125] Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, 124.
[126] Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 46.
[127] Rollins, 53.
[128] Rollins, 23.

> any attempt that would render the essence of God accessible, bringing God into either aesthetic visibility (in the form of a physical structure, such as a statue) or conceptual visibility (in the form of a concept, such as a theological system).[129]

Any representation of God, either material or conceptual, is idolatrous when it claims to portray God as God really is. In order to illustrate this, Rollins mentions the Golden Calf. The story of the golden calf is found in the book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible. Uncertain about whether Moses who was receiving the ten commandments from YHWH on mount Sinai was still alive, the people of Israel made and worshipped a golden calf. This angered YHWH and so Moses rushed down the mountain to destroy the idol (Ex. 32). The image of the golden calf has become an important image in Western Christianity in debates on the use and misuse of media to experience the Christian God. In fact, Yvonne Sherwood has argued that the golden calf is the ultimate symbol for the problem of representing divine presence.[130] She writes that "the calf survives as an image *and* an image of the destruction of the image. It lingers as a sign of presence and absence; representation and its erasure."[131] To Rollins, the problem was not so much that the Israelites created a Golden calf, but that they mistook it for God's presence. Because of this "the image [of the golden Calf] became an idol to the people and eclipsed the genuine experience of God."[132] Important for Rollins is that this means that any conceptions of God must be denied in name of the hyper-present God, and because of this "a certain atheist spirit is actually deeply embedded within Christianity."[133]

Rollins therefore urges his readers to reject the idolatrous approach to faith in favour of an iconic approach.[134] Indeed, Ikon's name is a clear reference to the use of icons.[135] Rollins writes that

> To treat something as an icon is to view particular words, images or experiences as aids in contemplation of that which cannot be reduced to words, images or experience. Not only this, but the icon represents a place where God touches humanity. Consequently,

[129] Rollins, 12.
[130] Yvonne Sherwood, 'The Hypericon of the Golden Calf', in *Figurations and Sensations of the Unseen in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Contested Desires*, ed. Birgit Meyer and Terje Stordalen (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 57–76.
[131] Sherwood, 57.
[132] Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 14.
[133] Rollins, 25.
[134] Rollins, 38.
[135] Ganiel, 'Emerging from the Evangelical Subculture in Northern Ireland', 40.

> icons are not only the place where we contemplate God; they also act as the place that God uses in order to communicate with us.[136]

The link to the history of Christianity in this discussion is clear. Rollins' books are full of references to mystical figures such as Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart and are filled with Christian theological concepts. Inspired by this Christian tradition, Rollins embraces an atheistic stance that is willing to reject any conception of God. Of course, he does this in order to reclaim a genuine experience of God as unknown and hyper-present. In this sense, Rollins' work lingers between theist and atheist discourse. Rollins writes that

> We act both as theist and atheist. This a/theism is not some agnostic middle point hovering hesitantly between theism and atheism but, rather, actively embraces both out of a profound faith.[137]

Thus, rather than offering an understanding of God, Rollins suggests getting rid of any conceptualizations of God, which he calls idols, in order to allow room for the genuine experience of the unknown God that lingers between hyper-presence and absence. Rollins thus argues that an experience of God is a transformative realization that God can only be known as a mysterious unknown. God is unknown because God's presence is a hyper-presence that cannot be reduced to understanding. In terms of experience, however, this means that the main experience of God is that of God's absence. Because of this, Rollins increasingly focuses on divine absence as a central Christian theological concept.

Idolatry and God's Absence

In his later works, Rollins approaches idolatry in a different manner. Whereas Rollins had first defined idolatry as any attempt to reduce God to a material or conceptual image, here an idol becomes any object that is deemed sacred because it is believed to bring wholeness and completeness. In *The Idolatry of God,* he defines an idol as "that object which we believe is the answer to all our problems, that thing we believe can fill the fundamental gap we experience festering in the very depths of our human experience."[138] Rollins emphasizes that the human condition is characterized by a gap, or lack, that is experienced as traumatic and as something

[136] Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 38.
[137] Rollins, 25.
[138] Rollins, *The Idolatry of God*, 25–26.

that should be covered over through religious, political, and cultural remedies.[139] Thus, an idol is anything that promises a person wholeness and completeness. Or to be more precise, an idol is anything that a person *believes* will provide wholeness and completeness. This belief generates an obsessive desire for anything that is believed to be able to resolve the lack.[140]

For Rollins, the problem with Christianity is that it has turned the Christian God into an idol, into one more sacred object that will help Christians escape the experience of fundamental lack. However, Rollins is convinced that an idol is ultimately dissatisfactory. In the first instance, it leaves people dissatisfied because they do not possess the idol that they think will make them whole and complete. However, whenever the idol is obtained, it becomes clear that it, too, cannot make them whole and complete. In the case of the Golden Calf, then, the problem is not so much that it is a portrayal of God but rather that it is believed to bring wholeness which fuels an obsessive desire to overcome the experience of the lack which can never truly be overcome.[141] For Rollins, this means that the idol is in the eyes of the beholder and therefore, that virtually anything can become an idol as long as there are people that believe that it will help them overcome their sense of lack through offering wholeness and completeness. With God reduced to an idol, the real problem is not so much how to experience God, but rather how to be freed from the excessive drive generated by the desire for wholeness. Rollins finds a solution in the story of Jesus. Here he discovers that the idol as any object that will provide wholeness does not exist. By revealing this secret, Christianity contains a remedy to the tyranny of the idol and allows Christians to embrace the lack according to Rollins.[142] He illustrates this with the following example:

> This curtain was a thick veil that was believed to separate the people from God. The temple was constructed in such a way that the people would constantly be aware of their separation and alienation from God. The people could enter the temple but not the Holy of Holies, which lay just beyond the curtain (that can be said to represent the law). Only the high priest could enter and only once a year in a highly orchestrated way. When the

[139] Rollins, 9. This emphasis on lack is a psycho-analytic insight introduced by Jacques Lacan. Cf. Bruce Fink, 'The Subject and the Other's Desire', in *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud : Seminar I, Freud's Papers on Technique, Seminar II, the Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996), 76–97.
[140] Rollins, *The Divine Magician*, 19.
[141] To be clear, Rollins is a story-teller rather than a biblical theologian. Whenever he refers to Biblical stories, he does not claim that his interpretation is historically accurate but rather he retells them to emphasize different aspects of them.
[142] To be clear, Rollins uses the term Christianity as a normative rather than a descriptive term. He uses it to describe his view on the dissonance between contemporary Christianity (especially Evangelical Western Protestantism) and his ideal version of Christianity.

> temple curtain is ripped apart, the truth of the whole separation/alienation system is seen for what it is, for we discover something utterly shocking: *there is nothing behind the curtain*…. With the destruction of the Law, the Idol is abolished."[143]

Against Christians who would claim that Christianity offers a solution to the experience of lack, Rollins argues that Christianity helps people become free from the false desire for a solution and teaches them to embrace the lack. As already described, Rollins is critical of contemporary Christianity because he thinks that rather than helping people face the traumatic reality of the lack at the heart of our existence, it encourages Christians to view God as something that will fill this lack and by doing so, reduces God to an idol.[144] Rollins encourages Christians to rid themselves of God as idol in order to retrieve the Christian message that there is no solution to the lack that is encountered and instead offers freedom from the desire to overcome this lack. Because of this, "the loss of God is seen to be part of the life of faith rather than its destruction."[145] And, therefore:

> If a Christian is to participate in the Crucifixion, then that involves undergoing that felt absence. This is not an optional extra or a depressing experience that a few melancholy souls must endure: *it is a constitutive experience for the Christian*.[146]

In his later work, Rollins offers a response to the problem of presence by emphasizing the experience of divine absence. Here he emphasizes the felt absence of God, arguing that to live an authentic Christian life means to live as if God (as traditionally understood) does not exist.[147] Thus, a Christian is understood to be one who denounces God's existence as a false idol in name of the Christian insight that there is no solution to the experienced lack and one who embraces this lack that is necessarily part of existence. The death of God as idol is a necessary component of a Christian faith as only this profound experience of the absence of God leads to an embrace of life as it is, including the lack.

Conclusion

This chapter asked how Ikon responds to the problem of presence through an analysis of the theologies of absence found in Rollins' work. This chapter laid out two responses which were

[143] Rollins, *The Idolatry of God*, 91.
[144] Rollins, 26.
[145] Rollins, 165.
[146] Rollins, 165.
[147] Ganiel and Marti, 'Northern Ireland, America and the Emerging Church Movement', 43.

both introduced through the notion of idolatry. In the first response, Rollins argues that Christianity has confused understandings of God for God as God really is. The idol, then, is any attempt to reduce God's hyper-presence to a material or conceptual image. The problem with the idol is that it gets in the way of any transformative experience of God. In the second, Christianity has conceptualized God as that which promises wholeness and completeness. By doing so, Christianity has turned God into an idol as the Christian story reveals that the secret is that there is nothing that will help overcome the lack, and therefore it frees Christians from the tyranny of pursuing idols that are believed to provide wholeness. Instead, Christianity for Rollins encourages people to embrace the lack at the core of existence without relying on any idols.

Arguably, by emphasizing absence and lack in this manner, Rollins is introducing a form of Calvinist or reformed thought in his theology. Ganiel has pointed out that many of the core concepts of Rollins' theology are re-interpretations of reformed concepts such as original sin, total depravity, and of course idolatry.[148] Because of this, others have argued that Rollins' theology resembles a 'crypto-Calvinism'. In response to this, Rollins wrote

> Perhaps [it] is right, therefore, to say that I operate with a type of crypto-Calvinism. However, I repeat Calvinism with a difference: lack (or original sin) is not something that needs to be done away with but, rather, turned into a positive by fully embracing the negative.[149]

Just as Rollins has said that his work grew out of Ikon as a sort of retroactive justification, members of Ikon have claimed that Rollins gave them a vocabulary to explain Ikon. Stephen Caswell, for instance, has said that "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."[150] However, it would be a reach to assume that Rollins' books are identical to the convictions of all of Ikon's members. Instead, it is much more likely that these members have diverse opinions and beliefs about Ikon's aims and values. Nevertheless, Rollins has situated his thought in direct relation to Ikon, arguing that his theology was formed through reflecting on Ikon.

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[148] Gladys Ganiel, 'Peter Rollins' The Idolatry of God: Book Review', 23 November 2012, https://gladysganiel.com/social-justice/peter-rollins-the-idolatry-of-god-book-review-an-antidote-for-black-friday/.
[149] Peter Rollins, 'I Have Not Come for the Healthy', n.d., https://peterrollins.com/healthy.
[150] Ganiel and Marti, 'Northern Ireland, America and the Emerging Church Movement', 39.

In Rollins' work, we come to a new reframing of the problem of presence which is really a reversal of the problem. Whereas the problem of presence refers to a concern with rendering present what is absent, Rollins (and with him Ikon) is concerned with rendering absent what is perceived as present. The problem of presence is turned into a question of divine absence in Ikon's projects. The problem of presence becomes a concern with exposing the presence of God as a false presence and replacing it with a profound experience of the absence of that God.[151] However, this is easier said than done. Indeed, as the following chapter shows, there is an unavoidable materiality that informs these questions. Thus, rendering absent what is understood to be present also requires mediation processes. Specifically, we will look at the ways that Ikon uses its transformance art to mediate what may be called *felt absence* and what *emersive techniques* are applied in order to do so.[152]

Because of this reversal of the problem of presence, Ikon finds itself on the boundary of Christianity and of atheism. On the one hand, it rejects classical Christian concepts of God and institutional religion. On the other hand, it relates itself to Christian theology, figures, and practices. Simultaneously, Ikon embraces atheism as a viable critique of Christianity, preferring the experience of God's felt absence over any conception of God deemed by them as idolatrous. However, it is simultaneously critical of atheism for not getting rid of the promise of wholeness and completeness but only of the traditional conception of God. Because of this, it is perhaps best to typify Ikon as a Christian atheist phenomenon. It combines both in order to configure a new position that goes beyond the traditional boundaries of Christianity while finding its inspiration for doing so in Christianity. Rollins has called this the fidelity of betrayal. He argues that in order to remain true to the spirit of Christianity it is necessary to betray existing forms of it.[153] Therefore, "the authentic believer can be described as a non-Christian in the Christian sense of the term."[154]

Ikon is concerned with rendering absent the many sacred objects that are perceived to be present for Christians in the West, including the Christian God. The task of Ikon, then, becomes to expose the truth that sacred objects that promise wholeness do not exist and that

[151] To reiterate, what is present are conceptions of God which should be discarded according to Rollins.
[152] The meanings of these terms will become clear in the following chapter.
[153] Rollins, *The Fidelity of Betrayal*, 125.
[154] Rollins, 134.

"God was always already dead."[155] The following chapter elaborates on the ways that Ikon's performances mediate this divine absence.

[155] Peter Rollins, 'That Which Does Not Kill Us: Responding to Friendly Fire', *Modern Believing* 57, no. 4 (2016): 409, https://doi.org/10.3828/mb.2016.28.

CHAPTER THREE "I DO NOT EXIST": MEDIATING THE DEATH OF GOD

"Do you ever get the uneasy feeling that no one's watching you?"[156]

The previous chapter showed how Ikon, as a Christian atheist collective, centres the absence of God. Whereas the focus of the previous chapter was on Ikon's theologies of absence, this chapter analyses absence in Ikon's performances. Specifically, it explores the role of divine absence in Ikon's transformance art and its conceptions of 'the death of God'. Although there are numerous publications that focus on processes of secularization, religious pluralism, and the rise of the 'nones', there are few consolidated efforts to study experiences of God's absence. Put in a theoretical frame, this chapter asks how the death of God is made real in a sense-able manner through mediation practices for participants in Ikon's transformance art. By doing so, this chapter opens up new and exciting pathways for the study of religion. It offers original research that analyses the ways in which the death and absence of God is discussed in Ikon's transformance art. It seeks to conceptualize a form of absence that can be experienced as a tangible presence. The first section elaborates on the meaning of the death of God for Ikon. The second section provides an analysis of Ikon's performances and introduces the concept of *emersive technique* to signify the type of mediation practices that Ikon employs.

The Death of God in Ikon's Transformance Art

The notion of the death of God is often traced back to Friedrich Nietzsche's writings.[157] Although there are multiple references to the death of God in Nietzsche's philosophy, the most well-known is found in *The Gay Science*:

[156] Said by the Playwright (David Dastmalchian) in *Making Love*, a short film based on a play written by Peter Rollins.

[157] Clayton Crockett and Jeffrey W. Robbins, 'Background', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology*, ed. Christopher D. Rodkey and Jordan E. Miller (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 22; Matthew E. Harris, 'The Reception of Nietzsche's Announcement of the "Death of God" in Twentieth-Century Theorising Concerning the Divine', *Heythrop Journal* 59, no. 2 (March 2018): 148–62. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra: First Part (1883)', in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter A. Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 124–25.

> The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him* -- you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying, as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us? Do we not need to light lanterns in the morning? Do we hear nothing as yet of the noise of the gravediggers who are burying God? Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? Gods, too, decompose. God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.[158]

Before Nietzsche, G. W. F. Hegel had lectured about the death of God. However, whereas Nietzsche sees the death of God as final, Hegel refers to the death of God in direct relation to the Christian notion of resurrection:

> God has died, God is dead – this is the most frightful of all thoughts, that everything eternal and true is not, that negation itself is found in God [...] However, the process does not come to a halt at this point; rather, a reversal takes place: God, that is to say, maintains himself in this process, and the latter is only the death of death. God rises again to life, and thus things are reversed."[159]

Throughout history, the idea that gods can and do die is common, especially among agrarian cultures.[160] In line with this, James Frazer writes in *The Golden Bough* that "under the names of Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, and Attis, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia represented the yearly decay and revival of life, especially of vegetable life, which they personified as a god who annually died and rose again from the dead. In name and detail the

[158] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter A. Kaufmann (New York: Penguin Books, 1968), 95–96.
[159] Hegel as quoted in Paolo D. Bubbio, 'Hegel: Death of God and Recognition of the Self', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 23, no. 5 (20 October 2015): 695, https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2015.1091027.
[160] Jonathan Z. Smith, 'Dying and Rising Gods', in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones, 2nd ed., vol. 4 (Detroit, MI: Macmillan, 2005), 2535; David W. Aiken, 'On the Death of God: A Post-Mortem Reflection on a "Life"', *Zeitschrift Für Religions- Und Geistesgeschichte* 71, no. 3 (12 June 2019): 285, https://doi.org/10.1163/15700739-07103005.

rites varied from place to place: in substance they were the same."[161] A curious story is told by the first century Greek philosopher and priest Plutarch, which has a rich reception history in Western Christian theology. Here he tells of the death of the god Pan, something that had occurred only decades before.[162] According to the narrative, an Egyptian sailor called Thamus and those on board of the boat heard an audible voice telling Thamus to announce that "Great Pan is dead." Though reluctant, Thamus did as he was told, and the news quickly spread. When the Roman Emperor Tiberius heard the news, he asked the scholars at his court to investigate the claim.

There is a similar narrative in the discussions on the death of the Christian God in the radical theology of the 1960s which was briefly discussed in the introduction. One of the most notorious figures associated with the death of God movement is Thomas Altizer. Altizer was born in 1927 and grew up in Charleston, West Virginia. In his memoir, *Living the Death of God*, he describes his younger self as being obsessed with Christianity without much religious guidance.[163] As a young man, Altizer sought priesthood in the Episcopal Church after his experiences as a chaplain at an interracial Episcopal mission in south Chicago.[164] Unexpectedly, he failed the psychiatric tests and was told that he should expect himself to be in a psychiatric institution within a year. This confirmed his earlier fear that he had inherited the 'insanity' so prevalent in his family. Indeed, right before the psychiatric test, Altizer speaks of experiencing "violent tremors in the ground" and "an epiphany of Satan" in which he experienced becoming one with Satan in "the deepest and yet most horrible union."[165] Although Altizer was not admitted to a psychiatric institution in the coming year, he did give up his ambition for priesthood and fully dedicated himself to his studies in theology at the University of Chicago from 1947 to 1954. In June of 1955, Altizer had a profound experience that shaped the rest of his life:

> While reading Erich Heller's essay on Nietzsche and Rilke for the seventh time in a library at the University of Chicago, I had what I have ever since regarded as a genuine religious conversion, and this was a conversion to the death of God. For then I truly

[161] James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (1890; repr., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 301–2. Although the theme of dying and rising gods as found in Frazer's work is much less common than he had argued, it remains valid to argue that there is a long history of dying gods (cf. Smith 2005, 2535). Put otherwise, to say that Nietzsche was not the first to proclaim the death of a god is a valid historical claim.
[162] Plutarch, 'The Obsolescence of Oracles', in *Moralia*, trans. Frank c. Babbitt, vol. 5 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), 399–402.
[163] Thomas J. J. Altizer, *Living the Death of God: A Theological Memoir* (New York: SUNY Press, 2006).
[164] Altizer, 3–4.
[165] Altizer, 4.

> experienced the death of God, and experienced it as a conversion, and thus as the act and grace of God himself.[166]

Recollecting this experience, Altizer claims that at this moment he "could know God as the God who is truly dead."[167] Hereafter, Altizer would come to recognize Nietzsche as a radical prophet and his revelation of the death of God as profoundly liberative good news. Altizer saw himself as an evangelist called to spread this good news of what he called Christian atheism. He writes that "what I intended was to seek out what the listener-viewer most deeply knew as "God," and to call that forth in such a way as to make manifest its death, so that the viewer-hearer could experience that death if only momentarily, and could know that experience as life itself."[168] He saw the rest of his life as dedicated to creating a new language, mostly inspired by William Blake, Hegel and Nietzsche, necessary for a systematic theology that is centred around the death of God.[169] In *The Gospel of Christian Atheism,* he writes that "we must recognize that the death of God is a historical event: God has died in our time, in our history, in our existence."[170] Altizer along with the rest of the radical theologians were a formative influence for Ikon. Moody writes that radical theology "asks what modes of religious thought and practice might be possible after the death of divinity."[171] Like Altizer's radical theology, Ikon too searches for what religion after the death of God looks like. Moody writes that the death of God is interpreted as "the disappearance of the projected sacred-object and the discovery of the sacred dimension of all objects."[172] Yet more than Altizer, Ikon approaches the death of God as a personal experience.

Felt Absence and the Death of God

The experience of the absence of God is a recurrent theme in the history of Judaism and Christianity from the Deuteronomist's claim that God will hide his face (Deut. 31:17) to Jesus crying out 'My God, why have you forsaken me?' before dying on a cross (Mark 15:34). Most clearly it is found in the dark night of the soul of John of the Cross. However, it is generally only a matter of time before God will no longer hide his face (Ezekiel 39:29), Jesus will rise

[166] Altizer, 8.
[167] Altizer, 9.
[168] Altizer, 16.
[169] Altizer, 21.
[170] Thomas J. J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (London: Collins, 1966), 61.
[171] Moody, 'The Death and Decay of God', 253.
[172] Moody, 260.

from the dead and the sun will rise once again to replace the dark night.[173] Similarly, the time between Jesus' bodily death and resurrection, called Holy Saturday, is an important day in many Christian traditions.[174] However, Holy Saturday is temporary and is eclipsed by Easter.

Some philosophers have argued that this experience of God's absence has become increasingly dominant in the twentieth century. In an article on the French philosopher Simone Weil, Susan Taubes writes that atheism, a term once used to charge a person or a group with disbelief has come to refer to "a *religious* experience of the death of God."[175] The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, rather than speaking of the death of God, speaks of the eclipse of God. For Buber, the eclipse of God refers to God's act of concealing its being. God is accordingly absent in the sense that God is hidden. Hence "an eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself."[176] For Buber, this eclipse has taken place in twentieth century Europe, an eclipse "not to be proved; it is only to be experienced."[177] However, for Buber there is hope since "the eclipse of the light of God is no extinction; even tomorrow that which has stepped in between may give way."[178]

In this interpretation, then, the death of God refers to an experience of God's (temporary) absence. At Ikon, especially in its early performances, a similar understanding of the death of God is found. Here, the death of God is understood as a necessary but temporary experience that will be eclipsed by an experience of God as immanent hyper-presence. Recall, for example, the event *Prodigal* relayed in the first chapter.[179] Here, the sons are left waiting for their father who symbolizes God. However, in the very waiting, God is experienced as being concealed: "In this way the revelation of God is like a veil which both reveals and conceals the one whom we love." Another example is found in the transformance art event *Pyrotheology* held at Greenbelt Festival in 2009 (see Figure 3). In this piece, Ikon reflects on fire both as a destructive and a purifying force. While a burning church is projected onto the screen, a

[173] Indeed, while the dark night of the soul has become a symbol for an experience of God's absence, for John of the Cross it is a poetic description of a gradual union with God.
[174] Other names for this day are the Great Sabbath (Eastern Orthodox, Moravian), Joyous Saturday (Coptic Orthodox), Gospel Saturday (Syriac Orthodox)
[175] Susan A. Taubes, 'The Absent God', *The Journal of Religion* 35, no. 1 (January 1955): 6, https://doi.org/10.1086/484625. For other reflections on the death of God in the twentieth century see Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (Indianapolis, IND: Bobbs-Merrill, 1967); Dorothee Sölle, *Christ the Representative: An Essay in Theology After the 'Death of God'* (London: SCM Press, 1967); Gabriel Vahanian, *The Death of God: The Culture of Our Post-Christian Era* (New York: George Braziller, 1961)..
[176] Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 18, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400874088.
[177] Buber, 110.
[178] Buber, 112.
[179] The performance can also be found here: https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/2022/07/31/prodigal/

blindfolded member of Ikon picks up a large book and starts telling the following story without removing the blindfold:

> God slowly turned to face the world and called forth to the church with a booming voice, "Rise up and ascend to heaven all of you who have sought to escape the horrors of this world by sheltering beneath my wing. Come to me all who have turned from this suffering world by calling out 'Lord, Lord.'"
>
> In an instant, millions were caught up in the clouds and ascended into the heavenly realm, leaving the suffering world behind them.
>
> Once this great rapture had taken place, God paused for a moment and then addressed the angels, saying, "It is done, I have separated the people born of my spirit from those who have turned from me. It is time now for us to leave this place and take up residence in the earth, for it is there that we shall find our people: the ones who would forsake heaven in order to embrace the earth, the few who would turn away from eternity itself to serve at the feet of a fragile, broken life that passes from existence in but an instant."
>
> And so it was that God and the heavenly host left that place to dwell among those who had rooted themselves upon the earth – the ones who had forsaken God for the world and thus who bore the mark of God; the few who had discovered heaven in the very act of forsaking it.[180]

In this story, Ikon reinterprets the Christian not as the one who follows but rather forsakes God. However, here too, the God-forsaking Christian is reunited with the heaven-forsaking God. Thus, the notion of the death of God as a temporary moment is one theme in Ikon's performances which is also seen in the theologies of absence discussed in chapter two.

However, Ikon's transformance art also contains a different understanding of God's absence, namely as an existentially experienced felt absence. Rollins, for instance, understands atheism not as an intellectual position but as "the *felt experience of God's absence*; an experience that must be distinguished from the idea of a mere absence of experience."[181] This encounter with divine absence is important because, as mentioned before, Ikon seeks to transform its audience through its performance. Reflecting on the goal of transformance art, Rollins claims that "none of this is about believing in God. It's about believing in the death of God, i.e., it's about going 'oh yeah, there's something about doubt, ambiguity, and complexity

[180] https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/2022/06/09/pyrotheology/
[181] Rollins as quoted in Marti and Ganiel, *The Deconstructed Church*, 169.

Figure 3 Pictures of Pyrotheology. Source: https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/2022/06/09/pyrotheology/

that is salvatory.'"[182] Chapter one discussed transformance art and its emphasis on encouraging change in the participant. However, it would be a mistake to assume that transformance art seeks to bring about a change in thought or belief. Instead, Ikon seeks to transform the way that participants hold their belief. Thus, the goal is not to convince the participant to take on a certain conception of the world or of God but rather to relate to their already existing beliefs in a different manner:

> Those involved in the conversation are not explicitly attempting to construct or unearth a different set of beliefs that would somehow be more appropriate in today's context, but rather, they are looking at the way in which we hold the beliefs that we already have. This is not then a revolution that seeks to change what we believe, but rather one that sets about transforming the entire manner in which we hold our beliefs.[183]

Experiencing the absence of God is the main practice that Ikon employs to encourage this goal. Rather than offering an alternative worldview, Ikon seeks to disrupt existing worldviews to allow room for doubt, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Marti and Ganiel write that the goal of transformance art is to "disturb those present, guide them through an experience of the absence of God, and ultimately provoke them to live like Christians outside the walls of the church."[184] The following section analyses how Ikon in its transformance art attempt to mediate an embodied experience of divine absence.

Emersive Techniques in Ikon's Transformance Art

Mediation, Immersion and Emersive Techniques

One way of approaching religion is to view it as a world-making or mediation practice. In line with this, Birgit Meyer writes that an important starting point is that "humans relate to themselves, each other, and the 'world' not in a direct way as one might intuitively expect, but through mediation."[185] Mediation practices make possible an 'immediate' experience of a shared social world.[186] In this immediate experience of the world, media tend to become

[182] Rollins, Transformance Art at Wake Festival.
[183] Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 7.
[184] *The Deconstructed Church*, 124. As a side note, this quotation once again illustrates Ikon's place on the boundary between Christianity and atheism.
[185] Meyer, 'Material Mediations and Religious Practices of World-Making', 4.
[186] Meyer, 5. Thus Meyer writes here that "immediacy is not prior but rather an effect of mediation."

invisible and taken for granted.[187] In game studies, this phenomenon is called *immersion.* Immersion refers to "an impression of a non-mediated participation in a digital world generated by the machine, a sensation of a direct presence, which makes players lose sight of the physical world surrounding them."[188] It is mediated experience, experienced as immediate. This notion of immersion is helpful in understanding religious life-worlds. Indeed, Yaeri Kim argues that the experience of immersion in video games stands in a long history of cultural and religious experiences of the sublime.[189] However, immersion is difficult to obtain, also in the context of religious experience. Luhrmann writes that in her research on evangelical Christians,

> some explicitly and repeatedly told me that they deeply desired to hear God speak out loud to them and they could not. 'Please pray that I will hear God speak with a booming voice,' one man asked plaintively in his housegroup meeting. And another: 'I don't have these superpowerful [*sic*] experiences that make me fall to my knees.'[190]

Thus, as outlined in the discussion of the problem of presence in chapter two, mediation takes practice and even then, it may fail.

Because of this, approaches that understand religion as a form of mediation, then, have generally - and understandably so - been concerned with the ways that invisible beings, values, and worlds do become present to religious practitioners. To take the title of Luhrmann's recent work, they ask "how God becomes real."[191] A general observed trend then is that religions are understood to facilitate the experience of religious immersion through mediation practices. However, immersion functions differently at Ikon's performances where emphasis is placed on the experience of God's absence. Indeed, rather than facilitating experiences of religious immersion, Ikon seeks to make its audience aware of the mediative nature of immersion in order to temporarily take them out of this immersed state. Thus, Ikon is concerned with *emersion* rather than with immersion. In the context of game studies, Piotr Kubiński has written about *emersive effects* which may lead to the inability of a player to immerse in a video game.[192] These emersive effects reveal the mediated character of the virtual reality, causing an inability for players to immerse fully. To give an example, one such emersive effect is *shock.* Shocks are

[187] Meyer, 5.
[188] Piotr Kubiński, 'Immersion vs. Emersive Effects in Videogames', in *Engaging with Videogames: Play, Theory and Practice*, ed. Dawn Stobbart and Monica Evans (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014), 133, https://doi.org/10.1163/9781848882959_013.
[189] Yaeri Kim, '"Beyond Their Actual Limits": Immersion, Interactivity, and the Virtual Sublime in Burke and Video Games', *Games and Culture*, 31 March 2022, 1–18, https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120221084454.
[190] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*, 67.
[191] Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*.
[192] Kubiński, 'Immersion vs. Emersive Effects in Videogames'.

small moments in the game where a player is confronted with the poor design of the virtual space. This occurs when a player, amongst other things, encounters incomplete buildings and ending environments.[193]

In a comparable manner, we may say that in Ikon's transformance art, emersive effects are operationalized, with the aim of bringing about an experience of failed immersion. Whereas emersive effects are often unintended and avoided by video game developers where possible, Ikon employs them in an intentional manner. Therefore, it is apt to refer to this intended strategic employment of emersive effects as *emersive techniques*. Take, for example, the following excerpt from the piece *Fundamentalism*, performed by Ikon at Greenbelt Festival in 2006 (see also Figure 4):

> When the musician finished, he placed his guitar on the ground and told everyone that he wanted to share his testimony. He then proceeded to talk about how he had once been a Christian and worship leader but had gradually walked away from his beliefs. He spoke frankly and movingly about his loss of faith and descried how the news was received by his friends. The words were deeply personal as he outlined how he had found himself on the outside of the church he had once been part of. In less than five minutes he had brought us all to a place of quiet introspection by describing how his changing view on the world had placed him outside the walls of the community he loved.
>
> As he left the stage, a young woman who had been standing silently in the background stepped forward and stood on the soapbox. She paused for a moment and looked into the crowd. Then she opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She stammered for a moment, paused, then cleared her throat. But again no sound came from her lips. After a minute or so of this hesitation and silence, she simply hung her head in shame and returned to her spot on the stage. After a few more seconds a page from the Bible appeared on the wall behind her with the words from 1 Corinthians 14 highlighted and underlined:
>
> > Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says.[194]

[193] Kubiński, 135.
[194] https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/2022/06/10/fundamentalism/

Figure 4 Pictures taken of 'Fundamentalism'. Source: https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/2022/06/10/fundamentalism/

Here the main emersive structure that Ikon employs is encountered. As chapter 1 shows, Ikon's audience mainly consists of Emerging Christians that retain a shared turning away from evangelical Christianity. In this performance, the audience is first *oriented* through shared positive expectations (the musician's personal deconversion story). Then, *disoriented* through disrupted expectations (the silenced woman). Through this disruption of expectations, the audience is forced to reflect on what was once simply presupposed. Moody writes that when the Bible verse was displayed on the screen, she sensed a "palpable ripple of understanding and empathy around the room."[195] A similar structure is found in the subsequent scene in the same performance:

> A few moments later, another woman who had been standing motionless on the stage stepped forward and mounted the soapbox. In contrast to her predecessor she spoke eloquently, delivering a short but deeply moving sermon entitled "The Singing Ministry of Christ." It was a grace-filled reflection that overflowed with the themes of forgiveness and love. But no sooner had she finished than the same sermon began to crackle loudly through speakers set up around the room. This time, however, it was being preached by a man, a man whose distinctive voice most of those gathered instantly recognized. This was the voice of an infamous fundamentalist preacher. As his voice boomed loudly around the room, his image appeared on the various screens while a DJ mixed music beneath his words.[196]

At the beginning of this scene, the first disruption seems resolved. The underlying message appears to be that whereas Evangelical churches that take this biblical passage literally are oppressive to women, at Ikon women speak and preach freely about their relationship with God. This leads us to the third element of Ikon's emersive structure, namely *re-orientation*. However, this renewed orientation is quickly disrupted when it is revealed that the sermon is actually from Ian Paisley, a conservative Northern-Irish preacher and politician. It is safe to assume that most who participated in Ikon's events would be overly critical of a figure like Paisley, who was known for his controversial conservative claims both as a preacher and a politician (see chapter one on Ikon's background). Moody recounts that one member of the audience told her how the gorgeous sermon told by the woman almost moved him to tears when he was suddenly

[195] Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, 174.
[196] Rollins, *The Idolatry of God*, 178–79.

"confronted with his own beliefs and prejudices when it is revealed that the sermon is from fundamentalist preacher Ian Paisley."[197]

Thus, the emersive structure underlying Ikon's transformance art could be described in the following manner:

Orientation → Disorientation → Re-orientation

Shock and Irony as Emersive Techniques

Disorientation can take on different forms and Ikon employs different emersive techniques to increase its intensity. In no way does this section provide an exhaustive overview but rather it shows how emersive techniques are operationalized to disorient the audience and the prominent feature of material culture therein. This section focuses on two common emersive techniques that Ikon employs in its transformance art: shock and irony.

Chapter one referenced Ganiel who claimed that during one of Ikon's performances, in a short amount of time, "the people in the bar had transgressed an alarming number of the boundaries and cultural codes associated with evangelicalism."[198] Indeed, the use of shock to disrupt the expectations of the audience is perhaps the most common emersive technique employed in Ikon's transformance art. In a recent interview with Ganiel, Rollins recounts that, in preparation of the events, one member of the Cyndicate would often say "let's do something that offends us, what would we find difficult?"[199] Creating a sense of shock is done in many of the performances. One example is found in the piece *Sins of the Father,* performed by Ikon at Greenbelt in 2005. After red wine has been poured out into broken glasses, a man enters the stage holding a large Bible from which he reads the following story:

> On judgement day a summons wet forth to the sea, commanding that she give up her dead, and a voice called out to Hades that the prisoners be released from their chains.

[197] Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, 174.
[198] Ganiel, 'Emerging from the Evangelical Subculture in Northern Ireland', 39.
[199] Rollins, Transformance Art at Wake Festival.

> Then the angels brought up all of humanity and brought them to the great white throne of God. All creation stood silently as a great angel opened the books.
>
> The first to be judged stood up and approached the text. As the accused looked at the charges, all humanity spoke as one:
>
> 'When we were hungry you gave us nothing to eat. When we were thirsty you gave us nothing to drink. We were strangers and you did not invite us in. We needed clothes and you did not clothe us. We were sick and in prison and you did not look after us.'
>
> Silence descended upon all of creation as the people pronounced their judgment on God.[200]

The telling of stories is one of the main methods used during the performance to mediate this sense of shock. The audience is also often asked to contribute in one way or another. In the piece *Pyrotheology*, the audience is encouraged to place a page that they received into bonfires "as a sign that all our religious narratives are but ash before the all-consuming fire of divine mystery" (see Figure 3). In *Sins of the Father,* the audience is asked to write on paper what they are frustrated or angry about in relation to God which are then ritually offered to God.[201] The wine poured into broken wine glasses is a dissonant reference to holy communion. In addition, a DJ mixes music and loops the words taken from Matthew 25:31-46:

> When I was hungry you gave me nothing to eat.
>
> When I was thirsty you gave me nothing to drink.
>
> I was a stranger and you did not invite me in.
>
> I needed clothes and you did not clothe me.
>
> I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.

This text, commonly used to urge adherents of Christianity to prioritize social justice, is re-interpreted as an accusation against God for committing sins against humanity.

Music is an important medium that Ikon employs. Thus, Mark Porter describes how communities like Ikon are critical of the ways that music is used in evangelical churches to

[200] https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/2022/07/31/sins-of-the-father/
[201] Another example is found during the piece *The God Delusion*, where the audience is asked to edit the Nicean Creed (see https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/2022/06/09/pyrotheology/).

create communal experiences of God's presence.[202] In resistance to this, Ikon employs music to "disturb, to layer multiple meanings or provoke."[203] One of Ikon's participants told Porter that "the music was trying to orient the listener (to soothe, or lull into a false state), then to disorient (out of place, discordant or sugar-sweet), and then to sometimes re-orient the listener."[204] The use of music to create a sense of shock is also found in *Fundamentalism* (see also Figure 4):

> A young man stepped onto the stage and invited everyone to stand and sing with him. He then began to play a contemporary song connected loosely with the Bible verse used in the introduction. As the worship leader played, the words were projected onto a huge wall so that people could sing along.

Here we see the first step of orientation. As described in chapter one, many of the participants were in some way familiar with evangelical Christianity. To sing worship songs together would be a common occurrence in this setting. The scene continues:

> But as he reached the second verse the words began to fade and various phrases began to appear over the top of them:
>
> *I am the truth*
> *Follow me*
> *Be my friend*
> *I shall crush my enemies beneath my feet*
> *I am the way*
> *It is my way or no way*
> *I am the truth*
> *There is no truth for those who would reject me*
> *I am life*
> *There is only death for those who displease me*
> *Love me*
> *Or I will hate you*
> *I am the truth*

[202] Mark Porter, 'Fleeing the Resonance Machine: Music and Sound in "Emerging Church" Communities', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 35, no. 3 (2020): 494.
[203] Ikon Participant as quoted in Porter, 495. Italics are added to emphasize.
[204] Porter, 495. It was this quote that helped me name the emersive structure of orientation, disorientation and re-orientation earlier in this chapter.

Follow me

Be my friend

Or I will destroy you

As these phrases began to appear, the worship song started to take on a somewhat uncanny and oppressive feel. The words that people were singing began to take on a dark meaning that had been absent before. Here we again encounter the disorienting element of the emersive structure. In line with this Porter writes that music at Ikon

> does something very active, but in deliberately striking out against other elements of the event or against expectations, it is used in a way which again deliberately frustrates any unified or persistent chain of resonance. It may well strike certain nerves, but it is designed both to draw in and involve the listener and to provoke a distancing.[205]

Ikon also employs irony to disorientate the participant. Whereas shock is an explicit form of disruption, irony is much more implicit. We encounter this emersive technique in the performance *Prosperity.*[206] During the performance the audience is oriented. The first scene begins with a well-dressed man reading a Bible in an armchair. The man begins by sharing about his relationship with God.

> … A few days ago I found myself in conversation with a guy who had such a deep faith that he absolutely, totally and without equivocation believed in God. He was the perfect example of someone who suffered no doubt, uncertainty or anxiety in the face of the world. During this conversation I felt personally strengthened in my own faith and thought to myself, 'Thank you, God, that religion offers us certainty and security in a world full of ambiguity'…

The scene takes on the genre of 'testimony' well known in evangelicalism, sounding "much like the beginning of any typical testimony, detailing a difficult past and the search for answers."[207] As the testimony continues, the man cuts a piece of chocolate cake and pours himself a glass of champagne:

[205] Porter, 495.
[206] This piece has not been performed at Greenbelt. Instead, it was most likely held at one of the locations that Ikon used in Belfast. I am unable to find the date it was performed.
[207] Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 117.

> Having said this, he takes his cake and stuffs it greedily into his mouth, then swallows it with the aid of his champagne. He then claims that this champagne and chocolate cake is the true body and blood of Christ.
>
> Everyone is then actively encouraged to come up to eat the chocolate cake and drink the champagne as Communion. At this point the atmosphere turns very dark. Even though people are being actively encouraged to come up to the altar, nobody moves.

In *Prosperity,* the idea that God is responsible for personal success is taken too such an extreme that it becomes disturbing for the participants. Thus, by taking an ironic stance, this performance disorients the audience, asking them to rethink their preconceived assumptions.

Mediating the Death of God

It has been shown that Ikon employs emersive techniques to encourage the audience to rethink their presuppositions. Perhaps one of the most shocking elements of Ikon's performances is the recurring reference to the death of God. As pointed out before, the idea that gods die has a long history. Yet the blasphemous connotations of the death of God do as well. Thus, the first century Jewish philosopher Philo writes in a discussion on the nature of the world, "I shrink from saying, for the very thought is blasphemy, that quiescence will entail as a consequence the death of God."[208] Because of this history, Ikon is able to employ discourses on the death of God to mediate felt absence. Take for example the following scene from *The God Delusion,* performed by Ikon at Greenbelt in 2007 (see Figure 5):

[208] Philo, 'On the Eternity of the World', in *Every Good Man Is Free. On the Contemplative Life. On the Eternity of the World. Against Flaccus. Apology for the Jews. On Providence*, trans. F. H. Colson (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941), 245.

Figure 5 Pictures of the performance 'The God Delusion'. Source: https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/2022/06/09/the-god-delusion/

> Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for joining us this evening. Take a seat and make yourselves comfortable. Tonight we would like to share a secret with you, a sacred secret that must be kept strictly between us. A number of years ago while I was walking home late one evening, I heard a voice from heaven calling my name. I stood still and listened intently to what I took to be nothing less than the voice of God. As I waited, rooted to the spot, God spoke to me.

At this point the giant woman who had been standing silently in the centre of the room spoke out: "I do not exist." The man then continued,

> It seemed as if I was being confronted with the loss of God instigated by none other than God. I was confused, my world began to spin, and everything that I took to be solid began to melt into thin air. And yet there seemed to be something deeply important about these divine words, something that I am unravelling to this day.[209]

Reminiscent of the discussion on Christian atheism in chapter two, this scene displays a seemingly paradoxical situation. A man receives a supernatural revelation from God who reveals that God does not exist. Whereas atheism is generally seen as a threat in evangelical Christianity coming from the outside, this performance places the words into the mouth of God. By doing so, this piece generates a sense of disorienting shock for it is not clear whether and how this revelation can be resolved. Instead, it illustrates the importance of liminality or in-betweenness for Ikon. Through decentring stories such as this, Ikon encourages its audience to enter into a shared experience of God's felt absence. A similar tendency is displayed in the following scene found in the same performance. Halfway a monologue given by a woman who had been knitting, she says:

> Suddenly [I] realized that I did not know God. And as I thought that most terrifying of thoughts, he left me.
>
> God left me.
>
> Things come apart.
>
> The god with the answers was gone. The god with my security was gone. The god with my future, secretly stored until the appointed time of its revelation, was gone. The

[209] https://religionaftergod.wordpress.com/2022/06/09/the-god-delusion/

> godman who promised to never leave. The god who was my father. The god who was not my father. The god who spoke my personality. The god who wrote my behavior down like a map. The god who told me the code to decipher the whole world and all its mysteries – space and time, life and death, holy and profane – was gone.
>
> And I was gone, unraveled completely, from the soul out.

Here too, the experience of the absence of God is centred. As implied in this scene, the experience of God's absence is one of radical uncertainty, not only about God but also about the world in general.[210] By mediating God's death, Ikon seeks to introduce doubt, complexity, and ambiguity into Christian spirituality. In line with this, Moody writes that "at transformance art gatherings, participants are not only urged to identify idols and to acknowledge intellectual doubts, but to begin to existentially experience something of what Jesus felt on the Cross, where Christ loses everything, including God, and where doubt, disbelief and atheism become internal to the Christian faith, which passes through the death of God."[211]

Conclusion

This chapter explored the ways that the death of God is made real in a sense-able manner in Ikon's transformance art. It argued that Ikon's performances have a disorienting structure that is created through emersive techniques that seek to disrupt and disorient the audience. The death of God is mediated through the instigation of shock and felt absence. By doing so, Ikon attempts to bring about an experience of the death of God. Rather than belief-oriented, Ikon focuses on the ways beliefs are held and lived out in everyday life. In contrast to the places and spaces it seeks to leave behind, Ikon emphasizes ambiguity, complexity, and doubt.

In terms of theory, this chapter introduces the concepts of emersive effects and techniques for the study of religion as a helpful tool to understand contemporary practices found on the boundaries of religion and non-religion. The findings of this chapter call for more research on the use of such effects and techniques by other communities. Because of this, these concepts may have great heuristic potential for the study of religion as mediation. Informed and inspired by Ikon's performances, the following chapter reflects on the concept of felt absence

[210] It would be a mistake to conclude that Ikon seeks to establish God's non-existence. Rather than converting their audience to atheism, Ikon seeks to introduce uncertainty and complexity in the ways that the audience holds their beliefs. The experience of God's absence is an emersive aid that helps the audience embrace this radical uncertainty.
[211] Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, 175.

for the study of religion. By showing how the death of God is mediated through felt absence, this chapter generates the hypothesis that, together with experiencing divine presence, felt absence may be a formative influence on contemporary religious practices.

CHAPTER FOUR MAPPING IKON: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGION

The previous chapters described the ways that Ikon, in its performances, centres absence and transformative disruption through emersive techniques. By doing so, Ikon constitutes a particular form of Christian atheism that both seeks to move beyond contemporary forms of Christianity while simultaneously taking inspiration from the history of Christianity. This chapter explores the implications of the ideas, values, and practices of Ikon for the study of religion. Specifically, the first section explores how absence may be conceptualized for the study of religion. Section two reflects on the relationship between religion and secularity in light of the previous chapters. The last section offers a methodological reflection on the task of religious studies. It distinguishes between the scholar as photographer and as cartographer, arguing in favour of the latter.

Absence and Presence in the Study of Religion

Presence and absence are crucial concepts both for the study of religion and for religious adherents. Because of this, Orsi writes that "absence and presence, theory and theology, are twinned."[212] In his publication *History and Presence*, Orsi sought to argue that that "presence is the norm of human existence, including in religion, and absence is an authoritative imposition" and that therefore "the study of religion is or ought to be the study of what human beings do to, for, and against the gods really present."[213] Indeed, as seen in chapter two's discussion on the problem of presence, the notion of presence is vital in understanding how human-divine relations are constructed, maintained and interrupted. However, its twin, absence, has been less prominently developed for the study of religion. Yet, as seen in the previous chapters, there are communities such as Ikon that emphasize divine absence rather than presence. Whereas religion is generally understood as dealing with making present what is absent, the practices and values of Ikon focus on deconstructing what is perceived to be real, on mediating absence rather than presence. This section seeks to explore the implications of the notion of absence in order to contribute to a theory on divine absence for the study of religion.

[212] Orsi, *History and Presence*, 6.
[213] Orsi, 4, 6.

Similar to discussions on divine presence, this section does not argue in favour or against the existence of gods. Instead, it takes phenomenological experience as its starting point to develop a theory of divine absence. In the context of religious studies, phenomenology asks and describes how religious phenomena are perceived by religious adherents.[214] In phenomenological terms, it is possible to distinguish between (at least) two common experiences of absence. The most common experience is that of an object's absence as a lack of presence. The object is simply not there and therefore does not appear as a phenomenon to be perceived. In this sense, absence becomes the dichotomous other of presence, where one either experiences that something *is* (presence) or *is not* (absence). However, phenomenologically speaking, it is also possible to experience absence in a tangible manner. In Sartre's phenomenology there is famous example that illustrates this.[215] Say I expect to meet a close friend at 16:00 at a café. While I know this friend to always be on time, I am once again fifteen minutes late. Hoping that my friend is still at the café, I look around and conclude that "She is not here." Now while my friend is absent to everyone at the café, I am the only one who, expecting to see my friend there, *experiences* her absence. In a paradoxical manner, my friend's absence is made present to me at that moment. In this sense, to experience absence as a form of presence entails a sensory experience. Indeed, within discussions in the philosophy of mind, different philosophers have argued for the validity of experiencing and perceiving absence visually, auditorily, and through touch.[216] Scholars in other research disciplines have developed a similar account of absence. Sociologist Kevin Hetherington writes for instance that

[214] To avoid confusion it may be helpful to distinguish between philosophical and comparative phenomenology. Comparative phenomenology searches for patterns in religious traditions and experiences in order to establish a comprehensive account of religion. This approach is associated with figures such as Gerardus van der Leeuw and Mircea Eliade. When I refer to phenomenology, I am building on the insights of philosophical phenomenology as inspired by Edmund Husserl's system and developed by philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, Edith Stein, and Emmanuel Levinas. Cf. Christina M. Gschwandtner, 'What Is Phenomenology of Religion? (Part I): The Study of Religious Phenomena', *Philosophy Compass* 14, no. 2 (2019): e12566, https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12566; Christina M. Gschwandtner, 'What Is Phenomenology of Religion? (Part II): The Phenomenology of Religious Experience', *Philosophy Compass* 14, no. 2 (2019): e12567, https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12567; James Cox, *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion: Key Figures, Formative Influences and Subsequent Debates* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rug/detail.action?docID=436347.

[215] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), 33–35.

[216] Anna Farennikova, 'Seeing Absence', *Philosophical Studies* 166, no. 3 (2013): 429–54; Jean-Rémy Martin and Jérôme Dokic, 'Seeing Absence or Absence of Seeing?', *Thought: A Journal of Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2013): 117–25; Ian Phillips, 'Hearing and Hallucinating Silence', in *Hallucination: Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. Fiona Macpherson and Dimitris Platchias (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 333–60; Dan Cavedon-Taylor, 'Touching Voids: On the Varieties of Absence Perception', *Review of Philosophy and Psychology* 8, no. 2 (2017): 355–66. Although the discussion on the implications of experiencing absence is still ongoing in the philosophy of mind, it does provide an important starting point (cf. Laura Gow, 'A New Theory of Absence

> The absent can have just as much of an effect upon relations as recognisable forms of presence can have. Social relations are performed not only around what is there but sometimes also around the *presence* of what is not … Indeed, the category of absence can have a significant presence in social relations and in material culture.[217]

Similarly, in the field of anthropology, Mikkel Bille et al. write that "phenomena may have a powerful presence in people's lives precisely because of their absence; a paradox that we refer to as 'the presence of absence'."[218] One paradoxical but crucial implication of this conceptualization of absence as a sensed presence is that, phenomenologically speaking, absence requires materiality. Put differently, similar to the observation that experiencing invisible beings requires material means that help render them present, this type of absence does as well. Thus, the sociologist Morgan Meyer writes that "absence has a materiality and exists in – and has effects on – the spaces people inhabit and their daily practices and experiences."[219] Similarly, the anthropologist Maria Starzmann writes that "absence is not just there … but it results from materialised practice, and more specifically from the various ways in which humans interact or do not interact with things."[220] Thus, this experience of absence is sensed and material. In addition, it may illicit strong emotions. Perhaps the strongest emotional response to perceived absence is found in the experience of grief. Thomas Fuchs writes that the

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Experience', *European Journal of Philosophy* 29, no. 1 (2021): 168–81, https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12577.). Here are some examples of such experiences of absence:

> "You are at the dental surgery, undergoing a procedure to have a tooth removed. After the tooth's extraction, and once the anaesthetic wears off, you run your tongue along your teeth and arrive at the gap where once a tooth was located. The gap is experienced as unnerving, and not merely on its initial probing… Something once experienced as present within your mouth is now experienced as lacking" (Cavedon-Taylor, 1).
>
> "You've been working on your laptop in the cafe for a few hours and have decided to take a break. You step outside, leaving your laptop temporarily unattended on the table. After a few minutes, you walk back inside. Your eyes fall upon the table. The laptop is gone!" (Farennikova, 'Seeing Absence', 430).

[217] Kevin Hetherington, 'Secondhandedness: Consumption, Disposal, and Absent Presence', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22, no. 1 (2004): 159.

[218] Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup, and Tim Flohr Sørensen, 'Introduction: An Anthropology of Absence', in *An Anthropology of Absence: Materializations of Transcendence and Loss*, ed. Mikkel Bille, Frida Hastrup, and Tim Flohr Sørensen (New York, NY: Springer, 2010), 4, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-5529-6_1.

[219] Morgan Meyer, 'Placing and Tracing Absence: A Material Culture of the Immaterial', *Journal of Material Culture* 17, no. 1 (2012): 103.

[220] Maria Theresia Starzmann, 'Excavating Tempelhof Airfield: Objects of Memory and the Politics of Absence', *Rethinking History* 18, no. 2 (3 April 2014): 220–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2013.858453.

core conflict of grief consists of the experienced ambiguity of presence and absence.[221] This may result in an experienced, sensed absence of the deceased person.[222]

In the field of religious studies, Yoram Bilu has studied the importance of sensed and material absence for the Hasidic followers of Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson in Brooklyn, US. Although the Rabbi passed away in 1994, some of his followers continue to claim that he is alive, though invisible.[223] They wait until the Rabbi will reveal himself again but until then "they, too, have to handle the painful void engendered by the Rabbi's disappearance"[224] Bilu has studied how these followers called *Meshichistim* render the absent Rabbi near through ritual practices.[225] Although these followers are hopeful about the return of their Rabbi, they are at present left to cope with the "the painful absence of the Rabbi" and a "general anguish over the Rabbi's absence."[226] According to Kravel-Tovi and Bilu, the followers "bemoan his absence and constantly beseech him to reveal himself at once."[227] Different than the more common experience of absence as a lack of presence, what becomes clear is that this second experience of absence may arouse emotions, embodied experiences, and a desire to mediate the this absence through material means.

In Ikon's performances, this second experience of absence is a recurring theme as seen in chapter 3. Indeed, we already encountered the same distinction made above in Rollins' philosophy where the felt experience of God's absence was differentiated from a mere absence of experience. In addition, chapter 3 shows that, much like mediation practices that seek to render gods present, Ikon employs emersive techniques to illicit a profound experience of divine absence. This goes to show that it is necessary to develop a concept of absence that helps analyse the complex and dynamic experiences that people, whether self-identifying as religious

[221] Thomas Fuchs, 'Presence in Absence. The Ambiguous Phenomenology of Grief', *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 17, no. 1 (February 2018): 43–63, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-017-9506-2.
[222] Fuchs quotes a text by C.S. Lewis, written after his wife passed away: "Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything. But no, that is not quite accurate. There is one place where her absence comes locally home to me, and it is a place I can't avoid. I mean my own body. It had such a different importance while it was the body of H.'s lover. Now it's like an empty house." Fuchs, 46.
[223] Yoram Bilu, '"We Want to See Our King": Apparitions in Messianic Habad', *Ethos* 41, no. 1 (2013): 98–126, https://doi.org/10.1111/etho.12004.
[224] Bilu, 99.
[225] Michal Kravel-Tovi and Yoram Bilu, 'The Work of the Present: Constructing Messianic Temporality in the Wake of Failed Prophecy among Chabad Hasidim', *American Ethnologist* 35, no. 1 (2008): 64–80; Bilu, '"We Want to See Our King"'; Yoram Bilu, *With Us More Than Ever: Making the Absent Rebbe Present in Messianic Chabad* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).
[226] Bilu, '"We Want to See Our King"', 104.
[227] Bilu, 104. Cf. Kravel-Tovi and Bilu, 'The Work of the Present', 74.

or not, may have. Therefore, I propose to develop the promising concept of felt absence as a sensed and embodied experience of absence that is made real through mediation processes.[228]

Religion and Secularity after the Death of God

Chapter two concluded that Ikon is best understood as a Christian atheist collective. It is difficult not to note the glaring contradiction central in this statement. Indeed, throughout the history of Christianity, atheism has been understood as both incompatible to its core teachings and as a potential outside threat. However, as seen in collectives such as Ikon, there seems to be an increasing willingness to embrace a form of atheism as a viable Christian option. The death of God is an important symbol for such Christians, although the meaning of it may vary widely. For instance, in an article about the gender-based violence and xenophobia that North African migrant women experience in South Africa, Gcebile Gina describes how these women come together and "pray for the death of this 'God' who ordains this violence and pray to a God who wills peace and the affirmation of humanity of women and the weak of our communities."[229] In an entirely different context, the philosopher of religion Paul Tillich has argued that in response to the idea that God exists, "atheism is the right religious and theological reply."[230] Although the various uses of the death of God vary, they share a discourse where atheism and Christianity are entangled, leaving it unclear where the one starts and the other ends (if such boundaries can even be drawn).

To make matters more complicated, Christianity is generally characterized as a (world-)religion while atheism is studied either under the notion of non-religion or secularism. Thus, when asking how Ikon should be classified, we may find that we have reached an impasse. Where are the boundaries between religion and non-religion or between religion and secularism drawn, and are these distinctions valid? These questions have become central both in academic and public discussions on religion. Indeed, the concept of religion has become increasingly

[228] The term felt absence is repeatedly used by Rollins and others to describe this type of absence. Perhaps there are better terms to use than felt absence. Felt absence helps emphasize the embodied and experiential components. However, there may well be other terms to describe this phenomenon that place emphasis elsewhere ('void' would imply more spatial emphasis, 'non-presence' would emphasize that it is not opposed to but rather other than presence as commonly understood, etc.). The use of the notion of felt absence is therefore not definitive and may be used interchangeably with other concepts that help highlight other components of absence. Regardless of whether others would embrace or replace the term, I hope that the concept of felt absence will help other scholars to think about the meaning of absence for the study of religion,

[229] Gcebile Gina, '"We Pray for the Death of 'God'": Southern African Women in Prayer', *Anglican Theological Review* 98, no. 2 (2016): 342.

[230] Paul Tillich, 'The Two Types of Philosophy of Religion', in *Theology of Culture*, ed. Robert C. Kimball (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), 25.

contested. Not only is religion notoriously difficult to define, but its roots also do not go back as far as one might expect. There is much to be said for the idea that both the concept of religion as well as religious practices have existed for thousands of years.[231] However, in the last three decades the argument that the concept of religion is closely linked to the formation of the notion of the secular has gained significant traction.[232] Three relevant arguments are worth reiterating here.

Firstly, the argument is made that the secular nation state constructed the concept of religion as its other against whom it identified itself. Various scholars have described how modernity is characterized by the production of binaries.[233] At the core of these binaries runs the line between 'us' and 'them', the 'self' and its 'other'. It is argued that a dichotomous conception of the relation between the secular and religion springs from this same source. It is important to note that the secular-religious binary should not be understood as having a single dimension. Instead, it is multi-layered, positing the 'self' in light of the various constructed 'others'. In opposition to the religious, it identifies the secular.[234] In contrast to superstitious magic, it places reasonable faith.[235] In the face of the 'radical Muslim' and the colonial 'primitive', it positions the enlightened Judeo-Christian secular values of Europe. In these examples it also becomes clear that the oppositional categories are never equal in value. Instead, they are informed by unequal power relations. Thus, in relation to the 'Occident-Orient' binary, Edward Said writes that "the Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different', thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, 'normal'."[236] Historically, this has meant that

[231] G. Casadio, 'Historicising and Translating Religion', in *Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 52–72.
[232] Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 2005); Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*, trans. William Sayers (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).
[233] John D. Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (London: Penguin UK, 2018), 273–304; Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1991), 18–52; Michel Foucault, 'The Subject and Power', *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1 July 1982): 777–95, https://doi.org/10.1086/448181.
[234] Courtney Bender and Ann Taves, 'Introduction: Things of Value', in *What Matters?: Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age*, ed. Courtney Bender and Ann Taves (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 1–33.
[235] Randall Styers, *Making Magic: Religion, Magic, and Science in the Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
[236] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin UK, 2019), 40.

secularity and the religious as concepts are bound together, mutually conditioned by its other yet unequal in value.[237]

Secondly, it is argued that the construction of the concept of religion is closely linked to the colonial endeavours of European empires. Here it becomes clear that secular states and colonial empires do not treat all religions the same. Indeed, Taylor has shown how there is a close historical link between secularism and the history of Christianity. However, Mahmood has criticized Taylor's account for overlooking the importance of Christianity's others throughout this historical process. Whereas Taylor tends to describe European Christianity (or Latin Christendom) which culminated into secularity in homogenous terms, it is important to note that European Christians readily identified themselves in opposition to its perceived others. Indeed, secularism, though pertaining to be neutral, runs the risk of privileging certain religions while marginalizing others. Because of this, Jason Josephson-Storm has argued that speaking of a modern trinary would be more accurate, where religion (or Christianity) and secularity, though in tension with each other, share a common enemy that they classify as superstition.[238] Important here is that "Western Christendom (perhaps during "the Enlightenment") constructed a set of binary oppositions between the religious and the secular, Church and state, which it then attempted to impose globally, producing "religions" at the colonial periphery where it encountered resistance."[239]

Thirdly, the argument is made that the study of religion has been dependent on these secular and colonial projects, revealing the problematic politics of the academic concept of religion. In its most innocent conception, religion is a second-order concept taken up by scholars of religion to compare and contrast different phenomena in the social world as Jonathan Z. Smith has noted.[240] However, the close ties of the history of the study of religion with Protestant theology and its indebtedness to colonial racism have often meant a close alliance between the

[237] José Casanova, 'Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective', *The Hedgehog Review* 8, no. 1–2 (2006): 10, https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004154070.i-608.39.
[238] Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago, Ill: University Of Chicago Press, 2012).
[239] Jason Ānanda Josephson-Storm, 'The Superstition, Secularism, and Religion Trinary: Or Re-Theorizing Secularism', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 30, no. 1 (2 January 2018): 2, https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341409.
[240] Jonathan Z. Smith, 'On Comparison', in *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 1990), 50–51; Jonathan Z. Smith, 'Religion, Religions, Religious', in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 281–82.

study of religion and the secular-religious binary.[241] Thus, David Chidester has argued that the comparative study of religions "was a crucial index for imperial thinking about empire."[242] This leads to the conclusion that the study of religion produces the very thing it claims to study, namely the concept of religion, and that the construction of this concept is (at least partially) driven by political interests.[243] This critical turn that questions the subject matter of religious studies is embedded in the larger incorporation of critical theory in the humanities which highlighted that theoretical concepts and academic practices that were taken for granted as neutral were contingent on historical, social and political factors.[244]

In line with this, various scholars have called for a post-secular perspective to the study of religion that takes seriously this secular-religious binary and its roots in the oppressive binary-producing practices of colonial modernity.[245] Although the term 'post-secular' had been used for over a decade by various theologians and philosophers, it became popularized through Jürgen Habermas' lecture on a post-secular society.[246] Since then, the term has been employed in at least three ways: as a descriptive, normative, and methodological concept.

As a descriptive concept, the post-secular describes a sociological phenomenon where the retreat of religion from the public sphere appears to be reversed. Thus, Habermas writes that public consciousness in Europe has entered a post-secular stage which has to come to terms with the "continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized

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[241] David Chidester, *Empire of Religion: Imperialism and Comparative Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226117577.001.0001; Jonathan Z. Smith, 'Tillich['s] Remains...', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78, no. 4 (2010): 1139–70; Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*; Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*.
[242] Chidester, *Empire of Religion*, 4.
[243] King, 'The Copernican Turn in the Study of Religion', 2.
[244] Boaz Huss, 'The Sacred Is the Profane, Spirituality Is Not Religion: The Decline of the Religion/Secular Divide and the Emergence of the Critical Discourse on Religion', *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 27, no. 2 (9 June 2015): 99, https://doi.org/10.1163/15700682-12341333.
[245] Pedro Alemany Navarro, 'Mediation, Practice, and Aisthesis: Towards a Culturalist Approach to Religion in the Post-Secular', *Journal of the Sociology and Theory of Religion* 10 (2020): 118–31; Michael Staudigl and Jason W. Alvis, 'Phenomenology and the Post-Secular Turn: Reconsidering the "Return of the Religious"', *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 24, no. 5 (19 October 2016): 589–99, https://doi.org/10.1080/09672559.2016.1259917; Arie L. Molendijk, 'In Pursuit of the Postsecular', *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 76, no. 2 (15 March 2015): 100–115, https://doi.org/10.1080/21692327.2015.1053403; Erin K. Wilson and Manfred B. Steger, 'Religious Globalisms in the Post-Secular Age', *Globalizations* 10, no. 3 (June 2013): 481–95, https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2013.787774; Sarah Bracke, 'Conjugating the Modern/Religious, Conceptualizing Female Religious Agency: Contours of a "post-Secular" Conjuncture', *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 6 (2008): 51–67; Rosi Braidotti, 'In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism', *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 6 (1 November 2008): 1–24, https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276408095542.
[246] Jürgen Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', *New Perspectives Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (September 2008): 17–29, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5842.2008.01017.x.

environment."[247] He attributes this to a resurgence of religion that is marked by religious violence, fundamental radicalization and missionary expansion.[248] Ernst van den Hemel has described the return of religion in political rhetoric, especially in far right politics as post-secular.[249] Here, the 'post' in post-secular refers to a chronological development. Out of the secular emerges the post-secular, a moment marked by a return of public religious expressions. However, it is questionable whether the post-secular is an adequate term to describe the recent history of Europe and North America. Tariq Modood, for example, argues that it is more accurate to describe this socio-political situation as a crisis of multi-culturalism where the ethno-religious identity of Muslims in the public sphere is perceived as a threat to white European identity.[250]

In a second sense, the post-secular refers to a normative stance. In its most general sense, this refers to any proposal of what a post-secular society ought to look like. For example, Beaumont et al. and Habermas propose the post-secular as a complementary learning process and mutual dialogue between secular and religious citizens.[251] Rosi Braidotti has been critical of normative accounts of the post-secular as they tend to be characterized by what Braidotti calls a "post-secular anxiety" that is permeated with nostalgia and Islamophobia.[252] In addition, these accounts also tend to be trapped in a temporal understanding of the post-secular, in some ways reducing it to a desire for a 'pre-secular' society, in other ways linking it as a historical development that springs from secular countries.

Both the descriptive and the normative conceptions of the post-secular run the risk of becoming trapped in a chronological conception of time that sees the post-secular as a temporal moment inextricably linked to the history of the secular. This is problematic as it assumes that there was an historical period where the ideals of secularism were realized. However, it is more fruitful to approach the post-secular as an awareness that the secular-religious binary is a modern construct which overlooks the many ways that the two concepts are entangled. This

[247] Habermas, 19.
[248] Habermas, 18.
[249] Ernst van den Hemel, '(Pro)Claiming Tradition: The "Judeo-Christian" Roots of Dutch Society and the Rise of Conservative Nationalism', in *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere*, ed. Rosi Braidotti et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 53–76, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137401144_4.
[250] Tariq Modood, 'Is There a Crisis of "Postsecularism" in Western Europe?', in *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere*, ed. Rosi Braidotti et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 14–34, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137401144_2.
[251] Justin Beaumont, Klaus Eder, and Eduardo Mendieta, 'Reflexive Secularization? Concepts, Processes and Antagonisms of Postsecularity', *European Journal of Social Theory* 23, no. 3 (1 August 2020): 304, https://doi.org/10.1177/1368431018813769; Habermas, 'Notes on Post-Secular Society', 27–29.
[252] Braidotti, 'In Spite of the Times', 10.

leads to the third conception of the post-secular, namely as a methodological stance. This conception of the post-secular refers to a particular way of seeing the secular-religious binary. This is then an inherently hermeneutical approach. To put it briefly, hermeneutics refers to the theories that are concerned with the process of interpretation in general and of texts in particular.[253] The hermeneutical starting point is that it is not possible to have direct access to neutral or objective facts and that therefore everything is a matter of interpretation.[254] Hermeneutics holds that interpretation is central to being human and that it is always contingent on the historical context of the interpreter.[255] Hermeneutics, then, is about consciously incorporating theories on interpretation in order to offer a weaker form of understanding that does not offer a strong description of the way things are.

The post-secular as a hermeneutics offers a different way of seeing the relationship between the secular and religion, one that seeks to go beyond the dividing practices that characterizes the secular-religious binary. Understood in this sense, the post-secular refers to a counter-discourse that seeks to disrupt the dominant, secularist discourse that has been dominant in the history of the study of religion.[256] However, without offering ways forward, the post-secular as a counter-discourse runs the risk of reiterating the secular-religious binary, albeit through negation. Therefore, I take the post-secular as a hermeneutical stance that both critiques the secular-religious binary and provides a way forward that approaches religion and secularity not in dichotomous terms but rather as complex and dynamic cultural phenomena that interact, diverge, and are often entangled.

However, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the secular-religious binary lacks explanatory power. In the secular-religious binary, it is difficult to adequately understand what happens during the transformance art of Ikon. Therefore, a post-secular hermeneutic is needed that shows how religiosity, secularity, and beliefs about the (non)-existence of God can co-exist and relate. The religious atheism found at Ikon is driven by a deep self-described religious desire. A post-secular hermeneutics, then, promotes a sense of non-reducible multiplicity. Rather than reproducing a binary logic, a post-secular hermeneutics traces relations,

[253] Michiel Leezenberg and Gerard de Vries, *History and Philosophy of the Humanities: An Introduction* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 181.
[254] Caputo, *Hermeneutics*, 4–6.
[255] Georgia Warnke, 'Hermeneutics, Ethics, and Politics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 79, 94.
[256] Rosi Braidotti et al., 'Introductory Notes', in *Transformations of Religion and the Public Sphere*, ed. Rosi Braidotti et al. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 1, https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137401144_2.

divergences, and enmeshments, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's account of the multiplicity of the rhizome.[257]

Even though the transformance art of Ikon is clearly religious in the sense that it takes up religious language and adheres to practices and ideas typically associated with Christianity (although often with a twist), it also critiques Christianity for its emphasis on belief in the existence of a divine, patriarchal being "out there" and for its lack of emphasis on "this world" (i.e. the secular) as seen in chapter two. As such it is not simply religious, and neither is it simply secular. What we do see is that Ikon transforms both what is typically meant by Christianity and atheism. What seems to be typical for adherents to death-of-God Christianity is a movement from a Christian, theistic worldview through a secular, atheist worldview to what can be called a post-secular worldview. Indeed, this worldview has been called a/theism by several thinkers who have at some point identified with the tradition of radical theology.[258] This means that communities like Ikon appear to be characterized by the attempt to move beyond binary oppositions between secularity and religion, material and spiritual, presence and absence. In this sense, it is possible to speak of religious atheism as a post-secular way of being that seeks to go beyond the secular-religious binary of modern European and North American societies. This means that not only does Ikon signify a transformation of religion under secular conditions, but it also signifies the transformation of what was often seen as secular under religious conditions. As such, the transformance art of Ikon actively both undermines the secular-religious binary and reveals one of the pathways that the interaction between religious expressions and secular processes may take.

The Cartographical Task of the Study of Religion

The acknowledgement of the inadequacy of the secular-religious binary seems to be the first step towards a post-secular perspective. In light of this, it is necessary to form a post-secular approach that traces and exposes the genealogies of different theoretical concepts and approaches in the study of religion to this binary.[259] Thus, Fitzgerald proposes to study religion as "an ideological category, an aspect of modern western ideology, with a specific location in

[257] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, 2nd edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 3–25.
[258] Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 1987); John D. Caputo, 'Atheism, A/Theology, and the Postmodern Condition', in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 267–82, https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521842700.017; Rollins, *How (Not) to Speak of God*, 31–43.
[259] King, 'The Copernican Turn in the Study of Religion'.

history, including in the nineteenth-century period of European colonization."[260] However, it also has clear epistemological implications for the future of the study of religion. For instance, taking the concept of multiplicity seriously means that existing connections between religions and their surrounding worlds as well as within religions are limitless, meaning that an interest-driven ordering principle must decide which connection to follow and more importantly, which not to follow. This is seen most clearly in the historical distinction made between religion and secularity. As the previous section showed, the concept of religion is not something that is encountered in the world but rather a constructed concept that is informed by geo-political, theological, and colonial power dynamics.

Religious institutions produce worlds where humans, institutions and divine beings co-exist. Religious theory does something similar. As Wendy Brown writes, "as theory interprets the world, it fabricates the world."[261] Therefore, theory both offers ways of seeing and by doing so constructs a certain kind of world where certain things are emphasized, over-exaggerated and overlooked. This is both its pitfall and its strength. Consequently, it is necessary to ask when the task of the scholar of religion has been accomplished. With the risk of oversimplifying, there are at least two main conceptions of the scholar of religion. In the first, the scholar is viewed as a photographer of sorts, who through theory (the camera) and data (the landscape) seeks to provide an accurate picture of religious phenomena as encountered in the world. The photographer-scholar is an observer, who seeks to understand religion as an outsider (i.e., the *etic* perspective). However, as shown in the previous section, a critical approach to religion has turned the camera back onto the photographer-scholar to illustrate that religious studies is neither value- nor power-free. In response to the outdated assumptions of the photographer-scholar, it is proposed that either a new approach should be developed or that more accurate pictures should be made. Underlying both of these proposed solutions is the idea that it should be the aim of the scholar of religion to provide an accurate picture of religious phenomena, the only difference being that old paradigms are left behind for new ones (from cartesian dualism to non-reductive materialism for example).[262] These scholars therefore remain within the same photo-theoretical framework, where scholarship is about transferring

[260] Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, 4.
[261] Wendy Brown, 'At The Edge: The Future of Political Theory', in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 82, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=445457.
[262] Cf. Manuel A. Vásquez, *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

information about the world. However, as scholars such as Richard Rorty and Latour have shown, this conception of truth-production is inaccurate both theoretically and in practice.[263]

Another conceptualization of the scholar of religion is as a cartographer. Deleuze and Guatarri, for instance, claim that "writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come."[264] In the study of critical cartography as proposed by scholars such as Jeremy Crampton and Jeffrey Stone, maps are always embedded in contextual values and power dynamics.[265] Whether a map is 'accurate' is dependent on the purpose it is supposed to serve. In this sense, a map is always reductive and through this reductive act it becomes useful. A map is never equal to the territory it draws. Thus, the cartographer-scholar is not so much interested in accurate depictions of religious phenomena but rather the conditions that inform the scholarship that produces the concept of religion. This does not mean that the territory does not exist or put differently that there is no data for religion.[266] Instead it highlights that map-making is not only dependent on the territory it draws but also on the interests that drive its commission. As Stone writes, in accounting for the shift in map-making of Africa, "the great change to maps deriving from the colonial rather than the imperial function is contemporaneous with first efforts to establish administrations on the grounds, usually some short time after the formal proclamation by the colonial authority. *The maps reflect the needs of the nascent administrative systems*."[267] Making maps is a political act. Whereas the photographer-scholar sought an objective outsider's perspective, the cartographer-scholar acknowledges that scholarship is interest-driven. This interest-driven aspect of scholarship only becomes problematic when it is left unacknowledged. Rather than seeking to rid the study of religion of these interests it is necessary to ask which interests are worth pursuing and which needed to be resisted and deconstructed as various pioneering scholars have done in the last forty years.[268] I contend that only through acknowledging the

[263] Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life, Laboratory Life* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 45–52.
[264] Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 4–5.
[265] Jeremy W. Crampton, 'Cartography: Performative, Participatory, Political', *Progress in Human Geography* 33, no. 6 (2009): 840–48; Jeremy W. Crampton and John Krygier, 'An Introduction to Critical Cartography', *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies* 4, no. 1 (2005): 11–33; Jeremy W. Crampton, 'Maps as Social Constructions: Power, Communication and Visualization', *Progress in Human Geography* 25, no. 2 (2001): 235–52; Jeffrey C. Stone, 'Imperialism, Colonialism and Cartography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 13, no. 1 (1988): 57–64, https://doi.org/10.2307/622775.
[266] Cf. Vásquez, *More Than Belief*, 9.
[267] Stone, 'Imperialism, Colonialism and Cartography', 59. Italics added to place emphasis.
[268] One problem that this argument runs into is whether it tries to resolve dualisms by purporting a new one: a dualism between the world and the map (the world as it is and the world as constructed). Although maps can certainly be oppositional and binary-producing, I like to think that the map may also function in a dialectical relation to the world it maps. The world affects the map and the map affects the world.

cartographic dimension of theory, religious studies is able to move beyond its present theoretical and ethical problems.[269]

Conclusion

This chapter offered various reflections on the study of religion in light of the research provided in the previous chapters on Ikon. It introduced the notion of felt absence as a sensed and embodied experience of absence that is made real through mediation processes. In addition, it offered a reflection on religion and secularity, arguing in favour of a conceptualization of the post-secular as a methodological stance that that both critiques the secular-religious binary and provides a way forward that approaches religion and secularity not in dichotomous terms but rather as complex and dynamic cultural phenomena that interact, diverge, and are often entangled. Finally, this chapter reflected on the task of religious studies, taking inspiration from the field of critical cartography to argue that the study of religion is best conceived as an interest-driven rather than territory-driven enterprise (although this does not imply that territory plays no part). The next chapter concludes this thesis with a reflection on the potential and limits of its findings.

[269] The use of complex agent-based modelling and the use of artificial intelligence is on the rise in the study of religion. Here it is necessary to remember that models, too, are not territory. Here we encounter the well-known aphorism "all models are wrong, but some are useful."`

CONCLUSION

This thesis reflected on and analysed the ideas and performances of a small Christian atheist community. The introduction emphasized that Ikon is situated on the boundaries of common yet contested categories such as 'Christianity', 'atheism', and 'religion'. The main descriptive question that this thesis sought to answer was how the death of God is conceptualized and made real in a sense-able manner in Ikon's performances and publications. Rather than providing conclusive answers, this thesis is a work of hypothesis-generation.

One of the main hypotheses of this thesis is that absence as an experiential and tangible reality may be formative for religious communities, something that is at risk of being overlooked in the study of religion in favour of experiences of divine presence. Now it is important to emphasize that I am not saying that this emphasis on presence is misplaced or misguided. Neither am I saying that it should be replaced with the concept of absence. Instead, I am arguing that the study of religion with its emphasis on presence should be supplemented with a study of absence in religious experience.[270] This means that a theoretical focus on absence may provide promising new pathways for the study of religion that are pioneered by scholars such as Bilu and Stanisław Głaz. Bilu's research on the impact of absence on a group of Hasidic Jews in Brooklyn, US has already been described in chapter four. Głaz's research is aimed at the impact of profound experiences of divine absence on the spiritual lives of university students. Noting that religious experiences as reported in the mystical literature are either marked by an acute awareness of God's presence or of God's absence, Głaz suggests that intense experiences of God's absence may impact the role of meaning and sensitivity in the

[270] With the risk of digressing, it is reminiscent of the following passage of the Tao Te Ching:

> We join spokes together in a wheel,
> but it is the center hole
> That makes the wagon move
>
> We shape clay into a pot,
> but it is the emptiness inside
> that holds whatever we want.
>
> We hammer wood for a house,
> but it is the inner space
> that makes it livable.
>
> We work with being,
> but non-being is what we use. (Lao-Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Book of the Way*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (London: Kyle Books, 2011), 11.)

lives of these students.[271] Another movement worth studying in relation to divine absence is the recent and controversial 'ex-vangelical' or 'deconstruction' movement. In a similar manner as Ikon, large numbers have recently voiced their critique of conservative trends in Western Evangelical Christianity. Many of these people come together, both online and offline, to share their experiences and critiques of what they are leaving together.[272] Hervieu-Legér has argued that the figure of the converted serves as an apt symbol for religious modernity.[273] The reason for this is that a shift occurred where parents encouraged their children to make their own decisions in religious matters without imposing a certain belief-system on them. In a similar manner, we could argue that the figure of the deconverted serves as an apt symbol for contemporary Europe and North America, where de-conversion is a crucial identity marker for many as seen at Ikon as shown in chapter one and in the Ex-vangelical movement.

Another hypothesis of this thesis is that similar to experiences of divine presence, absence is dependent on and conditioned by mediation processes and material means. Chapter three showed that Ikon employs different media to mediate an experience of felt absence by disrupting the preconceived beliefs of the audience. Inspired by video game studies, chapter three developed the notion of emersive techniques. As explained there, emersive techniques refer to the intended and strategic employment of emersive effects which bring about experiences of failed immersion in virtual but arguably also spiritual life-worlds. In chapter three, two emersive techniques were identified, namely shock and irony. More research could show whether more emersive techniques could be identified and whether the use of emersive techniques is also common amongst other religious and non-religious groups.

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[271] Stanisław Głaz, 'The Importance of the Experience of God's Absence, and of Meaning in Life, in the Development of Sensitivity of Conscience among Polish University Students', *Religions* 6, no. 3 (September 2015): 912–29, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel6030912; Stanisław Głaz, 'The Role of the Meaning of Life and Religious Experience of God's Presence and God's Absence Amongst Students with Different Levels of Conscience Sensitivity', *Religions* 4, no. 1 (March 2013): 132–44, https://doi.org/10.3390/rel4010132. Although Głaz initiates a promising field of research, his results seem inadequate. It is unclear, for example, what students mean by a "religious experience of god's absence." For example, rather than being an actual experience, a student might understand this in a rhetorical manner, referring to times in their lives that they experienced difficulty or suffering. This only adds to the observation that there is still much to be gained in researching absence for the study of religion.

[272] Andrew F. Herrmann, 'Purity, Nationalism, and Whiteness: The Fracturing of Fundamentalist Evangelicalism', *International Review of Qualitative Research* 13, no. 4 (1 February 2021): 414–32, https://doi.org/10.1177/1940844720937813; Steven Fekete and Jessica Knippel, 'The Devil You Know: An Exploration of Virtual Religious Deconstruction Communities', *Journal of Religion, Media and Digital Culture* 9, no. 2 (23 October 2020): 165–84, https://doi.org/10.1163/21659214-BJA10021.

[273] Daniéle Hervieu-Léger, 'The Figure of the Converted as Descriptive Figure of Religious Modernity: A Reflection Based on the File of Conversions to Catholicism in France', in *Secularization and Social Integration: Papers in Honor of Karel Dobbelaere*, ed. Rudi Laermans, Bryan Wilson, and Jaak Billiet (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1998), 277–86.

Another hypothesis generated by the findings of this thesis is about disruptive religion. In resistance to the idea that religion is a *sui generis* category that can be found in the world, much research on religion approach it as a constructive phenomenon. Put differently, religious practices, ideas and artefacts help religious adherents construct religious life-worlds.[274] It could be argued that at the moment, much research is aimed at studying the ways that religion is constructive in the lives of religious adherents, investigating the effects of religion on meaning-making, well-being, and on social identities.[275] Without trivializing this perspective, the idea that religion is in many ways and for many people a disruptive phenomenon is a valuable addition. As seen, in chapter three, the notion of disruption was a crucial element of Ikon's performances. Religious experiences and practices may both create and shatter worlds. Rollins views Christianity as analogous to the musical genre of punk. What punk brings is not a new genre that builds on but differs from other genres. Instead, as a disruptive force, it shatters existing genres.[276] It could be argued that religious experiences and practices linger on a constructive/disruptive scale where both elements shape the dynamics of religious life.

More research from multiple disciplines is necessary to affirm or deny these hypotheses. I would argue that one of the strengths of this thesis was its philosophical approach, allowing for much time to be spent on theoretical concerns and the creation of helpful concepts. By applying a grounded philosophical approach, this thesis has brought theoretical concepts and existing research in conversation in order to shed light both on religious phenomena and on theory and methods for religious studies. This GPA may be a promising method for the study of religion, as well as for the humanities in general. However, this approach also limits the findings of this thesis in various ways. First of all, it would be fair to say that there is an over-representation of textual sources. This is partly due to the fact that this thesis was dependent on the fieldwork of other scholars such as Moody and Ganiel. Another reason for this is that the performances were mainly analysed as written texts. Although the digital archive contains many images and some videos, textual sources have the overhand. One problem I ran into, for instance, was that it was difficult to distinguish between the intended effects and the actual

[274] See for example Berger and Luckmann's conception of the human 'world-constructor'. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Allan Lane, 1966), 121.
[275] Ann Taves, Egil Asprem, and Elliott Ihm, 'Psychology, Meaning Making, and the Study of Worldviews: Beyond Religion and Non-Religion.', *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 10, no. 3 (2018): 207; Bert Garssen, Anja Visser, and Grieteke Pool, 'Does Spirituality or Religion Positively Affect Mental Health? Meta-Analysis of Longitudinal Studies', *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 2020, 1–17.
[276] *Christianity and the Absurd: Punk, Dadaism and the Foolishness of Faith*, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rO7TBApMP5s.

effects of the performances on the audience in these texts. Entire worlds may exist between intended and actual effects. This becomes clear in the following anecdote told by Moody about one of the performances she attended:

> This performance, entitled The End, was part of Rollins' 2013 Idolatry of God retreat, and, as such, many of those gathered had high expectations of this evening, as well as reservations, given Ikon's reputation for not only thought provoking but also existentially-disturbing artistic events. But much of this transformance art piece revolved around very familiar ideas, images and themes about endings, mortality and death. Remarking upon the clichéd nature of the different elements of the performance in my field notes, I felt as if this gathering was telling me something I already knew. But I also knew that drawing mere intellectual assent from those present – that we know we are going to die, that the end is already and always nigh – could not be all that this transformance art event was ultimately about. Indeed, The End illustrated well the need to move from an intellectual engagement with the themes and ideas of a particular performance piece to an embodied experience of the existential moment that an idea permeates through to the body – although it did so in a way unforeseen by its creators, for I later found out that the moment that created this shift for me was completely unintentional and unanticipated.
>
> A man entered the circle that we had created, lifted the coffin to his shoulder and threw it down onto the ground. The coffin breaks open, spilling forth black cloth, ribbon and paper, and spewing out a cloud of dust. During the minutes of silence after this act, a ripple of coughs slowly erupts around the circle as the billowing dust rises up from the coffin and around the room, slowly reaching our lungs. At that moment, The End was not merely about affirming knowledge that we already had – one day, we will be dead, we will decay, we will be dust. Rather, it became about allowing our bodies to ingest this idea, letting our bodies know what we already knew but refused to know. […] However, the dust cloud was an unplanned element within the performance; Ikon had not realised that ash from a fireplace would, when thrown from a height, billow up and be breathed in by those assembled.[277]

As seen in this excerpt, intended and actual effects can greatly diverge, and a potential limit of this thesis is that it mostly focuses on intended effects as the sources it uses are provided by

[277] Moody, *Radical Theology and Emerging Christianity*, 178–79.

members of Ikon such as Rollins.[278] For now this means that more research on Christian atheist communities such as Ikon is necessary to corroborate the findings and hypotheses of this thesis.

Communities such as Ikon are fascinating for the study of contemporary Christianity in the West. One way forward would be to evaluate Ikon's politics as it is, on the hand critical of market capitalism, but at the same time resembling neo-liberal values by emphasizing entrepreneurship, individuality, and authenticity.[279] In addition, Ikon could be an interesting case of reflexive or critical religion which emphasizes the locative, contingent nature of religious experience. Perhaps, between religion and non-religion, communities such as Ikon constitute a form of critical religion. Is this a new phenomenon? What are the historical, political, and socio-economic contexts that condition such forms of critical religion?

Therefore, this thesis contributes to the study of contemporary religious communities in the West, who navigate their (shared) identities between religion and non-religion, faith and atheism, divine presence and divine absence. As this thesis shows, through its emphasis on felt absence and the death of God, Ikon attempts to move beyond traditional forms of Christianity in a manner that is deeply dependent on Christian discourses and traditions. Material media and sense-able, embodied experiences are crucial constitutive dimensions of this search for religious identity, even when it moves into non- or even anti-religious territory. Hopefully, this thesis will spark more research on the phenomenon of Christian atheism and the hypotheses that this thesis has generated.

[278] Moody's anecdote also raises fascinating questions about the agency of matter, where matter is not only something that is used in mediation practices but may also have unintended yet real effects.
[279] Porter, 'Fleeing the Resonance Machine', 497; Burge and Djupe, 'Truly Inclusive or Uniformly Liberal?'; Randall W. Reed, 'Emerging Treason? Politics and Identity in the Emerging Church Movement', *Critical Research on Religion* 2, no. 1 (2014): 66–85; Bielo, 'Belief, Deconversion, and Authenticity among US Emerging Evangelicals'.

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