

*The Mystical Wisdom of a Closeted Life Between Polarities:
A hermeneutical investigation of Henri Nouwen's life and writing in view of his gay self.*

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Preface

The need for and the value of wisdom, which is the “ability to discern inner qualities and relationships” and of having “good sense,” is perhaps made especially evident in matters of great intensity which hold the potential for grave consequence.¹ A quick survey of the present context with regard to Christian faith and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people readily reveals itself to be such a matter. This is perhaps no more clear than in a new social movement which began in January 2022 called “#OutInChurch” in which 125 members of the Roman Catholic Church in Germany, ranging from priests to parishioners, came out publicly as queer and are “call[ing] for better protection of LGBTQ rights and an end to [the church’s] institutional discrimination against queer people.”² Their written manifesto reads “... it is essential that church leaders take responsibility for the countless experiences of suffering that LGBTIQ+ people have had in the church, work through the church's history of guilt and follow our demands.”³ Their demands include, in addition to taking responsibility for the suffering of LGBT people, that the church give blessings to same-sex couples and that the church ensure equal labor and employment rights for LGBT persons within the church as a direct response to previous employment discrimination.⁴ This unprecedented social movement is requiring that Christian

¹ Merriam Webster. (n.d.). “Definition of WISDOM.” Retrieved September 9, 2021 from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wisdom>

² Deutsche Welle (DW). (2022, January 24) “German Catholic priests come out as queer, demand reform.” DW.COM. Retrieved February 1, 2022, from <https://www.dw.com/en/german-catholic-priests-come-out-as-queer-demand-reform/a-60531857>

³ Out In Church. (2022, January 24). “Manifesto.” Retrieved February 1, 2022 from <https://outinchurch.de/manifest/>

⁴ Deutsche Welle (DW). (2022, January 24) “German Catholic priests come out as queer, demand reform.” DW.COM. Retrieved February 1, 2022, from <https://www.dw.com/en/german-catholic-priests-come-out-as-queer-demand-reform/a-60531857>

leaders think, engage, and respond in unprecedented ways with regard to the discussion of faith and sexuality. Christian leaders are tasked, now more than ever, with discerning how to both protect the integrity of the Christian faith as well as the dignity of LGBT people. While turning to old sources of wisdom about the matter is profitable for navigating the present tension, it is also helpful and necessary to uncover and consider new sources of wisdom as well. One potential new source is the person of Henri Nouwen.

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch Roman Catholic priest and world-renown spiritual author, is widely considered “one of the most influential spiritual thinkers of the twentieth century....”⁵ He published thirty-nine books which have been translated into thirty languages and have totaled over eight million copies, many of which are still in print today.⁶ To say that he has helped shape millions of spiritual lives around the world is no hyperbole. Nouwen’s relevance to the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality comes into view as a result of a posthumously revealed insight about his life. In 1999, three years after Nouwen’s death, biographer Michael Ford set out to reveal “how the contemplative side of his character was not so much overshadowed by his emotional trials but rather driven by them.”⁷ To do this he aimed at revealing the great “secret” or “key” to Nouwen’s life which was simply that Henri Nouwen was

⁵ Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg ix.

⁶ Henri Nouwen Society. (2015, November 10). “About Henri.” Henri Nouwen Society. Retrieved February 14, 2022 from <https://henrinouwen.org/about/>

⁷ Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. page xi.

gay.⁸ Biographers and friends of Nouwen alike note that it was a source of “constant tension,” and for most of his life “it was largely a secret [which he] dared not speak its name.”⁹ Nevertheless, by the end of his life its presence within him was something that Nouwen was under no illusions of for himself. In a letter three months before he died, Nouwen wrote to a friend that “my sexuality will remain a great source of suffering to me until I die.”¹⁰ As a highly influential source of contemporary Christian Spirituality, indeed one of the most influential sources of the last century, the posthumous insight of Nouwen’s gay sexual orientation immediately suggests that his life and writing may hold potential wisdom or insight for navigating the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality. This speculation, however, is only confirmed when considering the norms of his literary genre, which is Christian Spirituality.

The whole literary genre of Christian Spirituality which spans over the two millennia of the faith’s existence is made up, in principle, plainly of various authors making sense of their own spiritual journeys, personal struggles, and unique circumstances through their writing (albeit with varying degrees of explicitly included self-disclosure). Prominent scholar in the academic study of Christian Spirituality, Dr. Sandra Schneiders, suggests that writing in the genre of

⁸ Laurent Nouwen. (2021, September 10). "Interview with Laurent Nouwen" [In Person in Rotterdam, the Netherlands].

The term “gay,” as it is used here, merely articulates the experience of having ongoing and dominate romantic and sexual attraction to members of the same sex. It is not used as any indication of “behavior” or “sexual acts.” Indeed this use in alignment with Merriam-Webster which defines “gay” merely as: “of, relating to, or characterized by sexual or romantic attraction to people of one's same sex.” See: Merriam Webster. (n.d.). “Definition of GAY.” Retrieved November 11, 2021, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/gay>

⁹ Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 140.

¹⁰ Nouwen, H. J. M., & Earnshaw, G. (2016). *Love, Henri: Letters on the Spiritual Life* (First Edition). Convergent. pg xv.

spirituality is simply a “self-implicating act.”¹¹ To ignore or mask the inherent link between the authorial self and their text within the genre is to error in interpretation and to render faulty understandings of the author, their texts, and their life. For Nouwen, the “self-implication” of his writing is in many ways its greatest strength. Commentator Deirdre LaNoue wrote that “Nouwen was known for his sometimes painful transparency in his writing. This seemed to be the key that drew many to read his work... His acknowledgment of his own weaknesses and spiritual struggles gave many people ‘permission to search their own hearts more honestly and deeply.’”¹² Indeed, he plainly made sense of his own personal experience and spiritual struggles by writing about them, whether implicitly or explicitly. Therefore, regardless of the degree to which his gay sexuality was publicly known, due to the self-implicating nature of his literary genre, Nouwen’s self, which we now know includes the dimension of his homosexuality, is undeniably present in his writing and therefore at least partially generative of or related to his renown spiritual insights. Thus, on the basis of his literary genre alone, Nouwen’s life and writing do, in fact, say *something* about faith and sexuality albeit not immediately unambiguous or clear. Retrieving Nouwen as a source of wisdom in the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality therefore requires one to explore the mystery he left behind.

The matter of Nouwen’s sexuality is indeed a mystery as a result of the plain fact that he never wrote an explicit autobiographical account of his sexuality, nor did he write any type of working “treatise” dealing with the matter of faith and sexuality. This has made it difficult for academic researchers and everyday readers alike to properly understand Nouwen and his world-

¹¹ Schneiders, S. M., Lescher, B. H., & Liebert, E. (Eds.). (2006). *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders*. Paulist Press. pg 53.

¹² LaNoue, D. (2000). *The Spiritual Legacy of Henri Nouwen*. Continuum. pg 24.

renown spirituality in view of his gay self. Just because Nouwen never wrote anything so explicit about the matter, however, does not mean that “exploring the mystery” of his sexuality is merely a task of baseless postulation or conjecture. Rather, even while there is a lot which remains ambiguous about the matter, what is indisputable is that there are seemingly innumerable “artifacts” plainly present in both biographical accounts of his life and his own published oeuvre which bear explicit witness to the development of his thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes not only to his own personal sexual orientation but also to human sexuality in general. Even while never writing anything explicit or conclusive about the matter then, these “artifacts of sexuality” (as they are referred to in this thesis) reveal a great deal about Nouwen’s sexuality and his spirituality. Until now, in secondary studies concerning Nouwen there has been little effort to gather and analyze these artifacts in any systematic or organized way, let alone any attempt at a robust analysis or interpretation of what these artifacts might ultimately mean. Thus, retrieving Nouwen as a potential source of wisdom for the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality begins not by surmising things about his life, but rather by synthesizing and analyzing what is already plainly present in his life and writing. This undertaking is not only promising with the potential it has for uncovering new wisdom for the contentious discussion of faith and sexuality today, but it is also needful and overdue.

Given the inescapable self-implicating nature of Nouwen’s literary genre, in order to properly understand Nouwen’s world-renown oeuvre, an oeuvre which is still enriching millions of spiritual lives around the world today, it is vital to acknowledge and account for the presence of his gay self within his writing. Indeed, the degree to which this new interpretive avenue of Henri Nouwen is left unexplored is the degree to which we risk not properly understanding

Nouwen's life and writing at all. Furthermore, since there has been little effort in secondary studies of Nouwen to rigorously understand Nouwen in view of his gay self since his death, this interpretive avenue is also long overdue. Indeed, Jurjen Beumer, one of Nouwen's friends and the first person to publish a biography about Nouwen, wrote at the end of his biographical account published in 1997 that "more than once I have insisted that [Nouwen's] work is not yet 'over,' just as his life is not yet really 'over.' There was so much left to say, so much that was waiting for reflection." Briefly overviewing that various "projects" left to explore in Nouwen's life and writing he raises the question, "Doesn't the theology of homosexuality deserve a spiritual Christian interpretation?"¹³ The time has come then to undertake the interpretive avenue of Henri Nouwen in view of his gay self, not only to ensure proper understanding of Nouwen and his renown oeuvre on the spiritual life, but also to uncover what wisdom might lie within his closeted life for navigating the contentious discussion of faith and sexuality today.

Introduction

The Research Problem and Research Question

The research problem will be to explore the new interpretive avenue made possible by the posthumously revealed insight of Nouwen's gay self and determine its possible meaning for today. Given Nouwen's non-disclosure about the matter however, it is necessary to gather, synthesize, and analyze the various "artifacts of sexuality" plainly present in biographical accounts of his life and in his own published writing. In so doing, with a more rigorous understanding of Nouwen and his sexuality, we can then move to interpreting the meaning of

¹³ Beumer, J. (1997). *Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking For God*. Crossroad Pub. Co. pg 169.

such an understanding and its relevant implications for Christian leaders today. The research question will therefore be: What does a hermeneutical evaluation of Henri Nouwen's life and writing, employing a specific analysis of his sexuality, render with regard to navigating the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality?

Aims of this Study

In answering the research question, this thesis will aim to arrive at two definitive things. First, it will aim to arrive at a more rigorous understanding of Henri Nouwen in view of his gay self, redressing the mystery that has largely existed until now surrounding his sexuality. Secondly, after establishing an understanding of Nouwen and his sexuality, this thesis will then aim at interpreting and articulating the meaning and relevance of such an understanding for the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality, determining the practical implications for Christian leaders today.

Status Quaestionis

Although Nouwen died only twenty-five years ago, there is already a considerable and ever increasing amount of secondary literature concerning his life and work. These studies of Nouwen include biographies, literary summaries, anthologies, commentaries, doctoral dissertations and academic articles. Nouwen's sexuality however, a confirmed and irrefutable dimension of his person, has largely been unexplored to great depth in much of this secondary literature. Some works do more to discuss it and acknowledge it than others, however few, if any, attempt to deeply understand not only his personal beliefs, attitudes, and relationship to his own

sexuality, but also what his sexuality actually means for us today. Part of the reason for this seems to be that the “artifacts of sexuality” have only existed in a scattered and disseminated way in the assorted literature. As a result it has been difficult for academic researchers and everyday readers to properly understand Nouwen in view of his sexuality. This thesis will attempt to remedy this void in the secondary literature about Nouwen by retrieving these artifacts from their scattered and disseminated locations, analyzing and interpreting them together. In so doing, it will attempt to contribute something new to the secondary literature and studies concerning Henri Nouwen.

Sources Used

To effectively answer the research question this thesis will draw upon both primary sources and secondary sources. The primary sources will include a selection from Nouwen’s thirty-nine published books, his academic articles, and his letter correspondence. In the analysis of his life and writing found in chapter two, it will refer to primary texts which, in agreement with commentators and biographers, are paradigmatic of Nouwen’s spiritual teaching and emblematic of his maturing development of thought, especially as it relates to homosexuality. The secondary sources will include five different biographical accounts of Nouwen, as well as commentaries and academic summarizations of Nouwen’s work such as Dr. Wil Hernandez’s 2015 *Mere Spirituality: The Spiritual Life According to Henri Nouwen*.¹⁴ Lastly, given that it has

¹⁴ The five biographical accounts are: (1) Jurjen Beuemer’s biography 1997 *Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking for God*; (2) Robert Jonas’ 1998 biography and anthology *Henri Nouwen: Writings*; both of Michael Ford’s biographies, (3) his 1999 *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri Nouwen* and (4) his 2018 *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri Nouwen*; and (5) finally Deirdre LaNoue’s 2000 *The Spiritual Legacy of Henri Nouwen*.

only been twenty-five years since Nouwen's death, there are a considerable number of people alive today who personally knew Nouwen. In my research, I have been fortunate enough to get in contact with a few such individuals to interview for this thesis such as: Laurent Nouwen, Nouwen's younger brother; Maurice Monette, a close friend of Nouwen's; and Gabrielle Earnshaw who, while she did not know Nouwen personally, was the head archivist at the Henri Nouwen Archives for nearly two decades. As a result, this thesis will employ information gathered from these biographical interviews.

Method Used

To answer the research question and fulfill the aims of this thesis, a hermeneutical methodology will be employed. This thesis will abide by the norms of this methodology especially as they are outlined by scholars such as Dr. David Perrin in his academic guide *Studying Christian Spirituality*, as well as Dr. Sandra Schneider in the collection of essays titled *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders*. This methodology is not only effective in studies of Christian Spirituality, but it is also normative of *credible* studies of Christian Spirituality. The reason for this is because it accounts for the shared reality of self-implication of both the author being studied and the researcher (who is myself). Additionally, hermeneutical methodology creates the possibility of arriving at practical wisdom for today. Dr. Phillip Sheldrake, a prominent scholar and writer in Christian Spirituality writes that "Hermeneutical methodology moves the study of spirituality beyond matters of content toward a quest for wisdom to live by, rather than [just] technical information held at a distance."¹⁵ A

¹⁵ Ibid, pg 23.

further discussion concerning the norms of hermeneutical methodology, as well as the way this thesis aligns with such norms, will take place in the first chapter.

Overview of Text

To answer the research question, this thesis will be broken up into three chapters. The first, *“From Norms to Nouwen: Situating the Study”* seeks to properly lay the necessary foundation of this study of Nouwen by completing three “situating tasks:” first, establishing the norms of hermeneutical studies; second, accounting for the interpretive influences in this thesis; and third, amply introducing the person and writing of Henri Nouwen. The second chapter, *“From Estrangement to Reconciliation: Three Levels of Nouwen’s Sexual Integration”* will be an analysis of the “artifacts of sexuality” present both in biographical accounts of his life as well as in his published writing. In the analysis it becomes readily evident that, over the course of his life, Nouwen moves from a place of deep self-estrangement to a place of deepening self-reconciliation with regard to his sexuality, a movement which was made possible by way of three stages of integration: mind, heart, and body. The third chapter, *“From the Moral to the Mystical: Hermeneutical Determinations for Today”* is a discussion on the hermeneutical determinations that can be made from the analysis of the artifacts of sexuality in chapter two. Ultimately, by way of using his personal example of moving from estrangement to reconciliation, his life and writing can be seen to offer a model of moving from a moral to a mystical understanding of sexuality and we will discuss the ways that proves relevant for Christian leaders today. Finally, in the conclusion, beyond discussing the ways this thesis seems to most of all confirm Nouwen’s deepest intuition about sexuality, there is a concluding discussion titled *“From Limits to*

Horizons: Revisiting the Difficulties and Possibilities of this Study” which will explore the limitations of the study and the horizons it opens for further research.

Chapter 1. *From Norms To Nouwen: Situating the Study*

In order to effectively undertake the investigative study of Nouwen and his sexuality, as it is proposed in this thesis, it is first necessary to situate the study by laying a proper foundation for its investigation. This chapter will seek to do so by completing three “situating tasks:” first, establishing the norms of hermeneutical studies and explicitly discussing the ways this study aligns with such norms; second, accounting for the unavoidable interpretive influences present in this study by openly disclosing and evaluating them; and third, by amply introducing the person and writing of Henri Nouwen, establishing a more holistic understanding of him that goes beyond the narrow dimension of his sexuality, an understanding which might be neglected otherwise. Completing these “situating tasks” and thereby laying a solid foundation for the investigation proposed here will help ensure that this thesis, both in its findings and its final determinations, remains as rigorous, credible, and fruitful as possible. This chapter will therefore have three sections, with a section devoted to each task.

1.1 Establishing The Norms Of Hermeneutical Studies

In order to ensure that this study’s interpretive endeavor and its findings remain viable, credible, and fruitful a thoughtful discussion on the norms of such a study with an explicit explanation of the manner in which it aligns with those norms is important. To aid in this discussion, I will be referring primarily to the methodological norms as they are set forth by Dr. David Perrin in his 2007 academic guide *Studying Christian Spirituality*, as well as Dr. Sandra Schneider’s insights to the academic study of Christian Spirituality as they are synthesized in the 2006 collection of essays called *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M.*

Schneiders. To begin our discussion about such norms it is perhaps profitable to first discuss the end goal of studying anything within Christian Spirituality at all.

Christianity, as a faith which spans over two thousand years, is endowed with a tremendous wealth of spiritual wisdom, tradition, practice and expression. While the greatest spiritual authority is given to the Biblical texts, the person of Jesus himself, and the Church (especially depending on one's denominational devotions), there are nevertheless an innumerable amount of figures who have made manifest God's love and presence in the world through their example and instruction, that is their lives and their writing. By turning to these timeless and various "sources" of Christian Spirituality, contemporary practitioners are able to learn and discover wisdom and insight for their spiritual life today. Indeed, as Perrin understands, for those who turn to the genre of Christian Spirituality, both everyday readers and researchers alike, the goal is "not to lay bare raw information, but rather is focused on meaning and wisdom for life today." In this way, "Transformation or conversion is the very heart of the enterprise of Christian Spirituality."¹⁶ If arriving at transformative insight for today is the goal of studies in Christian Spirituality, it is necessary to consider the means by which one arrives at such wisdom. Given that the context of the contemporary researcher is often profoundly dissimilar from the context of the various sources of Christian Spirituality, it becomes important to consider the implications of context for the goal of transformation.

Each of the innumerable authors who have contributed to the literary genre of Christian Spirituality over the centuries can be seen as merely attempting to make sense of their own Christian faith within their own unique contexts and situations. As a result, their context then

¹⁶ Perrin, D. B. (2007). *Studying Christian Spirituality*. Routledge. pg. 13.

bears tremendous influence on the insights and the writing that fill the pages of their books. As distinguished academic and writer on Christian Spirituality Dr. Phillip Sheldrake writes:

The origins and development of spiritual traditions reflect the circumstances of time and place as well as the psychological state of the people involved. They consequently embody values that are socially conditioned.... This does not imply that spiritual traditions and texts have no value beyond their original contexts. However, it does mean that to appreciate their riches we must take context seriously. Context has become a primary framework for the study of spiritual traditions.¹⁷

Thus, the context of the author is inseparable from their writings and properly accounting for it is part of what allows sources of Christian Spirituality from prior generations to be effective sources of spiritual transformation in subsequent ones. Beyond historical context, however, the context and motivations of the contemporary researcher also come to bear on the genre's end goal of spiritual transformation. Sheldrake writes:

...our way of studying a mystical text, a spiritual tradition, a significant personality involves more than the use of certain techniques. We operate from our own cultural horizons, which, while they include blind spots that need to be exposed, are also the only means through which interpretation is possible.¹⁸

Along with contemporary context, since studying anything in Christian spirituality is a "self-implicating act," the personal motivations of the researcher are also important to account for.

Perrin writes

...the explorer - whether student, researcher, or casual reader - in Christian Spirituality frequently is part of the reality under scrutiny. Not only is he or she trying to plumb the truth and meaning of Christianity in general, but also and perhaps more significantly, the individual is often directly or indirectly searching for his or her own identity in it all... quite often people are drawn to Christian Spirituality due to their questions about life, God, and the search for meaning in life.¹⁹

¹⁷ Sheldrake, P. (2007). *A Brief History of Spirituality*. Blackwell Pub. pg 5-6.

¹⁸ Schneiders, S. M., Lescher, B. H., & Liebert, E. (Eds.). (2006). *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders*. Paulist Press. pg 21.

¹⁹ Perrin, D. B. (2007). *Studying Christian Spirituality*. Routledge. pg 7.

What is evident then, in normative studies of Christian spirituality, is there is an ongoing tension between the various sources of Christian Spirituality with their original contexts, and the influences of both the researcher's contemporary context and personal motivations. What this means is that if any study within Christian Spirituality is to remain credible and fruitful in accomplishing its ultimate aim of spiritual transformation it must employ an interpretive methodology that properly accounts for these tensions.

Hermeneutical methodology, in the way that it accounts for both contexts, is the best way to resolve this tension.²⁰ Perrin writes, "Texts are always brought back to life in a life, in the life circumstances of a real flesh-and-blood person. That is why a hermeneutical reading is the favored reading - there is room for both the text and the life experience of the reader to be brought forward."²¹ A hermeneutical methodology is not only *a* method, but the *preferable* method of interpretation within academic studies of Christian Spirituality. Perrin outlines six distinctive features of this approach that make it compelling to use: (1) it "allows texts to speak in different times and places;" (2) it "uses numerous analytical techniques (for example: literary analysis, theological analysis, feminist analysis) to open up the text;" (3) "acknowledges that interpretation always takes places in particular circumstance;" (4) "values the personal life story as one of the factors that the readers brings to the text in order to tease out current meanings;" (5) "goes beyond a search for facts or objective information (knowledge) that the author wanted to convey to the reader;" and lastly (6) "acknowledges that texts only make sense in the context of a

²⁰ In Perrin's assessment "if [the academic study of] Christian spirituality is to be credible in the eyes of the wider community, it needs to be accountable for the ways it goes about doing research and explaining its findings objectively. Hermeneutical methodology is one way to do this."
Ibid, pg 8.

²¹ Ibid, pg 192.

life; they are meaningful only inasmuch as they assist the reader, and the reading community, to encounter the text as a dynamic, transformative event.”²² By employing such methodology, as outlined by Perrin, it effectively accounts for the inescapable tension of dissimilar contexts and ensures the interpretation is fruitful for transformation today. We will now turn to a brief discussion of the “methodological principles” of interpretation as they have been outlined by Perrin and which are characteristic of credible hermeneutical studies.

In Perrin’s *Studying Christian Spirituality* he outlines seven “core methodological principles” in the academic study of Christian Spirituality. The seven principles are: (1) “a broad understanding of Christian spirituality;” (2) “an awareness of the relationship between Christian spirituality and theology;” (3) an acknowledgment that “human experience is the object of study” (in other words, it is a study that goes beyond the exclusive boundaries of theology); (4) crucial sensitivity to the “importance of context” (as previously discussed); (5) “historical consciousness” which “brings into focus the belief that people are products of their own times, yet their vision for life may provide valuable wisdom for current and subsequent generations;” (6) the necessity of a “multidisciplinary approach” which comes as a result of studying human experience; and lastly, (7) “hermeneutical theory” which does not just aim at acquiring information about the reality under scrutiny but rather, allows for it to lead to meaningful contemporary transformation.”²³ Perrin writes that these seven principles, when they act as “points of reference,” ultimately “provide students with a solid basis upon which to embark on particular projects in their study of Christian Spirituality.”²⁴ Our discussion here has revealed that

²² Ibid, pg 192.

²³ Ibid, pg 11-13.

²⁴ Ibid, pg 13.

the goal of studying anything in Christian Spirituality is to arrive at transformative wisdom for today. This is only possible when there is an interpretive methodology that accounts for the tension between the two dissimilar contexts. Hermeneutical methodology, especially when abiding by Perrin's seven methodological principles, presents itself as not only as a normative means of studying Christian Spirituality but also the *favored* means. We can now briefly reflect on the ways this study will align with these norms.

What we can see from our discussion on the norms of studies of Christian Spirituality is that studying Henri Nouwen's life and writing, employing an analysis of his sexuality, with the goal of understanding its meaning for us today fits well within the norms of academic hermeneutical studies of Christian Spirituality. Such a study, however, is viable only inasmuch as the context of Nouwen and his texts are acknowledged, in addition to there being an explicit acknowledgement of the interpretive influences which relate to the researcher (who is myself), namely their context and motivations. In light of this, this thesis will align itself with the hermeneutical methodological norms set forth by scholars in three ways. First, the interpretive influences of the researcher (myself), namely my context and my motivations, will be explicitly accounted for and disclosed in the next part of this chapter. Second, the source's historical context, which is Nouwen and his writing, will be accounted for in chapter two in the close analysis of his life and writing. Indeed, in chapter two, Nouwen's life and writing are only ever analyzed in context of his corresponding time, religious and social environments, location, and life events. Finally, by employing the seven core methodological principles outlined by Perrin in the manner he recommends, namely as "points of reference," there will be more than enough

solid basis to embark on our study of Nouwen and his sexuality. It should be said, however, that any findings or determinations this study arrives at will be enduringly provisional.

Due to the multidisciplinary nature of hermeneutical methodology, the interpretive work is not simple, clear-cut, or straight forward. Rather it is a “messy” and “multifaceted” endeavor or as Sheldrake has called it, it is “ascetical.” He writes “There is an ascetical aspect to interdisciplinary work because such encounters make us vulnerable. What was taken as simple and neat is shown to be multifaceted and messy; what was assumed to be fixed proves to be the starting point for another journey. This is not a question of continual deferral or refusing commitment. Interdisciplinarity is a discipline of learning to live with the provisional.”²⁵ As a result the findings of this normative hermeneutical study of Nouwen will remain enduringly provisional and must remain open to the same methods of reinterpretation that it itself is employing. With the first “situating task” now complete, we can now turn to the second task which is accounting for the interpretive influences in this thesis.

1.2 Accounting for Interpretive Influences: The Researcher’s Context and Motivations

In any hermeneutical study of Christian Spirituality, there are always two interpretive influences which relate to the researcher, their context and their personal motivations. The influences of these realities are not merely “tolerated” in hermeneutical studies but are, in fact, *valued* as integral and essential to the interpretive act itself. Perrin writes, with regard to the researcher’s context, that “A hermeneutical reading of the text considers one’s concerned engagement with the world: what is currently of significance, actual preoccupations, and timely

²⁵ Schneiders, S. M., Lescher, B. H., & Liebert, E. (Eds.). (2006). *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders*. Paulist Press. pg 21.

existential questions... In a hermeneutical reading of texts, biases are not to be set aside. Instead, they form a critical contribution to a current reading; they provide the lens with which the reader can make particular readings of the text.”²⁶ Furthermore, with regard to the researcher’s personal motivations, scholar Belden Lane writes in her summarization of Sandra Schneiders that “...the reader’s incorporation of their own [personal] vulnerability into the experience of the text through active reading creates not only new insights but a new reality, something that had not previously existed. This act of participation is what often allows readers to suggest far deeper understandings of the text than anything the author might initially have envisioned.”²⁷ Despite being valued as integral to the very interpretive task, as was determined in the last section, part of what will ensure the credibility of this study of Nouwen and his sexuality is properly accounting for and disclosing these influences.

The interpretive influence of the present context has already been made readily evident in this study in the ways that the contentious events transpiring in the present context with regard to faith and sexuality are influencing the proposed readings of Henri Nouwen in this thesis. Indeed, the growing tension between LGBT people and the Christian faith, as evidenced in the “#OutInChruch” social movement within the German Catholic Church, is contributing to the interpretive aims of this thesis by catalyzing its search for increased wisdom in Nouwen’s life for navigating the matter. While the influence of the contemporary context is plainly evident in this study, the influence of the researcher’s personal motivations are not and thereby require particular attention. Indeed, unless these motivations are revealed in a very transparent and

²⁶ Perrin, D. B. (2007). *Studying Christian Spirituality*. Routledge. pg 207.

²⁷ Schneiders, S. M., Lescher, B. H., & Liebert, E. (Eds.). (2006). *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders*. Paulist Press. pg 66.

unambiguous way, their undisclosed biases and blindspots may compromise the integrity of the study. Scholar Belden Lane proposes a threefold pattern for addressing the self implication of hermeneutical studies in Christian Spirituality to ensure that researcher's motivations do not compromise the credibility of the study. The three steps are: (1) openly identifying the authorial self, (2) recognizing the instructive potential of the authorial self, and lastly, (3) concealing the authorial self so as to focus on the research at hand.²⁸ What follows will be my explicit attempt to abide by her academic recommendations concerning the self-implication inherent to this study.

First, it is necessary to “identify openly the authorial self, that is, the writer’s own perspective and multilayered relationship to the spiritual figure, tradition, or text under examination. This addresses the problem of the absent author whose biases are present but undisclosed.”²⁹ In recent years, Nouwen has become to me what can only be described as a role model, a spiritual mentor, and a friend. In times of distress, disorientation, and doubt concerning my faith and spirituality, I have often felt as though Nouwen’s wisdom has kept me grounded in and attuned to the wonder and mystery of the Divine. Despite the significance his writing and example now holds for me, my first encounter with him was uninterestingly incidental and casual. One of Nouwen’s last published books, *Return of the Prodigal Son*, happened to be part of the reading requirements for my course “Introduction to Spiritual Formation” during my bachelors studies. Immediately I was enamored by the simplicity, accessibility, and depth that characterize his writing. Having grown up and been formed exclusively within reformed and conservative American Evangelical expressions of Christian faith, Nouwen, as Dutch Roman

²⁸ Ibid, pg 57.

²⁹ Ibid, pg 57.

Catholic priest, opened up an entirely new world of Christian faith and expression, especially as it relates to the dynamics of spiritual formation (which have been characteristically neglected in the evangelical tradition).³⁰ This casual encounter with him in my coursework led to a deepening fascination with his life and writing and, as a result, I subsequently read not only more of his own writing but also secondary literature about him.

Nearly two years after my initial encounter with Nouwen, however, I stumbled upon new information about him that only deepened, clarified, and intensified my curiosity about his life and writing. Along with many others, I was surprised to discover that not only was he gay but also that, regardless of his international acclaim, so few people knew about it. Coincidentally, at this time, I was not only searching for answers concerning my own faith and sexuality, but I was also walking alongside numerous peers who were trying to reconcile their own faith and sexuality as well. The moralized judgments and fearful attitude that surround questions of sexuality within many Christian communities, and especially within my tradition of evangelicalism, meant that myself and many others felt isolated, fearful, and desperate to make sense of our experiences. The man whose life and writing already meant a great deal to me suddenly took on new meaning as I found in him representation of someone “not heterosexual” living not only a faithful but an *exemplary* Christian life. This was very significant for me as, until then, I was not sure how to continue in my faith nor if it were possible, despite how much I wanted to. As a result, I began to plumb anew the depths of his writing and the literature about him. Fruitful as it was, I became frustrated not only by the mystery he plainly left behind, but

³⁰ For more on this see: Phillips, Susan S., “Spiritual Guidance in the Evangelical Christian Tradition”, John R. Mabry (ed.), *Spiritual Guidance across Religions*, Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing 2014, 289-302.

also by the lack of any synthesized study or discussion about his sexuality in secondary literature. I became very curious to know what it might have possibly meant that Henri Nouwen, this well-loved, highly esteemed, and world-renown spiritual author, was gay and therefore what it meant for me and my peers. In this way, as is normative in hermeneutical studies of Christian Spirituality, it is clear that my own personal motivations also solicit or catalyze the final interpretive aim of this thesis.

In Belden Lane's second recommendation concerning the self-implication in studies of Christian Spirituality she suggests there is a need "to recognize the instructive potential of the authorial self as a bridge figure in providing the reader a deeper understanding of the world of the 'other.' This recognizes the possibilities and difficulties of the engaged author whose experience becomes admittedly a part of the analysis."³¹ The possibilities that my self bring to this interpretive endeavor are twofold: first, given my particular affinity and sympathy to Nouwen in general, my optimism about him will certainly lend itself in the task of deriving meaning from his life and writing about the matter. Indeed, the fact that I merely remain hopeful that Nouwen can offer something substantive reveals one of the great possibilities my engaged self brings to this study. On the other hand, however, one difficulty this could pose is that it could result in erroneous conclusions, especially if they, as a result of becoming *overly* optimistic, lead to presumptuous, overconfident, or overly idealistic assertions. Secondly, and perhaps most obviously, my own experience of navigating faith and sexuality will undoubtedly come to bear in this study. This holds the possibility of being able to speak with greater insight and credibility into the lived experience that is shared with Nouwen, allowing my own

³¹ Schneiders, S. M., Lescher, B. H., & Liebert, E. (Eds.). (2006). *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders*. Paulist Press. pg 57.

experience to generate deeper readings, understandings, and insights into his life and writing. One difficulty of this, however, is in the risk of appropriating or colonizing Nouwen's life and writing to fulfill or fit my own beliefs, desires, or needs about the matter. Furthermore, given that my work deals with only one side of Nouwen, Nouwen as I see him, it is impossible for me to speak conclusively or objectively about him and his writing. The risk or difficulty here is in presenting my "portrait" of Nouwen as the *only* portrait or the "*most correct*" portrait. It is important to see that these risks or difficulties in this study, which merely reveal my unavoidable biases, are not unique to me and this study. Indeed, paralleled biases would also be present for anyone who studies Nouwen for any reason. We can understand why then that Perrin asserts that biases are not to be "set aside" in hermeneutical studies, but should rather be properly accounted for. The "possibilities and difficulties" of my self will therefore be revisited in the conclusion of this study to ensure that the findings and determinations of this thesis are presented as realistically and credibly as possible.

In the third and final recommendation of Belden Lane, in properly addressing the self-implication in studies of Christian spirituality, she writes there is the subsequent need "...to conceal or deconstruct the authorial self, keeping the researcher's identity in the background so as to focus on the research itself. This points, in turn, to the problem of the interfering author whose subjectivity abandons methodological rigor, risking a dangerous self-indulgence if not a new colonialism respect to the subject(s) being studied."³² Having both disclosed my self which is inescapably present in this study, and having explicitly explored the possibilities and difficulties that relate to that reality, I will now allow my self to fall to the background as we turn

³² Ibid, pg 58.

to the hermeneutical investigation of understanding Henri Nouwen's life and writing in view of his sexuality.

This section, "Accounting for Interpretive Influences: The Researcher's Context and Motivations" has sought to fulfill the second "situating task" of this thesis by explicitly accounting for the inevitable influence of the researcher's context and personal motivations (referring to myself). In so doing, it has attempted to adhere to the academic recommendations of scholars in the field of Christian Spirituality in the hope that this thesis' final findings and determinations remain viable, credible, and fruitful. Having done so, we can now turn to the last "situating task" of the study which is properly introducing Henri Nouwen, establishing a more holistic understanding of his person and his writing.

1.3 Introducing Henri Nouwen: A Mystic Between Polarities

While an evaluation of the sexual dimension of Nouwen is warranted and necessary, it is nevertheless incomplete. To speak about Nouwen as the "gay man" is to speak about him only partially and in an incomplete manner because he was also much more than *merely* a gay man. Nouwen himself thought that "his sexuality was not the most interesting dimension of his personality, even though he was always aware of its power."³³ One temptation, as a result, might be to simply "dehumanize him by pretending that he was not a sexual being" and, as biographer Ford helpfully contends, this would be "...clearly ridiculous because he both wrote and spoke about his sexual feelings [in a variety of ways]."³⁴ To minimize or mask his sexuality would fail

³³ Ibid, pg 57.

³⁴ Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg 57.

to acknowledge the holistic person of Henri Nouwen as a real human being and, as a result, fail to appreciate the significance of his whole human self in relation to his life and writing. The other extreme, the temptation to make too much of his sexuality, is true as well. John McNeill, who is a Catholic priest and well known writer on homosexuality cautioned against any “over-analysis of Henri Nouwen's sexuality.”³⁵ The task at hand then is to not make too much or too little of his sexuality in relation to his life and writing.³⁶ For this reason, before narrowly analyzing his sexuality, it is first necessary to begin with an introduction to Nouwen which establishes a holistic understanding of his personhood and his writing, an understanding that would otherwise be neglected in the narrow evaluation of his sexuality. In so doing, this section will fulfill the final “situating task” of this thesis, creating a solid foundation from which to embark on its investigative endeavor.

Henri Nouwen was many things over the course of his life: a Dutch Roman Catholic priest, a psychologist, a pastoral theologian, an academic and professor, an author, a speaker, a caregiver; and yet, in surveying his life, it is clear that he first and foremost was a man in lifelong pursuit of union with God or, as some have rightly considered him, a mystic. For Raymond Tomkinson, a priest and author, it was Nouwen’s mystical quality that made him so striking and genius. He said "Henri Nouwen was an excellent example of the well-balanced mystic. He trod the inward and the outward journey, coming to know the pain and the joy of both the paradox of

³⁵ Ibid, pg 68.

³⁶ Interestingly, this speaks in many ways to how Nouwen, over the course of his life, sought to understand sexuality for himself and in general. In my interview with his brother, Laurent, he suggested that sexuality poses a threat only when it “gets out of proportion” and for Nouwen, concerning sexuality, “It [was] about finding it’s proper place in [one’s] whole life.” Laurent Nouwen. (2021, September 10). “Interview with Laurent Nouwen” [In Person in Rotterdam, the Netherlands].

knowing we are never alone, yet sharing deeply in humanity's unconscious sense of alienation.”³⁷

Given the ambiguity of the term “mystic,” however, it is necessary to consider exactly what is meant by “mystic” and “mysticism.” Dr. Phillip Sheldrake, the distinguished scholar of Christian Spirituality, writes that:

In broad terms, many contemporary Western approaches frequently treat ‘spirituality’ and ‘mysticism’ as virtually synonymous. ‘Spirituality’ implies an exploration of the depths of human existence and the ultimate purpose of life and a quest for deeper wisdom. The notion of ‘mysticism’ additionally suggests that we may have immediate encounters with and perhaps an experiential ‘knowledge’ of the mystery of God or the Absolute.³⁸

According to Dr. Bernard McGinn, emeritus professor of Historical Theology at University of Chicago and researcher of Christian mysticism, “mysticism” refers to “those elements in Christian belief and practice that concern the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the effects attendant upon a heightened awareness of God’s immediate and transformative presence.”³⁹ In this way, a ‘mystic’ is someone who believes in and practices their Christian faith “with particular intensity” focused on *experiential* intimacy with The Divine and ‘mysticism’ can be understood as “merely one aspect of Christian spirituality - a kind of intensification of the Christian spiritual path.”⁴⁰ Thus it seems that Nouwen can rightly be understood as a mystic, as he earnestly sought to understand how one might discover experiential unity with God and the implications of that unity for how one related to oneself, to others, and to the world.⁴¹ Not only

³⁷ Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg 27.

³⁸ Sheldrake, P. (2013). *Spirituality: A Brief History* (2nd ed). John Wiley & Sons. pg 7.

³⁹ Ibid, pg 8.

⁴⁰ Ibid, pg 8.

⁴¹ Indeed, Nouwen’s friend Frank Hamilton once said, after pointing out that mystics were those who attempted to “give meaning to the mystery of God,” that “Henri was there seeing the mystery of God, then interpreting it for those who could not understand it.”
Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg 92

can Nouwen's writing be therefore categorized as a type of mystical writing, but actually to the degree to which Nouwen's writing was "mystical" is the degree to which many viewed it as particularly valuable. As biographer Ford observed, "part of his gift was the dexterity with which he popularized and refashioned the mystical in such a way that it became accessible for a wide constituency."⁴² With an understanding of Nouwen as a mystic, we can now briefly consider the central theses in his work.

Nouwen filled the pages of his oeuvre articulating the mystical path as his entire conceptualization of the spiritual life centered on the notion of intimate "communion" with God. As Dr. Wil Hernandez, a Henri Nouwen scholar and lecturer of Nouwen spirituality, summarizes in his book *Mere Spirituality: The Spiritual Life According to Henri Nouwen*, he says that "Henri Nouwen believed that the nature of our spiritual life consists of a life apart in solitude with God (communion), a life shared in community with God's people, and a life given in ministry to others (commission)."⁴³ Everything else was secondary to communion with God because "it is in the place of intimacy that we enter not only into oneness with God but also into oneness with our own self, where we fully embrace who we truly are in God."⁴⁴ Who we truly are, as Nouwen was known to emphatically and excitedly proclaim, is that of "the Beloved."⁴⁵ Nouwen writes in his

⁴² Scholars such as William Johnston, a Jesuit priest and prolific writer on mysticism, "believed mystical theology needed to be rewritten for the men and women in the twenty-first century" and suggested that the writings of Nouwen have largely succeeded in doing precisely that. Ibid, pg xv, xvi.

⁴³ Hernandez, W. (2015). *Mere spirituality: The Spiritual Life According to Henri Nouwen*. Christian Journeys/from SkyLight Paths Publishing. pg xv.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pg xvi.

⁴⁵ For one great example of this see the video of his sermon at the Crystal Cathedral. It can be accessed at: Henri Nouwen Society. (2020, May 9). "Being the Beloved (Full Sermon Part One), Henri Nouwen at the Crystal Cathedral." Retrieved February 14, 2022 from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=trG7Oh_PopM

book *Life of the Beloved* that “Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence... From the moment we claim the truth of being the Beloved, we are faced with the call to become who we are. Becoming the Beloved is the great spiritual journey we have to make.”⁴⁶ Claiming one’s Belovedness is vital because Nouwen understood that everything else then rightfully flows from that place. Nouwen wrote that “communion with God alone in prayer leads inevitably to community with God’s people, and then to ministry in the world.”⁴⁷ Nouwen in his writing then not only teaches us to discover and traverse the mystical path to experiential communion with God, but also reveals that true community with others and true commission (ministry) in the world is only fruitful when we live from that place of abiding mystical communion. In order to properly understand Nouwen and his oeuvre, it is important to understand the characteristics of his writing style, as well as the influences he drew upon.

With regard to the means by which he articulated his mystical vision in writing there are a couple of characteristics which are “quintessential Nouwen,” some have ventured to call them “Henri-isms” or simply Nouwen’s “spiritual methodology.”⁴⁸ The first characteristic is that Nouwen continually framed the spiritual life as a dynamic and constant movement between two polarities.⁴⁹ Biographer Beumer writes “His books show this process, this spiritual journey and

⁴⁶ Nouwen, H. J. M. (1992). *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. Crossroad. pg 37.

⁴⁷ Hernandez, W. (2015). *Mere spirituality: The Spiritual Life According to Henri Nouwen*. Christian Journeys/from SkyLight Paths Publishing. pg xxi.

⁴⁸ Nouwen, H. J. M., & Jonas, R. A. (1998). *Henri Nouwen: Writings*. Orbis Books. pg xxxv.

⁴⁹ This conceptualization was first introduced most clearly in his book *Reaching Out* in which he describes the spiritual life as consisting of three movements: from loneliness to solitude, from hostility to hospitality, and from illusion to prayer. This movement between two polarities is also observed in many other texts such as *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* in which he talks about the need to move from the “house of fear” to the “house of love.”

Nouwen, H. J. M. (1986). *Lifesigns: Intimacy, Fecundity, and Ecstasy in Christian Perspective* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 20.

pilgrimage. It is a movement ‘from... to’..., this is how [Henri] saw the human life fitting together, alternating between extremes in order to be found somewhere in the middle by the Eternal One.”⁵⁰ The second characteristic of his writing is how simple and accessible his books were.⁵¹ Robert Jonas, a friend of Nouwen’s, reflected

Even though Henri had received his doctorate in theology, he wanted, more than anything, to communicate the living presence of Christ to his listeners, both in his pastoral presence and through his writing. This interest dictated the style of composition. More and more, he dropped academic language and difficult theological terms. More and more he directed his writing to an audience of moderately educated Christians, both Catholic and protestant, ordinary people in the pews.⁵²

The third and final characteristic of his work is that, as it has been said by a number individuals, he often “wrote the same book” over and over. Perhaps this is because, as was already discussed, Nouwen’s primary objective, more than anything else, was to articulate one primary thing: the mystical path to unity with God and the implications of such. Hernandez concludes, “In most of his writings, he repeated himself without apology, if only to underline his key constructs. But he did so almost always from a new perspective and context.”⁵³ In a survey of his life and writing it is not necessary, therefore, to evaluate each of Nouwen’s nearly forty publications, rather just the ones paradigmatic of his central theses. While the majority of Nouwen’s writing can be understood as an attempt to articulate one main thing, it is important to consider the diverse and varied influences that informed his mystical vision.

⁵⁰ Beumer, J. (1997). *Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking For God*. Crossroad Pub. Co. pg 141.

⁵¹ Part of the reason for this is that they followed a familiar three-point structure. Robert Jonas noted that “Henri’s friends [would often] joke about the fact that many of his books, and most of his sermons, are based on three points. The content of each point may vary, but rarely the number.”
Nouwen, H. J. M., & Jonas, R. A. (1998). *Henri Nouwen: Writings*. Orbis Books. pg xxxv.

⁵² Ibid, pg xxix.

⁵³ Hernandez, W. (2015). *Mere spirituality: The Spiritual Life According to Henri Nouwen*. Christian Journeys/from SkyLight Paths Publishing. pg xii.

Despite belonging to the Roman Catholic tradition as an ordained priest, Nouwen was nevertheless influenced by a diverse range of sources that reached far beyond the boundaries of Roman Catholicism. First, it was said that he had a “profoundly wide ranging grasp of the Christian classics” and was unsurprisingly influenced by many Western Christian sources.⁵⁴ Nouwen, however, was also profoundly influenced by the spirituality of Eastern Orthodoxy, even admitting at one point that he “had probably learned more about the spiritual life from that tradition than from any Western spiritual writers.”⁵⁵ Beyond western and eastern Christian influences, Nouwen was also influenced by art as “art helped Henri get in touch with the transcendent.”⁵⁶ The art of Vincent van Gogh and Rembrandt were particularly influential in this regard.⁵⁷ Other sources of influence included: philosophers such as Heidegger and Kierkegaard;

⁵⁴ Western sources such as: Thérèse of Lisieux, Julian of Norwich, St. Ignatius of Loyola, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, Charles de Foucauld, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Thomas Merton, among many others.

LaNoüe, D. (2000). *The Spiritual Legacy of Henri Nouwen*. Continuum. pg 20.

⁵⁵ He was particularly influenced by a number of things from the Eastern rite such as: the Hesychastic tradition; the Jesus Prayer which states “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me” and which accompanied him during some of his driest spiritual seasons; the writings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers; as well as some of the writings of the eastern brothers who wrote in nineteenth-century Russia. Two specific texts of the Eastern rite, the *Philokalia* and *The Art of Prayer*, proved to be especially influential to him. This is especially true of the writings of one Desert Father in specific from the *Philokalia*, Evagrius Ponticus. Most of all, however, one reason the Eastern rite was so influential to him was that, as John Garvey suggested, a friend of Nouwen who was himself an orthodox convert from catholicism, it “...was the idea of an alternative approach to Christianity in which one could have a profound sense of freedom and at the same time a deep sense of fidelity to tradition. [Nouwen] understood that [freedom and fidelity] do not need to be contradictory, and he found something of that in Orthodoxy.”

Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 10.

⁵⁶ Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg 124.

⁵⁷ Nouwen said “although Vincent van Gogh is certainly not a religious writer in the traditional sense of the word, for me he was a man whose spirit touched my spirit very deeply, and who brought me in touch with some aspects of the spiritual life that no formal spiritual writer ever did.” Many have observed that “the turbulent emotional lives of both men mirrored each other in many ways” and that “the mystic in van Gogh guided the mystic in Henri.”

Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 10.

psychologists such as Victor Frankl, Carl Rogers, and Carl Jung; and even some Zen masters.⁵⁸

Despite this diverse set of influences in Nouwen's mystical vision and spiritual teaching, it is important to note that "Nouwen's chief theological source was always the Bible, and in particular the Gospel of St. John, where he found the most intimate connections with his own prayer life."⁵⁹

Indeed, Robert Jonas reflected that "...references to non-Christian sources decreased in Henri's post-Yale years. More and more he relied exclusively on the Hebrew and Christian scriptures for stories, metaphors, and messages of hope. After [Nouwen's time at] Yale, the sole organizing metaphors of his homilies and writings became the life of Jesus and the love that Jesus shared with Abba."⁶⁰ In this way, more than anything, the person of Jesus was the model of his spiritual life and teaching, Jonas even attested that "Jesus was Henri's mentor and model of maturity."⁶¹

The centrality of Jesus can not only be seen to have shaped his writing but it also shaped the way he lived. Despite being far from perfect, Nouwen's intense devotion to Jesus resulted in him being viewed by some as simply a saintly figure. Robert Durback, a friend of Nouwen, said "...I just saw in him a man who was a Christ figure if ever I met one. In my estimation, he was a very saintly man. He was very much configured to Christ. That would be my definition of a saint."⁶²

Henri Nouwen then was a man who was influenced by a diverse range of sources yet, both in his

⁵⁸ LaNoe, D. (2000). *The Spiritual Legacy of Henri Nouwen*. Continuum. pg 20.

⁵⁹ Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 9.

The primacy of the Gospel of John in Nouwen's spirituality is observed by many and in Buemer's assessment he actually "derives most of his spiritual insights from John's gospel. Nouwen's spirituality is thoroughly Johannine."

Buemer, J. (1997). *Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking For God*. Crossroad Pub. Co. pg 155.

⁶⁰ Nouwen, H. J. M., & Jonas, R. A. (1998). *Henri Nouwen: Writings*. Orbis Books. pg xl.

⁶¹ Ibid, pg xxii.

⁶² Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg 153.

writing and his personhood, was most significantly shaped by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Nevertheless, Nouwen was also inescapably human and, as a result, like all other humans, he was a man who never fully “arrived” on the spiritual path.

It is right to think about Henri Nouwen as a “*mystic between polarities*.” Not only is such a characteristic emblematic of his own conceptualization of the spiritual life, but it was also characteristic of who he was as a person. Beumer’s biographical portrait is titled “Henri Nouwen: a *Restless Seeking for God*” because over the course of Nouwen’s life he was indeed restless, always on the move.⁶³ This restlessness seemed to be driven most of all by a constant search for integration and an ever deepening spiritual understanding of all things. Indeed, as Richard Rohr assessed, the Franciscan priest and well-known Catholic contemplative and author, “For [Nouwen], all of life was interconnected in some mystical way. Nouwen’s entire existence, though by all measures far from perfect, seemed always to be heading and gravitating toward fuller, higher, wider, and deeper aspects of integration. His constant movement in this direction appeared effortless and unforced.”⁶⁴ The constant movement towards deeper levels of integration is just as evident with regard to his sexuality as it is for every other dimension of his. Indeed, as we will see in the next chapter, in the analysis of the artifacts of sexuality present in Nouwen’s

⁶³ This began from the time he was a child, Beumer wrote that Nouwen was “...an enormously lively child. He was very active, ever in motion, and always busy (Beumer).” It is said that as a child “Henri enjoyed life, but he was always impatient, as if life were sometimes an unbearable waiting for the coming reign of God, the full embrace of his Abba. (Jonas). This characteristic of Nouwen was witnessed in his childhood and lasted his entire life, never diminishing, perhaps exhibited most clearly at the end of his life by the admonitions of psychologists, physicians, and his dearest friends that it was imperative for him to “slow down” because his overbooked schedule and staggeringly busy pace was quite literally killing him. His friend, Robert Jonas, wrote that in the wake of the shock and grief of Nouwen’s sudden death that “there was a voice within me that cried out ‘See what you’ve done? You’ve killed yourself with overwork!(Jonas)’”

Beumer, J. (1997). *Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking For God*. Crossroad Pub. Co. pg 19.
 Nouwen, H. J. M., & Jonas, R. A. (1998). *Henri Nouwen: Writings*. Orbis Books. pg xxiii.

⁶⁴ Hernandez, W. (2012). *Henri Nouwen and Spiritual Polarities: A Life of Tension*. Paulist Press. pg 3.

life and writing, Nouwen's constant movement toward deepening levels of integration is what ultimately allows him to move from a place of deep self-estrangement to a place of deepening self-reconciliation with regard to his sexuality.

This chapter, "*From Norms to Nouwen: Situating the Study*," has sought to properly situate this study by establishing a proper foundation for this thesis' proposed investigation. In order to do so it fulfilled three "situating tasks:" first, establishing the norms of hermeneutical studies and explicitly discussing the ways this study aligns with such norms; second, accounting for the unavoidable interpretive influences present in this thesis by openly disclosing and evaluating the researcher's context and motivations; and third, by sufficiently introducing the person and writing of Henri Nouwen, establishing a broader and more holistic understanding of him, an understanding which might be neglected otherwise in a narrow analysis of his sexuality. The purpose of completing these three situating tasks has been to ensure that the interpretive work and the resulting findings remain viable, credible, and fruitful. With this done we can now turn to chapter two and the work of analyzing Nouwen's life and writing in view of his gay self.

Chapter 2. *From Estrangement to Reconciliation: Three Levels of Nouwen's Sexual Integration*

In order to retrieve Nouwen as a possible source of wisdom for the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality, interpreting the meaning of his life and writing in view of his gay self for Christian leaders today, it is first necessary to establish a baseline understanding of Nouwen and his sexuality. Given that Nouwen never wrote an explicit autobiographical account of his sexuality nor any type of "treatise" concerning the matter of faith and sexuality, in addition to the fact that there has been little effort in secondary studies of Nouwen concerning his sexuality, a rigorous understanding of Nouwen in view of his gay self has largely not existed until now. Even while never writing anything explicit or conclusive about the matter, however, there are many "artifacts" found within both biographical accounts of Nouwen's life and in his own published writing which reveal a great deal about Nouwen's sexuality and his spirituality. These "artifacts of sexuality" bear explicit witness to the development of his thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes not only to his own personal sexual orientation but also to human sexuality in general. Establishing a rigorous understanding of Nouwen and his sexuality therefore is not a task of baseless postulation or conjecture, but a task of surveying his life and writing together, specifically focusing on and analyzing the artifacts of sexuality found within. This chapter will seek to establish such an understanding of Nouwen and his sexuality by analyzing the artifacts of sexuality. In so doing, what becomes readily evident is that over the course of Nouwen's life he moves from a place of deep self-estrangement to a place of deepening self-reconciliation with regard to his sexuality. This movement was made possible by three progressive stages of integration: mind, heart, and body. In describing Nouwen's movement from estrangement to

reconciliation, as told by the artifacts of sexuality, this chapter will therefore have three sections, each corresponding to his three stages of integration.

2.1 Mind

In order to properly understand Nouwen's movement towards deepening levels of integration and reconciliation with regard to his sexuality, it is necessary to first understand the ways in which he was dis-integrated and estranged. Henri Nouwen said that he was aware of his homosexual orientation from the time he was six years old.⁶⁵ Interestingly, from the age of eight, Nouwen never wanted to be anything other than a priest. Some have suggested that the uniquely early awareness of both his sexual orientation and his calling to the priesthood are not unrelated. Researchers on Catholicism and homosexuality have shown that for many, especially before the gay liberation movements of the late twentieth century, there was simply no other conceivable option than to enter holy orders for those who became aware of their homosexuality.⁶⁶ Regardless of the degree to which this may or may not have been an influence for Nouwen, his estrangement to his sexuality is seen most clearly as a result of his social and familial context, his formation in seminary and his graduate study in psychology.

⁶⁵ Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 74.

⁶⁶ In a 2019 awarding winning and New York Times best selling sociological and journalistic study done on Roman Catholicism and homosexuality, which was published in a book titled *In the Closet of the Vatican: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy*, the French author Martel suggests that, based on his quite extensive research and observations, prior to the gay liberation movements of the 70s and 80s, gay adolescents had very few options apart from entering holy orders. He wrote that "For a long time... [those] who discovered that they were homosexual, or who had doubts about their inclinations, chose the priesthood. So these pariahs became initiates and made a strength of a weakness." Martel, F. (2019). *In the Closet of The Vatican: Power, Homosexuality, Hypocrisy*. Bloomsbury Continuum. pg. 3.

Born in 1932 in the Netherlands, Nouwen grew up in Europe during a time when, socially and religiously, there was a strong return to pre-war traditional values and religious norms which were characteristically homophobic.⁶⁷ Laurent's brother told me that "from his religious tradition, which was a very strict, conservative Catholic approach and in the social setting of the time he was born, it was quite a strict situation in which homosexuality was simply conceived of as a kind of illness or a punishable deed. Coming out of this culture, Henri must have experienced a fear. I would not deny that fear. In general, however, in his generation, all of sexuality was suppressed."⁶⁸ Laurent mentioned that this suppression and "suspicion" of sexuality was also present in Nouwen's own family.⁶⁹ This burgeoning estrangement from his self and his sexuality would only be heightened in seminary.

At eighteen years old in 1950, Nouwen went off to seminary education and biographer Ford observed that "...the climate of priestly formation in the 1950s forbade special friendships. Seminarians were expected to lead disciplined, holy lives, mistrusting the body and their own emotions."⁷⁰ Nouwen would inherit a deep suspicion of his body and sexuality which would render him self-estranged and dis-integrated. Nouwen's friend Robert Jonas wrote that "[Henri]

⁶⁷ Biographer Beumer wrote "the 1950s were industrious years, but they were also very traditional. Norms and values, traditions and customs, all reverted to their proper places, both in the church and in society. In contrast to what many had hoped for during the war years, the political and religious establishment tried to return to conditions as they had existed before the war." Beumer, J. (1997). *Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking For God*. Crossroad Pub. Co. pg 18.

Homophobia is defined by Britannica as "culturally produced fear of or prejudice against homosexuals." Anderson, E. (2016, November 22). homophobia. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/homophobia>

⁶⁸ Laurent Nouwen. (2021, September 10). "Interview with Laurent Nouwen" [In Person in Rotterdam, the Netherlands].

⁶⁹ Laurent mentioned that even their mother viewed anything other than sexual relations for explicitly "reproductive purposes" as taboo.

⁷⁰ Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg 10.

often felt guilty and ashamed of his sexual feelings... He had inherited a longstanding Christian suspicion of sexuality, often interpreted as ‘the evil desires of the flesh’ in conservative circles.”⁷¹ This deepening self-estrangement was further intensified after his ordination and in his graduate studies in psychology.

Following his ordination at twenty five years old he got special permission from his archbishop to begin a seven year doctoral study in 1957 in clinical psychology at the Catholic University of Nijmegen, which was rare at the time.⁷² At the end of his studies he got accepted for a fellowship in a program for psychiatry and religion at the Menninger Institute in Topeka, Kansas in the United States. This is where he became “spiritually adult” and while growing a lot he also was becoming increasingly disturbed by his sexual orientation. Ford wrote that “at Menninger he became more acutely aware of his homosexuality, which he saw as a disability, and it started to disturb him greatly.”⁷³ The distress and estrangement he felt in regard to his sexuality is easy to understand especially as the world of psychology that he had been immersed within still classified homosexuality, according to the American Psychiatric Association, as a “sociopathic personality disturbance” and it was not dropped as a diagnostic category until 1973.⁷⁴ Now in his thirties, one can only imagine the dissonance and turmoil he would have been experiencing with regard to his estranged relationship with his sexuality. How was he to reconcile himself to the reality of his homosexual condition when the religious institution he

⁷¹ Nouwen, H. J. M., & Jonas, R. A. (1998). *Henri Nouwen: Writings*. Orbis Books. pg lv.

⁷² Indeed, this was during the time when psychology dismissed religion as “neurotic” and Christianity dismissed psychology as “atheistic,” secular and even evil. Nouwen was part of a rare few who saw them not as enemies and who sought to meaningfully integrate the two.

⁷³ Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 91.

⁷⁴ Drescher J. (2015). “Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality.” *Behavioral sciences* (Basel, Switzerland), 5(4), 565–575. <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs5040565>

lovingly belonged to held homophobic and moralized judgements of the matter and his clinical psychological training taught him to understand his homosexual condition as a “sociopathic personality disturbance” to be cured? His first steps away from this self-estrangement and towards reconciliation would be made possible by way of the integration of his mind.

The integration of the mind is witnessed clearly in the 1969 first edition of his first published book, *Intimacy: Pastoral Psychological Essays*.⁷⁵ Included as the third chapter of the book is an essay titled “Homosexuality: Prejudice or Mental Illness?” In it Nouwen observes that due to homosexuality being a “loaded subject” that both “attracts and repels us at the same time,” one’s feelings toward the topic “tend to be vague and confused.” He writes that “perhaps the only thing we can do is clarify: not only our confused thoughts, but even more, our mixed emotions.”⁷⁶ By way of analyzing two different perspectives on the “problem of homosexuality” he articulates that the goal of his discussion is to “come to a fearless and relaxed understanding of a problem which is a source of suffering for many people.”⁷⁷ Some things he suggests in the article were better received than others, for instance he does suggest that “changing” ones orientation is not only possible but also the *preferable* “solution.”⁷⁸ Nevertheless, he explicitly

⁷⁵ Nouwen was offered a position at Notre Dame immediately following his time at Menninger. Despite initially wanting to return to the Netherlands, he decided however to stay for two years and teach. This was his first academic position. This book is a collection of psychological essays and lectures from his time as a lecturer of psychology at the University of Notre Dame.

⁷⁶ Nouwen, H. J. M. (1970). *Intimacy: Pastoral Psychological Essays* (1st ed.). Fides Publishers. pg 38.

⁷⁷ Ibid, pg 39.

⁷⁸ Despite the fact that he does not prescribe this in a blanket way, some within the LGBT community were critical of and hurt by this suggestion, and the mixed response he received actually led to him removing the entire chapter from subsequent editions of the book. In my interview with Gabrielle Earnshaw, who was the leading archivist for the Henri Nouwen Archives for nearly two decades, she suggested that Nouwen removing this chapter as a result of reader response was “quintessential Henri” because Nouwen was tremendously compassionate and it was never his intention to harm people or inhibit their relationships with God.

Earnshaw, G. (2021, September 30). “Interview with Gabrielle Earnshaw” [Online via Zoom].

cautions against “over moralizing” the matter as it is both pastorally unhelpful and unproductive, often leading to harmful rejection, misunderstanding, and discrimination. He concludes that those who are “unsuccessful” in changing their orientation or who are uninterested in attempting to should be loved, respected, and embraced.⁷⁹ He also encourages the need for self disclosure for gay people who are closeted and in distress about their sexuality. Ultimately, what we see in this essay is Nouwen’s explicit attempt to integrate his mind by “clarifying and reconciling his thoughts and feelings” about sexuality. While he only does this from a “safe distance” in the article by approaching it exclusively from a psychological perspective (as opposed to an autobiographical one), there is a biographical account from this exact period of his life in which Nouwen seeks out spiritual care from a psychiatrist monk in order to address “something” which was “distressing him greatly,” more than likely referring to his sexuality.⁸⁰ This evidences his personal engagement and private efforts to begin to reconcile his thoughts and feelings about his own sexuality and thereby integrate his mind. Nevertheless, as is the explicit purpose of the article, Nouwen can be seen to arrive at a more “fearless and relaxed response” to the matter of homosexuality, and as a result, we can witness his first step in his movement from self estrangement towards reconciliation.

⁷⁹ He writes “it does not make sense to push him or try to change him. It is much more important to relate to him on the basis of reality, to show understanding and to prevent any form of rejection of him as a human being...”

Nouwen, H. J. M. (1970). *Intimacy: Pastoral Psychological Essays* (1st ed.). Fides Publishers. pg 52.

⁸⁰ Given what we know about Nouwen and his life at this time, is not unlikely that what was “disturbing” him was his sexuality, although it is important to note that it may have only been one thing among a few for which he was seeking counsel for. Nouwen spoke to John Eudes Bamberger who happened to be both a monk and psychiatrist, and according to John Eudes “Nouwen was going through a difficult time in his life, experiencing deep (and, for him, unparalleled) anguish over his vocation.” He said that Nouwen “came with considerable stress and crisis and I think he left in peace.” Interestingly, the book *Intimacy* is actually dedicated “to John Eudes.”

Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 92.

2.2 Heart

In the next period of Nouwen's life he can be observed to descend from the head to the heart with regard to the integration of his self and his sexuality. After a few years back in the Netherlands following his time at Notre Dame University, he was recruited to teach pastoral theology at Yale Divinity School which he agreed to on certain conditions.⁸¹ The integration of the heart is witnessed clearly in two published texts from this period.

The first text which bears witness to the integration of his heart is an essay titled "The Self Availability of the Homosexual" which was included in a 1971 book of collected essays by various authors titled *Is Gay Good? Ethics, Theology, and Homosexuality* and was developed from the thinking of the Dutch psychiatrist W. G. Sengers.⁸² In short, the article is about "the need for gay and lesbian people to be themselves in all circumstances, for both their spiritual and emotional health."⁸³ Nouwen writes "In a culture in which homosexual behavior is quite easily associated with abnormal behavior, and referred to in terms of pathology, it is quite understandable that a man or a woman who experiences homosexual feelings will be inclined to

⁸¹ Nouwen had been approached by the Dean of the Yale University Divinity School, Colin Williams, who had been so impressed by his book *Intimacy* that he wanted Nouwen to come and teach pastoral theology. At thirty-nine years old in 1971, Nouwen accepted the offer on some rather bold conditions and moved back to the United States. The conditions that Yale accepted, the ones that Nouwen put forth as the conditions under which he would accept the offer to teach were: 1) he would not be expected to write a dissertation 2) within three years he wanted a permanent appointment 3) within five years he wanted to become a full professor and 4) his writing would meet only his own criteria and would not be measured "according some scientific yardstick." His time at Yale would become one of the most fruitful periods of his life as he published eleven books in ten years.

LaNoue, D. (2000). *The Spiritual Legacy of Henri Nouwen*. Continuum. pg 21.

⁸² Given how taboo it was for him to write so openly about the topic, as well as how "brilliant" the article is, it is curious to note that it is one of the least well known writings of Nouwen. ("Brilliant" according to biographer Michael Ford.)

⁸³ Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 141.

disown himself or herself from these feelings and put them in the periphery of his experience.”⁸⁴

This self-disowning and self-estrangement leads to psychological and spiritual suffering. The challenge for the homosexual person is to overcome the “inner resistance” to their homosexual human condition which results from their homophobic and moralized environments and claim their feelings as truly their own or, in other words, to integrate them.⁸⁵ Nouwen writes

“homosexual [feelings], just as heterosexual feelings, touch the core of a man’s internal life and he who pretends not to have them is like a man who pretends to be able to live without a heart.

But when man is able to overcome his resistance and make his homosexual feelings available to himself and recognize them as belonging to the center of his own life, he will be in a situation in which he can relate to them on a realistic basis.”⁸⁶ Here we see Nouwen explicitly

conceptualizing the task of integration of the heart: if one is going to “live from the heart” they must make their own experience available to themselves, claiming and accepting it as truly

theirs. Interestingly, this act is then what makes the possibility of a moral life attainable at all. He poignantly articulates that Christian morality does not advocate for the denial of feelings but only

⁸⁴ Nouwen, H. J. M., Oberholtzer, W. D. (Ed.). (1971). *Is Gay Good? Ethics, Theology, and Homosexuality*. Westminster Press. pg 207.

⁸⁵ There are two forms of inner resistance for the homosexual person: repression and suppression. Both do damage and harm to the psychological and emotional wellbeing of the homosexual person. Repression, the first form of resistance listed, is when a homosexual person denies their inclinations not only to others but primarily to themselves. Nouwen writes “By doing this, a man cuts himself off from his own most personal, intimate, and creative feelings and forces himself to ‘evacuate’ to the safe place of cerebral life.... It is obvious that this kind of denial does great harm to the personality” as it “easily creates emotional poverty.” The second and less severe form is “suppression” and this is when a homosexual person knows and understand their own feelings but are ever cautious not to communicate them to anyone else, “tortured by the fear” that other people might discover them. Nouwen says “Through this fear the homosexual suffers much from isolation even when he is with many others, since he constantly has to pretend that he is ‘normal’ and is never in a position where he can be himself and express his real feelings.”

Nouwen, H. J. M., Oberholtzer, W. D. (Ed.). (1971). *Is Gay Good? Ethics, Theology, and Homosexuality*. Westminster Press. pg 208-210.

⁸⁶ Nouwen, H. J. M., Oberholtzer, W. D. (Ed.). (1971). *Is Gay Good? Ethics, Theology, and Homosexuality*. Westminster Press. pg 210.

a “responsible relating” to them. He writes that “Jesus in no way judges feelings or emotions. He only asks us not to deny, distort, or prevent them, but to make them available for God's love.”⁸⁷

While Nouwen is still writing about the subject in a distant manner, using psychology and the theory of Dr. Sengers as the entry point into the discussion, the ideas he theorized about in this article will be worked out in a much more personal way in the second key text from this period of his life.

In Nouwen’s 1975 book *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life*, Nouwen moves from this “self availability” concept as a psychological theory considered at a safe distance, to a practice he is evidently personally undertaking.⁸⁸ In this text, which was “more personal” than anything he had ever written previously, he writes that the time has come for him to stop “anxiously avoiding the pain of accepting the responsibility for my own life.”⁸⁹ While still writing about his sexuality in a concealed matter, it marks the moment that he personally begins living what he only wrote about previously in theory: becoming self available and thereby integrating with and living from his heart. Biographer Beumer wrote “What [Nouwen] advocated

⁸⁷ Ibid, pg 210.

⁸⁸ *Reaching Out* is considered a pivotal work in Nouwen’s oeuvre by almost all commentators. Not only for the personal shift it signifies in Nouwen but also because it marks the first time he set out to write a “concise description of Christian spirituality.”

LaNoue, D. (2000). *The Spiritual Legacy of Henri Nouwen*. Continuum. pg 25.

⁸⁹ Nouwen, H. J. M. (1975). *Reaching out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 8.

up to now only in general... he now applied directly to himself.”⁹⁰ This development in Nouwen, bearing witness to his further progression from estrangement to reconciliation, is not only evidenced in these two published “artifacts” but is also in the biographical accounts in which Nouwen can be seen to speak out against overly moralized views of sexuality. In his view, moralizing the matter of homosexuality not only prevents the kind of personal integration necessary for homosexual persons to relate realistically to themselves but it also leads to overt social discrimination.⁹¹

After ten fruitful years at Yale, Nouwen became restless and lost, evidently now “self-available” but struggling with the practical implications of relating realistically to his sexuality, especially as a vowed celibate priest. Many biographers and friends agree that the dissonance he increasingly feels is partially a result of the tension between his public image as an increasingly well-known Catholic priest and spiritual author and a privately self-available gay man who was closeted to his growing religious readership. How was he to reconcile these things? Was it

⁹⁰ Beumer, J. (1997). *Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking For God*. Crossroad Pub. Co. pg 33.

As a result it is easy to understand why *Reaching Out* has especially resonated with Nouwen’s LGBT readership. One gay reader of Nouwen’s book commented that “I was struggling with depression, the church’s view of homosexuality and a strong desire to be still and alone with God... Nouwen’s writings resonated, with profound reality and integrity. Here was a man who articulated my personal struggles with clarity, gentleness and empathy.”

Ford, M. (2004). *Disclosures: Conversations Gay and Spiritual*. Darton, Longman, and Todd. pg 49

⁹¹ This is evidenced in the biographical account of his 1976 advocacy in defense of Ensign Vernon E. Berg III who was going to be discharged from the military simply because he was homosexual. The case had been brought to Nouwen’s attention and he was asked to make a statement in Berg’s defense to which he responded “I’d be happy to.” Nouwen wrote a letter on his behalf advocating that Berg’s homosexuality was not adequate basis to question his capacity or ability to do the job and was wrongful discrimination. One other academic who wrote a letter in defense of Ensign Berg was Dr. John Boswell, an assistant professor of history at Yale during Henri Nouwen’s tenure. Boswell is famous for his book *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* which was published in 1980 and caused quite a stir in Christian spheres with its suggestion that the Bible, when interpreted with context in mind, is actually morally neutral towards homosexuality.

Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg 66.

possible to? What would happen if he came out to his readership about his sexuality? He loved and was deeply committed to his priesthood, to the Catholic church, and to helping others on their spiritual journey, how would his being homosexual impact these things? Nouwen felt spiritually homeless, uncertain about his vocation, unsure how to reconcile his public and private worlds without causing scandal and harm and, as a result, grew increasingly restless. What follows is what some biographers refer as an “interlude period” in his life.⁹² During this period he accepted a position to teach at Harvard University and there are two particular biographical artifacts from time which reveal his growing turmoil concerning what his sexuality meant for him practically.

In 1982, at fifty years old, Nouwen was recruited to teach Christian Spirituality with an emphasis on Liberation Theology at Harvard University. The first biographical artifact concerning sexuality during Nouwen’s time at Harvard is that he seemed to take a more traditionalist approach to homosexuality. It was said that “some claim he was ruthlessly unsympathetic to a number of gay men at that time because of his allegiance to [catholic] church teaching, telling them that the only way they could be acceptable to God was strictly to obey the church’s law on celibacy...”⁹³ Ford wonders about this suggesting that “perhaps as a loyal servant of the church and world-renown priest, he felt obliged to uphold traditional teaching - but more probably he was becoming more acutely aware of his own struggles in this area and his

⁹² There are three big things that took place during this “interlude period:” first was his recurring visits to Latin America, second was his teaching position at Harvard and lastly was his introduction to L’Arche, an international organization that works with people who have developmental disabilities. The interlude period spanned from 1981-1985.

⁹³ Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 141.

warnings to students might have been reminders to himself.”⁹⁴ Perhaps maintaining a “hardline traditional stance” was a way for him to manage his dissonance and keep public suspicions about his sexuality to a minimum.⁹⁵ The second biographical artifact from this period, and a second means for him to manage his growing dissonance, is in Nouwen’s commissioning of a custom icon for him to “consecrate his homosexual feelings to Christ.” Robert Lenz, the artist who was commissioned by Nouwen, said “no one could understand some of Henri's problems at Harvard, or why he ordered that icon from me, without recognizing that he was a homosexual human being who was basically being grilled over the fire of church law and his own conscience, as formed by another era of spirituality. That explained why he looked so tortured.”⁹⁶ This would explain his explicit reaffirmation of traditionalist teaching and his commissioning of a special icon, both served as reminders to himself to honor his vows of celibacy. Nevertheless, Nouwen had integrated with his mind and heart and, even while still uncertain of the practical implications of his sexual orientation, he still needed to integrate with a part of himself that he had been deeply estranged from, his body.

2.3 Body

While Nouwen would continue to wrestle for the rest of his life with the practical tension between his public and private worlds, he does nevertheless take definitive steps in the last years of his life to address the tremendous estrangement he experienced with regard to his body, which

⁹⁴ Ibid, pg 14.

⁹⁵ Ford wrote “being on a pedestal had a price, when reactionary lay people in the Catholic world seemed to be lying in wait for the scent of scandal so they could be the first to tip off the authorities.” Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded Prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday pg 143.

⁹⁶ Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 142.

stemmed from his childhood and formative years. This integration of his body would happen in a number of ways but is perhaps especially clear in three distinct biographical events.

The first was his experience of becoming a caretaker for a disabled young man named Adam in 1986 at L'Arche Daybreak.⁹⁷ Adam was unable to speak or care for himself and had frequent seizures. Nouwen bathed, groomed, dressed, fed, and transferred him, among other things. This was a profound experience for him because in order to care for Adam well, he had to really be present to Adam and Adam's vulnerable body. In order to be present to Adam and his body, however, he discovered that he had to be present to himself and his own body as well. The insights from this relationship would result in a book titled *Adam: God's Beloved*, and marks a definitive moment for Nouwen when he was learning to simply *be with* his body.⁹⁸ The second biographical event related to embodiment was that of a severe emotional collapse and "dark night of the soul" which Nouwen experienced as a result of the breakdown of very close relationship in 1988. This was an event that many have observed was tied in a significant way, although not exclusively, to his sexuality and his intense desire of intimacy (but not only sexual intimacy). The emotional breakdown was so severe that Nouwen had to spend over six months away at a facility in intensive psychotherapy and spiritual care. Part of his therapeutic

⁹⁷ In 1985 Nouwen decided to leave Harvard in search for something more and accepted an invitation from Jean Vanier, one of the founders of L'Arche, to come stay at the L'Arche community in Trosly-Breuil, France for a year. L'Arche is an international organization that centers on building community around individuals with developmental disabilities. During this year he made a visit to another one of the L'Arche communities called Daybreak, located outside of Toronto, Canada. A profound trip both for him and the community, he was ultimately offered a position as their community pastor. He accepted it and finally felt like he was coming "home." Daybreak would be where he would spend the remaining ten years of his life.

LaNoue, D. (2000). *The Spiritual Legacy of Henri Nouwen*. Continuum. pg 31.

⁹⁸ Nouwen, H. J. M. (1997). *Adam, God's Beloved*. Orbis Books. pg 20.

intervention involved being physically held and embraced by his therapists.⁹⁹ It was during this time that he came to realize that he was called to not merely *be with* his body, but to *befriend* his body.¹⁰⁰ The third event which catalyzed his integration of the body was a near death experience. Hit by the mirror of a passing car one day in 1990, he ended up in the ICU with internal bleeding and only narrowly escaped death. Despite the physical trauma of it all, spiritually he felt very at peace with his brush with mortality and this proved to have a mystical quality to it. Ultimately he felt assured of God's love and acceptance for him and for the first time he felt *safe* in his body, as though his body (along with its sexual orientation) was not his enemy or hindrance or threat to God's love and acceptance of him.¹⁰¹ Thus these three events enabled him to begin to integrate

⁹⁹ From January to July 1988 he would live under the spiritual care of two directors at treatment facility in Winnipeg. Here he would receive psychotherapy and spiritual direction everyday from a male and female guide. He would pray everyday laying prostrate on the floor, often while crying, and he would keep to himself and do the blessed sacrament in his room. Part of the treatment included him just being physically held and embraced, in a non-sexual manner. A friend reflected during this time that "It responded to a craving within him to be held physically in a nonsexual way. The sessions took place fully clothed on a bed for comfort's sake but in the context of an office. There in the arms of this male therapist, in a primal state, he could be held very tightly and weep, scream, writhe, and be caressed, all the things a parent does when holding an infant or small child. He was held unconditionally with an enormous amount of nurture and tenderness, which was for him very healing."

Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 170.

Joans reflected that "...at the Winnipeg house, Henri [learned] to appreciate his body, to trust the emotions and sensations that he found there. He [had learned] the importance of allowing himself to be physically held and to know that such holding did not have to be erotic. He was beginning to understand that he should pay some attention to diet and exercise."

Nouwen, H. J. M., & Jonas, R. A. (1998). *Henri Nouwen: Writings*. Orbis Books. pg lviii

¹⁰⁰ Nouwen wrote to himself as a spiritual imperative during his recovery from the dark night that "Increasingly, you have come to see your body as an enemy that has to be conquered. But God wants you to befriend your body so that it can be made ready for the Resurrection. When you do not fully own your body, you cannot claim it for an everlasting life."

Nouwen, H. J. M. (1998). *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom* (First Image Book Ed). Doubleday. pg 19.

¹⁰¹ Professor Michael Christiansen, a former student of Nouwen's and an author on Nouwen's spirituality wrote, "After his accident, Henri didn't seem to care as much about academic respectability or systematic thought but began to speak 'from eternity into time,' which was a prophetic state of mind and heart... Looking at his most mystical works, this new mission fulfilled a life-long quest, a deeper need and longing for a transcendent spirituality- a timeless realm where there is unconditional love and acceptance."

Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg 132.

his body with his sexuality and his spirituality, first by simply learning to *be with* his body (Adam), then by *befriending* his body (the emotional break down) and finally by *feeling safe* in his body (the near death experience). Insights from these events of bodily integration unsurprisingly became present in his various writings from that period.¹⁰² One important text to especially consider is that of *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*.

One of Nouwen's most widely known texts, in addition to being viewed by many commentators and scholars as representative of Nouwen's "most mature thought" concerning the spiritual life, is his 1995 *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. Emblematic of the life journey Nouwen himself had made, this was a text that he actually drafted during his incredibly intensive recovery period from his emotional breakdown and dark night.¹⁰³ The book is the result of his meditations on Rembrandt's painting of the Biblical parable concerning the prodigal son. Nouwen came to see that the painting "put him in touch with his deepest self. It became a summary of his life, but also a call for him to become something new."¹⁰⁴ Sue Monsteller, a close friend and colleague at Daybreak, once said to Nouwen "Whether you are the younger son or the elder son, you have to realize that you are called to become the father."¹⁰⁵ The

¹⁰² For example, themes present in the biographical accounts of his dark night of the soul and his near death experience, appear clearly in his 1992 book *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. We see here a crystallization of Nouwen's thought as he emerges from his dark night and his near death experience. There is more clarity than ever concerning the truth of his integrated self's acceptability, belovedness, and safety. Nouwen writes "self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the 'Beloved.' Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence... From the moment we claim the truth of being the Beloved, we are faced with the call to become who we are. Becoming the Beloved is the great spiritual journey we have to make." Nouwen, H. J. M. (1992). *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. Crossroad. pg 26.

¹⁰³ The book jacket itself even reads "on the road to reconciliation" as if not explicitly depicting Nouwen's own movement between the polarities of estrangement and reconciliation.

¹⁰⁴ Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 173.

¹⁰⁵ Nouwen, H. J. M. (1995). *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*. Image. pg 22.

final step of homecoming, as Nouwen articulates it in this book, is to “claim for himself the authority of true compassion” and to take on the role of the father. Nouwen writes “Rembrandt, who showed me the Father in utmost vulnerability, made me come to the awareness that my final vocation is indeed to become like the Father and *to live out his divine compassion in my daily life*. Though I am both the younger son and the elder son, I am not to remain them, but to become the father... it is a step that is essential for the fulfillment of the spiritual journey (emphasis added).”¹⁰⁶ This marks a profound moment in Nouwen’s life, a shift in his conceptualization of the spiritual life. Not only must he trust that God welcomes him (and his homosexual condition) home in an unconditional embrace of divine love, assuaging his deepest fears from childhood of being unlovable and unacceptable; but he also realizes that it is not enough to simply remain there. In order to fulfill the spiritual life he must become like the father and begin to welcome others home in the same regard. Here one can see Nouwen making yet another step from the place of estrangement to reconciliation, not only trusting that his whole human condition (sexuality included) is being held in the loving embrace of God but also recognizing that he must truly *live from* that deeply integrated place in order to embrace others. Nouwen’s “claiming the authority of true compassion” is exhibited in a number of biographical artifacts of sexuality from this period, both in public and private ways.

Publicly this was seen in his acceptance to finally attend and speak at the conference for the National Catholic AIDs network in 1994 and 1995, just two years before his death.¹⁰⁷ During the incredibly polarized and stigmatized public health crisis, especially when there was a

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, pg 121.

¹⁰⁷ He had been invited numerous times in previous years but had not accepted the invitation because he was hesitant or wary of the scandal it might cause.

“deafening silence of mainstream Christianity” concerning the epidemic, Nouwen’s act of AIDS advocacy was as courageous as it was compassionate.¹⁰⁸ The talks he gave at each of the conferences were “moving,” “audacious,” and even unprecedented, especially in that he mentioned that he did not view the AIDS epidemic as “God’s curse” or judgement on gay people, contrary to what many prominent Christians leaders were explicitly claiming at the time.¹⁰⁹ This artifact concerning sexuality in Nouwen’s life reveals the great progress he had made towards inner reconciliation and reveals Nouwen claiming the “authority of compassion” that he wrote about in *Return of the Prodigal Son*.¹¹⁰ Beyond these public acts, however, Nouwen’s deepening self-reconciliation is also evidenced in private ways.

¹⁰⁸ Frank Perelli, an author on the AIDS epidemic and pastoral care wrote in his 1991 book titled *Ministry to Persons with AIDS: A Family Systems Approach* that pastoral caregivers during the AIDS epidemic “need to be courageous because criticism for working with PWAs will probably follow. People will question the clergy person’s sexual orientation, motives, and orthodoxy.” Nouwen’s acts, along with the other pastoral caregivers, were acts of courageous compassion. Perelli, R. J. (1991). *Ministry to Persons with AIDS: A family systems approach*. Augsburg. pg 41.

For more on the “deafening silence of mainstream Christianity” see: Snowden, F. M. (2019). “HIV/AIDS: The Experience of the United States.” In *Epidemics and Society* (pp. 429–447). Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvqc6gg5.25>

¹⁰⁹ Such as prominent evangelical leaders like Rev. Jerry Falwell, who in 1987, said “AIDS is a lethal judgment of God on the sin of homosexuality and it is also the judgment of God on America for endorsing this vulgar, perverted and reprobate lifestyle.” As well as Billy Graham who in 1993 said: “Is AIDS a judgment of God? I could not be sure, but I think so.” For more see: Kowalewski, M. R. (1990). “Religious Constructions of the AIDS Crisis”. *Sociological Analysis*, 51(1), 91–96. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3711343>

¹¹⁰ Ford suggests that this marked a “turning point” for Nouwen with regard to his understanding of human sexuality. In the first year Nouwen gave a moving talk about befriending death. The second year he made an even more audacious talk in that he affirmed the significant and special role the romantic partner had in the life of a gay man dying of AIDS, whom he knew personally. It was said the “he spoke movingly of a lay Catholic high school chaplain called Peter who was dying of AIDS and cancer, a young man who had dedicated his life to God but now feels angry and abandoned.” Nouwen not only mentioned admiration for Peter’s gay romantic partner in his talk but also, a few months later, at Peter’s funeral, Nouwen would ensure not only that Peter’s partner would be rightly situated on the front row alongside the bereaved parents and family (which was very uncommon and taboo at the time), but also publicly acknowledged him for his prominent, especially intimate and significant role he played in Peter’s life. In this way, the AIDS epidemic allowed Henri to connect with his sexuality from a more objective and safe place of compassion and advocacy. Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 58.

Over the years, Nouwen had slowly begun developing friendships with gay people and always treated them with profound levels of compassion, respect, and empathy. Claiming the “authority of compassion” seemed to allow him to celebrate the good he witnessed in gay people and in the same-sex couples he befriended. This is evidenced in many ways but one example is in the biographical account of Nouwen explicitly blessing some gay friends in Canada who were entering a civil partnership, acknowledging that they were entering into a “holy commitment.”¹¹¹ This kind of compassion and respect meant that those who were gay and knew him never felt condemnation from him, even while he remained personally loyal to the Roman Catholic tradition. People such as Maurice Monette, himself a former Catholic priest, and his husband Jeff Jackson, were a gay couple that Nouwen befriended and shared openly with. Maurice told me, in reflecting if Nouwen was ever condemning, saying “No, no - he never did that. I think that's again part of his deep faith in his mysticism, if you wish, that he was never rejecting. But he always leaned back on the traditional.”¹¹² Indeed it seems it was Nouwen’s “deep faith in his mysticism” which enabled him to exercise the “authority of compassion” as it is witnessed in these public and private acts. This deep trust in his mysticism, which was characteristic of his later years of life, was realized most fully in what would become the final passion of his life, the circus.

¹¹¹ It was also evidenced in the pastoral guidance he offered to people. In response to one woman who in a distressed state disclosed her lesbian orientation, Nouwen said, “with love and compassion in his eyes,” that her sexual orientation was a “blessing from God (Ford).” There is also a letter dated December 26, 1995, just nine months before Nouwen’s death where he responds to a young, evidently gay, man struggling with loneliness and singleness in which he says “But please trust that Jesus loves you so much that he will send to you the man you are waiting for...But keep trusting that your sexuality is your gift and that you are called to love deeply and generously (Nouwen/Earnshaw).” Ford, M. (1999). *Wounded prophet: A Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 70. Nouwen, H. J. M., & Earnshaw, G. (2016). *Love, Henri: Letters on the Spiritual Life* (First Edition). Convergent. pg 336.

¹¹² Monette, M. (2021, September 3). “Interview with Maurice Monette” [Online Via Zoom].

Near the end of Nouwen's life he became enamored with the circus, in particular a trapeze group from South Africa called the Flying Rodleights.¹¹³ The Rodleights taught Nouwen new insights about the body and the spiritual life after the group leader told Nouwen that "Everybody always thinks the hero of the trapeze is the flyer. I am a flyer. I do all these things- saltos, triples, and spectacular things. People applaud, and I think I am great. But the real hero is the catcher. I can only fly freely when I know there is a catcher to catch me."¹¹⁴ Nouwen began to see the whole spiritual life modeled in the bodies of the trapeze artists and he became very passionate about it. Jonas reflects "Henri felt that this image captured the essence of our relationship with God. In the spiritual journey, we must throw ourselves toward God and then trust that God will catch us. If, out of anxiety, we try to catch God or to control how God should catch us, we may fall."¹¹⁵ This vision became so strong for him that he began working on a book about the "theology of the trapeze" and it was going to be unlike anything he had written before.¹¹⁶ With being able to "trust the catcher," it generated in him an invigorated and deepened trust in his mystical vision rooted in an understanding of the loving Divine embrace being inclusive and welcoming to all people, which seemed to give him the ultimate freedom to exercise the "authority of compassion" in his daily life.

While it is clear that Nouwen progressively moved to a place of deepening self-reconciliation, it is important to note that he never fully "arrived." As some have observed

¹¹³ Initially he met them while at a performance with his father in 1991 and was so enamored by them that he introduced himself, after which a friendship with the group developed.

¹¹⁴ Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg 136.

¹¹⁵ Nouwen, H. J. M., & Jonas, R. A. (1998). *Henri Nouwen: Writings*. Orbis Books. pg lix.

¹¹⁶ He died unfortunately before he was able to finish this book, although he had begun working on the manuscripts and had made countless notes about the matter.

“Nouwen wrestled publicly with his demons, trying to write his way into a freedom he never quite realized.”¹¹⁷ Indeed, he never fully reconciled the tension between his public and private worlds, nor did he reconcile the tension of his loyalty to the priesthood and his human intimacy needs (a struggle he undoubtedly shared with many other vowed celibate priests).¹¹⁸

Nevertheless, many friends attest to the fact that Nouwen seemed to have at least “arrived” at a fully reconciled place with regards to his sense of belovedness and his sense of safety in the embrace of God. Maurice concluded that “I don't think he could have made the leap in the end [to fully reconcile and fulfill his intimacy needs]. But he did, I think, make it in the sense of knowing God's love. If you want to use theological language, he had ‘assurance.’ He really knew that he was being accepted and he was learning to accept himself.”¹¹⁹ His friend Robert Jonas observed something similar and wrote that “Henri Nouwen remained a complex person to the end, but it is also true that in his final years many friends felt graced to see him grow in self-acceptance and inner peace - the fruit of his lifelong intention to receive God’s love fully.”¹²⁰ Indeed, it is easy for anyone to see the remarkable contrast between Nouwen the young man who was taught to be suspicious and fearful of the body and its sexuality, in contrast to Nouwen at the end of his life, who had a profound mystical vision of communion with God lived from his wholly integrated and embodied human condition and a confident mystical trust in his un-diminishable Belovedness. Ultimately then, it seems that Laurent Nouwen was more than correct

¹¹⁷ Schneiders, S. M., Lescher, B. H., & Liebert, E. (Eds.). (2006). *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in honor of Sandra M. Schneiders*. Paulist Press. pg 62.

¹¹⁸ Some have suggested, such as Maurice Monette, that the turmoil over the tension between his public image and his private life is part of what contributed to his early death and heart attack.

¹¹⁹ Monette, M. (2021, September 3). “Interview with Maurice Monette” [Online Via Zoom].

¹²⁰ Nouwen, H. J. M., & Jonas, R. A. (1998). *Henri Nouwen: Writings*. Orbis Books. pg lxix.

in his assessment when he said “you cannot speak about the same Henri in 1957 when he was ordained, as the Henri at the end of his life. He was not the same person. He went through a lot of processes and changes, very strongly.”¹²¹ In the same way then that he conceptualized the whole spiritual life as a constant movement between polarities in which one never fully arrives, so too can Nouwen’s own journey with his sexuality be understood.

This chapter, “From Estrangement to Reconciliation: Three Levels of Nouwen’s Sexual Integration” set out to understand Henri Nouwen’s sexuality in a manner in which has not been done before is secondary literature about him. In order to do this, it surveyed his life and writing together, focusing on the numerous scattered “artifacts of sexuality” present in both biographical accounts of his life and in his own published work and analyzing them together. In so doing, it became readily evident that, over the course of his life, Henri Nouwen moved from a place of deep self-estrangement to a place of deepening self-reconciliation with regard to his sexuality. This movement was made possible by his constant movement toward deepening levels of integration, witnessed in three progressive stages: mind, heart, and body. As a result, this chapter fulfills the first aim of this thesis which was to arrive at a more rigorous understanding of Henri Nouwen in view of his gay self, redressing the mystery that has largely existed concerning such until now. With such an understanding of Nouwen and his sexuality established, we can now turn to chapter three which will attempt to determine the meaning and implications of this understanding for Christian leaders navigating the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality.

¹²¹ Laurent Nouwen. (2021, September 10). “Interview with Laurent Nouwen” [In Person in Rotterdam, the Netherlands].

Chapter 3. *From the Moral to the Mystical: Hermeneutical Determinations for Today*

With a more rigorous understanding of Nouwen and his sexuality established in the previous chapter, we can now turn to the hermeneutical task of this thesis which is determining the relevant implications of such an understanding for Christian leaders navigating the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality. In other words, we can now answer the question: can Henri Nouwen, in view of his gay self, be retrieved as a source of wisdom for the contentious discussion of the Christian faith and sexuality today? If so, in what way? To answer this question it is perhaps helpful to begin by considering one of Nouwen's deepest intuitions about the matter of faith and sexuality. In an interview four years before his death Nouwen revealed this intuition saying:

I haven't found yet the best ways to write about sexuality because I still have the feeling that in order to write well about sexuality *you have to speak about it from a place of mysticism and not just from the place of morality*. When you speak about morality, we deal with questions about what you're allowed to do and what you're not allowed to do, what's good and what's not so good, and all that. I do think there are a lot of discussions on that level and I don't feel any need to join in these discussions, not that they are useless - that's [just] not my vocation. But I have a very strong feeling that there's something to be said about sexuality, and about intimacy and sexuality, which has to come from a place of communion... Every human being lives a sexual life, whether you're celibate or married or whatever. Sexual life is life. That sexual life has to be lived as a life that deepens the communion with God and with our fellow human beings. And if it doesn't, then it can be very harmful. I haven't found the right language for it yet and hope I will one day (emphasis added).¹²²

Unfortunately he died without ever having found the "proper language" to write anything explicit about this approach. Many have lamented this reality and have affirmed that Nouwen's intuition to "think mystically" was correct. Sister Jeannine Gramick, the cofounder of a Catholic ministry for gay and lesbian people, and someone who personally knew Nouwen said "To see

¹²² Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg 57-58.

sexuality as mystical is the correct approach. It's taking sexuality out of the category of rules and regulations, and considers sexuality as a life force... I would loved to have seen Nouwen develop the mystical dimension to sexuality more fully."¹²³ Even while this intuition was left unexplored in his. own writing, one may wonder if his life offers a model of moving "from the moral to the mystical" with regard to sexuality. Indeed it seems, when analyzed and interpreted more closely, Nouwen's personal movement from estrangement to reconciliation may just provide a model for Christian Leaders today of moving from a moral to a mystical perspective of sexuality.

Therefore, after establishing the correlation between Nouwen's personal movement from estrangement to reconciliation with a movement from a moral to a mystical perspective of sexuality, this chapter will seek to determine the relevant implications of such an interpretation for today by: first, evaluating the task of "integration," especially as it was the "vehicle" which ultimately moved Nouwen from estrangement to reconciliation; second, by delineating the respective impact a moral and a mystical perspective come to bear on the task of integration as is evidenced by Nouwen's own life; and finally, determining the ultimate implications of such for Christian leaders navigating the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality.

In order to arrive at a rigorous (if even only approximate) determination of what Nouwen meant to "think mystically" about sexuality, it is important to first establish outright that Nouwen's personal movement from estrangement to reconciliation is directly correlated to a movement from a moral to a mystical perspective of sexuality. Our analysis in chapter two concerning the artifacts of sexuality readily reveal this to be true. It is clear that Nouwen inherited a moral perspective of sexuality in that he was born and reared within a very strict,

¹²³ Ibid, pg 69.

conservative catholic, and traditionalist society in which “being homosexual” was not only plainly viewed as a sin, something morally wrong, but also all of sexuality in general was taboo; this is not to mention his graduate studies of psychology in which to “be homosexual” was “bad” because to be homosexual was to be “mentally ill,” to be “broken,” to be in need of some kind of repair, healing, or cure. This moralized perspective of sexuality is thereby directly correlated with Nouwen’s self-estrangement. Given Nouwen’s life long mystical search for union with God, however, characterized by a “constant movement” towards deepening levels of integration (as Richard Rohr assessed), Nouwen can be seen to increasingly move away from a moral to a mystical perspective of sexuality and thereby achieve greater self-reconciliation, something many of his close friends were relieved to bear witness to. This is witnessed clearly in the artifacts of sexuality, especially in the stark contrast between Nouwen in his early life and Nouwen at the end of his life, operating from a deep trust in his “trapeze-inspired” mystical vision. Indeed, it seems it was his deepening trust in his mysticism near the end of his life which is correlated with his deepening self-reconciliation. With an understanding of the correlated nature of his movement from estrangement to reconciliation with a movement from a moral to a mystical perspective, we can now more closely evaluate the task of “integration” as it was the “vehicle” which moved Nouwen towards reconciliation.

3.1 The Task of Integration

For Nouwen, as a pastoral psychologist, he believed that each person is tasked with living an integrated life and that Christian leaders, in their pastoral roles, have an important part to play in the developmental task of integration. What does integration amount to? Essentially, integration amounts to increasingly claiming and accepting one’s basic human condition, in all

its dimensions and particularities. As scholar Yolanda Dreyer wrote in an article which explores the spirituality present in Nouwen's pastoral psychology, "The pastoral relationship facilitates people to become whole or integrated, encompassing their mental health and well-being in the broadest sense. Wholeness includes the dimensions of body, soul, and spirit in interrelationship with one another."¹²⁴ Being able to accept and claim the entirety of one's human condition is vital for anyone to relate realistically and effectively to themselves and the world around them. Dreyer writes that "Integrated people function as a whole in order to deal effectively with all life situations."¹²⁵ While the concept is simple enough, it is important to understand why integration is difficult and what prevents it.

Integration is not easy as there are many aspect of one's basic human condition that one may not like or want to accept, especially aspects of one's self that are sources of suffering, pain, or marginalization. Interestingly, the last book published by Nouwen before he died was a book related to this subject. The book, *Can You Drink The Cup?*, is based upon the idea that "to drink the cup" is "to accept and befriend the totality of who we are."¹²⁶ Nouwen writes in the book, offering a clear image of the integrative task:

Drinking the cup of life is fully appropriating and internalizing our own unique existence, with all its sorrows and joys. It is not easy to do this. For a long time we might not feel capable of accepting our own life; we might keep fighting for a better or at least a different life. Often a deep protest against our "fate" rises in us. We didn't choose our country, our parents, the color of our skin, our sexual orientation. We didn't even choose our character, intelligence, physical appearance, or mannerisms. Sometimes we want to do every possible thing to change the circumstances of our life. We wish we were in another body, lived in another time, or had another mind! A cry can come out of our

¹²⁴ Dreyer, Y. (2003). "Beyond Psychology: Spirituality in Henri Nouwen's Pastoral Care." *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 59(3), pg 715–733.

¹²⁵ *Ibid*, pg 715–733.

¹²⁶ Nouwen, H. J. M., & Jonas, R. A. (1998). *Henri Nouwen: Writings*. Orbis Books. pg lxxv.

depths: "Why do I have to be this person? I didn't ask for it, and I don't want it." But as we gradually come to befriend our own reality, to look with compassion at our own sorrows and joys, and as we are able to discover the unique potential of our way of being in the world - we can move beyond our protest, put the cup of our life to our lips and drink it, slowly, carefully, but fully.... Drinking our cup is not simply adapting ourselves to a bad situation and trying to use it as well as we can. Drinking our cup is a hopeful, courageous, and self-confident way of living. It is standing in the world with head erect, solidly rooted in the knowledge of who we are, facing the reality that surrounds us, and responding to it from our hearts.¹²⁷

Despite one's own resistance to accepting their self, Nouwen understood that accepting one's basic human condition was integral to psychological and spiritual wellbeing.

Nouwen believed that when one overcomes their naturally arising resistance and achieves deepening levels of integration, one often discovers that such acceptance somehow becomes a source of healing and transformation in itself. As Dreyer writes about Nouwen's pastoral care, "Accepting the basic human condition is the beginning of the process of liberation and hope." One of the reasons for this is creates the possibility of community, solidarity, and true belonging. Dreyer continues, "The shared human condition opens up the possibility for people to find hope and creative ways of mobilizing their paralyzed lives together, in community and with one another in the presence of God."¹²⁸ In this way, at it's best, rather than jeopardizing one's lovability and acceptability, claiming one's human condition is a courageous act that creates the possibility of being truly known and thereby truly loved at all. Beyond the ways integration is vital of psychological well-being, so too is it integral for spiritual well-being. Near the end of his life, as he increasingly integrated the body into his mystical vision, Nouwen began to understand that the spiritual life is exclusively accessed and lived from and with the *body*, from the

¹²⁷ Nouwen, H. J. M. (2006). *Can You Drink the Cup?* (10th anniversary ed). Ave Maria Press. pg 30-31.

¹²⁸ Dreyer, Y. (2003). "Beyond Psychology: Spirituality in Henri Nouwen's Pastoral Care." *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 59(3), pg 715-733.

embodied human condition. In Laurent's assessment, Nouwen came to view "spirituality as embodied - it's in the body of you, it's in the body me, in the body of everyone - you cannot exclude anybody from that. At the end of his life, Henri became very interested in 'spirituality in the flesh' and this idea that from our flesh or with our flesh, we can live a sacred life."¹²⁹ If the spiritual life is accessed from and with our flesh (and thereby so is the spiritual experience of Divine love), then when one tries to subvert, deny, distort, or evade their "flesh," their embodied human condition, they inadvertently evade God's love and presence as well. This idea is captured poignantly in the Orthodox Father Anthony Bloom's saying which goes: "As long as we ourselves are real, as long as we are truly ourselves, God can be present and can do something with us. But the moment we try to be what we are not, there is nothing left to say or have; we become a fictitious personality, an unreal presence, and this unreal presence cannot be approached by God."¹³⁰ In this way Nouwen understood integration as vital not only to the psychological well-being of people, but also their spiritual well-being as accepting one's basic human condition was directly correlated to being able to accept God's love and presence.

Ultimately then, for Henri Nouwen, everyone is tasked with living an integrated life, a life in which one increasingly accepts the entirety of their self. This integration is essential for relating realistically and effectively to themselves, to others, and the world around them. Despite integration being something in which everyone must undertake for healthy lives, it is also true that everyone faces a natural arising resistance to such integration. Nevertheless, each person must work to face and overcome this resistance in order to discover the liberation, healing, and

¹²⁹ Laurent Nouwen. (2021, September 10). "Interview with Laurent Nouwen" [In Person in Rotterdam, the Netherlands].

¹³⁰ Bloom, A., & Wilson, T. (1970). *Beginning to Pray*. Paulist Press. pg N/A.

hope that integration brings, especially as integration is vital to psychological and spiritual wellbeing. With such an understanding of the integrative task we can now consider the respective implications that a moral and a mystical perspective of sexuality have with regard to integration, especially as is evidenced in Nouwen's correlated personal movement from estrangement to reconciliation.

3.2 The Moral and the Mystical and their Impact on Integration

While all people are tasked with living integrated lives and all people already experience naturally arising resistance which inhibits such integration, with regard to human sexuality and LGBT persons, moralized perspectives serve to *especially* inhibit the integrative task. Indeed, moralized perspectives of sexuality lead to self-estrangement and dis-integration because of the ways they overtly increase the inner resistance to oneself. Nouwen speaks of this in his article "The Self Availability of the Homosexual" when he wrote that "In a culture in which homosexual behavior is quite easily associated with abnormal behavior, and referred to in terms of pathology, it is quite understandable that a man or a woman who experiences homosexual feelings will be inclined to disown himself or herself from these feelings and put them in the periphery of his experience. The idea of being or becoming 'a homosexual' is so loaded with fear that it is really impossible for many to relate realistically to these real feelings as being their own."¹³¹ If to be heterosexual is to be "good" and to be homosexual is to be "bad," then the person who finds themselves as attracted to the same sex, under no volition or choice of their own, will inherent a fearful and resistant response to their own condition and will thereby be unable to integrate with themselves. If a gay person wants to be deemed "good," their only option is to live a life of dis-

¹³¹ Nouwen, H. J. M., Oberholtzer, W. D. (Ed.). (1971). *Is Gay Good? Ethics, Theology, and Homosexuality*. Westminster Press. pg 207.

integration, continually repressing and suppressing themselves, denying, distorting, and concealing their self in order to fit the moralized vision of “good.” It is important to see that this inner resistance to one’s own human condition not only inhibits integration then, robbing the individual of the healing and hope which come from achieving integration, but it also exacerbates their suffering. Nouwen writes that if a homosexual person “thinks, talks, or acts as if this feeling is not there at all, he mutilates his own emotional life and is in danger of a psychological paralysis.”¹³² Indeed, quoting Dr. Sengers, Nouwen writes that “deep-seated resistance against the existing homosexual feelings in man is one of the main reasons for the great suffering of the homosexual.”¹³³ This kind of suffering is clearly witnessed in Nouwen’s life in many ways, but especially in his lifelong disembodiment, as well as his unremitting

¹³² Ibid, pg 210.

¹³³ Ibid, pg 209.

distrust of love.¹³⁴ Thus, what we see from Nouwen's own life and writing is that moralized perspectives of sexuality inhibit the vital task of personal integration by heightening one's inner resistance to themselves and this inner resistance leads to psychological and spiritual suffering.

Whereas a moral perspective of sexuality can be seen to clearly inhibit integration by adding to the inner resistance of the homosexual persons and responding to the matter in fear, a mystical perspective of sexuality can be seen to facilitate integration by creating a framework by which a person can respond to their own condition fearlessly and freely. In fact, for Nouwen, the Christian Gospel is "good news" partially because it frees people to face their condition so fearlessly. He writes that "The gospel makes it overwhelmingly clear that Christ came to reveal

¹³⁴ This suffering which results from the self-estrangement and dis-integration naturally arising from moralized perspectives of sexuality is seen in Nouwen's life in at least two clear ways: first in his severe disembodiment and, second in his distrust of love. In a moralized perspective, the body which has homosexual inclinations, rather than being received as a "morally neutral" thing, is instead viewed as an overt threat or a danger to the person's lovability, acceptability, and safety. A threat to one's safety is especially evident when eschatological judgments are made about sexual orientation. How is any homosexual person to feel safe in their own body if they internalize the moral judgment that "gay people go to hell?" Their body, with its sexual attractions, then literally threatens their "eternal safety," it becomes their enemy to quell and their only option is exist dis-embodied and to feel unremittingly unsafe within themselves. Nouwen exhibited this kind of deep suspicion of his body and we see the great lengths he had to go to at the end of his life in repairing the damage it caused him. He had to work on simply "befriending his body" and healing from the years of his dissociation and bodily estrangement. Nouwen wrote to himself as a spiritual imperative during his emotional breakdown and intensive psychotherapy during his dark night of the soul that "Increasingly, you have come to see your body as an enemy that has to be conquered. But God wants you to befriend your body so that it can be made ready for the Resurrection. When you do not fully own your body, you cannot claim it for an everlasting life. (Nouwen, *The Inner Voice of Love, 1998*)." Beyond disembodiment, however, Nouwen's dis-integrative suffering was also exhibited in his distrust of love. Inasmuch as Nouwen was resistant to accept his homosexual condition was the degree to which he was inadvertently resistant to accepting God's love. As our discussion in 3.1 revealed, which explored the interrelated nature of his sexuality and his spirituality, Nouwen progressively came to understand that his spiritual experience of Divine love was inescapably enmeshed with his embodied human condition. In other words, his ability to accept God's unconditional love was dependent on his ability to accept his own human condition. The resistance to accept himself had resulted from a moralized perspective of sexuality meant that it also increased his resistance to God's love. A friend of Nouwen's observed this in him saying saying "I don't think he was really able to accept the unconditional love of God because he could not accept the unconditional human quality of who he was until the last three or four years of his life (Ford, 2018)."

Nouwen, H. J. M. (1998). *The Inner Voice of Love: A Journey Through Anguish to Freedom* (First Image Book Ed). Doubleday. pg 19.

Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg 85.

the real human condition and to challenge people to face it without fear.”¹³⁵ A free and fearless response to the human condition is a direct corollary of Nouwen’s mystical theology, upheld perhaps most clearly by two mystical truths affirmed in his oeuvre: first, nothing human is alien to God, and second, the irrevocable and eternal love of each person. With regard to the first, Beumer, in his reflection concerning the “mystical theology” present in Nouwen’s oeuvre, wrote that for Nouwen “God has entered into the reality of creation (incarnation). Although separate from creation, God is nevertheless fully joined with it. Precisely because reality (humanity and the world) is from God, created by God, then nothing in or about that reality is alien to God.”¹³⁶ The homosexual human condition, therefore, along with all human conditions, is not something alien, foreign, or threatening to God.¹³⁷ Secondly, one of the most central concepts of Nouwen’s mysticism is the notion of each persons’ inherent and irrevocable “Belovedness.”¹³⁸ Nouwen wrote “Being the Beloved expresses the core truth of our existence”¹³⁹ and he wrote to a friend in 1995, just a year before his death that "Our first and most important spiritual task is to claim that

¹³⁵ Nouwen, H. J. M. (1970). *Intimacy: Pastoral Psychological Essays* (1st ed.). Fides Publishers. pg 62.

¹³⁶ Beumer, J. (1997). *Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking For God*. Crossroad Pub. Co. pg 144.

¹³⁷ This view requires, however, an understanding of sexuality as “a life force,” as something inherent and intrinsic to the human condition. In other words, being homosexual or heterosexual is not something that one chooses, wills, or determines by act of volition but are simply expressions of the basic human condition. Indeed, Nouwen wrote in his article “Homosexuality: Prejudice or Mental Illness” that “...we are invited to understand the homosexual existence as an expression of our basic human condition....”
Nouwen, H. J. M. (1970). *Intimacy: Pastoral Psychological Essays* (1st ed.). Fides Publishers. pg 52.

¹³⁸ Nouwen wrote in his book *Life of the Beloved* that “Long before any person spoke to us in this world, we are spoken to by the voice of eternal love. Our preciousness, uniqueness, and individuality are not given to us by those who meet us in clock-time - our brief chronological existence - but by the One who has chosen us with an everlasting love, a love that existed from all eternity and will last through all eternity.”

Nouwen, H. J. M. (1992). *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. Crossroad. pg 49.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, pg 37.

unconditional love of God for ourselves.”¹⁴⁰ This notion is derived directly from his mystical vision. Hernandez wrote, in speaking about Nouwen’s mysticism, that “When we enter the mystical life, we enter into an intimate and unifying communion with God, who created us in and out of love.”¹⁴¹ It is easy for one to understand how a mystical perspective, rooted in these two mystical theological truths, would create a framework in which one is able to freely and fearlessly face their own human condition and claim it as their own, trusting that their human condition does not threaten their lovability and acceptability. It is for this reason that a mystical perspective of sexuality facilitates integration, helping a gay person to overcome the resistance they feel towards their self. Beyond the very different implications a moral and mystical perspective have on the vital task of personal integration, it is important to also consider social implications of these perspectives as well.

The moral and the mystical perspective of sexuality also have considerable social implications. Not only does a moral perspective of sexuality lead to personal dis-integration and self-estrangement but so too does it lead to social dis-integration and estrangement. The reason for this is that it naturally leads to the exclusion and marginalization of the people or groups of people who do not fit the moral vision of “good.” Suspicion arises about “the other” and give birth to prejudice, stigma, and marginalization which can lead to very destructive results. Specifically with regard to sexuality, a moralized perspective often results in homophobia, which

¹⁴⁰ Nouwen, H. J. M., & Earnshaw, G. (2016). *Love, Henri: Letters on the Spiritual Life* (First Edition). Convergent. pg 333.

¹⁴¹ Hernandez, W. (2015). *Mere spirituality: The Spiritual Life According to Henri Nouwen*. Christian Journeys/from SkyLight Paths Publishing. pg xvi.

is “the expressed fear, dislike, and prejudice of gay people.”¹⁴² Such homophobia not only prevents the possibility of a homosexual person from integrating socially, but it also becomes a vehicle of violence and harm when it leads to overt discrimination and bigotry. Nouwen himself was deeply concerned about the reality of this kind of discrimination which often results from moralized perspectives.¹⁴³

Alternatively, a mystical perspective of sexuality not only facilitates personal integration but so too does it facilitate social integration. Beumer, reflecting on Nouwen’s mysticism, said that “the closer we come to God, the closer we come to all our brothers and sisters in the human family. God is not a private God. The God who dwells in our inner sanctuary is also the God who dwells in the inner sanctuary of each human being.”¹⁴⁴ In this way, by personally claiming the truth of one’s own Belovedness it allows one to more readily see, witness, and call out the shared Belovedness of others. Nouwen himself wrote “God’s love is a love that includes all people - each one in his own or her uniqueness. It is only when we have claimed our own place in God’s love that we can experience this all embracing, non-comparing love and feel safe, not only with God, but also with all our brothers and sisters.”¹⁴⁵ The suspicion, prejudice, and hostility toward “the other” in moralized perspectives gives way to compassion, solidarity, and hospitality.

¹⁴² For more see: Anderson, E. (2016, November 22). “Homophobia.” Encyclopedia Britannica. Accessed on January 2, 2022 from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/homophobia>

¹⁴³ This is evidenced in the artifacts of sexuality related to his advocacy in defense of Ensign Berg, a man being discharged from the military purely on the basis of his homosexual orientation. In his letter he highlighted the fact that moral judgements are dangerous when they lead to such overt discrimination. Ford, M. (2018). *Lonely Mystic: A New Portrait of Henri J.M. Nouwen*. Paulist Press. pg 65.

¹⁴⁴ Beumer, J. (1997). *Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking For God*. Crossroad Pub. Co. pg 152.

¹⁴⁵ Nouwen, H. J. M. (1992). *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. Crossroad. pg 54

Ultimately, whereas a moral perspective leads to a fearful response to the diverse human condition by deeming some conditions as “good” and others “bad,” preventing both personal and social integration and resulting in estrangement and dis-integration; a mystical perspective, by affirming two mystical theological truths, offers people a free and fearless place to integrate personally and socially, enabling them to accept what is true not only about their own human condition but also the human condition of everyone they encounter. Now that we have more closely observed Nouwen's personal movement from estrangement to reconciliation and have, as a result, come to an understanding of the impact a moral and mystical perspective have on the vital task of human integration, we can now discuss the relevant implications of such an understanding for contemporary Christian leaders navigating the discussion of Christian faith and sexuality. We will discuss two implications: first, the implications of this for the Christian leader's pastoral function and second, the implications of this for Christian leader's Christian integrity.

3.3 Implications for Christian Leaders Today

The first implication these two perspectives have for Christian leaders today is with regard to the pastoral function. Dreyer asserts, when speaking about Nouwen's pastoral psychology, that “The pastoral relationship facilitates people to become whole or integrated... the aim is to create conditions which are conducive to healing and integration.”¹⁴⁶ If a Christian leader can be pastoral inasmuch as they help *facilitate* integration, then our discussion concerning the differences between a moral and a mystical perspective of sexuality reveal plainly that the pastoral function cannot be fulfilled when moralized perspectives of sexuality are

¹⁴⁶ Dreyer, Y. (2003). “Beyond Psychology: Spirituality in Henri Nouwen's Pastoral Care.” *HTS Theologiese Studies / Theological Studies*, 59(3), pg 715–733.

employed. Indeed, for Christian leaders to maintain moral perspectives of sexuality in the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality, which inhibit the integration of gay people both personally and socially, is for them to ultimately thwart their ability to be truly *pastoral*.

Furthermore, and as a result, Christian leaders who employ a moralized perspective of sexuality must reckon with the fact that they are thereby actively hindering the psychological and spiritual development of gay people within their sphere of influence. In Beumer's assessment of Nouwen's mystical theology he said "Ministers have a lot to unlearn; their dogmatic and ethical jackets are too tight.... Dogmatic paddling hinders a free spiritual experience of faith, and if the spiritual leaders of a church cannot break loose from this practice, then they themselves prevent the development of the vitally important community."¹⁴⁷ This is evidenced clearly when considering that Nouwen believed that "being the Beloved" expressed the "core truth" of the human existence and that claiming that truth is "greatest task" of the spiritual life. He wrote "Self rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the 'Beloved.'"¹⁴⁸ With such a conceptualization of the spiritual life, it is clear that moralized perspectives of sexuality, in the ways they lead gay people to self dis-ownership, self-estrangement, and self-rejection, are actually antithetical to the spiritual life and in direct opposition to spiritual development. Beyond the determination that moralized perspectives of sexuality jeopardize the pastoral function, it is also important to consider the implications of such for Christian integrity.

¹⁴⁷ Beumer, J. (1997). *Henri Nouwen: A Restless Seeking For God*. Crossroad Pub. Co. pg 142.

¹⁴⁸ Nouwen, H. J. M. (1992). *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. Crossroad. pg 28.

Moralized perspectives of sexuality in the ways they not only inflict psychological and spiritual suffering on gay people by keeping them personally dis-integrated, but also in the ways that such perspectives result in prejudice, discrimination, and bigotry, that is social dis-integration, can ultimately be seen to undermine the very integrity of one's Christian faith. Nowhere else is this more clearly evidenced perhaps then in the historical accounts of the "Christian response" to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s in North America. As Robert Perelli wrote in 1991, a therapist, scholar, and writer on pastoral care and AIDS, "[the moralized view of] AIDS has exacerbated discrimination against publicly gay people by employers, insurance companies, health care providers, churches, housing authorities, and the government."¹⁴⁹ This discrimination and homophobia ultimately meant that gay men with AIDS were often neglected or abandoned entirely by their families and the Church, leaving their end-of-life needs to complete strangers to manage. This is not to mention many of the bodies of deceased gay men which were left unclaimed by families too ashamed by their sons' sexuality, behavior and AIDS diagnosis.¹⁵⁰ Earl Shelp, a prominent writer on pastoral care and the AIDS epidemic determined in his 1989 article titled "AIDS, High Risks Behaviors, and Moral Judgments" that "moral judgments about sex and intravenous drug use, the primary modes by which the AIDS virus is transmitted, have helped to inhibit a compassionate response to people

¹⁴⁹ Perelli, R. J. (1991). *Ministry to persons with AIDS: A family systems approach*. Augsburg. pg 33.

¹⁵⁰ Distinguished professor of Christian Ethics, Dr. David Gushee, wrote in his 2020 book *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* speaking about the evangelical response to the AIDS crisis that he has personally "known gay people who stood vigil over their dead friends when those friends' Christian families would not even deign to bury them." Gushee, D. P. (2020). *After Evangelicalism: The Path to a New Christianity* (First edition). WJK, Westminster John Knox Press. pg. 233.

For more see: Koon, D. (2015, January 8). "Ruth Coker Burks, the cemetery angel." *Arkansas Times*. Accessed on January 15, 2022 from <https://arktimes.com/news/cover-stories/2015/01/08/ruth-coker-burks-the-cemetery-angel>

touched by AIDS. This situation is contradictory to the church's ethos, placing the church in an untenable, ambiguous position.”¹⁵¹ Indeed, the extent to which moralized views of sexuality result in explicit discrimination, as was evidenced in the AIDS epidemic, is the extent to which the integrity of one’s Christian faith is called into question. Shelp writes “Where moral judgments impede or deny supportive, compassionate ministries to people in need, Christians fail in their witness and the love command is denied.”¹⁵² Nouwen himself wrote that “Action with and for those who suffer is the concrete expression of the compassionate life and the final criterion of being a Christian.”¹⁵³ Therefore, in the ways that moralized perspectives of sexuality result in social dis-integration and estrangement, as evidenced in discrimination and prejudice which inhibits Christian compassion, Christian leaders who endorse such perspectives thereby jeopardize the very integrity of their Christian faith.

Ultimately, our discussion concerning Nouwen’s model of moving from a moral to a mystical perceptive of sexuality has revealed that gay people, along with all other people, must be afforded the opportunity to achieve integration, both personally and socially. Not only is such integration vital for their psychological and spiritual wellbeing, but it is also the only way they can realistically achieve moral lives. Indeed, given that “morality” is typically the greatest concern for Christian leaders today in the discussion concerning LGBT people and the Christian faith, it is imperative that Christian leaders today realize that “achieving morality” is only

¹⁵¹ Shelp, E. E. (1989). “AIDS, High Risks Behaviors, and Moral Judgments.” *Journal of Pastoral Care*, 43(4), 325–335. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234098904300404>

¹⁵² *Ibid*, pg 325–335.

¹⁵³ McNeill, D. P., Morrison, D. A., Nouwen, H. J. M., & Filártiga, J. (1982). *Compassion: a reflection on the Christian life* (1st ed). Doubleday. pg 28.

realistically attainable *after* one has properly achieved integration. Nouwen writes in his article on the self availability of the homosexual that:

Christian morality in no way advocates the denial of feelings, but only a responsible way of relating to them. Man becomes a moral man only when he is able to face his own real condition and make his decision from there. The homosexual is just as responsible for his way of relating to his sexual feelings as the heterosexual is. But it seems extremely pretentious and even very dangerous to suggest that homosexual feelings are less human, less real, or less authentic than heterosexual feelings. Feelings can never be considered good or bad, moral or immoral, in themselves. Only the way man relates to them can. If a man feels a strong erotic love for another man, he experiences a real deep human feeling which tells him very much about himself. If he thinks, talks, or acts as if this feeling is not there at all, he mutilates his own emotional life and is in danger of a psychological paralysis. But when he makes his real feelings available to himself and recognizes them as his own, he is able to make a moral decision about the way of life he wants to live.¹⁵⁴

Therefore, for Christian leaders who are committed to not only maintaining their pastoral function and the integrity of their Christian faith in the contentious discussion of faith and sexuality, but are also truly committed to *helping gay people achieve realistically moral lives*, then it is imperative that they move from a moral to a mystical perspective of sexuality. Indeed, if Christian leaders are as concerned with “upholding morality” in the contemporary discussion as many say they are, then such leaders will feel compelled by Nouwen’s closeted life to actively advocate for and help facilitate the integration of gay people.

This chapter, “From the Moral to the Mystical: Hermeneutical Determinations for Today,” has revealed that, while Nouwen never wrote anything explicit about his intuition to “think mystically” about sexuality, by using his own personal movement from estrangement to reconciliation he can be seen to offer a model of moving from a moral to a mystical perspective of sexuality. The reason for this is his personal movement from estrangement or reconciliation is

¹⁵⁴ Nouwen, H. J. M., Oberholtzer, W. D. (Ed.). (1971). *Is Gay Good? Ethics, Theology, and Homosexuality*. Westminster Press. pg 210.

directly correlated with a movement from a moral to a mystical perspective. By establishing a clear understanding of the vital development task of human integration and the respective impact moral and mystical perspectives of sexuality come to bear on it, we came to see that for Christian leaders to not only maintain their *pastoral* function but also the very *integrity* of their Christian faith amid the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality, it is vital that they move from a moral perspective of sexuality to a mystical. For them to continue to endorse moralized perspectives of sexuality is for them to be complicit not only in the psychological and spiritual suffering of LGBT people which results from personal and social dis-integration, but they will also be actively impeding the psychological and spiritual development of LGBT people. All of this perhaps helps us to understand why Nouwen wrote in his book on Christian leadership that:

But for the future of Christian leadership it is of vital importance to reclaim the mystical aspect of theology so that every word spoken, every advice given, and every strategy developed can come from a heart that knows God intimately.... For Christian leadership to be truly fruitful in the future, a movement from the moral to the mystical is required.¹⁵⁵

Indeed, for the Christian leader who wants to engage the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality in ways that are fruitful and faithful and which help gay people achieve realistically moral lives, Nouwen's life and writing in view of his gay self beckons them to adopt a mystical perspective of sexuality. Such an understanding then fulfills the final aim of this thesis which was to arrive at what wisdom might be found within Nouwen's closeted life between polarities for Christian leaders today.

¹⁵⁵ Nouwen, H. J. M. (2002). *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. Crossroad Pub. Co. pg 31-32.

Conclusion

4.1 Going to Places Nouwen Did Not

With the unprecedented events transpiring in the present moment with regard to the Christian faith and sexuality, as is witnessed with the “#OutInChurch” movement in Germany, it is clear that Christian leaders are being forced to think, respond, and engage the matter in new and unprecedented ways. In light of the posthumously revealed insight of Henri Nouwen’s gay sexual orientation, our study set out to determine whether or not Nouwen might be retrieved as a new source of wisdom for Christian leaders today. By seeking to answer the research question of “What does a hermeneutical evaluation of Henri Nouwen’s life and writing, employing a specific analysis of his sexuality, render with regard to Christian leaders navigating the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality?” we were able to fulfill the two aims of this study which were: first, to arrive at a more rigorous understanding of Henri Nouwen in view of his gay self; and second, to determine the meaning and relevance of such an understanding for Christian leaders today.

With regard to the first aim, our analysis of the artifacts of sexuality present in biographical accounts of his life and own published writing allowed us to establish an understanding of Nouwen and his sexuality that has not existed previously in secondary literature about his life. Namely, it revealed that Nouwen, over the course of his life and with regard to his gay sexuality, moved from a place of deep self-estrangement to a place of deepening self-reconciliation by way of three progressive stages of integration. With regard to the second aim, given that Nouwen’s personal movement from estrangement to reconciliation can be seen as directly correlated with a movement from a moral to a mystical perspective of sexuality, it was

determined that Nouwen thereby offers contemporary Christian leaders a model to emulate. In so doing, it confirmed Nouwen's deepest intuition about faith and sexuality, namely that it is insufficient to solely "think morally" about sexuality. Indeed, our study of Nouwen allows us to more readily recognize the plain deficiency, shortcoming, and destructive impact that moralized perspectives of sexuality have in our present context. With current events ranging from a news headline in December 2021 that tragically reads "12-Year-Old Dies by Suicide After Bullies Say He'd Go to Hell for Being Gay," revealing the extreme lengths a young boy evidently had to go to escape the suffering of his personal and social estrangement,¹⁵⁶ to the new Florida State bill advanced on February 17, 2022, nicknamed the "Don't Say Gay Bill," which explicitly restricts discussions of sexual orientation and gender identities in schools and is fueling stigma and social dis-integration of gay students;¹⁵⁷ Nouwen helps us recognize that moralized perspectives of sexuality are still as prominent, destructive, and deficient as ever. As a result, it was determined that for Christian leaders navigating the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality, in order for them to not only maintain their pastoral function and preserve their Christian integrity, but to also help gay people achieve realistically moral lives, it is imperative that they move from a moral to a mystical perspective of sexuality. To do otherwise is for them to remain not only complicit in gay people's personal and social dis-integrative suffering, but also, and as a result, to

¹⁵⁶ Cooper, A. (2021, December 7). "12-YO Dies by Suicide After Bullies Say He'd Go to Hell for Being Gay." Advocate. Accessed on February 2, 2022 from <https://www.advocate.com/news/2021/12/07/12-year-old-boy-kills-self-after-bullies-say-hed-go-hell-being-gay>

¹⁵⁷ Ryan Thoreson of The Human Rights Watch wrote "these restrictions not only prevent students from accessing information that's essential to their health and well-being, but send a discriminatory message that being LGBT is inappropriate or wrong. That message not only stigmatizes LGBT children but can tacitly encourage intolerance and bullying from peers from a young age." Thoreson, R. (2022, February 17). "Florida Advances 'Don't Say Gay' Bill." Human Rights Watch. Accessed on February 24, 2022 from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/17/florida-advances-dont-say-gay-bill>

be actively hindering their psychological and spiritual development. It is perhaps important to note however, that this wisdom retrieved from Nouwen's life can be seen as relevant to both sides of the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality.

One will notice that the "*pro-gay*" and "*anti-gay*" side (as the two polarized sides could be very generally described), are often both fixated solely on moralistic determinations. Both are often preoccupied with establishing and constructing moral apologetic cases surrounding "what is allowed" and "what is not allowed," and arguing why the other side is mistaken in their moral determinations. Nouwen's example reveals that the struggle of gay people and the Christian faith is not purely a matter of "what is allowed" and "what is not allowed" but instead a matter liberating gay people (just like all people) to freely and fearlessly face their human condition and to achieve integration, as only then can matters of morality be realistically addressed. To the extent that both the pro-gay and anti-gay side the contemporary discussion have lost sight of this is the extent to which Nouwen can be retrieved as an especially relevant source of wisdom about the matter. Ultimately it seems that by fulfilling the two aims of this study and thereby retrieving Nouwen a new source of wisdom for today, enables us to go where Nouwen did not.

In discussing Nouwen and his sexuality, Maurice Monette told me that "it would have been lovely to have had [Nouwen] write a final book [on sexuality]... it would have been beautiful to see that struggle expressed. But one person can't do everything, so it's up to other people now, to express it, and to go to places that he hadn't gone."¹⁵⁸ Even if only provisional in nature then, this study of Nouwen's life and writing in view of his gay self can be seen perhaps to do exactly that, "to go where Nouwen did not go." In so doing it can be seen to possibly fulfill

¹⁵⁸ Monette, M. (2021, September 3). "Interview with Maurice Monette" [Online Via Zoom].

one of Nouwen's deepest hopes in his lifelong struggle with his sexuality. In a letter to a friend three months before he died Nouwen said "my sexuality will remain a great source of suffering to me until I die. . . . But I have to trust that the pain will be fruitful."¹⁵⁹ In the ways Nouwen's life and writing, in view of his gay self, increases our wisdom for navigating the contentious discussion of faith and sexuality in such a way that preserves the integrity of Christian faith and the dignity of LGBT people, Nouwen's sexuality can plainly be seen to move well beyond merely a "source of suffering" and into something profoundly fruitful, something by which all of us can benefit. All of which reveals the mystical wisdom of a closeted life between polarities.

4.2 From Limits to Horizons: Revisiting the Difficulties and Possibilities of this Study

Before concluding, it is important to briefly reflect on both the limitations inherent in this study as well as the horizons it opens for further research. To do this I will revisit the limitations or difficulties of this study as they were discussed in chapter one, to abide by the academic recommendations of scholar Belden Lane. The first possibility that my self brought was, given my general affinity to Nouwen, a great deal of optimism concerning his ability to offer something substantive to the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality. The risk was that I might be *overly* optimistic in my interpretation of him, perhaps leading to presumptuous claims. With regard to the analysis of the artifacts of sexuality in chapter two, what became evident was that there were many more "artifacts of sexuality" explicitly present and plainly available than I had initially expected. This meant that there was very little "postulating" about his movement from estrangement to reconciliation. As a result, I remain confident that any assuredness I hold

¹⁵⁹ Nouwen, H. J. M. (2002). *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*. Crossroad Pub. Co. pg xv.

concerning these investigative findings more or less escapes the risk of blind optimism and presumptuous claim as I did my best to ensure that any conclusions made were well supported by textual or biographical evidence, plainly recorded fact, or solid reasoning. With regard to the investigation's corresponding hermeneutical determinations, namely that Nouwen offers a model for moving from a moral to a mystical understanding of sexuality, I remain confident that my interpretation was well founded and reasonable. To whatever extent my general optimism may have influenced the hermeneutical determinations, I am confident that it did not do so to unreasonable ends. Indeed, given Nouwen's own explicitly expressed desire to articulate such a mystical vision (but never doing so before he died), not to mention the norms of hermeneutical methodology in that it allows for one to suggest deeper readings than the author may have envisioned, I remain confident that this hermeneutical determination was warranted, well founded, and relevant.

The other possibility and difficulty discussed in chapter one that my self brought to the study had to do with my own personal experience of navigating questions related to faith and sexuality. This certainly enabled me to provide deeper readings of Nouwen and to draw out particularly nuanced understandings of Nouwen's experience of his homosexuality. I think these nuanced readings are most present in chapter three's exploration of the respective effect moralized views have on the task of integration. Much of Nouwen's experience of suffering that relate to feeling estranged, in many ways, was also my own experience. In this regard, I was able to speak with greater credibility and depth to the specific experience of Nouwen and to the more generalized experience of LGBT people in religious settings which moralize sexuality. The difficulty this dimension of my self implication posed, however, was first in the temptation to

appropriate Nouwen for my own agenda. This however was counterbalanced in my hermeneutical determinations in my attempt to speak about the moral and the mystical in terms of the psychological theory concerning the developmental task of integration. Speaking of the moral and mystical in terms of the task of “integration” such provided a more “objective basis” to consider the implications of the moral and the mystical for today. Nevertheless, the final risk of my self-implication was in the temptation to assert that my own (unavoidable) biases and the readings they generate of Nouwen are normative. This may result in a risk of presenting my own perspective of Nouwen as the *only* perspective or the perspective that is “most correct.” As we saw in the first chapter, however, this temptation is not unique to this study but is unavoidable in any study done in the realm of spirituality. In light of this, I must simply acknowledge the fact that my depiction of Nouwen’s life and writing in this thesis is unavoidably limited because it is only Nouwen as I see him. Thus my interpretation of him and his thought, even if backed with good reason and strong evidence, is inescapably partial and thereby must be open to reinterpretation.¹⁶⁰ With these limitations addressed we can now briefly discuss the horizons this thesis opens up for future study concerning Nouwen and sexuality.

Future studies of Nouwen and sexuality will be well served to do a broader retrieval of sources than I was able to. Indeed, in the investigation of chapter two, the artifacts of sexuality were retrieved from five different biographical accounts of Nouwen’s life, three interviews I personally conducted, as well as a survey of a number of the primarily texts in Nouwen’s published oeuvre. Naturally, it was impossible for me to do a retrieval on *all* sources about

¹⁶⁰ As Philip Sheldrake says in regards to studies of Christian Spirituality, one must learn “to live with the provisional.”

Schneiders, S. M., Lescher, B. H., & Liebert, E. (Eds.). (2006). *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders*. Paulist Press. pg 21.

Nouwen, so in this way my investigation is by no means exhaustive and thereby must remain provisional and partial. Not only were there more individuals I had hoped to interview for my project such as Jim Forest, Sue Mosteller, Ron Rolheiser, among others, but there was also a great deal of material housed in the Henri Nouwen Archives at the University of Toronto that I was simply unable to survey within the scope of this project. Part of the reason for this is that, in the Archives, there is very little that is digitized and accessible online. Therefore, further study of Nouwen and the topic of sexuality would certainly benefit from physically visiting the archives and retrieving upon these additional sources. By retrieving sources that I was unable to include in my analysis, one would be able to broaden, expand, clarify or even offer correction to the investigation and analysis of Henri Nouwen and his sexuality as it is found in this thesis.

With regard to horizons this studies opens up concerning Henri Nouwen and his sexuality, future studies of Nouwen will do well to determine the meaning of his sexuality for interpreting and categorizing his entire body of work, his oeuvre. Indeed, some are quick to make much or little of the posthumous revelation concerning his sexuality. Some in the field of gay theology optimistically suggest that he ought to be interpreted as such and go as far as to label him a kind of “LGBT Saint.”¹⁶¹ Meanwhile, those of more traditionalist traditions assert that either it makes no meaningful difference in the way his work should be understood today or they

¹⁶¹ Such as MCC Minister Kittredge Cherry, although she does admit that Nouwen may have been resistant to this type of categorization.

Cherry, K. (2021, September 20). “Henri Nouwen: Priest and author who struggled with his homosexuality.” *Q Spirit*. Accessed on October 1, 2021 from <https://qspirit.net/henri-nouwen-homosexuality/>

go as far as to view it as a means of discrediting his work altogether.¹⁶² What arises amid these somewhat polarized speculations about the meaning of his gay self are some very consequential questions about his world-renown oeuvre such as: What does Nouwen's "being gay" mean for how his life and writing are to be interpreted posthumously? Can the field of gay theology and gay spirituality reasonably "approach" and categorize Nouwen's oeuvre as such? If so, in what way? Furthermore, what does Nouwen's non-disclosure (and lack of transparency to readers) mean for the relevance and integrity of his oeuvre? Given Nouwen's prominence as one of the most significant spiritual authors of the last century whose writing is still enriching millions of spiritual lives around the world today, these questions seem more than necessary to address. Future studies of Nouwen and his sexuality, therefore, will do well to undertake such inquiry.

¹⁶² Some have even dismissively declared that Nouwen's popularity is due to "little more" than him being a "frustrated homosexual." Such a view seems far too reductionistic however and Laurent's response, Nouwen's brother, to such is that "Henri would be hurt by that" and that such a categorization falls "tremendously short" of a proper understanding of Nouwen. Laurent Nouwen. (2021, September 10). "Interview with Laurent Nouwen" [In Person in Rotterdam, the Netherlands].

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Abstract

This thesis undertakes the largely unexplored interpretive avenue of Henri J.M. Nouwen made possible by the posthumously revealed insight of his gay sexual orientation. Given the self-implicating nature of his literary genre, which is Christian Spirituality, this hermeneutical investigation of Nouwen's life and writing, employing a specific analysis of his sexuality, aims at determining two things: first, to arrive at a rigorous understanding of Henri Nouwen in view of his gay self, redressing the mystery that has existed until now with regard to his sexuality; and secondly, interpreting the meaning and relevance of such an understanding for Christian leaders navigating the contemporary discussion of faith and sexuality. It ultimately confirms Nouwen's intuition that it is necessary for Christian leaders to "think mystically" about sexuality, not only to preserve their pastoral function, but also the very integrity of their Christian faith.