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Henri Nouwen as an Evangelical Mystic

I suspect the title of this essay may raise eyebrows. Labeling Henri Nouwen, one of the most influential spiritual writers of the past century, a mystic is not likely to fuel any argument. But to call such a well-known Catholic an evangelical may be an altogether different story.

The terms *evangelical* and *mystic* do not seem to fit naturally together. Mysticism is still very much an alien concept to the average Protestant, let

alone evangelical. To make sense of the pairing of these concepts requires us to open each of them up if they are to fit someone of Henri Nouwen's stature. He is too large a figure to be forced into our small categorical boxes.

Evangelicalism is far from monolithic and cannot be defined in an exclusive manner. Historically, the term first appeared as a label for a group of sixteenth-century Catholics

who were determined to recover a more biblical form of Christianity. Luther, Calvin, and other European reformers of the day adopted the same label. In more modern times, evangelicals have generally come to be known as serious believers who stick to the biblical fundamentals of their faith. The term has, of course, evolved since then, as new evangelicals, post-evangelicals, progressive evangelicals, ecumenical

evangelicals, charismatic evangelicals, and, yes, Catholic evangelicals all find their home within this movement. The common thread woven through all of them is their shared commitment to the *evangel* or good news. This is the core of being an evangelical: a foundational focus on the gospel of Christ and a strong emphasis on evangelism and conversion.

This is why I feel free to identify Henri Nouwen as an evangelical. Theologically he was neither liberal nor conservative. And he cannot be considered evangelical in the institutional sense of the word. Yet I hasten to suggest that Nouwen was every bit an evangelical when it came to his Christ-centered spiritual calling. The gospel was no doubt uppermost in his conviction and ministry.

Nouwen, the Gospel Preacher

Nobody can read Nouwen's books such as *Letters to Marc about Jesus* and *Making All Things New* and not be impressed by how crystal clear his understanding of the gospel message and the nature of our life in the Spirit was. He wrote, "It has become clearer to me than ever that my personal relationship with Jesus is the heart of my existence."¹ He recognized his vocation as that of preaching Christ's gospel to all who would listen. "To speak about Jesus and his divine work of salvation," Nouwen insisted, "shouldn't be a burden or a heavy obligation." Genuinely, he believed that "[w]hat we have received is so . . . rich that we cannot hold it to ourselves but feel compelled to bring it to every human being we meet."²

Michael O'Laughlin suggested that Nouwen "brought evangelical excitement to Catholics and . . . depth of Catholic sacramentality . . . to his Protestant listeners." As Nouwen's former teaching assistant at Harvard, O'Laughlin recalled how Nouwen struck him as one of those "evangelical preachers who know how to . . . get people excited about following Jesus . . . like something straight out of the revival tent."³ Nouwen did proclaim Jesus boldly and rather unashamedly at Harvard—something deemed by many insiders of the university as a politically incorrect move. When Nouwen later sensed constraints on being able to continue to do this, he chose not to compromise what he believed to be his primary calling. Instead, he left the Ivy League school without any regrets. How can you get more evangelically minded than that?

But there's more to Nouwen than his evangelical fervor; there's definitely a mystical side to him that is palpable in both his life and his writings.

Mystical and Evangelical

Mysticism, like evangelicalism, is not easy to define. Volumes have been written on the subject, but the "myst" in mysticism often clouds our perception and makes it hard to understand how this is something for all Christians, not just the spiritual elite.

Nouwen's understanding of mysticism cuts through this confusion. He described a mystic as a person whose identity is deeply rooted in God's love. In

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its essence, mysticism is simply dwelling in the presence of God, this being the heart of contemplative prayer.⁴ Every Christian, he felt, was essentially a mystic whose mystical life needed to be continually deepened and nurtured by the spiritual disciplines.

While Nouwen was much at home in the company of evangelicals and shared their directness and openness about their faith in Jesus, he also wrote that "evangelicals have a great need for a mystical dimension to their lives so they could be more free in living and not driven." He went on to argue that the

evangelical movement has become just a bit victimized by a success-oriented culture, wanting the church—like the corporation—to be successful. On that level, the mystical tradition of communion with Christ is important. "I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain connected with me, then you will bear fruit." The fruit is not success.⁵

Nouwen's comments on the evangelical movement are very reminiscent of another early twentieth-century evangelical mystic, A. W. Tozer. Tozer, who introduced Christian mysticism into the mainstream of Protestant evangelicalism, at one time expressed his distress over "the way in which conservative Christianity was being applied—or not applied—in the practical walk of the Christian believer with his Lord." Tozer identified this subtle error as a practical one, not a theological one: "It was the lack of mysticism in evangelical Christianity."⁶

Tozer's understanding of mysticism aligns well with Nouwen's. To Tozer, a mystic is one who "experiences his faith down in the depths of his . . . being." He went on to describe the mystic as one who "exists in a world of spiritual reality" and is "quietly, deeply, and sometimes almost ecstatically aware of the Presence of God in his own nature and the world around him."⁷ Both Tozer and Nouwen understood mysticism as a direct, personal experience of God. Both embodied the evangelical and mystical dimensions of the Christian faith.

Henri Nouwen's mysticism projected a healthy balance between the inward and the outward realities of his lived experience. Far from the stereotyped notion of a solitary mystic who is thoroughly detached from the world, Nouwen exemplified a mysticism of communal engagement.

Nouwen's Mysticism

Nouwen's writings reveal two mystical encounters. The first occurred very early after his ordination as a priest—in fact, at his first Mass of Thanksgiving during his Post-Communion meditation. We don't know exactly what transpired except that Nouwen described the moment as "an intimate and mystical experience."⁸ It seems fitting that this first mystical experience coincided with the celebration of the Holy Communion. By his own testimony, his life gravitated around the mystery of the Eucharist—the sacred ritual that he deemed to be the spiritual core of his priesthood.

The second took place while he was about to undergo surgery in 1989 after a near brush with death. Seriously injured when a van's side mirror hit him as he walked along the icy road near the L'Arche Daybreak Community in Canada, Nouwen described the following transcendent encounter just prior to his surgery:

What I experienced then was something I had never experienced before: pure and unconditional love. Better still, what I experienced was an intensely personal presence, a presence that pushed all my fears aside and said, "Come, don't be afraid. I love you."⁹

Nouwen did not view either of these experiences as simply private. His interior experiences consistently found exterior expression. The first, set within the context of the Eucharistic celebration, impacted the way Nouwen effectively utilized the Holy Communion as a means to reach out to others inclusively and communally. As a priest, Nouwen always acted as a gracious and accommodating spiritual host, openly displaying a spirit of inclusivity. Mary Bastedo, chair of the Spiritual Life Committee at the time Nouwen joined the L'Arche community, made this comment about him: "He lived his priesthood not as something that excluded others but rather as a way to invite others into participation."¹⁰

His second experience of the reality of God's love emboldened him to proclaim his identity as God's beloved with renewed conviction. Once he grasped deeply the essence of his belovedness, Nouwen felt free to give of himself in love to others. Propelled by such a life-transforming perspective, Nouwen solidified his newfound certainty with this confession: "I am convinced that I will truly be able to love the world when I fully believe that I am loved far beyond its boundaries."¹¹

Henri Nouwen's mysticism projected a healthy balance between the inward and the outward realities of his lived experience. Far from the stereotyped

notion of a solitary mystic who is thoroughly detached from the world, Nouwen exemplified a mysticism of communal engagement. This is much in keeping with the type of mysticism that Evelyn Underhill advocated: a union with the divine that "impels a person toward an active, outside, rather than purely passive, inward life."¹² Nouwen himself concluded, after reading Evelyn Underhill's *The Mystics of the Church*, that "[i]t is one of the most convincing arguments for the Christian belief that the love of God lived in its fullest sense leads to a most selfless dedication to the neighbor."¹³ Clearly, Henri Nouwen's mysticism is based upon the intertwining thrusts of the Great Commandment—to love God and to love our neighbor—that, for him, can never be divorced from each other.

In an equally profound way, Henri Nouwen came to believe that mysticism "is the opposite of withdrawal from the world." He went on to argue that our "[i]ntimate union with God leads to the most creative involvement in the contemporary world."¹⁴ "The great mystical truth of the spiritual life," Nouwen emphasized, "is that the more intimately connected you are with the Lord, the more in solidarity you are with all the suffering people of the world."¹⁵ He repeatedly insisted that "[w]e cannot live in intimate communion with Jesus without being sent to our brothers and sisters who belong to that same humanity that Jesus has accepted as his own."¹⁶ This shows his firm belief about the inevitable interconnection between intimacy and solidarity. Fueled by this conviction, Nouwen wrestled with the spiritual and social ramifications of the gospel. Such was

his way of working out his own brand of evangelical mysticism.

In Jesus, Nouwen argued, "the mystical and the revolutionary ways are not opposite ways, but two sides of the same human mode of experiential transcendence."¹⁷ "Jesus," Nouwen added, "was a revolutionary who did not become an extremist, since he did not offer an ideology but himself. He was also a mystic who did not use his intimate relationship with God to stay away from the social evils of his time." Mysticism and revolution can, therefore, be seen as "two aspects of the same attempt to bring about radical change."¹⁸ They are inextricably linked together as conjoined realities.

Herein lies the integrated quality of the spirituality which every evangelical mystic is to live out. Henri Nouwen provides us a brilliant example of how to do this.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Letters to Marc About Jesus*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988, 7.
- ² Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Bread for the Journey*, San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997, August 6, 5.
- ³ Gerald S. Twomey and Claude Pomerleau, eds. *Remembering Henri*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006, 6, 5.
- ⁴ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus*, New York: Crossroad, 1989, 28.
- ⁵ Arthur Boers, "What Henri Nouwen Found at Daybreak: Experiments in Spiritual Living in a Secular World," *Christianity Today* 38, October 3, 1994, 29.
- ⁶ David A. J. Seargent, *Lamps on the Candelabrum: Five Evangelical Mystics*, eBook, 2003, 17.
- ⁷ A. W. Tozer, *The Christian Book of Mystical Verse*, WingSpread Publishers, 1991, vi.
- ⁸ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Can You Drink This Cup?* Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1996, 110.

⁹ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Beyond the Mirror*. New York: Crossroad, 1990, 46-47.

¹⁰ Mary Bastedo, as quoted in *Befriending Life*. Edited by Beth Porter et al. New York: Doubleday, 2001, 33.

¹¹ Nouwen, *Beyond the Mirror*, 70.

¹² As cited in Sheldrake, *Spaces for the Sacred*, 128.

¹³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary*, New York: Image Books, 1989, 177.

¹⁴ Nouwen, *The Genesee Diary*, 177.

¹⁵ Henri J. M. Nouwen, "Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy," *Radix* (May/June, 1984), 10.

¹⁶ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Lifesigns*. New York: Doubleday, 1986, 45.

¹⁷ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer*. New York: Image Books, 1979, 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

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