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Swinging between two poles. Henri Nouwen's unique metaphor for spiritual transformation

ABSTRACT

The article seeks to examine Henri Nouwen's contribution to the study of spiritual transformation by uncovering his methodology, elucidating his sources, and exploring his central metaphor. When Nouwen considers the path to spiritual wholeness, he begins with an analysis of the typical Western lifestyle. Thereafter, he searches for an "antidote" to the sense of alienation he discovers. This "antidote" is expressed as a process of transformation into love. This article considers the nature of transformation in the classic mystical tradition and touches on the contributions of perennial philosophy and transpersonal psychology which may have influenced Nouwen. The question as to whether transformation is a linear, staged, or cyclical process is considered and Waaijman's proposal that it should be described as a "way" is explored. Finally, the article contributes to the study of spiritual transformation by considering Nouwen's description of transformation as a series of spiritual swings between poles.



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1. INTRODUCTION

When one examines the guiding metaphor Henri Nouwen used to describe the mystical path of spiritual transformation, a series of swings between two poles, one can be forgiven for thinking that he drew inspiration from his experience of the flying trapeze, maybe the Flying Rodleigh troupe, which had such an influence on him. The problem with this theory is that his seminal work *Reaching out*, which outlined his thinking on transformation, was

published in 1975, while he first saw the Rodleights in April 1991 (Marchinkowski 2021:18). Perhaps the best way to connect the spiritual metaphor with the circus act is to imagine Nouwen (1998:74-75) seeing the idea confirmed before his eyes as he watched the Rodleights, an experience of utter ecstasy, for the first time.

Nouwen (1975:8) was determined to describe his spiritual journey and convinced that the expression thereof could be of benefit to his readers. At Yale, his teaching and writing soon focused on the path toward spiritual transformation. As a “priest-psychologist”, he started with a contextual analysis and with the human condition, which he considered to be alienated, fearful, and lonely. From there, he wrote about a search for wholeness that would require the spiritual seeker to return to God at the centre of life; this would involve a personal, communal, and God-ward transformative process.

This article explores this process of transformation, involving a series of swings between poles. The primary source is Nouwen’s book entitled, *Reaching out* (1975). Nouwen (1975:7) considered this book to be closer to himself than anything he had written until then; it summarised his views on the path of transformation, expressing in his own accessible language what he had learned both in his psychology training and experience, and in his reading of the mystical tradition.

This article seeks to highlight Nouwen’s contribution to the study of spiritual transformation by tracing his methodology, discerning his sources, and ultimately analysing his central metaphor. Nouwen begins with a contextual analysis, in which he remains faithful to his psychological training. Thereafter, he seeks an “antidote” to the alienating lifestyle in which people find themselves trapped. This “antidote” is expressed as a process of transformation into love, or toward the “house of love”, where God is and where we are the beloved (Nouwen 1986:7). To lay a foundation, the article considers the nature of transformation in the classic mystical tradition and briefly touches on the contributions of perennial philosophy and transpersonal psychology that may have influenced him. The article raises the question as to whether transformation is a linear, staged, or cyclical process. It explains Kees Waaijman’s proposal that spiritual transformation should be described as a “way”. Finally, the article discusses Nouwen’s description of transformation as a series of spiritual swings between poles.

2. LIVING IN A WORLD OF FEAR

Nouwen believed that the world was powered by fear and that human beings lived in a constant state of anxiety. He believed that people feared each other, feared themselves, social structures, other nations, death and, more

than anything, human beings feared God. Lives were immersed in fear and controlled by it.

It often seems that fear has invaded every part of our being to such a degree that we no longer know what a life without fear would be like (Nouwen 1986:3; 2010:74).

Social structures (schools, the police, banks) are built around fear and use fear to establish their authority.

Thomas Merton, who influenced Nouwen significantly, addressed the same theme in his book entitled, *The new man* (1961a). Merton analysed the role of fear in human life by reminding the reader of the ancient story of Prometheus. In Merton's (1961a:15) recollection of the Promethean myth, Prometheus lived in constant fear. His fear was that he, in himself, had no value. This is the reason why he needed to steal fire from the gods. He feared the gods not only because he had stolen from them, but also, most importantly, because they were stronger than him and he felt as if they were against him. Like Prometheus, we are determined to secure and protect our self-determination. Fear is often a response to the feeling that our freedom is being challenged. Fear can be used as a method of control or manipulation (Nouwen 1986:4). We deepen our voices, and "throw our weight around" to bring people into line. Nouwen's "houses of fear" are synonymous with the structures that Bruteau (1980:126) called the "domination paradigm". Nouwen believed that fear had infiltrated almost every stratum of life from the natural "pecking orders" to the oppression of women to the phenomenon of war.

Fear cannot lead to anything healthy. At best, it leads to superficial unity and relationships. For Prometheus, fear led him to chain himself to a rock (see Merton 1961a:19). He felt caught out and he wanted to be punished. Fear needed to be transformed. Prometheus needed to realise that the fire was always there for the taking if he had only asked. Therefore, Nouwen (1986:9; 2010:79) proposed that the Christian must strive to find the "house of love", where God is and where we are the beloved. We do this by embarking on the way of transformation.

In summing up the futility of Prometheus' quest, Merton (1961a:34) points to the way of transformation as humanity's most important pursuit:

The union of the Christian with God is the exact opposite of a Promethean exploit, because the Christian is not trying to steal something from God that God does not want him to have. On the contrary, he is striving with his whole heart to fulfill the will of God and lay hands upon that which God created him to receive. And what is that? It is nothing else but a participation in the life, and wisdom, and joy and peace of God Himself.

This is greater than any other gift, higher than any other power. It is supreme freedom, the most perfect fulfillment. It has been called by the Fathers of the Church the divinization (theosis) of man. It is the ultimate in man's self-realization, for when it is perfected, man not only discovers his true self, but finds himself to be mystically one with the God by Whom he has been elevated and transformed.

For Nouwen, love is the antidote to this debilitating lifestyle of fear, the way it gets transformed. God, who is love (1 John 4:8), beckons us home, where we can be received as the beloved in the embrace of love.¹

If we follow the classic descriptions of the spiritual path or "way",² transformation of the spiritual pilgrim "in love" may be thought of as an end point in the "way", although, as will be pointed out in this article, the spiritual path is more often not experienced as linear but as cyclical.³

Human beings are always in the process of becoming, a state in which our consciousness is evolving.

The psychologist David Benner (2012:xii) insists that it is possible to experience

a profound reorganisation of the very foundations of our identity, values, meaning, and consciousness ... for our whole perspective on life – on our self, on others, on the whole world, and on God – to shift dramatically

and for persons to experience a much larger, truer self in the process. It is important, however, to realise that this "way" is not simply a process of self-help or even growing maturity as such. Rather, it is a process of increasing awareness, integration, and growing wholeness. It is also, according to Nouwen and the ancient mystics, a movement toward unity with God (Benner 2012:xiv). I will refer to this "way" or journey as transformation.

1 For an exploration of the unitive stage in Nouwen's spirituality, see Marchinkowski (2021).

2 In an in-person conversation with Prof. Kees Waaijman on Friday 3 December 2021 in Nijmegen, Waaijman suggested that the term "the way" (ἡ ὁδός), found in John 14:6 and Isaiah 55:8-9 (LXX), may be the best label for what is being discussed in this instance. This avoids the fallacy that the journey toward transformation is a linear process, involving a number of sequential steps with unification at the end. See also Waaijman (2003).

3 For an explanation of the nonlinear nature of this "way", see Nouwen (1975:13).

3. BECOMING AWARE

The way of transformation begins with becoming aware. Many contemporary spiritual authors have written about this important spiritual practice.⁴ Grasping the challenge to set aside illusion and endeavouring to overcome it is an essential starting point in the way of transformation.

An embrace of the present moment can do something that nothing else can do: it can bring us into the only place where we truly are, the only place we can truly be alive (Benner 2012:5).

The problem is that we try to evade the present moment. We avoid it by escaping to the past and lingering in a cycle of nostalgic reminiscing and endless review or we venture forth into an imaginary future in anticipation and continuous rehearsal of events that may or may not happen. Awakening to the present moment or becoming aware of who and where we are “here and now”⁵ is the first step in the way of transformation (Benner 2012:15). It is a deliberate step, enabling us to respond rather than react, and to participate fully in our life (Benner 2012:5). It allows us to be open to the present context and to the transcendent.

4. PERENNIAL PHILOSOPHY AND TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY

The world of perennial⁶ philosophy has itself contributed to the human search for transformation. The work of Gottfried Leibniz, Aldous Huxley, and Huston Smith drew connections between many “timeless truths that lie at the basis of the world’s wisdom traditions” (Benner 2012:20) and labelled these connections the “great chain of being”. Following ideas developed by Plato and Aristotle, perennial thinkers traced this chain through Augustinian and Thomistic Christian theology. This “great chain of being” was used as a way of understanding the relationship of matter to God, dividing it into a hierarchically ordered range of levels of reality (Benner 2012:20-21).

This became a framework for understanding the unfolding self on five levels ranging from “matter” through “life”, “mind”, “soul”, and ultimately

4 See, for example, Tolle (1999) and Rohr (2009) as examples of this. For a fuller discussion of the spiritual practice of “reverence”, which is directly linked to awareness, see Marchinkowski & De Villiers (2020:445-446) or Brown Taylor (2009:17-34).

5 This is such a pervasive theme in the mystics, and it is so important to Nouwen that he entitled his 1997 book *Here and now* and described how he was shaken into the “here and now” by a near fatal accident.

6 “Called ‘perennial’ because this philosophy is so profusely present across cultures and ages” (Snyman 2002:73).

“spirit” (Snyman 2002:72). Matter was understood as the first created thing (in the Genesis story), after which God breathed life into matter. Matter was enlivened.

Matter includes only itself but each of the higher levels includes all lower levels while at the same time transcending them. Thus, life transcends matter, includes it (Benner 2012:21).

The level of “mind” then included life and matter and transcended both, while operating in the same way.

Consciousness, thought, memory, will, imagination, and emotion are all mental processes that illustrate the way in which mind is grounded in matter (Benner 2012:22).

At the next level is “soul”, which again contains and transcends everything below it. For Benner (2012:22), soul is located in experience – where we reflect on how we interact with our world. Finally, the level of “spirit” is the space within which we can reach out to the Divine.

The central claim of the Perennial Philosophy is that humans can move all the way up the hierarchy from matter to spirit itself (Benner 2012:25).

Human beings are considered to have enormous potential to evolve beyond their present level of consciousness, even toward unity with the Divine.

One commentator on the nature of consciousness, who has elicited both broad appeal and scathing criticism, is integral theorist and author, Ken Wilber.⁷ From his publication of *The spectrum of consciousness* (1977) to his *Integral spirituality* (2006), Wilber sought to connect with the vision of the perennial philosophers (Snyman 2002:71), with the recorded experiences of mystics east and west, to trace points of contact between eastern and western philosophy and spirituality so as to

impart a clear and precise understanding of the way consciousness develops and interrelates with other aspects of the universe, which includes all the vast depths of not only the physical, but also the psychological, spiritual, cultural and sociological ‘Kosmos’ (Snyman 2002:71).

In Wilber’s (1995:57) thinking, all things have consciousness; most of them operate on the level of the subconscious, fewer on the level of conscious

7 Snyman’s unpublished DTh thesis (2002) provides an excellent overview of Wilber’s spectrum of consciousness, which is, in effect, his map of the way of transformation from the point of view of Integral Studies.

(awareness), still fewer are self-conscious, and very few are super-conscious. As human beings, we are called to evolve to our greatest potential and all things have a secret impulse to evolve. We do so by a process of self-transcendence (Wilber 1995:44) involving stages of consciousness (Wilber 2006:4-5). This process is not always deliberate; it sometimes involves struggle, even pain, and the journey is a path inward to discover the true self, and ultimately outward toward the Other.

This process involves a holon transcending and including, in order to become a new holon. Wilber used the term “holon” to refer to the building blocks of life. A “holon” is both a whole in itself and a part of a greater whole. A transformation has taken place in a holon when it transcends itself; it has become a new holon, incorporating what has gone before and adding something new. The human person is a holon, a whole organism but also part of a greater whole – humanity or the Cosmos. The human person is called to grow, to transcend and this is primarily in the area of consciousness. In order for human beings to grow (to evolve), they need to integrate and transcend different parts of themselves and their world. This is both an inward (inside the person) and an outward (reaching beyond themselves into the world and Cosmos) journey. “Consciousness” is not the ultimate stage of being. It is the process through which the journey takes place (Snyman 2002:89). It is significant how closely these schemas tie up with the mystical tradition and its attempts to articulate the way of transformation.

The work of perennial philosophers, transpersonal psychologists, and integral theorists provides a compelling alternative yet complementary view on the process of human transformation. It is likely that Nouwen was exposed to such views in the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s because of the wide interest in the work of Abraham Maslow, Stanislav Grof, and others in the USA at that time (Ferrer 2002:27). Whether this informed his thinking is uncertain but it is most likely that he approached his model of spiritual transformation with both his training in psychology (Ford 2018:12, 31) and his reading of the mystical tradition.

5. TRANSFORMATION

5.1 The mystics and transformation

The library of documented experience provided by the mystics offers insights into transformation from a different vantage point. Many describe the spiritual life as a journey with different stages or levels (Byrne 1993:565). Some use the term “*theosis* (or deification)”, others write of an “ascent (up mountains or ladders) *conversatio* (in Western monasticism), the *triplex via* (or threefold

path)” (Sheldrake 2013:388). The Christian is envisioned as being engaged in a process akin to a physical journey, persevering toward a closer experience of the Divine. The Fathers gradually developed a theory of stages for the spiritual life, with Origen explaining the way in Neoplatonic terms, as three gradually ascending steps starting with beginners (*praxis*), moving on to the proficient (*theōria*), and, finally, the perfect (*theologia*). According to Sheldrake (2013:388), the journey was a progressive “recovery of the likeness of God in the soul in a movement upwards toward greater light”, while Byrne (1993:565-566) refers to it as “a movement of ongoing conversion or transformation”. He points out that “journey-consciousness” is part of Vatican II’s “agenda of spiritual renewal.”

The mystics read the scriptures with the notion of journey in mind. Patriarchs such as Abraham and Moses were understood to have taken spiritual journeys. The Psalms provided sustenance for the spiritual journey.⁸ Significant among the examples of a progressive staged journey was *The life of Moses* by Gregory of Nyssa.

During the Middle Ages, the pattern of describing the transformative way in the West, a three-way or staged pattern (purgative, illuminative, and unitive) became the classic model (Sheldrake 2013:389; Byrne 1993:569). After this, the *Ascent of Mount Carmel* by John of the Cross and Walter Hilton’s *Ladder* (or *Scale*) of perfection were simply understood to fit into such a model, while Teresa of Avila describes the same in *The interior castle* as a *camino* through different rooms of the “castle” of the soul (Byrne 1993:572), which is conveniently grouped in a threefold way. The journey culminates in the fifth to seventh rooms in which the unitive stage is reached and ultimately, spiritual marriage. *The rule of St. Benedict*, itself a widely read and accepted guide to the way of transformation, describes the progression in terms of twelve degrees of humility (Sheldrake 2013:389).

In the 20th century, the concept of a linear process with sequential stages has been criticised. Rahner questioned the concept, accusing it of being based on an outdated Neoplatonic world view,⁹ in which the ultimate aim of existence is to experience total detachment from human passions. He also critiqued it as

8 See Byrne’s (1993:568) comments on Brueggemann (2007).

9 Louth (2007) investigates the significant influence of Platonism on Christian mysticism (and, in particular, the soul’s journey motif). See especially Louth (2007:xii-xiii, 186-194). It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore this theme more fully, although it does provide evidence about the origins of the journey motif.

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).

Gradually, the rigid threefold pattern gave way to more cyclical patterns¹⁰ and less individualistic understandings.

Waaijman's proposal of understanding transformation as a "way" instead of a linear, staged process seems to be an approach that navigates the linear/cyclical debate. In his paper, after characteristically surveying the prevalence of the term ("way") in many religious traditions, Waaijman (2003:63) acknowledged that spirituality (transformation) is not static but a process, a divine-human relational process. This process 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 human within the transformative relationship between the human seeker and the Divine (Waaijman 2003:73). Waaijman outlines multiple "ways" that lead to the Divine, namely everlasting, conversion, direction, integrity and wholeness, and the way beyond the end. Of the last of these "ways", Waaijman (2003:78) counsels that

[h]uman beings can 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.

It seems that a "way" need not be linear; it may be cyclical and may even be found in transformation conceived as a swing between two poles.

5.2 What is transformation?

Benner (2012:59) defines transformation as

an enduring expansion of consciousness that expresses itself in four ways:

1. increased awareness
2. a broader, more inclusive identity
3. a larger framework for meaning making (how we understand and make sense of our self, others, God, and the world)
4. a reorganization of personality that results in a changed way of being in the world.

¹⁰ "[T]hese 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." (Byrne 1993:570).

Lombaard (2015:2) proposes that transformation is central to spirituality believing that “(w)ithout transformation, spirituality is stagnant”. He goes on to point out that transformation involves an “encounter with the Divine that brings about profound change in an individual’s relationship with the Holy”. There are consequences for the individual, for the community and even further:

God touches the self and – so as not to fall into the confines of pietism, but to acknowledge the extending influence of piety – the ‘self’ changes the world in circles of ripples across various spheres of society (Lombaard 2015:2).

Transformation brings changes in the personality that results in an altered way of being in the world (Benner 2012:59; Lombaard 2015:3), thereby facilitating God’s use of people to affect their environment in a positive and life-giving way (Lombaard 2015:2). It seems almost trite to remind ourselves that transformation is not confined to a specific class of person such as religious orders or mystics; rather, it is

open and opening: it is open to many people, who experience their change and growth, the conversion that alters their inner awareness as an opening-up toward the Other and the other (Lombaard 2015:2-3).

It is also not usually a result of a single experience, but rather an ongoing relationship with the Divine.

The mystics do, however, describe a unitive stage, in which a person might be embraced in the Divine. Even in this instance, Lombaard (2015:3) cautions that

that is not meant as hubris, where I (as the individual human) become the Divine. Rather, the opposite is meant: that in the presence of God I find myself so wholly overwhelmed, insignificant and humbled, that my being is subsumed wholly in awe of the Holy, as if I disappear, and God is all.

5.3 Henri Nouwen’s understanding of transformation

Although Nouwen’s thinking on transformation is quite unique,¹¹ the influence of the Desert Monks, of psychologists such as Anton Boisen (with his

11 As pointed out earlier, Nouwen (1975:11) uses the idea of movement between multiple polarities in his discussion of spiritual transformation. Michael Christensen and Rebecca Laird found twenty-six different “movements” between polarities in Nouwen’s (2010:130-131) writing. Each of these movements can be undertaken using “practices of the heart” (Nouwen 2010:vii). They are not stages of spiritual development as such but transformative movements toward human flourishing and toward the Divine (Nouwen 2010:130-131).

theories on people as “living human documents”), and of Thomas Merton is discernible. Merton and Nouwen were by no means soulmates. Their style, lives, and audiences were completely different.¹² Nouwen seems to have been influenced by Merton’s dialectic of contemplation and action¹³ and by Merton’s thoughts regarding the true and false self (Ford 2018:16). Nouwen expressed his thoughts more simply than Merton and kept his language as non-technical as possible, as his books were aimed at the ordinary Christian. In Merton’s spirituality, consciousness provides the vehicle to cross over from the world of fear to God’s house of love. Higgins (1971:53) shows how, for Merton, consciousness involves “entering into the self” and “transcending the self”. For Merton, consciousness can be defined as self-awareness. It must, however, be noted that the “awareness” might, in discovering the true self, find that the self is very different from the self as perceived previously. It is not the self that has changed, merely that one is now more aware than before of one’s true identity. Awareness of one’s true identity, of who one really is, is important and transformative. This authentic place is a step on the way of transformation. Transformation involves delving ever deeper into the self in search of God. It culminates, both in Nouwen and Merton’s understanding of transformation, in a realisation in the self of its identity as the “beloved of God”¹⁴ and of a connectedness between the self and all things.

For Nouwen, love (the Father’s love) accomplishes the transformation of “the beloved”¹⁵ at every point and allows the beloved to move from one stage to the next, or – more especially – to make the requisite swings between the poles – loneliness to solitude, hostility to hospitality, and illusion to prayer.

12 See the discussion on Nouwen and Merton in Ford (1999:119).

13 Nouwen’s polarities usually involve sets that include swings inward, to find the true Self, swings outward, toward the other, and swings toward the Divine.

14 This is a favourite theme of Nouwen, found in many of his books. See especially Nouwen (1992).

15 “More to the point, as Nouwen clarifies, the more deeply we get to experience God’s self-revealing love, the more our self-love deepens” (Hernandez 2012:Kindle location 514). See also Nouwen (1977:69).

6. CONTEMPLATION AND TRANSFORMATION

Contemplation is a process in spirituality's inward area (Waaïjman 2020:434), involving spiritual practices,¹⁶ in which human beings seek direct contact with God. The invitation is given by God (Merton 1961b:3). Merton (1961b:1) is effusive about the beauty and benefits of contemplation, calling it

the highest expression of man's intellectual and spiritual life, ... [a] spiritual wonder [and evoking] spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life.

Contemplation starts with awareness, a seeing "without seeing" and a knowing "without knowing" (Merton 1961b:1). It requires the openness to transcend our accepted knowledge systems, our settled explanations. Setting these aside, the pilgrim reaches out to experience the Divine in whose presence there is no falsehood, and all is known. A different sort of knowing is required in contemplation,¹⁷ Cartesian methods will not help. Indeed, contemplation

does not arrive at reality after a process of deduction, but by an intuitive awakening in which our free and personal reality becomes fully alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God (Merton 1961b:8-9).

Waaïjman (2020:436) points out that Origen of Alexandria counselled his students to attune themselves to the voice of God instead of to the voices of human beings. This could only be accomplished by changing their mind:

from an attitude of objectifying Scripture – the text considered to be there, outside me as a thing – to an attitude which sees Scripture as the voice of Another, asking for a dialogical attitude.

Nouwen is well practised at contemplation. He practices this spiritual discipline in numerous ways,¹⁸ with remarkable spiritual insight, with which he produces his books. Contemplation gives us a sober understanding of who

16 Waaïjman (2020:434) explores six paradigms of contemplation from the Christian spiritual tradition: "The contemplative reader, the contemplative warrior, Contemplative as Mary and Martha, Contemplation in discernment, Contemplation in presence and Prophetic contemplation".

17 In his discussion on spiritual reading as contemplation, Waaïjman (2020:434) describes the process as beginning with "the interpretation of signs, read in a protected space, seeking understanding", but it ends with "the 'other' reading, brought about by the divine-human dialogue".

18 See especially the discussion on *Visio Divina* on Rembrandt's painting, caring for Adam and the flying trapeze in Marchinkowski (2021). See also Nouwen's book *Behold the beauty of the Lord. Praying with icons* (1987).

and what we are¹⁹ (“nothingness”) and of who God is (Merton 1961a:9). In fact, contemplation provides access to reality – what is real, an

unexpected leap of the spirit of man into existential luminosity of Reality itself, not merely by the metaphysical intuition of being, but by the transcendent fulfilment of an existential communion with Him Who IS (Merton 1961a:9-10).

Contemplation is a task for the mature Christian who seeks relationship with God not on the basis of ritual, law or even the yearning to be obedient, but rather the experience of friendship with God (Merton 1961a:12).

Merton (1961a:13) believes that contemplation offers us a unique perspective on God, not as an object separate from ourselves, “but as the Reality within our own reality, the Being within our being, the life of our life”. In facilitating the process of transformation, contemplation left the pilgrim changed.

Our spirit undergoes a conversion, a metanoia, which reorientates our whole being after raising it to a new level, and even seems to change our whole nature itself. And then, ‘self-realization’ becomes an awareness that we are quite different from our normal empirical selves. At the same time, we are vividly conscious of the fact that this new mode of being is truly more ‘normal’ than our ordinary existence (Merton 1961a:88-89).

Merton describes transformation as “entering into ourselves”, “transcending ourselves”, and ultimately “going out of ourselves” (Merton 1961a:89).

Waaïjman (2007:41) characterises transformation as “the most significant transition in the divine-human relational process”, and distinguishes five layers within the process:

1. the transformation from non-being into being – the creation by God;
2. the transformation from being deformed to being re-formed in God’s re-creation of man;
3. someone’s becoming conformed to a divine-human transformation model which introduces a person into divine reality;
4. transformation in love in which the soul is led into God, while God takes up his abode in the soul;
5. the transformation in glory which awaits us after this life but of which the transformation in love already contains a sketch (Waaïjman 2007:42).

19 “Contemplation is the highest and most paradoxical form of self-realization, attained by apparent self-annihilation” (Merton 1961a:13).

By broadening the perspective on transformation beyond a singular quest through purgation and illumination to unification, Waaijman proposes that transformation relates to the entire span of human life, and he locates the unitive stage primarily in death and glorification.

Waaijman also describes two fundamental processes at work in transformation, namely “conformation” and “unformation”. He shows how a person is both “conformed” to Christ in “behaviour, thinking and willing, remembering, feeling and focus” (Waaijman 2007:47) in the process of transformation and “unformed” at the level of the intellect, the will, and the memory. The unformation is to rid the person of reliance on finite forms in will and memory so that God might shape these and the “the soul can fall past them into God’s unfathomableness” (Waaijman 2007:48). What results for the subjects, then, is that they become a new creation.

7. HENRI NOUWEN’S “SWINGING MOVEMENTS” AND TRANSFORMATION

Nouwen preferred the idea of “movements” (between poles) to describe the process of transformation.²⁰ They were “movements from the mind to the heart”²¹ (Nouwen 2010:xvi). Nouwen’s readers became accustomed to his movement motif (or theory), which he described as “movements of the Spirit” (Nouwen 2010:viii, 127). For Nouwen, the process of transformation involves multiple movements or swings between such poles as fear and love, on the one hand, and loneliness and solitude, on the other. A transformative opportunity exists within each swing (Nouwen 1975:11; 2010:128) and each pole offers “the context in which we can speak about the spiritual life” (Nouwen 1975:11; 2010:129). Nouwen saw the process of transformation played out as each person learned “to embrace and befriend spiritual polarities” (Hernandez 2012:Kindle Location 412).

The movements are not clearly separated or sequential. Some recur. They may relate to our personal stage of life or the life of the religious community within which we live. In articulating such a model of transformation, Nouwen steps away from the traditional three-stage model of transformation articulated

20 In considering this motif in Nouwen, Hernandez (2012:Kindle Location 367) writes: “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.”

21 In this regard, Nouwen (2010:xvi; 1975:145) was relying on the advice of Theophan the Recluse who counselled pilgrims to “descend with the mind into the heart and there stand before the face of the Lord”.

by the mystics.²² We might even say that he, as a psychologist, steps away from the stage theories of cognitive and faith development articulated by Piaget, Erikson, and Fowler, introducing “a new, transformative, nonsystematic approach to spiritual formation” (Nouwen 2010:134). The beauty of Nouwen’s movements is that they do not resolve the tensions of the spiritual life but continuously call spiritual pilgrims to conversion and transformation (Nouwen 2010:135) and, in the midst of this process, pilgrims become more aware, free and connected to God and others. The movements vary from person to person (Nouwen 2010:131).

The route to wholeness involves a “confrontation with our state of brokenness” (Hernandez 2012:Kindle location 445), which meant confrontation with the “negative” pole such as loneliness, hostility, or illusion and not avoiding or ignoring it, so that we could then move on to the positive pole, “theologically, the process of our union with God is necessity, paved by suffering” (Hernandez 2012:Kindle location 445).

Hernandez (2012: Kindle location 2024; Ford 2018:16-17) believes that Nouwen was not only comfortable with spiritual polarities, but he also encouraged the accompanying tensions that the polarities sparked within himself and his readers.

8. CONCLUSION

The Catholic priest, psychologist and spiritual writer Henri Nouwen had a unique contribution to make to the study of spiritual transformation. He was shaped, as a priest, by the classical mystical tradition, with its descriptions of a staged linear process, whereby the spiritual seeker ultimately found union with God. The stage theories on spiritual growth proposed by Piaget, Fowler, and others also influenced Nouwen in his training in Psychology. The writings of the Desert Monks and other spiritual writers such as Thomas Merton on the spiritual quest enamoured him.

This article examined Nouwen’s writings and considered the sources that influenced him. Nouwen’s writing delves into this process that seeks to find the “house of love”, by outlining numerous “pendulum swing”-style movements between sets of psycho-spiritual poles: non-linear, likely to repeat, and cyclical. These polarities include negative, alienated places that the spiritual seeker must confront and tensions that have an inertia of their own. To investigate

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

the various poles has been outside the scope of this article. The article's aim was to simply explore Nouwen's theory, the picture of the movements, and to place them alongside the debate about what kind of a journey the path of spiritual transformation is.

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