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*1994 Ted Ward
Writing Award
Recipient
Second Place*

Henri J. M. Nouwen:
A Pastoral Voice for
the Re-Formation of
Theological Education

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Henri J. M. Nouwen was ordained as a diocesan priest in 1957 at the age of 25. Today after 37 years in the ministry he is known around the world as a servant of servants, a priest to those who minister. Seminarians, Christian ministry professionals, and pastors find in his books a prophetic understanding of the nature of spiritual leadership. From his first book about ministry, *Intimacy*, to the popular *Wounded Healer*, to the more recent *In the Name of Jesus*, Nouwen has written clearly and forthrightly about today's spiritual leader.

Not only has Nouwen been a prophetic voice challenging spiritual leaders to new visions of service, he has also written about the formation of those leaders. And though Nouwen has had an amazing and broad impact on the leaders themselves, generally the institutions that form them have not been so touched. Several of today's theologians have been calling for a re-formation of the institutions which train the spiritual leaders of tomorrow. Edward Farley, David Kelsey, G. P. Schnier, E.

Tilden, and Charles Wood are a few of these voices¹ They challenge theological institutions to construct a more comprehensive understanding of training which forms the whole student for her or his intended purpose: providing spiritual leadership in the context of a rapidly changing and diverse society. Nouwen calls for the same re-formation, but he represents the pastoral voice. From the perspective of one who has walked where the pastors and Christian leaders have walked and who has a pastoral interest in them, Nouwen has consistently called for a training of persons which enables them to be effective spiritual leaders and not just effective professional religious leaders.

The purpose of this article is to amplify Nouwen's pastoral voice calling for the re-formation of theological institutions by, first, distinguishing between the spiritual leader and the professional religious leader as Nouwen sees it, then, second, demonstrating how he consistently identified the need for the Reformation of theological institutions to meet the principal objective: to train persons for spiritual leadership and not just for professional religious leadership. The objective is to turn up the volume of his prophetic voice in order that those who are responsible for and involved in those institutions-presidents, deans, and particularly trustees-would hear again the need to prepare persons for spiritual leadership.²

A Pastoral Definition of Spiritual Leadership

Leadership differs from management in that leadership seeks to influence individuals towards a visionary objective which involves risk-taking while management seeks to preserve the objectives already known in a defined environment.³ In the same way religious leadership and spiritual leadership are very different. Religious leadership seeks to preserve the stated objectives of the church or denomination within its known context, while spiritual leadership seeks to influence individuals to recognize the work of God in themselves: "The real spiritual guide is the one who, instead of advising us what to do or to whom to go, offers us a chance to stay alone and take the risk of entering into our own existence."⁴

Nouwen in his earliest works wrote of the dangers of a purely professional ministry. For him the leadership of ministry cannot

be separated from the spiritual life of the minister: "Thus the spiritual life of the minister, formed and trained in a school of prayer, is the core of spiritual leadership."⁵ The source of a minister's actions is a growing intimacy with Christ;

"Ministry is the manifestation in our own person of the presence of Christ in the world.... The basis of all ministry rests not in the moral life but in the mystical life. The issue is not to live as well as we can, but to let our life be one that finds its source in the Divine Life."⁶

Professional religious leaders tend to find satisfaction in righteous living. Spiritual leaders have a passion to be in right-relationship with Christ.

The spiritual leader manifests God by articulating his or her own movements of the Spirit. The religious leader, on the other hand, manifests God by articulating the doctrines of the established church, a helpful and needed training for understanding Christian faith but woefully inadequate for transforming individuals and impacting their cultures.

"The man who can articulate the movements of his inner life, who can give names to his varied experiences, need no longer be a victim himself, but is able slowly and consistently to remove obstacles that prevent the spirit from entering.... This articulation, I believe, is the basis for a spiritual leadership of the future, because only he who is able to articulate his own experience can offer himself to others as a source of clarification."⁷

The basic authority of spiritual leaders comes from their own lived experience of faith, while the basic authority of religious leaders comes from their position in the church or from their professional degree.

Spiritual leadership always involves risk-taking. Religious leadership does not. Conformity to the mind of Christ in that denomination supposes a particularized conformity. Conformity to the mind of Christ in that denomination supposes a willingness to continually change and be clay in the hands of God.

"The Christian leader is, therefore, first of all, a man who is willing to put his own articulated faith at the disposal of those who ask for his help. In this sense he is a servant of servants, because he is first to enter the

promised but dangerous land, the first to tell those who are afraid what he has seen, heard and touched.”⁸

With careful seeing, hearing, and touching, the minister is free to give service to others in the name of Jesus, vastly different from giving service in the name of a denomination. For Nouwen, the service is not so much in doing and telling but in providing space for God within oneself and nurturing that space in others. “Our [ministers’] task is to help people concentrate on the real but often hidden event of God’s active presence in their lives.”⁹ The objective of religious leadership is to bring about change which conforms to the doctrines of a particular church, albeit born from that denomination’s understanding of Scriptures and the leading of the Holy Spirit. However, spiritual leadership has a deeper objective. “Here we are touching a profound spiritual truth, that service is an expression of the search for God and not just of the desire to bring about individual or social change.”¹⁰ The objective of spiritual leadership is to help others recognize God. The point is not to change people but to create a space where change can take place.

The distinctions between the nature, expression, quality, and objectives of spiritual and professional religious leadership are clear. One is primarily sourced in God and nurtured by the Spirit in the context of the church, while the other tends to be sourced and nurtured by those in authority in the church. What, then, are the implications for theological education?

A Pastoral Call for the Re-formation of Theological Education

In one of Nouwen’s first books on ministry, *Creative Ministry*, he sets the stage for his on-going concern that seminaries are training ministers professionally but not spiritually. To him seminaries today are under the influence of Western behavioral sciences and have given up the routines of spiritual exercises. Because of the lack of attention to their spiritual formation, when students begin the multifaceted work of ministry, they often do not have the spiritual resources needed to sustain energy and creative vitality. Fatigue and depression are the results.

Not only does the lack of spiritual training affect the morale and vitality of ministers, it also inhibits their ability to be responsive to the movement of the Spirit. Thus they tend to fall into safe patterns of professional religious leadership rather than explore the edges of prophetic spiritual leadership. Spiritual attentiveness develops within the spiritual leader the ability "to break through restrictive boundaries of disciplines and specialties in the conviction that the Spirit moves beyond professional expertise."¹¹

In *The Wounded Healer* Nouwen further develops the dangers of ministers who have only been trained professionally. They tend to use their "skillful diagnostic eye. . . for distant and detailed analysis" rather than for compassionate partnership with the suffering of those to whom they minister (p. 42). Professionalism inhibits the development of compassion toward and a sense of partnership with the ones being served. The resulting leadership is often aloof and judgmental because the minister has the training and the skills, the answers and the judgements, but not the passion for care. Only when ministers are aware of their own spiritual poverty are they able to appreciate and care for the spiritual poverty of others. And this type of knowledge is not found in a textbook but in the exploration of one's spiritual heart.

Such ministers move from knowing to not-knowing. They have learned to depend on the Spirit to inform their professional expertise and not vice versa.

"[The] well-educated ministers are not individuals who can tell you exactly who God is, where good and evil are and how to travel from this world to the next, but people whose articulate not-knowing makes them free to listen to the voice of God."¹²

Such a skill is not developed or automatically bestowed when one makes a decision to follow and serve God. The conduit is open, the connection made, but the individual learns how to access and live in its circuitry. This training is often left to the wanderings of students in their spare time and not carefully tended as the foundation and fount of their professional training.

Such wanderings can leave students feeling disconnected and bored. It is the prayer life that connects them with Christ into an intimacy which creates interest.

“The history of Jewish and Christian spirituality shows that our most precious relationship, our relationship with God, cannot simply be left to our spontaneous outpourings. Precisely because God is central to our lives, our relationship with him calls for formation and training, including skills and methods. Therefore, it is sad that most ministers have more hours of training in how to talk and be with people than how to talk and be with God.”¹³

Behavioral sciences are aids in ministry, not the foundation of ministry. The disciplines of the spiritual life are the aids which help connect students to the foundation, Christ, and to the fount, the Holy Spirit. The disciples are as much a part of the rigor and preparation for mature ministry as the study of preaching and counseling techniques.

For Nouwen the goal of theological education is to bring students closer to God. “Seminaries...must lead theology students into an ever-growing communion with God, with each other, and with their fellow human beings.. .Theological education is meant to form our whole person toward an increasing conformity with the mind of Christ so that our way of praying and our way of believing will be one.”¹⁴

The greatest criticism of the Church is the hypocrisy of the leadership. The hypocrisy of the followers is often forgiven, but few outside the Church can understand the hypocrisy of the leaders. Ministers without a dynamic spiritual life nurtured in prayer will invariably become religious leaders who maintain religious traditions, rather than spiritual leaders who transform their communities.

Seminaries are the logical place to train students in the life-long journey of spiritual attentiveness. True formation requires discernment which for Nouwen is strenuous theological reflection. In theological institutions most spiritual leaders are sociologically or psychologically but not theologically trained.

“Theological reflection is reflecting on the painful and joyful realities of every day with the mind of Jesus and thereby raising human consciousness to the knowledge of God’s gentle guidance. This is a hard discipline, since God’s presence is often hidden.”¹⁵

Spiritual leaders are the ones who help people hear God. They are the ones who should know the heart of God and that is only possible through prayer, study, and theological reflection.

However, Nouwen writes, "I think we are only half aware of how secular... theological schools have become."¹⁶ Formation in the mind of Christ is not what most seminaries are about, and yet theological schools are the places where persons are prepared for leadership in the church. These persons will be trained, and some excellently, but for what are they being trained is the question that begs answering. The tendency has been to prepare persons for effective professional ministry which then tends to produce religious leaders. Nouwen, the pastor of pastors, has called us to a deeper understanding of spiritual leadership in the church and has asked the institutions that prepare persons for ministry to re-form their objectives to produce this kind of leadership. Nouwen has no other agenda then to care for persons in ministry and for persons seeking hope in a relationship with Christ. Theological schools are the places where that hope can be nurtured into a spiritual reality in tomorrow's leaders rather than into a religious paradigm for professionals.

Notes and References

¹See Farley, Edward, *The Fragility of Knowledge: Theological Education in the Church and the University* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) Kelsey, D.H., *To Understand God Truly: What's Theological About a Theological School* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); Schnier, G.P., "Formation as a unifying concept of Theological Education," *Theological Education*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 1985, pp. 94-113; Tilden, E., "Spiritual Formation in Theological Schools: Ferment and Challenge", *Theological Educanon*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1980, pp. 7-52; Wood, C., "Spiritual Formation and Theological Education," *Religious Education*, Vol. 86, No. 4, 1991, pp. 550-561.

²Robert K. Greenleaf, in his seminal work *Servant Leadership*, proposed that trustees have the role of initiating the goals of an institution. Trustees, by holding the public trust of an institution, are the ones who define the goals and initiate plans for their attainment. Therefore, in an institution for theological education, discussions should be taking place about the nature of spiritual leadership and its formation at the trustee level.

³Managment does require leadership skills, but the tasks and objectives of managers and leaders differ. See John Gardner, *On Leadership*, (New York: The Free Press), pp. 3-4, and Bernard M. Bass, *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership*, 3rd ed. (New York: The Free Press), pp. 383-400.

⁴Nouwen, Henri, J.M., *Reaching Out; The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 36.

⁵—, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 73.

⁶—, *Gracias: A Latin America Journal* (San Francisco: Harper & Rin, 1983), 31.

⁷—, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1972), 38.

⁸Ibid

⁹—, *The Way of the Heart: Desert Spirituality and Contemporary Ministry* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981), 63.

¹⁰—, *Compassion, A Reflection on the Christian Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 31.

¹¹—, *Creative Ministry* (GardnerCity: Image Books, 1978), 118.

¹²*Reading Art*, 105.

¹³*The Living Reminder*, 69.

¹⁴*Way of the Heart*, 47

¹⁵—, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership* (New York: Crossroads, 1989) 68-69.

¹⁶Ibid.