

Henri Nouwen's Prayer of the Heart. Contemplation as Key to Spiritual Transformation

George W Marchinkowski

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3145-4342>

- Department Practical and Missional Theology, University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa
-

Abstract

John de Gruchy discerned the present as a Kairos moment for the Western church with a renewed interest in the monastic and mystical. This article seeks to make a contribution by exploring spiritual transformation through Henri Nouwen's eyes. After explaining his guiding motif, this article will explore his ultimate spiritual movement, from illusion to prayer, by investigating his claim that before the unitive phase in transformation might be experienced, illusions need to be unmasked. Next, contemplative prayer as a spiritual practice to complete this 'swing' will be examined. One of the most compelling ways Nouwen practiced contemplation, Visio Divina, will be described as an example of his contemplative practice, complemented by de Gruchy's own exploration of icons as a means of grace. The practice will be placed in everyday life as a practice for ordinary people. Finally, it will be claimed that the 'swing' from illusion to prayer was for Nouwen centred in the heart and fulfilled in a permanent moment-by-moment interaction between a spiritual seeker and God ending in the Divine embrace.

Keywords: Contemplation; Henri Nouwen; Illusion; Icons; Prayer; Spiritual transformation; The Heart

Introduction

In his recent book, *This monastic moment. The war of the Spirit and the Rule of Love* (2021), South African theologian John de Gruchy expressed the discernment that an opportunity presented itself to the church in South Africa and cross the Western world. Citing the effects on daily life (and religious organisations) of the COVID-19 pandemic (de Gruchy 2021:2) and the rise of the change in profile of the Church after the demise of Christendom (de Gruchy 2021:15), de Gruchy encouraged his readers to see the present time as a *kairos* moment, a chance to change direction so that the church can avoid disappearing altogether.

Far too many of us Christians have either been seduced by the false values of the age and the spirit of Christian triumphalism, or else have been attracted to gnostic forms of spirituality that provide a means of escape from reality and responsibility. Any delay in responding to this *kairos* moment increases the danger that we fail to change our ways and grasp the opportunity God gives us to receive the coming kingdom in greater fullness now (De Gruchy 2021:15).

Using St. Anthony the Great as an example, de Gruchy proposed a return to the monastic ways, to the life of devotion, to authentic faith communities, and to the more affective dimensions of faith which flourished in the mystical tradition. His advice is compelling and adds credence to a desire of many Christians who have taken to are identifying themselves as ‘spiritual but not religious’ to explore spirituality more deeply.¹

This article will explore Henri Nouwen’s contribution to the spirituality of ordinary people in everyday life. After briefly explaining his guiding motif, spiritual transformation as a series of ‘swings’ between poles, this article will focus on Nouwen’s third and ultimate spiritual movement, from illusion to prayer, by investigating his claim that before a spiritual seeker experiences the unitive phase in transformation, there were illusions that ought to be unmasked. Next, the significance of contemplative prayer as a spiritual practice in completing this ‘swing’ will be examined. Contemplation may not only facilitate the unmasking of illusion but ought also to bring a person into a state of true prayer.

For Nouwen, it was from the human heart² that every journey of spiritual transformation began, and it was in the Heart of God that the ultimate outcome of the spiritual life was experienced (Nouwen 1981:76). This journey involved several pendulum swings between spiritual polarities. These polarities varied from such personal experiences as debilitating loneliness to states of true solitude, and from an underlying hostility toward strangers to creating free spaces of hospitality in which those strangers might become friends. Each of these ‘swings’ offered a transformative opportunity, a more integrated and whole self. In his 1975 book, *Reaching out*, Nouwen’s last mentioned spiritual pendulum swing was focussed on the interaction between a human being and God. It was the last challenge in the spiritual life and, from another perspective, it was the primary swing needed to experience wholeness. The question of how a person living in contemporary society might reach out to the Divine was Nouwen’s focus.

A characteristic practice of Nouwen, *Visio Divina*, or contemplation by gazing at a painting or an icon, will be briefly described to illustrate contemplation as he understood it. To conclude, it will be pointed out that for Nouwen, the swing from illusion to prayer was a practice of the heart, which was fulfilled in a ceaseless, moment-by-moment dialogue between a human being and God culminating in the Divine embrace.

Spiritual transformation through a series of ‘swings’

Spiritual transformation has traditionally been understood as a three-stage process: purgation, illumination and unity with the Divine (Sheldrake 2013:389; Byrne 1993:569). The sixteenth century work of John of the Cross, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, and Walter Hilton’s *Ladder of Perfection* (published in the fifteenth century), fit into

¹ Frohlich (2020:32) points out that “In the United States, at least a third of those ages 18-29 reject affiliation with any religious group, and a far higher percentage do not participate in religion practice”. Sheldrake (1999:162) adds that “(m)any of the people who read spirituality books or listen to bestselling CDs of plainchant are also suspicious of religious institutions or dogma.”

² “Nouwen saw the human heart as the centre of being, a sacred place within all people where God dwells and where we are invited to dwell with God.” (Ford 1999:8) “For Nouwen the heart was that place where humanity and divinity touched, the intersection of heaven and earth, where the finite heart of humanity was mystically unified with the infinite heart of God” (Ford 1999:8).

such a model, while Teresa of Avila described the same three-fold pattern in her *The Interior Castle* as a *camino* through different rooms of the 'castle' of the soul (Byrne 1993:572). An epic journey through the rooms culminates in the unitive stage and ultimately, spiritual marriage. The Rule of St Benedict described the progression as twelve degrees of humility (Sheldrake 2013:389). In summary, the accepted theoretical picture of transformation is linear, staged and sequential.

In a previous article, I argued that the concept of a linear process with sequential stages has been criticised in recent times by Karl Rahner and other influential Catholic theologians who have questioned its Neoplatonic³ foundations (Marchinkowski 2022:250). Rahner believed that the motive of Neoplatonism, to experience total detachment from human passions, was not a Christian motive and "an approach which seems, theologically, to involve an objective, continuous and inevitable increase of grace or, ethically, the limitation of higher moral acts to one stage or another" (Sheldrake 2013:389). In the context of such critique, Nouwen's concept of transformation, as a series of pendulum swings between opposite poles, may not seem so antithetical. The rigid three-fold pattern has for a long time been giving way to more cyclical conceptions⁴ of human spiritual transformation and less individualistic schemas.

Kees Waaijman's proposition of imagining transformation as a 'way' instead of a linear, staged process, is an approach that navigates the linear/cyclical debate. Waaijman (2003:63) acknowledged that spirituality (transformation) is not static but a dynamic divine-human relational process. It is not "an actual road, but the way one goes into life" (Waaijman 2003:66). The 'way' inevitably mediates between the poles of the Divine and the human (Waaijman 2003:73) within the transformative relationship between the human seeker and the Divine. Waaijman outlined multiple 'ways' that lead to the Divine and counselled that "Human beings could only enter into this completely different world by unconditionally letting go of their own world. They have to allow themselves to be liberated from their self-constructed treadmill" (Waaijman 2003:78). It seems apparent then that a 'way' may not be linear, may be cyclical, and may even be conceived of as a swing between two poles in the realm of spiritual transformation.

Henri Nouwen's 'swinging movements' in spiritual transformation

When Henri Nouwen studied the spiritual life, especially the question of how ordinary people in everyday life could seek spiritual integration and a life lived in symbiosis with the Divine, he envisioned this as a series of 'movements' (between poles).⁵ He perceived the process as a series of "movements from the mind to the heart"⁶ (Nouwen 2010:xvi),

³ Louth (2007) investigated the far reaching influence of Platonism on Christian mysticism (and particularly the motif of the soul's journey motif). See particularly (Louth 2007:xii-xiii) and (Louth 2007:186-194). This article does not explore this theme more fully, although it does provide evidence about the origins of the journey motif.

⁴ Even Byrne (1993:570) admits that "these three ways are not absolute; they do not serve as chronological categories. They are spiralling movements, often interpenetrating one another, used to describe normative moments in the spiritual journey."

⁵ When Hernandez considered this motif in Nouwen, he suggested: "If our mysterious God has deliberately chosen to communicate with us at times via the enigmatic means of antinomies, paradoxes, and polarities, then it should not surprise us to find ourselves wrestling with them amidst the realities of our own journeying experience" (Hernandez 2012:Kindle Location 367).

⁶ Nouwen identified Theophan the Recluse as his source, who counselled pilgrims to "descend with the mind into the heart and there stand before the face of the Lord" (Nouwen 2010:xvi; 1975:145).

and his movement motif or theory, “movements of the Spirit”, became a signature feature of his thought (Nouwen 2010:viii,127). He believed that spiritual transformation should be described as involving multiple movements or swings between such poles as loneliness, hostility and illusion on the one hand and solitude, hospitality and prayer on the other. Each ‘swing’ offered a transformative opportunity (Nouwen 1975:11; Nouwen 2010:128) and each ‘pole’ offered “the context in which we can speak about the spiritual life” (Nouwen 1975:11; Nouwen 2010:129). Nouwen saw the process of spiritual transformation being played out as each person learned “to embrace and befriend spiritual polarities” (Hernandez 2012:Kindle Location 412).

The swings were not clearly separated or sequential. One could not graduate from one set of swings, never to return. Some swings related to one’s personal stage of life or the context. What was clear was that Nouwen had stepped away from the three-stage model of transformation of the mystics,⁷ and as a psychologist, he also stepped away from the well accepted stage theories of cognitive and faith development articulated by such theorists as Piaget, Erikson and Fowler, introducing “a new, transformative, nonsystematic approach to spiritual formation” (Nouwen 2010:134). Nouwen’s movements, which are not uniform to every person, did not resolve the tensions of the spiritual life, but offered a path for spiritual pilgrims to conversion and transformation (Nouwen 2010:135) allowing them to become more aware, free and connected to the world, their neighbours and the Divine.

The route to wholeness involved a “confrontation with our state of brokenness” (Hernandez 2012:Kindle location 445), confronting the ‘negative’ poles such as loneliness, hostility or illusion while neither avoiding nor ignoring them so as to move on to the positive pole. “[T]heologically, the process of our union with God is, of necessity, paved by suffering” (Hernandez 2012:453). Hernandez believed that Nouwen was not only comfortable with spiritual polarities but encouraged the accompanying tensions that the polarities produced within himself and his readers (Hernandez 2012: 2016); Ford 2018:16–17).

Nouwen called his third and most intimate transformational ‘swing’ the movement from illusion to prayer.

Spiritual transformation and the unmasking of illusion

When Henri Nouwen described his third pendulum swing, his primary proposition was that spiritual transformation was only possible after a systematic confrontation with multiple illusions that plagued the contemporary spiritual seeker and prohibited a true connection with the Divine. This confrontation happened in effect through a process of discernment engaged by means of contemplation. Discernment, or as some contemporary writers have labelled the spiritual practice ‘paying attention’ (Brown Taylor 2009:17–34), is the primary spiritual practice in the process of confronting illusion. The spiritual pilgrim is called first to become aware, to ‘see’ at the level of the

⁷ Christensen believed that Nouwen turned the sixth-century mystic, John of the Ladder’s ladder on its side in his Notre Dame years, teaching a model of “spiritual formation as a series of horizontal movements of the heart, back and forth ... with the goal of human wholeness rather than divine perfection.” (Nouwen 2010:132).

senses.⁸ In contemplation, it is essential to be aware, to take notice of objects and feelings, even movements of the Spirit that might otherwise be glossed over. This initial 'seeing' becomes discernment when a seeker penetrates beneath the level of the ordinary, to see with spiritual sight (or the third eye; Rohr 2009:28) what is happening in the heart.

Underhill described mysticism as "the direct intuition or experience of God" and a mystic as "a person who has, to a greater or less degree, such a direct experience – one whose religion and life are centred, not merely on an accepted belief or practice, but on that which he regards as first-hand personal knowledge" (Underhill 1921:9–10). This 'paying attention' may involve spiritual encounters which may be ecstatic⁹ or ordinary,¹⁰ but these encounters are all transformative of the spiritual seeker's understanding of life and result in new practices. The seeker may become conscious of the presence of God in an intimate and direct way (Rohr 2009:29), so that their faith may become based on real-life experiences of the Divine.

Henri Nouwen applied his skills of perception and spiritual sight to his own life, looking beneath the surface of his context to suggest practices that could contribute toward wholeness and human flourishing. In doing so, he fulfilled the vocation of a mystic by calling on those who read or heard him to "imagine" and "explore" the inner transformation of the self, grounded in a new understanding of how human beings relate to God (McGinn 2006:xiii). Nouwen discerned his context, perceiving the world with spiritual sight (or the "third eye"), and in the process, illusions were confronted and unmasked.

Ordinary people living in a disconnected world

In one of his best-known books, *The wounded healer* (2010), Nouwen placed the challenge of unmasking illusion into everyday life by creating an 'average joe', whom he called 'Peter' (Nouwen 2010a:7). Nouwen described Peter's perception of his world as "drifting" with "boundaries" that were "becoming increasingly vague" (Nouwen 2010a:7), so that he was less able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. "In the absence of clear boundaries between himself and his milieu, between fantasy and reality, between what to do and what to avoid, it seems that Peter has become a prisoner of the 'now', caught in the present without meaningful connections with his past or future" (Nouwen 2010a:8).

To survive and flourish, Peter needed to confront the illusions around him. One illusion of the seventies (when Nouwen wrote this book) was the naïve confidence that invention and technology would save humanity and make life easier. Sadly, the products of human ingenuity carried the potential for self-destruction (Nouwen 2010a:9–11). Nouwen proposed that innovation and technological invention used without discernment and ethical consideration, had not always led to human flourishing but rather

⁸ For a deeper discussion of seeing as a spiritual practice, See "*The practice of paying attention. Reverence*" in Brown Taylor (2009:17–34).

⁹ McGinn writes that "mysticism (as the mystics have insisted) is more than a matter of unusual sensations, but essentially comprises new ways of knowing and loving based on states of awareness in which God becomes present in our inner acts, not as an object to be grasped, but as the direct and transforming centre of life." (McGinn 2006:xvi).

¹⁰ For Ursula King, the "seeing" can better be understood as an "awareness" of "the powerful presence of the divine Spirit" in which the mystic "experiences to an extraordinary degree the profoundly personal encounter with the energy of divine life." (King 2001:3).

exploitation, polarisation and even potentially self-destruction. An example of this was the Atomic bomb. Technology, which seemed at first to make life easier, had in fact caused pollution, ecological disaster and even potential human extinction (Nouwen 2010:10–11).

Ordinary people in everyday life should seek to unmask illusion in a world drifting and with vague boundaries by being discerning as to the true consequences of technology and innovation. This may lead to wise choices and consequent flourishing.

Illusion as the cause of alienation from life

Nouwen's 'Peter' was adrift in the world as a result of the illusions which surrounded him. Nouwen considered three broad reasons for this: historical dislocation, fragmented ideology and the search for a new immortality.

By way of social commentary, Nouwen proposed that the average person living in Western culture experienced a disconnect with the positive and helpful aspects of their cultural tradition – such as those relating to family, worldview, faith, and life expectation (Nouwen 2010:12). This disconnect caused people to be plagued by apathy, lethargy and a general disinterest in life when they really ought to have been experiencing anxiety and joy (Nouwen 2010:13). Hence, his diagnosis was that the cause was a sense of historical dislocation. Nouwen's thoughts, written in the seventies, seem surprisingly relevant for human experience in a twenty-first century postmodern context. Postmodernism creates distance between itself and modernity by deconstructing "literal, fundamental truths"¹¹ (Du Toit 2007:25), and this may feel perplexing to people who perceive the world and history from a modernist perspective. Postmodernism may also bring benefits that will assist seekers in discerning the usefulness of inventions of our age (Du Toit 2007:25–26).

Another problem Nouwen identified was the shifting nature of our system of values. Peter now lived without a discernible ideology; his worldview had evolved from a fixed and absolute set of norms to a collection of more fluid fragments. Nouwen attributed this change partly to the "tremendous exposure of people to divergent and often contrasting ideas, traditions, religious convictions, and lifestyles" (Nouwen 2010:14). The change was disorientating and revealed the paradox that despite great human potential and new opportunities, there was a reluctance or an inability to bring an end to the great societal and political problems of the day. The 'average joe' (Peter) could not make sense of all of this and was struggling to appropriate a stable narrative (Nouwen 2010:15).

Finally, Nouwen made the point that Peter had a worldview limited by his mortality. "When we are no longer able to look beyond our own deaths and relate ourselves to what extends beyond the time and space of our individual lives, we lose both our desire to create and the excitement of being human" (Nouwen 2010:17). This limitation caused disorientation because a person had no sense of continuity with time and space (Nouwen

¹¹ "The postmodernist has emerged from Plato's cave and no longer accepts a perfect world of ideas, of which this world is but an imperfect reflection. Truth does not lie above or beyond our reality but manifests itself in countless forms within it. It is governed by time, cultural history, tradition, the rules dictated by the language and interests of the community in which it functions. Our image of truth has become Escher-like: details make sense in their context, but the overall picture is always fraught with paradox and contradiction." (Du Toit 2007:32).

2010:17–18). Nouwen identified this limitation as an illusion and an avoidance of the spiritual and transcendent dimensions of life. The limitation of mortality must be unmasked and replaced by a more holistic acceptance of finitude, an embrace of a solitude within the self, a hospitality toward the other, and prayer – which is a reaching out to the Divine. “It is only in the lasting effort to unmask illusions of our existence that a real spiritual life is possible” (Nouwen 1975:113).

This was Nouwen’s true vocation, to equip ordinary people in everyday life to unmask illusions and undertake new, more wholistic paths. Thomas Merton appealed to intellectuals, to those who were part of religious orders and to an eclectic array of poets and artists, but Nouwen focussed his efforts on ordinary people in everyday life, an audience who were ecumenical, interreligious and some even secular. Nouwen believed that “it is only in the lasting effort to unmask the illusions of our existence that a real spiritual life is possible” (Nouwen 1975:113).

For the unmasking of illusions, considered essential to the spiritual life, Nouwen turned to Contemplation.

Three challenges to human flourishing in everyday life raised by Nouwen have been considered here: historical dislocation, fragmented ideology and the search for a new immortality. Each of these is raised as a challenge that ought to be overcome so as to experience human flourishing.

Contemplation as a tool for unmasking illusion

A characteristic of Nouwen’s method was to explain spiritual practices in simple ways so that ordinary people could feel confident to try these methods that once seemed to fall exclusively in the domain of religious (monastic) communities. In an article published in *America* in August 1978, Nouwen sought to explain contemplative prayer (Nouwen 2022:1). Taking his lead from 1 Thessalonians 5: 17–18, Nouwen sought to provide a method of unceasing prayer for the ordinary Christian (See also Nouwen 1979:61).

First, Nouwen differentiated unceasing prayer from said prayers which are periodic, perhaps even sporadic, and focussed on verbal speech. Speaking of St. Paul, Nouwen wrote: “Prayer is not part of living, but all of living, not a part of his thought, but all of his thought” (Nouwen 2022:2). He cites *The Way of the Pilgrim* and the ‘Jesus prayer’ (Nouwen 1979:63; Ford 1999:11) which developed into so much a part of the Russian pilgrim’s practice that it became subconscious like breathing.

Nouwen introduced the problem of uncontrolled and random thought as a feature human beings struggle with. While on the one hand, it may be a distinguishing feature of humanness, the never-ending stream of thought may cause anxiety and even keep people from sleep. (Nouwen 1979:68). Thoughts include memories, seemingly endless reviewing of past events and decisions, even the emotions attached to these. The endless stream of thoughts might keep us focussed on past events or may take us into the future as we explore possible future scenarios and evaluate what we might say or how we may act if our journey takes us to certain places or if we meet certain people. The danger is that this mental exploration of past and future may keep one from experiencing the present moment along with all the people and experiences within it. One might also miss the presence of the Divine who dwells in the present moment. The uncontrolled nature of such thinking may also cause anxiety, guilt or shame. Uncontrolled thoughts may

manifest in disturbing dreams or nightmares (Nouwen 2022:3). It is this unceasing thought, Nouwen suggests, that might be converted into unceasing prayer.

The transition from unceasing thought to unceasing prayer is not a simple transaction. “To pray, I think, does not primarily mean to think about God in contrast to thinking about other things, or to spend time with God instead of spending time with other people. Rather, it means to think and live in the presence of God. As soon as we begin to divide our thoughts into thoughts about God and thoughts about people and events, we remove God from our daily life and put Him in a pious little niche where we can think pious thoughts and experience pious feelings” (Nouwen 2022:4). Nouwen believed that prayer could become unceasing when a person’s thoughts, be they pious or profane, could be reconciled in the company and embrace of God. At this point, prayer truly became conversation, and the result was truly transformation (Nouwen 2022:4).

Prayer is not introspection. Introspection is to look inward in search of some deeper understanding or to make connections (Nouwen 1979:72). It may have positive results, but it can also result in self-preoccupation. Prayer doesn’t look inward but rather outward toward God. It is the presentation of our inner thoughts to God so that God can respond in God’s divine compassion. Prayer facilitates a thorough transformation of our emotional and cognitive processes, moving away from ourselves toward God in simple trust that God can make all things new (Nouwen 2022:5) but unceasing prayer is also difficult because of the human inclination to keep parts of the inner life hidden. There is a resistance to total and vulnerable relinquishment to the Divine.

Contemplation as a spiritual practice

The practice of prayer requires set aside time and space.¹² Prayer is an “explicit way of being with God” (Nouwen 2022:6). During this set aside time, we need to direct all our attention to God. “Many people still have the impression that contemplative prayer is something very special, very “high” or very difficult, and really not for ordinary people with ordinary jobs and ordinary problems... the discipline of contemplative prayer is particularly valuable for those who have so much on their minds that they suffer from fragmentation” (Nouwen 2022:6).

Contemplative prayer is prayer in which one attentively looks toward God. It means to see Christ as the image of God the Father. “Contemplative prayer can be described as seeing Christ in the imagination, of letting Him enter fully into our consciousness so that He becomes the icon always present in our inner room. By looking at Christ with loving attention, we learn with our mind and heart what it means to say that he is the way to the Father. “[C]ontemplation means an always increasing imaginative vision of Jesus so that in, through and with Him, we can see the Father and live in His presence” (Nouwen 1979:78).

Nouwen makes a few practical suggestions. One is to take up a regular¹³ reading of scripture, followed by the repeating of a sentence or word that offers particular comfort. A second practice is suggested: To focus on the person of Christ in the text and consider what he is doing or saying in the particular reading. A careful and focussed observation,

¹² Nouwen calls such a space ‘solitude’. “Solitude indeed is the place of the great encounter, from which all other encounters derive their meaning. In solitude we meet God.” (1979:28).

¹³ Nouwen suggests the possibility of this first step taking place in the evening.

a visualisation of the text, will yield the best results. By focussing on Christ, one can see the Father. This practice may shape the events for the rest of the day and even one's responses to those events. Nouwen illustrates by using an example of his own life: "Slowly, however, I realized that I could indeed carry Christ, the image of God, with me and let Him affect not only my reflective thoughts but my daydreams as well" (Nouwen 2022:7). Nouwen counselled that it was not the technique of prayer that is important but rather the envelopment of one's entire life in prayer. This would remain out of reach unless the spiritual seeker was prepared to work hard at it with discipline and involving the whole Self in a daily practice (Nouwen 1979:82). Nouwen concludes, "when we give it serious attention and develop an appropriate discipline, we will see a real transformation in our life that will lead us closer and closer to God." (Nouwen 2022:8).

Contemplation and the confronting of illusion

Michael O'Laughlin credits Thomas Merton as having had a formative influence on Nouwen's practice of contemplation. "Merton's new way of seeing was part artistic sensibility, part prayer, and part psychology" (O' Laughlin 2004:178). One can imagine that Nouwen took to such a method with enthusiasm, quite noticeably so in his little book published under various titles¹⁴ but most latterly, *Encounters with Merton. Spiritual reflections* (2004), Nouwen also credits Merton with linking contemplation with justice (or revolution) (Nouwen 2004:20; Penkett 2019:12, 20). In this book, Nouwen traces Merton's spiritual journey, showing how Merton's initial nonchalance and sarcastic outlook is softened through contemplation into a compassionate love for the world and his fellow human beings (Nouwen 2004:25, 45, 74).

In the process of studying Merton, Nouwen discovered all the illusions Merton had to confront in his contemplative journey.¹⁵ These ranged from a lack of confidence in his ability to live out his vocation as a monk, the rumour that the fame he achieved as a writer would lead him away from the monastery and the constant temptation he had to adopt a more radical form of monasticism (Trappist). Merton also battled with the idea that his solitude cut him off from the rest of humanity (Penkett 2019:23), to such an extent that he would have nothing relevant to say to the world (Nouwen 2004:84). Merton discovered that "This unmasking (of illusion) is not a game one can choose to play or not to play. It is a sacred duty and regards the here and now of what occurs in the world" (Nouwen 2004:89). Merton took many opportunities to respond to the violence in his day with words of compassion or challenge, and by so doing, he unmasked illusions created by the powerful. The mystical life became for Nouwen a space in which people were offered opportunities to move away from illusion to grow into a true relationship with the Divine (Ford 2009:73).

¹⁴ Initially published in Dutch as *Bidden om het Leven, Het Contemplatief engagement van Thomas Merton* (1970). This was translated into English by David Schlaver as *Pray to Live* (1972), then the third edition as *Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic* (1981) and in the fourth edition, as *Encounters with Merton: Spiritual Reflections* (2004) (Penkett 2019:6,108,126).

¹⁵ "Compassion includes confrontation and this includes confronting oneself ... Direct confrontation is 'a true expression of compassion ... Compassion without confrontation fades quickly into fruitless sentimental commiseration.'" (Penkett 2019:14).

Visio Divina as contemplative methods

For Nouwen, art was always an important tool for processing the struggles of his heart, and Ford believed that is why Nouwen valued art immensely (Ford 1999:143). Readers of Nouwen would be able to identify at least three major pieces of evidence showing the influence art had on Nouwen's spirituality. First, the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh was a source of inspiration for Nouwen, the focus of one of his most popular courses at Yale and van Gogh helped Nouwen explore the landscape of compassion.¹⁶ Second, Nouwen's best known book, *The return of the prodigal son*, published in 1992, showcased his unique exegesis of Luke 15, and third, his exploration of icons, *Behold the beauty of the Lord*, published in 1987, in which he offered his readers *Visio Divina* as a contemplative practice.

Stepping into the picture and walking around

Both Sue Mosteller and Michael Ford outlined Nouwen's basic methodology for *Visio Divina* using a painting as a source. He would sit in front of the painting, be quiet and gaze. He would continue to gaze¹⁷ at the painting for a long time without interruption. While gazing, he would 'step into the picture and walk around' (Mosteller 2012 video clip; Ford 2018:141). This was Nouwen's visual contemplation, he treated a painting like an icon: a visible object, created to offer access to the mystery of the invisible (Nouwen 1987:14). This was how he approached Rembrandt van Rijn's *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. He stepped into the painting and walked around, looking for God to use the painting to show truth to him. The result was a remarkable treatment on Luke 15 with multiple layers of interpretation from the perspective of all the characters in the painting and also from the perspective of the painter, of Nouwen himself, from the perspective of Christ as the true older son and the invitation for the reader also to contribute her/his perspective.

Michael Ford discerned this methodology when he referred to Nouwen's contemplation on the Isenheim Altarpiece near Colmar, France, where a series of panels were painted for victims of the plague between 1513 and 1515: "By entering into the picture, then, Henri received something of a mystical insight into the fulfilment of his vocation. He entered the mind, not only of the painter, but also the patients who would have originally reflected on the panels and understood that God was with them in their trials" (Ford 2018:141). When Ford questioned Nouwen about his visual contemplative method, he responded: "I think indeed a painting allows me to project a lot of things there, to come in touch with things in myself. I am not suggesting that Rembrandt expected anybody to use the painting the way I did. But I have that wonderful freedom to look at a painting and let the painting become an icon that brings me in touch with my deepest self" (Ford 2018:142–143).

¹⁶ For a more in depth discussion of van Gogh's influence on Nouwen and particularly his influence on the concept of the wounded healer see the article by Marchinkowski (2023:4–5).

¹⁷ In her unpublished BD Thesis, Desiree Snyman describes this 'gazing' as follows: "To gaze at an icon is to pray. To gaze at an icon is to stand before God with the intellect in the heart. On one level an icon is a picture, yet an icon is far more than a beautiful painting" (Snyman 2001:1) She goes on to describe an icon as a window into God's presence, as sacramental and a channel of grace. She points out that an icon has no value in and of itself but facilitates participation in the Divine. "The purpose of the icon is prayerful communion, it is a guiding image that leads us into worship." (Snyman 2001:1–2).

Icons as access to visual contemplation

While Nouwen was shaped in the western tradition of Church which has always been Word orientated, prizing doctrine as the main source of belief,¹⁸ he soon developed an appreciation for and fascination with the iconography produced by the Orthodox tradition. As with paintings, seeing an icon could capture his attention, and so he began to use them as a tool for contemplative prayer. Nouwen viewed icons as dynamic, not simply works of art or objects designed either to please the senses or to shock. Icons were rooted in the Christian tradition, in the beloved community, and connected to the rhythms of prayer and sacrament (Ford 2009:100). For Nouwen, icons were windows to the eternal (Ford 1999:11).

In Nouwen's experience, icons could lead to the Divine, but this required the spiritual seeker to have time to give the icon prayerful attention, study and mostly an Eastern Orthodox spiritual practice of "gazing" (Nouwen 1987:13). Icons needed to be gazed at with complete attention and to be prayed with. 'Gazing' describes the kind of contemplation one engages with in respect of icons. It is an eastern practice. Whereas Western spirituality focussed on listening, Orthodox spirituality encouraged gazing at icons (Nouwen 1987:13). This was the *Visio Divina* that Nouwen adopted, believing that icons were created for the purpose of offering access, through the gate of the visible, to the mystery of the invisible. In so doing, they "lead us into the inner room of prayer and bring us close to the heart of God" (Nouwen 1987:14).

The South African Congregationalist theologian John de Gruchy believed that the exploration of icons as a 'means of grace' may have positive consequences for the 'spiritual but not religious', "(t)he global interest in orthodox icons coincides with the enormous contemporary hunger for spirituality" (2008:21). It may also open up new vistas of faith to Protestants: "Protestants need to re-learn to worship God with all their senses: hearing, seeing, tasting, touching, and smelling." (2008:32)

Icons are not easy to see.¹⁹ They don't immediately speak to our senses "It is only gradually, after a patient, prayerful presence that they start speaking to us. And as they speak, they speak more to our inner than to our outer senses" (Nouwen 1987:14). Behind the two-dimensional surface of the icon lies the Divine (Nouwen 1987:15).

Contemplation for ordinary people in everyday life

One of the most important features of Nouwen's work on spirituality or spiritual transformation is that he wrote for ordinary people in everyday life. His writing was never focussed on either an academic audience or specifically on communities of priests or religious orders. He was interested in how ordinary people might live before God and practise spiritual disciplines that would lead them toward the Divine embrace. Another

¹⁸ This perspective is shared by South African theologian and author John de Gruchy, whose theological training and Protestant heritage left him wary of icons and their liturgical use (de Gruchy 2008:10). De Gruchy was first introduced to icons by his wife, Isobel, and by reading Nouwen's *Behold the beauty of the Lord* (1987) (de Gruchy 2008:9).

¹⁹ For a fuller discussion on the difficulty of 'seeing' icons, see the article of Marchinkowski (2023:4).

Catholic scholar who made groundbreaking assertions on mysticism and its connection with everyday life was the French Jesuit, Michel De Certeau.²⁰

Michel De Certeau claims spirituality and contemplation for ordinary people

Mysticism, De Certeau believed, was a social practice and not simply a series of subjective experiences. It was a process or way of life (Sheldrake 2010:101; Brammer 2003:28), bound up with desire, which expressed a focused purposefulness toward “what is *not* known, *not* possessed, *not* fixed or final” (Sheldrake 2010: 101). This could be seen as thorough, fundamental and disruptive in both the religious and social spheres (Sheldrake 2010:101)

De Certeau formed his views in response to a significant change he discerned in the Western worldview between the mid-sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the influence of the Christian church began to decline and the Christian religious worldview began to lose its grip on the common imagination. He saw the rise of mystical writings (such as in Spain in the late sixteenth century) as a consequence, with a heightened interest on interior experience and a growing disinterest in Church doctrine. He saw the mystical tradition, from the post-Reformation back through the Middle Ages and the early Church as artificially constructed (Sheldrake 2010:102) to compensate for the interest. This was followed by the gradual psychologisation of the study of mysticism, where private insights and special experiences became the criteria for the presence and validity of “the mystical” (Sheldrake 2010:102).

Mysticism introduced a new and different paradigm in the Christian tradition, since it was not focussed on structures or doctrine but on a set of practices, actions (Sheldrake 2020:102–103; Brammer 2003:28).

Mysticism is neither a religion nor a philosophy but is grounded in lived experiences and practices that are heterogeneous, nonlinear, particular, and often nondiscursive. The mystical “event” or experience is generally unpredictable and irreproducible in scientific terms. (Brammer 2003:29)

De Certeau moved the focus of mysticism away from the austere and hagiographic mystics and their ecstatic experiences and placed it squarely in the experience of ordinary people in everyday life. He also proposed that it was futile to objectively analyse such events since they are basically “unpredictable” and “irreproducible”.

The crux of De Certeau’s view therefore, is that the Christian faith is, at its core, neither an institution nor a set of doctrines but rather an open yet reproducible set of practices.

De Certeau offered a few remarkable parameters. Firstly, he believed that mysticism is social, not purely personal and interior. Secondly, that mysticism is active in that it affects and ultimately transforms the world (Sheldrake 2010:105). Thirdly, he defined mysticism as a ‘way’ of people who were socially, culturally and religiously on the boundaries of social structures (Sheldrake 2010:105), who perpetually wander

²⁰ Sheldrake referred to Michel de Certeau as “one of the most creative interdisciplinary minds of the twentieth century, a highly original writer on Christian mysticism” (Sheldrake 2010:100). An excellent overview of his life and work can be found in the article “The Quest of Michel de Certeau.” (Zemon Davis 2008).

(Sheldrake 2012:209). These ordinary mystics found their security in the story of Christ, which they also practiced. It was not a body of doctrine to be objectively asserted (Sheldrake 2010:106; 2012:209). To De Certeau, Christianity belonged to the ordinary person and could only be lived out in simple, everyday practices.

By the end of de Certeau's life, his writing on spirituality became more and more detached from what the institutional church considered acceptable. He became interested in the landscape of everyday life (Sheldrake 2010:110), conceiving of spirituality as "self-transcendence experienced in succession of fragmented encounters with everyday 'others'" (Sheldrake 2010:110). Sheldrake shows how De Certeau encouraged ordinary people to explore and implement their own 'tactics' to live out their relationship with the Divine in their own contexts and situations (Sheldrake 2012:210). The 'everyday' was regarded as having a transcendent, mystical quality. "Daily life is scattered with marvels" and these are to be found everywhere. In so doing, de Certeau unveiled the ordinary as mystical (Sheldrake 2012:210). He considered ordinary people to be very inventive in developing both discursive and nondiscursive "tactics"²¹ necessary for life (Brammer 2003:31).

This was also Nouwen's way, to express what were previously considered cloistered spiritual practices in simple and accessible ways so that ordinary spiritual seekers could participate and explore.

Conclusion

This article is an exploration of contemplation as a spiritual practice and motivated by the discernment of John de Gruchy that this might be a Kairos moment for the South African (and Western) Church to move toward a more monastic season. Henri Nouwen described the process of spiritual transformation as a series of 'swings' between poles. This article began with an explanation of Nouwen's guiding motif and proceeded to explore his third and ultimate spiritual movement,²² from illusion to prayer, as the "most basic movement of the spiritual life" (Nouwen 1975:114) through which spiritual seekers can "reach out to God, our God, the one who is eternally real and from whom all reality comes forth" (Nouwen 1975:114).

Next, the article investigated Nouwen's claim that before a spiritual seeker might experience the unitive phase in transformation, there were illusions that needed to be unmasked. Some illusions were elements of self-deception and some were created by society. Here Nouwen was particularly influenced by the writing and life story of Thomas Merton. The significance of contemplative prayer as a spiritual practice was investigated, including its contribution in assisting the spiritual seeker to complete this 'swing'. Contemplation not only facilitated the unmasking of illusion but also brought a person into a state of true prayer.

Prayer for Nouwen could never be conceived of as a skill but only as a gift (Nouwen 1975:123) Paradoxically it also required serious discipline (Nouwen 1975:124)

²¹ "De Certeau ceaselessly returns, like the mystic, to the act of practicing itself." (Brammer 2003:36).

²² Nouwen describes this 'swing' as "first and final", and as central to the spiritual life (Nouwen 1975:114), acknowledging that it is the hardest of the three in *Reaching out* to explain. (Nouwen 1975:115).

and ultimately meant “participating in the intimate life of God himself” (Nouwen 1975:125).

Nouwen practiced contemplation in many ways but so as to demonstrate his method, *Visio Divina* was described as an example. The belief that Nouwen deliberately placed contemplation in everyday life as a practice for ordinary people was also asserted. De Gruchy’s encouragement that *Visio Divina* (especially by using icons) could be helpful to both the ‘spiritual but not religious’ but also to Protestants in general was noted. Finally, the article claimed that the ‘swing’ from illusion to prayer was for Nouwen a practice centred in the heart, one of his guiding motifs. Its ultimate outcome was a permanent moment-by-moment experience of interaction with God, the Divine embrace.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brown, Taylor, B. 2009. *An altar in the world. A geography of faith*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Byrne, R., 1993. Journey (Growth and development in spiritual life). In Downey, M. (ed.), *The new dictionary of Catholic spirituality*, Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, pp. 565–577.
- De Gruchy, J.W. 2008. *Icons as a means of grace*, Wellington: Lux Verbi.
- De Gruchy, J.W. 2021., *This Monastic moment: The war of the Spirit and the rule of Love*. Eugene: Cascade.
- Du Toit, C.W., 2007. *Seasons in theology: Inroads of postmodernism, reference and representation*. Research Institute for Theology and Religion. Pretoria: University of South Africa.
- Ford, M. 1999. *Wounded prophet: A portrait of Henri J. M. Nouwen*. New York: Doubleday.
- Ford, M. 2009. *Spiritual masters for all seasons*. Mahwah: Hidden Spring.
- Ford, M. 2018. *Lonely mystic: A new portrait of Henri. J. M. Nouwen*. Mahwah: Paulist. Kindle edition.
- Hernandez, W. 2012. *Henri Nouwen and spiritual polarities: A life of tension*. Mahwah: Paulist. Kindle edition.
- King, U. 2001. *Christian mystics: Their lives and legacies throughout the ages*. Mahwah: Hidden Spring.
- Louth, A., 2007. *The origins of the Christian mystical tradition: from Plato to Denys*. Second edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McGinn, B. 2006. *The essential writings of Christian mysticism*. New York: Random House.
- Mosteller, S. 2012. A painting, a parable, and my friend, Henri Nouwen. Video clip. *Collegeville Institute Lectures*. 2. [Online]. Available: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/collegevilleinstitute_lectures/2 [Accessed: 16 August 2021].
- Nouwen, H.J.M. 1972. *Wounded healer: Ministry in contemporary society*. New York: Image Doubleday.
- Nouwen, H.J.M. 1975. *Reaching out: Three movements of the spiritual life*. Glasgow: Collins.

- Nouwen, H.J.M. 1979. *Clowning in Rome: Reflections on solitude, celibacy, prayer and contemplation*. Garden City: Image Books.
- Nouwen, H.J.M. 1981. *The way of the heart: Desert spirituality and contemporary ministry*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Nouwen, H.J.M. 1986. The Trusting Heart and the primacy of the mystical life, *New Oxford Review* 53.
- Nouwen, H.J.M. 1987. *Behold the beauty of the Lord: Praying with icons*. Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press.
- Nouwen, H.J.M. 1994. *Here and now: Living in the Spirit*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Nouwen, H.J.M. 2004. *Encounters with Merton: Spiritual reflections*. Fourth edition, New York: Crossroad.
- Nouwen, H.J.M. 2010a. *The wounded healer: Ministry in contemporary society*, Second edition, New York: Image Doubleday.
- Nouwen, H.J.M. 2010b. *Spiritual formation: Following the movements of the Spirit*. M.J. Christensen & R.J. Laird (eds.). New York: HarperOne.
- Nouwen, H.J.M. 2022. Henri Nouwen: How to (actually) pray without ceasing, *America. The Jesuit Review*, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2022/01/24/henri-nouwen-prayer-unceasing-242269#> (Published on 24 January 2022 and accessed on 26 September 2023).
- O’Laughlin, M. 2004. *God’s Beloved: A spiritual biography of Henri Nouwen*. Mayknoll: Orbis.
- Penkett, L. 2019 *Touched by God’s Spirit. How Merton, van Gogh, Vanier and Rembrandt influenced Henri Nouwen’s heart of compassion*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Rohr, R. 2009 *The naked now. Learning to see as the mystics see*. New York: Crossroad.
- Sheldrake, P. 2013. Journey, Spiritual. In Sheldrake, P (ed.), *New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*. London: SCM Press, 388–390.
- Snyman, D. 2001. ‘*In the gaze of God: Aspects of the spiritual significance of Rublev’s Holy Trinity icon*’. Unpublished BD Thesis, Department of Religion and Theology, Rhodes University.
- Underhill, E. 1921. *The mystics of the Church*. London: James Clarke & co.
- Waaajman, K. 2003. The Way, rootmetaphor for spirituality. A biblical exploration, *Studies in Spirituality*. 13:63–79. doi: 10.2143/SIS.13.0.504589.
- Zemon Davis, N. 2008. The quest of Michel de Certeau. *The New York Review of Books* (May 15, 2008), 57–60.