

Peacework: Foreword and Introduction

Henri Nouwen

- Dutch Catholic priest, university professor, psychologist, and prolific author - one of the most popular spiritual writers of our times.
- Born in 1932 in the Netherlands - oldest of four children. Was deeply pious and decided to become a priest at very early age. Educated at the minor seminary in Apledoorn, before going to major seminary at Rijsemburg. Ordained priest in Archdiocese of Utrecht in 1957.
- From 1957-1964 studied psychology at Catholic University of Nijmegen - as well as learning about clinical psychology, also wanted to use psychology to focus on experience of faith/use in spiritual and pastoral care.
- After 2 year residency at Menninger Clinic for Religion and Psychiatric Research, in Kansas, Nouwen went on to join new Dept of Psychology at Uni of ND.
- After time at ND, briefly returned to Netherlands, where completed advanced theological study, before returning to US to teach pastoral theology at Yale from 1971-1981.
- Focus more on popular writings - disliked intellectual detachment of uni/lack of focus on spiritual and pastoral formation/emphasis on ambition and achievement. Persistently restless/self-critical - experimenting with different vocations e.g. 7 month sabbatical at Trappist Monastery in Rochester, New York.
- After leaving Yale, spent 6 months in South America. Maryknoll community in Peru and Bolivia from October 1981-March 1982.

Michael W. Higgins in *Commonweal* -

<https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/priest-writer-mentor-misfit>

Visiting the Museum of the Inquisition in Lima, with its bloody history of torture and oppression, he sees "a powerful reminder of how quickly we human beings are ready to torture each other and to do so often in the preposterous assumption that we are acting in the name of God," commenting further that this "can only be a reason for repentance and humble confession and a constant reminder that what we now condemn with strong voices was an intimate part of the church's daily life only two centuries ago." He excoriates a devotional history that he finds reprehensible, legacy of a self-lacerating Spanish spirituality imported to the New World with the Conquistadores and their zealous friars. Escorting American friends around Lima churches, he is appalled by the detailed, often surgical, depictions of the suffering Christ. One friend is so repulsed by the blood-spattered horrors

that she leaves to wait outside, but Nouwen dives further in, asserting in his journal that “the nearly exclusive emphasis on the tortured body of Christ strikes me as a perversion of the Good News into a morbid story that intimidates, frightens, and even subdues people but does not liberate them.” Then, typically, he proceeds to interrogate himself: “I wonder how much of this has been part of my own religious history, although more subtly. Maybe deep in my psyche I too know more about the deformed Jesus than about the risen Christ.”

- Returned to US, became Professor of Divinity at Harvard in 1983. Split time teaching at Harvard and in theological centre in South America. Resigned in 1985 and then began working as pastor/chaplain at L’arche community in Toronto – remained member of community until his death.
- Died suddenly in Netherlands in 1996 of a heart attack, whilst on the way to Russia to take part in documentary about his book *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. Age 64. Left behind huge legacy – 39 books, hundreds of articles, thousands of letters. Books sold over 7 million copies – been published in more than 35 languages.

<https://www.henrinouwen.org/about-henri-nouwen>

Peacework

- Writing as deeply informed by his own struggles, and challenge to reconcile faith and depression. Difficult to categorize - Mixes theological influences, readings of psychology – reads more pastorally/spiritually authentic - Openness to emotional struggle and vulnerability.
- See this also in writings on social issues which sees the application of the Gospel messages of peace and justice within society as inextricably linked to our inner, personal, spiritual lives. Wrote numerous essays on peace, including such a spiritual perspective.
- In *Peacework* Nouwen reflects on the spirituality of peacemaking, enacted and nourished through prayer, resistance, and community. Written at the height of the Cold War, in early 1980s, when fear that nuclear weapons would be used against Russia. Something which Nouwen had given speeches against e.g. 1970s vigil against Trident – 1980s speak out at anti-war/anti-nuclear rallies.

Foreword: John Dear

‘Henri wrote this meditation as his contribution to the Church and the peace movement, so that those marching and advocating for peace would root their actions in the heart of peace, in Jesus who is the face of the God of peace and in his Holy Spirit of peace. He did

not address the political landscape as much as the inner spiritual landscape. He thought that the only way to help pull humanity back from the brink of global destruction was through our inner conversion of heart and subsequent social, political, and economic transformation.'

- Dear, born 1959 – hugely prominent Catholic American peace activist and prolific author in his own right. Although well-known for his activism and 75 arrests for nonviolent civil disobedience, writes here how encouraged by Nouwen.
- Dear collected the Nouwen's writings available on peace and justice, shortly after Nouwen's death, which were published in *The Road to Peace*. This book comprises these writings, plus others on community and the conclusion.

Breakout Room Questions

Foreword:

- What do you make of Dear's claims that 'the global crises of war, nuclear weapons, poverty, hunger, AIDS, and the threat of environmental destruction... These so-called "political issues" are matters of life and death, which means they are first and foremost spiritual matters" (p.7)?
- What does this mean for you about how we address these issues?

Introduction:

- How do you see Nouwen addressing these issues so far, in the Introduction?
- What do you make of his claim that peacemaking is 'the central task for Christians'? p.15
- Do you agree with his claim that 'the word "peace" has become tainted'? p.17.
- Can you see Nouwen's 'personal experience of God, his insights into pastoral psychology, and his understanding of Christian discipleship' reflected in the Introduction?