

ESSAY

HENRI NOUWEN'S RELEVANCE TO POSTMODERN TIMES

The heavily freighted subject of “postmodernity,” like that of spirituality, evokes a bewildering array of opinions so diverse that a brief essay will never do justice to its treatment.¹ As one might expect, even Christian thinkers—theologians, psychologists, and philosophers—do not see eye-to-eye in their interpretive assessment of such a highly complex phenomenon.² To be sure, some navigate their way through its variegated landscape from a decidedly positive perspective.³ Others, like philosopher Douglas Groothuis, see the fundamental tenets of postmodernism as intellectually, philosophically, and theologically flawed and hostile to the Christian worldview despite some of its insights.⁴

¹ For technical distinction, “postmodernity” refers to a cultural state while “postmodernism” to a school of thought (see Pamela D. Couture, “The Effect of the Postmodern on Pastoral/Practical Theology and Care and Counseling,” *The Journal of Pastoral Theology* 13 (June 2003): 85-6).

² For a conservative assessment, see Millard Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise & Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001). Cf. Robert C. Greer, *Mapping Postmodernism: A Survey of Christian Options* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003).

³ Robert E. Webber (*Ancient-Future Faith: Rethinking Evangelical-ism for a Postmodern World* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999]) believes that the cultural context of postmodern society is actually a fertile ground for the recovery of classical spirituality—a conviction shared by Leonard Sweet (*Post-Modern Pilgrims: First Century Passion for the 21st Century World* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000]). Cf. Gary Collins, *The Soul Search: A Spiritual Journey to Authentic Intimacy with God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 61. See also Stanley J. Grenz and John R. Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism: Shaping Theology in a Postmodern Context* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

⁴ Groothuis is alarmed by how some Christian thinkers, who seem too favorably disposed to postmodernism, are flirting with the cultural current by not simply being savvy to its sensibilities but actually capitulating to postmodern philosophies (see *Truth Decay: Defending Christianity Against the Challenges of Postmodernism* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000]). Groothuis stands convinced that “the errors of postmodernism outweigh whatever wisdom it possesses” (“Postmodern fallacies: A Response to Merold Westphal,” *Christian Century* [26 July 2003], 41). Cf. Charles Colson with Anne Morse, “Postmodern Crack-up,” *Christianity Today* (December 2003): 72. See also Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor, eds., *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004).

Regardless of the kind of position one takes, the fact remains that we are in the process of transitioning from the modern into the postmodern era, and we need to grapple with the serious implications such shift and passage entail.⁵

In ways that seem to point to his prophetic sensibilities, Henri Nouwen evidenced a rare precognition of the cultural pulse of the future. I echo here some familiar—but most especially constructive—features of the postmodern phenomenon which Nouwen appeared to have predicted, thus all the more situating him as a relevant figure for our present time.

As a child of modernity transitioning through the slow but sure passage to postmodernity, Henri Nouwen proved to be ahead of his time as shown by the many ways he has anticipated the complex ethos that the advent of postmodernity would introduce. This propensity of his was not at all uncharacteristic of the way Nouwen normally operated as an individual. As John Garvey observed:

In all of Henri Nouwen's work there is a sense of eagerness, a curiosity, a hunger to see the ways in which the Holy Spirit moves people in our time; and it is not bound either by the sort of traditionalism which fears anything new, on the one hand, or by a slavish concern for the spirit of the age on the other.⁶

Henri Nouwen did exhibit a spirit of openness coupled with a genuinely embracing attitude in life. Perhaps this helps explain how he seemed to nurture in himself a kind of anticipatory perspective, thus making it so natural for him to envisage whatever might lie ahead of him.

⁵ As Albert Borgmann said, postmodernism is not only a departure from, but a response to modernity's crisis (*Crossing the Postmodern Di-vide* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992], 5). See Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 27ff.

⁶ John Garvey, ed., *Henri Nouwen*, The Modern Spirituality Series (Springfield, IL: Templegate Publishers, 1988), 19.

For instance, in reflecting upon his own “history with God,” Henri Nouwen candidly revealed some of his personal realizations which, if one were to read between the lines, contained intriguing bits of insights into some future direction Nouwen evidently was open to exploring:

During all these years, I learned that Protestants belong as much to the church as Catholics, and that Hindus, Buddhists, and Moslems believe in God as much as Christians do; that pagans can love one another as much as believers can; that the human psyche is multidimensional; that theology, psychology, and sociology are intersecting in many places; that women have a real call to ministry; that homosexual people have a unique vocation in the Christian community; that the poor people belong to the heart of the church; and that the spirit of God blows where it wants. All of these discoveries gradually broke down many fences that had given me a safe garden and made me deeply aware that God’s covenant with God’s people includes everyone. For me personally, it was a time of searching, questioning, and agonizing, a time that was extremely lonely and not without moments of great uncertainty and ambiguity.⁷

Henri Nouwen’s deepened, though not necessarily novel, conviction, “that the human psyche is multidimensional” and “that theology, psychology, and sociology are intersecting in many places” owed itself to his fundamental integrative leanings. Nouwen’s overall conceptual framework concerning integration does sit well with the postmodern penchant for pursuing the ideals of wholeness versus fragmentation. Psychologists Mark McMinn and Todd Hall are right: “Postmodernism, with its valuing of multiple ways of knowing” is, in reality, paving fresh perspectives in the whole arena of integration.⁸ They

⁷ Henri Nouwen, “My History with God,” unpublished notes for the class, “Communion, Community and Ministry: An Introduction to the Spiritual Life,” Regis College, Toronto (September-December 1994), 1. To be sure, some of Nouwen’s statements (especially the ones with universalist undertones) are enough to make conservative Christians nervous. But as Robert Jonas rightly points out, “[Nouwen’s] message about Jesus was so clear, powerful, and grounded in the New Testament that they could easily forgive what they considered to be his occasional lapses of judgment” (Robert A. Jonas, ed., *Henri Nouwen: Writings Selected with an Introduction by Robert A. Jonas* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), lxi.

⁸ Mark R. McMinn and Todd W. Hall, “Introduction,” in *Spiritual Formation, Counseling, and Psychotherapy*, ed. Todd W. Hall and Mark R. McMinn (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2003), ix.

note with interest, for example, that nowadays “[t]he swirling winds of postmodernism have created the possibility of using spirituality and psychology in the same sentence.”⁹

As a matter of fact, spirituality has become the “common currency” in the major task of integration. Beyond the issues of “logic, propositions, and rationality,” a fresh need to “grapple with the human narrative—the experiential content of life” has come to the fore.¹⁰ In a way, almost all of Henri Nouwen’s writings have already preconditioned us to engage in precisely this kind of task. True to postmodern form, the coinherence of spirituality with psychology, ministry, and theology that Henri Nouwen espoused is considered a welcome epistemological advance.

More to the point, Alister McGrath happily notes that “the widespread rejection of the Enlightenment paradigm in the west is now opening the way to a reestablishment of the original link between theology and spirituality ...”¹¹ This may well be due to the fact that the postmodern condition routinely welcomes a much more holistic and integrative approach to understanding that allows for the existence of mystery and tension and promotes mutuality and relationship in wholeness.¹² In contrast to a disjointed or an aggregate category of thinking, there is something of great value to the postmodern subscription to a form of coherence that is fed by mutually informing and interdependent categories.¹³

⁹ Idem, “Christian Spirituality: Introduction to Special Issue—Part 2,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 29 (spring 2001): 3.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Alister E. McGrath, *The Future of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 137.

¹² Sandra M. Schneiders, “The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6 [spring 1998]: 10).

¹³ John Franke, “Jesus, Christology, and Postmodern Theory” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society, Atlanta, Georgia, 19-21 November 2003).

Henri Nouwen's holistic view of the spiritual life and its formation fascinatingly projected a postmodern framework. For one, his integrative pursuits, while at bottom geared towards coinherence, also openly admitted the enigmatic and tensional factors of mystery, paradox, and even outright contradictions—emerging realities that are now celebrated as typifying the “new kind of wisdom.”¹⁴

If there is one other prominent feature of the postmodern landscape which Henri Nouwen vigorously tackled in his writings, it is the character of community. “The discourse of community,” as Elizabeth Bounds qualifies, is “a postmodern discourse” in that it “counters, either implicitly or explicitly, some of the effects—if not the entire project—of modernity.”¹⁵ Such renewal of interest in the corporate and communal aspects of existence is reckoned by many as a positive contribution of postmodernism. Lauded in particular is the acknowledgment of the importance of communities in helping shape our perception of reality.¹⁶

Even before the retrieved vocabulary of community began inching its way back into the rhetoric of our present day, Nouwen already had it covered in several of his works with such depth and breadth of scope. While he did address his own time and specific context, Henri Nouwen plowed deep enough such that his insights still hold relevant applicability to our current situation.

¹⁴ See Robert K. Johnston, *Useless Beauty: Ecclesiastes through the Lens of Contemporary Film* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 33. As Johnston puts it, “[w]isdom is rooted in the experience of paradox...” Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 207.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Bounds, *Coming Together/Coming Apart: Religion, Community, and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 27. According to Bounds, “the language of community highlights through reaction what have come to be considered problematic dimensions of modernity, such as ceaseless innovation, autonomous individuality, privileging the universal over the particular.”

¹⁶ See Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 20. Cf. Bill Kynes, “Postmodernism: A Primer for Pastors,” *The Ministerial Forum* 8 (1997).

Many of Nouwen's countercultural emphases continue to challenge our sometimes distorted concepts of community.¹⁷ Undeniably, Nouwen's joint view of spirituality and ministry was centered on the existential reality of community life. His communitarian conviction found manifold expressions in the way he conducted his multifaceted ministry.

In all practicality, Henri Nouwen's creative approach—multilevel, multidimensional, multilingual, and multidisciplinary at the same time—goes against the expert-driven, individualistic, and overly specialized ministry approach that is usually one-dimensional, hierarchical, and highly institutionalized in focus. Nouwen in fact “challenged a protected institutional approach to ministry” and advocated instead a posture of “solidarity with others rather than in authority over them.”¹⁸

Henri Nouwen's “multitasking” style of doing ministry holds a special appeal for today's generation that values integration and multidimensionality of ministry approach. Above and beyond his ministry approach, however, Henri Nouwen's personal brand of spirituality, with its trademark of imperfection, connects deeply to a generation that places such a high premium on authenticity, transparency, and a sense of ‘realness.’¹⁹ Imperfection is looked upon as part and parcel of postmodern realism—the kind that unabashedly recognizes human finitude and limitations and incorporates elements of ambiguity and uncertainty.

¹⁷ Cf. Willy Hernandez, “A Spirituality of Imperfection: The Coinherence of Spirituality with Psychology, Ministry, and Theology in Henri J.M. Nouwen's Integrated Approach to Soul Care and Spiritual Formation” (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2005), pp. 96-112. Cf. Grenz and Franke, *Beyond Foundationalism*, pp. 203-38.

¹⁸ Jeff Imbach, “A Theology of the Heart: The Life and Writings of Henri Nouwen,” Course Manual (Ministry Programs, Continuing & Distance Education Department, St. Francis Xavier University, Canada, January 2004), 1.

¹⁹ See Tony Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 90. Jones explains that while boomers were into “relevance,” postmoderns prefer “real more than relevant.” Quoted in Craig Detweiler and Barry Taylor, *A Matrix of Meanings: Finding God in Pop Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 312.

To sum up, Henri Nouwen's anticipatory connection with the emerging postmodern ethos can be detected in a number of vital areas: through his essential concept of coinherence and the locus of his integration; his open embrace of the matrix of paradox and mystery; his communitarian rhetoric and discourse; his creative and multilevel approach to ministry; and finally, his counterintuitive and countercultural mode of imperfection which he himself openly embodied throughout his lived experience. In short, mainly due to his unique *approach* (his spiritual formation dynamics) and his *person* (his lived spirituality), Henri Nouwen's impact lingers on in our postmodern times.