

HENRI J. M. NOUWEN




# Intimacy

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To John Eudes

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# 1

## From Magic to Faith

### RELIGIOUS GROWTH IN PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

During the year we are exposed to many events, trivial and significant, which usually don't raise questions unless we pay some special attention to them:

A paratrooper, Captain Ridgway, rowed from Cape Cod to Ireland with his friend. Overwhelmed by the greatness of the ocean and the incredible forces of nature, he found that the medal given to him by the Cape Codders kept him together and gave him words to pray.

One priest, smiling, said to another priest as they left a packed college church at the end of the semester, "The finals are the best proof that man is basically religious."

Little Johnny says, "Hey, Dad, you can't make President Kennedy alive. But God can, can't He? Cause he can do everything!" And we think: "Isn't little Johnny cute?"

You read about an astronaut, symbol of modern science, smuggling a cross into orbit, and you just don't know what to think about it.

Or you meet a student, coming from a deeply religious family where God was the source of strength and happiness, suddenly asking questions so deep and fundamental that

everything that had happened before seems completely irrelevant to him.

Then you read about a group of young men leaving their good jobs, their comfortable homes and sometimes even their families to go to the most desperate places of this world, to live with people they don't even as yet know.

What about all this? Magic or Faith? Superstition or contact with ultimate reality? Something to avoid or to aspire to? To clarify these questions let us look at the life of a man from the time he is folded in the safe womb of his mother to the moment he is walking around, broad-shouldered, with his thumbs pushed behind his leather belt, curiously looking around at this world and what lies beyond. We will call this trip "from Magic to Faith." We all make this trip, and it might be worthwhile to look at it from a distance.

In each phase of a man's life we will stress one particular aspect of our development which is a constituent of a mature religious sentiment.

#### A. *The first five years of life*

During the first five years of life we have to take three big steps out of the magical world in which we are born.

I. During the first 18 months we come to the somewhat frustrating discovery that we are not the center of the world.

Most of you will agree that there are people and things outside of us which will continue to exist even when we don't. This is, however, not so self-evident as it seems. It is only through a long and often frustrating experience that we are able to discover the objective world. As a baby in the mother's womb, everything is there for us; mother is a part of ourself. Later, it can be quite a painful experience to dis-

cover that our cry does not create the milk, that our smile does not produce the mother, that our needs do not evoke their own satisfaction. Only gradually do we discover our mother as the other, as not just a part of ourself. Every time we experience that we are not ruling the world by our feelings, thoughts and actions, we are forced to realize that there are other persons, things and events which have their autonomy.

Therefore, the first step out of the magical world is the discovery of an objective reality. It can happen that we reach this objectivity only partially. Although we slowly unfold and become able to stand on our own feet and point to the things around us as objective realities available for our curious mind, this may not happen so easily in the religious dimension. Many mature, successful men in this life often might still treat God as part of themselves. God is the factotum which comes in handy in times of illness, shock, final exams, in every situation in which we feel insecure. And if it does not work, the only reaction may be to cry louder. Far from becoming the Other, whose existence does not depend on mine, he might remain the easy frame which fits best around the edges of my security. Great anxiety, caused by internal or external storms, can sometimes force us to regress to this level of religion. This regression may even save our life, as it did Captain Ridgway's. It gives us something to hold on to, a medal or a candle which can keep us together. It may be a very helpful form of religion; but certainly it is not a mature form of religion.

II. The second step out of our magical world is the formation of the language. Somewhere between our 18th month of life and our 3rd birthday we started mumbling our first

sounds which slowly developed into words, sentences, and a language. Although it may be disappointing that there are things around us which do not belong to us, by words we can take revenge, because our first words give us a mysterious power over things. Like an American who is excited to discover that his first French word, *garçon*, really brings the waiter to his table, the child experiences not so much the mastery of words but mastery of objects. It takes quite a while before we can detach the word from the object and give it a symbolic function.

The magical word gives us power not only over objects but also over our own instinctual impulses. Before we had words we couldn't resist the temptation of grabbing flowers in daddy's garden. But by the word "flower" we became able to substitute the act of grabbing and touching, and with our hands clasped together at our back we could then say: "nice flower, no touch."<sup>1</sup>

Well, religion is full of words. Long litanies, exclamations and often-repeated formulas play a very important role in many religions. What concerns us here is that this use of words often does not transcend the magical phase. Instead of being the free and creative expression of deep realities communicable to our fellow man, the words may become a substitute for reality, a subtle form of power over the capricious movements of our gods, our devils, or our own impulses.

Is there not something of this magical world left in us if we feel that we will be saved if we say our prayers every day, or if we at least keep the custom of the three Hail Marys before going to bed? It seems difficult to overcome this word-magic. We feel pretty good if we have fulfilled our obliga-

<sup>1</sup> Selma H. Fraiberg, *The Magic Years* (Charles Scribner's Sons: 1959).

tion, mumbled our table prayers, raced through our rosary or recited our breviary. We seem to be saying, "God cannot do anything to us now. We did what he asked us to do, and now it is his turn to pay us back." Our prayers give us some power over God, instead of engaging us in a real dialogue.

III. The third step out of the magical world is the formation of our conscience. This is the great event between our third and fifth years. When we had learned that objects existed outside ourselves which kept existing even if we did not, and when we had experienced that words were not omnipotent tools to manipulate the world around us, we were still confronted with a much more important step: the step from daddy to us. "I am not going to hit my nasty little sister, not because Daddy does not like that, but because I don't like it, because it is bad." The external disciplinary agent, daddy, mommy, priest etc., slowly is converted into an internal policeman.

Conscience becomes possible by the process of identification. We develop the capacity to interiorize certain aspects of the personality of another person, to make them a part of ourselves. In the case of moral development, we take over judgments, standards and values of beloved persons and incorporate them into our own personality.

Or is there something else happening at the same time? During those first four years of life we felt that daddy could do everything, that he was omnipotent, that he could solve all the problems and lift all the weights. In our fantasy daddy is the greatest athlete in the world, he builds houses, writes books, creates bicycles and is able to get everything for me, if only he wants to. Well, we became disappointed sooner or later. Daddy turns out to be a square, after all. We couldn't

really depend on him any longer. How could we solve this problem?

Interiorization might not solve the whole problem. The need for an omnipotent Father who gives us love, shelter and protection, in whose arms we can hide and feel safe, might simply be too intense. The magical father couldn't be done without, we needed him too much, and therefore, he stayed with us in another name: GOD. And so we thought that if daddy could not make President Kennedy live again, at least God could do it.

When Sigmund Freud wrote his *Future of an Illusion*, he irritated and deeply disturbed the faithful, by saying that religion is the continuation of infantile life and that God is the projection of the ever-present desire for shelter.

Freud's task was to cure people, that is, to make them become more mature. And looking at the many people in his office in Vienna who suffered from their religion more than they were saved by it, he tried to unmask their projections. The psychiatrist Rumke summarizes Freud's position when he writes: "When man matures completely he realizes that his God image, often a father-God image, is a reincarnation of the infantile worldly father, loved and feared. God is apparently no more than a projection. If that which blocks his growth is taken away, the image fades. Man distinguishes good from evil according to his own standards. He has conquered the remainder of his neurosis, which was all that his religion was."<sup>2</sup> What is important in this context is that Freud was not altogether wrong. We often stay in this magical and infantile world in which God is as nice to have around as the comforting blanket of Linus in "Peanuts." For

<sup>2</sup> H. C. Rümke, *The Psychology of Unbelief* (Sheed & Ward: 1962).

many, religion is really not very much more than Freud found it to be, and for all of us, so many of our religious experiences are clothed in images of childhood that it is often very difficult to say where our infantilism ends and our religion begins.

It seems appropriate here to ask a critical question: Is the idea of God an infantile prolongation of our ideal father image, or is our receptivity to the child-father idea the result of our more profound and primary relationship with God? Indeed the basic criticism of Freud proposed by the German psychiatrist Binswanger is a reversal: God is not the prolongation of the child's relationship with his dad, but the child's feeling for his dad is a concretizing of an idea born of his most fundamental relation to his Creator. In other words, we couldn't love our father if God had not loved us first. But here we have left the field of psychology.<sup>3</sup>

In one way we have to agree with Freud: in so far as our God is a pure surrogate for our conscience and a preventative to the development of a rational mind, a mature self and an autonomous individual, it is only a sign of good health and insight to throw our God out as a disease called neurosis. It is even sad to notice how few have the courage to do this.

Healthy development means a gradual movement out of the magical world. Even when the development takes place in other areas, our religion easily remains on this immature level. In that case, God remains the magical pacifier whose existence depends on ours. Prayers remain tools to manipulate him in our direction and religion is nothing more than a big, soft bed on which we doze away and deny the hardships of life. Our religious sentiment will never be mature

<sup>3</sup> H. C. Rümke, *ibid.*

1) if God is not the Other, 2) if prayer is not a dialogue, and 3) if religion is not a source of creative autonomy.

### *B. School age: 5-12 years*

When we were about five years old we went to school. In the small unit of our family the most essential behavioral patterns were pretty well established. Our first experiences of trust, happiness, fear, friendship, joy and disappointment and our first reactions to these experiences took place in our parental home. But then we entered a new world. In school we met other boys and girls who also had parents and homes, and then we had to find out if what we learned at home really worked. In many ways our years in grade school were years in which our major patterns of behavior were fortified, modified, enlarged or disrupted, years in which we experienced success and failure in a larger society than we were used to during the first years of our lives.

Religion in our society is generally a private affair. As soon as we heard about the new math, the history of man, as soon as we learned how to do things ourselves and how to be master of our world, the chance was great that religion became isolated as a separate reality, good for Sunday and the pious hour of the week but not really related to all the new things we heard about this and other worlds. Allport says maturity comes only when a growing intelligence somehow is animated by the desire not to suffer arrested development, but to keep pace with the intake of relevant experience. "In many people, so far as the religious sentiment is concerned, this inner demand is absent. Finding their childhood religion to have comforting value and lacking outside pressure, they cling to an essentially juvenile formulation."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Gordon Allport, *The Individual and his Religion* (Macmillan: 1950).

A mature religion is integral in nature—that means that it is flexible enough to integrate all new knowledge within its frame of reference and keep pace with all the new discoveries of the human mind. It indeed takes the cross into the space craft. Going to school means starting on the road to science, and if religion does not follow the same road with an open and critical eye, the grown man who flies the ocean in superjets might be religiously still content with his tricycle. Essential for mature religion is the constant willingness to shift gears, to integrate new insights and to revise our positions.

### *C. Adolescence: 12-18 years*

With adolescence, we entered into a new and very critical phase of our development. Some of us might have experienced a sudden and dramatic change, others gradually entered the new realities hardly noticing the entry.

Suddenly or gradually, we were confronted with the fact that not only is life outside of us very complicated but life inside of us is just as complicated, or even more so. Until this time we were very curious about all the things going on around us, were excited by all the new things we saw and heard; but then we sensed deep and, often, very strange and disturbing feelings inside. New, often dark, urges seemed to push us without our understanding. We were overwhelmed by feelings of intense joy and happiness, so much so that we didn't know what it meant. Or we were victims of a wish to die, to kill, to hurt, to destroy. We felt that we were torn apart sometimes by the most conflicting feelings and ideas; love and hate, desire to embrace and desire to kill; desire to give and desire to take.

Perhaps we touch here one of the most important crossroads of our religious development. The question is: can we

accept and understand our inner conflicts in such a way that by clarification and understanding they become a source of maturation of our religious sentiment? Very often we fail. Very often religion has become identified with cleanliness, purity, the perfect life—and every feeling which seems to throw black spots on our white sheet seems to be antireligious. In that case we cannot allow ourselves to have strong sexual urges and cruel fantasies and aggressive desires. Religion says: "No!" Do not curse, do not steal, do not kill, do not masturbate, do not gossip, do not, do not, do not . . . Then teachers who tell us to be nice, obedient and lovable start to irritate us no end. Nobody really seems to understand this strange new world of internal feelings which make us feel solemnly unique but, at the same time, horribly lonesome.

Many of us remember how deeply we wanted understanding, how difficult it was to express ourselves and how few people really were close to us. A feeling of shame and guilt often made us feel terribly lonesome and we felt that we were hypocrites whom nobody would love if they really knew how we felt. Many things are possible in this period. We might feel that religion was so oppressive and depressive, so far away from all our experience, so authoritarian and negativistic that the only way of resolving the conflict was to break away from it. Some became sick of the shouting priest in the pulpit, others never felt any understanding for their disturbing feelings or could no longer stand the obvious hypocrisy of many churchgoers, and many dropped away—some slowly, others in open rebellion.

But there is another reaction, perhaps more harmful. This is the tendency to deny and repress drastically the other side, the dark wishes, the unwelcome shadow. Then we are saying, "After all, we are clean, pure, sinless, and we want

to keep our record spotless." We want to stay in complete control of ourselves, never have an evil thought, never curse, never get drunk, never fail, but always remain perfect, saintly and, in a way, so self-content that we don't leave anything to God to be saved. We walk through life as if we had swallowed an Easter candle, rigid and tense, always afraid that things will get out of hand.

This reaction is just as harmful as open rebellion, or even more so, because it blocks our way to religious maturation. But there is a way to maturity in which we can say, "Sure, I have weak spots but that does not make me weak. I have ugly thoughts but that does not make me ugly." This is the realization that we have to tolerate the weeds in order to have good wheat. If we try to eradicate all the weeds we might also pull out the precious wheat. A man who is never mad nor angry can never be passionately in favor of anything either. A man who never loses his temper might have nothing worthwhile to lose after all; he who is never down seldom enjoys himself either. He who never takes a risk might never fail, but he also will never succeed.

It is very difficult for each of us to believe in Christ's words, "I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners. . . ." Perhaps no psychologist has stressed the need of self-acceptance as the way to self-realization so much as Carl Jung. For Jung, self-realization meant the integration of the shadow. It is the growing ability to allow the dark side of our personality to enter into our awareness and thus prevent a one-sided life in which only that which is presentable to the outside world is considered as a real part of ourselves. To come to an inner unity, totality and wholeness, every part of our self should be accepted and integrated. Christ represents the light in us. But Christ was crucified between



two murderers and we cannot deny them, and certainly not the murderers who live in us.

This is a task for life, but during our adolescence we had a real chance to test our religious sentiment in this respect. The conflict is obvious; the solution is not rebellion nor repression, but integration.

#### *D. The young adult*

Meanwhile, we went to college. What happens in college? College is the period between homes. We have left our parental home and have not yet committed ourselves to a home of our own. We have gone a safe distance from all things Mom and Dad always had to say but we also keep a safe distance from those who want to take away this wonderful vacation from home life. We don't have to worry any more about how to find a compromise between our own ideas and feelings and those of our parents, but on the other hand, we are not yet responsible to any one person in particular. We feel that the time of being educated is over but we are not quite ready to start educating others. In short, we live between two homes, and in a certain way this is the period of the greatest freedom of our life.

In college we also develop a new way of thinking. We learn a scientific approach; the key term is: hypothesis; the criterion: probability; and the tool: experimentation. Only on the basis of an experiment are we willing to accept and reject, and only with a sense of relativity do we want to speak about certainty. For our religious development the college years can become the most ideal time to make our religious ideas and values from "second-hand fittings into first-hand fittings" (Allport). We may develop enough self-acceptance

and creative distance to do some responsible experimentation.

During the college years, a new important aspect of a mature religious sentiment can develop: "I can be sure without being cocksure" (Allport). As we enter college we take with us many religious concepts and ideas which seemed obvious, and which we never questioned. The question is, whether or not we have the courage to put question marks behind many things; if we can allow ourselves to doubt without losing all grounds. Only he who feels safe in this world can take risks, only he who has a basic trust in the value of life is free to ask many questions without feeling threatened. Trust creates the possibility of a religion of search, which makes a commitment possible without certainty. By the basic trust in the meaning of life we are able to live with a hypothesis, without the need of absolute certainty.

The man who never had any religious doubts during his college years probably walked around blindfolded; he who never experimented with his traditional values and ideas was probably more afraid than free; he who never put to a test any of dad's and mom's advice probably never developed a critical mind; and he who never became irritated by the many ambiguities, ambivalences and hypocrisies in his religious milieu probably never was really satisfied with anything either. But he who did, took a risk. The risk of embarrassing not only his parents but also his friends, the risk of feeling alienated from his past and of becoming irritated by everything religious, even the word "God." The risk even of the searing loneliness which Jesus Christ suffered when He cried, "God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

In college we can often discover, with pain and frustration, that a mature religious man is very close to the agnostic, and often we have difficulty in deciding which name expresses better our state of mind: agnostic or searching believer. Perhaps they are closer than we tend to think.

### *E. The adult man*

One facet of adulthood which has special significance for our religious attitude is that the mature adult mind is characterized by a unifying philosophy of life. If we could look at our daily life from above, we might wonder what we are so busy for, so excited about, so concerned with. We might ask with Alfie, "After all, what is it all about?" And if there is no real answer to this question, the most honest reaction might be: boredom. Many people who no longer see the meaning of their lives, their daily, often utterly dull, activities, feel bored. Boredom is the dullness of life felt all the way to your stomach. It is the lukewarm quality of daily life, which manifests itself in the repetition of the "I don't care" phrase. Now if we ask ourselves what boredom really means we might say, "It is the isolation of experience." That is to say, we have an experience in life which in no way seems to be connected with the past or the future. Every day seems to be just another day, indifferent, colorless and bleak, just like every other day. This is the mentality in which we need "kicks"—very short, artificially induced upheavals which, for a while, pull us out of our boredom without really giving any meaning to past or future.

Boredom is the disconnected life, filled with thousands of different words, ideas, thoughts and acts which seem like so many pieces of garbage in stagnant waters. Boredom,

which so easily leads to depression, often can become a pervasive feeling, a creeping temptation, difficult to shake off. And certainly, if we have finished school and have a family and a job, this feeling of deep boredom might overwhelm us with the question, "So what?" Now we have everything, and we will be dead, gone and forgotten in a couple of years, perhaps only remembered because of our oddities and idiosyncracies!

It is in this perspective that a mature, religious sentiment fulfills a creative function. Because it has a unifying power, it brings together the many isolated realities of life and casts them into one meaningful whole. The thousand disconnected pieces fall together and show a pattern which we couldn't see before. All the individuals in the card section of the stadium don't seem to make sense to each other, but from a certain distance, and in a certain perspective, they form a very meaningful word. Just so in a unifying perspective, the many facets of life prove to belong together and point in a definite direction. That is what we refer to if we say that a mature religion gives meaning to life, gives direction, reveals a goal and creates a task to be accomplished. It can make us leave job, country and family to dedicate our life to the suffering poor. It can make us bury ourselves in silence, isolation and contemplation in a Trappist monastery.

This new perspective is what we can call faith. It does not create new things but it adds a new dimension to the basic realities of life. It brings our fragmented personality into a meaningful whole, unifies our divided self. It is the source of inspiration for a searching mind, the basis for a creative community and a constant incentive for an on-going renewal of life.

So we come to the end of our trip from Magic to Faith. We started folded up in our mother's womb, one with the world in which we lived. We slowly unfolded out of the magical unity into an autonomous existence, in which we discovered that we were not alone but stood in a constant dialogue with our surroundings; and we ended by bringing together all the varieties of life in a new unity—not that of Magic but that of Faith.

## Intimacy and sexuality