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## On Contemplative Psychology.

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### 1. A definition of contemplative psychology.

Contemplative psychology is a psychology that forms an intrinsic part of the contemplative traditions of most world religions. The term 'contemplative psychology' therefore does not refer to academic psychological theory about contemplation, religion or religious behavior. It refers to the psychological insights and methods that are - often implicitly - present in the vision and practice of religions and that clarify and guide ones contemplative or religious development. So the term 'contemplative' is used here in the same broad sense as Thomas Merton (1953) uses it; it does not only refer to contemplation but it refers to all practices and perspectives that are part of the contemplative traditions.

#### 1.1. *Does contemplative psychology exist?*

Ever since the inception of the psychology of religion, psychologists (e.g. James, 1902; Jung, 1939; Clark, 1958; Leuba, 1972; Ornstein, 1972; Podvoll, 1982; Wilber, 1984) have been aware that contemplative traditions do contain psychological insights and knowledge about man and his spiritual development.

Of course the contemplative traditions themselves do not necessarily call these insights and knowledge 'psychological'. For the concept of 'psychology' is a rather recent notion. Nevertheless we can use this concept (also in retrospect) to delineate a particular kind of knowledge. It is well known that the Buddhist tradition contains one of the most explicit formulations of the psychological aspects of contemplative development (see e.g. Guenther, 1976; Lati Rinbochai, 1980). However in the other world-religions we also find psychological insights and approaches although they are less spelled out. Nevertheless they play a part in the spiritual training and guidance of the practitioners. Obviously the contemplative psychologies vary according to the contemplative traditions that they are embedded in, but as these psychologies are all about human beings, there seems to exist some common ground between all of them as well.

#### 1.2. *Is contemplative psychology a science?*

Whether we consider contemplative psychology a science depends on our definition of "science". I would like to restrict discussion of this vast issue here

to two remarks. Firstly human intelligence might be broader than the intelligence of which scientific method is the formalized expression. That is human ways of acquiring Knowledge and understanding might not yet be exhaustively captured and codified by our methodology of science. Secondly contemplative traditions are generally and fundamentally intelligent traditions as well. They do not only contain contemplative psychological theories of man (mind and behavior) but also various practices and methods by means of which the practitioner can examine and test the contemplative psychological theories involved. They contain a "contemplative methodology" as well.

This is not surprising for like any psychology contemplative psychology addresses the question of how we could intelligently approach and understand human life-experience. If we accept that the methods of contemplative traditions are valid ways to approach that question it would only be a matter of conceptual convention whether we would call contemplative psychology and its methodology 'scientific' or not.

### 1.3. *The aim of research into contemplative psychology*

Contemplative psychologies along with their particular methods contain, may be as yet in a rather implicit form, intelligent ways of understanding man. It is worthwhile then to formulate them explicitly and thereby clarify their psychological and methodological know how. That would not only contribute to our understanding of the epistemological, methodological and psychological value of contemplative traditions, but it might also broaden our perspective on and our practice of psychology of religion and of psychology in general. Moreover practical and pastoral theologians nowadays trust and lean more on the psychology of the scientific tradition, than on the psychology that we find in the contemplative traditions. Therefore they are bound by certain limitations that come with it. The implications of this shift in allegiance will be discussed below (4).

## 2. *Contemplative traditions*

Not only within the contemplative traditions themselves but also within the science of religion we find three more or less restrictive interpretations of what counts as a contemplative tradition. These interpretations obviously qualify the interpretation of its inherent psychology.

### 1.1. *Contemplative tradition as monastic tradition*

In a very strict sense the concept of 'contemplative tradition' refers to a context in which people devote their whole life to the practice of a religious discipline and to the spiritual exercises that are part of it. These people usually live together in what we call monasteries or cloisters of some sort: they study, pray, meditate and their daily life activities are permeated by a discipline that is supposed to develop and sustain religious or spiritual growth. In these monasteries the abbots are supposed to be trained in and to possess a practical knowledge of how to educate people in its religious vision and in the expression of that vision in word and deed. This know how is psychological and methodological in nature. It is contemplative psychology.

### 1.2. *Contemplative tradition as a lay tradition*

In a less strict sense the concept of a contemplative tradition is not limited to a monastic physical setup but it also covers religious disciplines that are practiced in the context of normal every day life. There seem to be two opinions here.

The first one being that religious discipline in every day life brings us closer to the vision or the perspective that is practiced in monasteries in its complete and purest form.

The second opinion is that one's every day life situation could be viewed as the "ultimate monastery". This refers to the possibility of a religious discipline that encompasses all aspects of human life in the same strict way as the religious discipline within the monastery encompasses all aspects of monastic life. Whether one views the lay contemplative as a prospective monk or nun or as the ultimate monk or nun there exists a particular kind of knowledge and know how in lay contemplative traditions that is of a psychological nature, and that could be coined 'contemplative psychology' as well.

### 1.3. *Contemplative tradition as a temporal (non religious) tradition*

In an even broader sense, contemplative traditions could be 'non religious', that is without a connection with a particular religion. They nevertheless contain a discipline based on a particular kind of psychological knowledge, that guides its practitioners towards the realization of the highest human values.

These traditions, like for instance Confucianism, have in common with the religious contemplative traditions some normative anthropology, some notion of 'materialistic man' or 'fallen man' and the idea that human beings have the possibility to uplift themselves and others from their 'corrupted state' towards what is often called 'enlightenment'. Last but not least they contain practicable methods or disciplines that are conducive to bringing

about enlightenment.

Of course the notions of 'materialistic' or 'fallen man' and 'enlightenment' need to be qualified in order to understand what is meant here. In this short presentation I will use these notions more or less intuitively.

### *3. Scientific psychology from a contemplative point of view*

In our culture with its increasing secularization of human life, contemplative knowledge and disciplines seem to be on the way out. The discipline of contemplative practice itself is often no longer understood by lay people and monks alike as a means to religious development. Therefore discipline is often suspended or even rejected. On the one hand we see a narrowing down of contemplative discipline to the discipline of study of religious texts or to the discipline of social welfare work. On the other hand we see that scientific psychology is filling the open place left by the gradual disappearance of contemplative psychology.

Scientific psychology being emancipated from religion explicitly states that it is not religiously bound. It is religiously neutral and that is its strength and its weakness at the same time. On the one hand its neutrality is a strength because it is based on an image of man in which religion plays a very small part if it plays at all. Scientific psychology is up to date in that respect; it is primarily a psychology about 'materialistic man'.

From the perspective of contemplative psychology, scientific psychology is therefore extremely worthwhile. For developing a clear and objective perspective on 'fallen man', is a necessary basis both for any contemplative psychology and for any contemplative development. On the other hand, scientific psychologists might become aware to what extent their 'neutral' theories about 'fallen man' are not particularly adequate when it comes to understanding man as a religious being. In that sense neutrality reflects a limitation. If we become aware of that and therefore are able to make this limitation explicit, its neutrality becomes a strength of psychology. If we are not aware of it, it becomes a weakness.

If we become aware of the limitations of conventional psychology and its outlook, we might wonder how contemplative psychology could complement conventional psychology. If we are not aware of it, we might fear that promoting contemplative psychology is a devious attempt to undermine and undo the independence of psychology as a religiously neutral scientific discipline.

### *4. Contemplative psychology and the psychology of religion*

Let us turn to our last issue: is contemplative psychology a particular kind of psychology of religion? What is the relationship between these two psychologies? Let me start out with a remark on the meaning of the preposition 'of' in 'psychology of religion'.

If we would interpret the preposition 'of' in the possessive sense of 'belonging to', then contemplative psychology would definitely be a psychology of religion, but the academic 'psychology of religion' would not. For the standard interpretation of the preposition 'of' in 'psychology of religion' is rather in the direction of 'about' than in the direction of 'belonging to'. And conventional psychology about religion is not and does not intend to be a psychology belonging to religion. This distinction between contemplative psychology and psychology of religion, has quite a few implications. I will discuss them briefly.

#### *4.1. Third-person psychology and first-person psychology*

Psychology of religion in the conventional sense of 'about', is closely aligned with what has been called third-person psychology, that is a psychology about other people; it has other people as its object of study. Third-person psychology and its methodology however tend to shun away from research into experience that is only available in the first-person sense. For the private character of first-person experience seems to exclude 'objectivity' as defined in third person methodology. Contemplative psychology however focuses rather strongly on experience as it happens to me or us. In that sense it is a first-person psychology that includes subjective or 'private' experience. It has its own notion of objectivity (see e.g. the 'acid test of truth' in Roberts, 1985: 171) which is somehow supposed to guarantee the trustworthiness of the contemplative approach. This touches upon an old issue of psychology as a science that we can only mention here; the issue whether the concepts of objectivity as they function in third-person psychology and first-person psychology could be special cases of a more general notion of trustworthiness.

#### *4.2. The object of both types of psychology*

A second implication that sets both types of psychology apart could be stated in terms of their object.

The object of contemplative psychology is the totality of human existence or human experience. The central question is: what is the place of all aspects of human life within the contemplative perspective and its development? How could one deal with all these aspects in a way that furthers one's contemplative development?

The object of scientific psychology of religion is religion itself, which is viewed as one among the many non-religious aspects of human life. The central question here is: how could we gain a third-person psychological understanding of religious phenomena and how are these causally related to other non-religious phenomena.

#### *4.3. Aim and method of both psychologies*

Put briefly the aim of contemplative psychology is primarily a way of being, that is 'knowing' in the first-person sense of being wise, being free from confusion and ignorance. It is close to 'knowledge by acquaintance' (Russell, 1912). It has a quality of intimacy and directness, and it is closely connected with being completely aware of one's life-experience on the spot.

The aim of psychology of religion is scientific knowledge, that is true information *about* its object of study. This knowledge is primarily representational and indirect and as such distinct from (at a distance of) what it represents, roughly speaking. It is close to 'knowledge by description' (Russell, 1912).

The methods of contemplative psychologies consist of contemplative practices and disciplines (meditation, contemplation, prayer, a certain disciplined way of holding one's mind and conducting one's life) that bring about what the contemplative tradition views as its ultimate fruition or aim. Generally these methods could be characterized as 'awareness strategies' (see De Wit, 1985, 1986). For the starting point of fairly all main contemplative disciplines is the discipline of becoming aware on the spot of one's working basis, that is of the dynamics and patterns of one's 'fallen state' of being.

The methods of psychology of religion consist of the empirical scientific method, which could be called a 'conceptual strategy' (De Wit, 1986) as it aims for the development of conceptual structures that represent human behavior (see 4.4.).

#### *4.4. Relativity of image of man and language*

The object of contemplative psychology being the totality of first person-experience is not a static but a dynamic totality. Therefore the image of man implicit in contemplative psychologies is not static but it is a developmental image of man. As one's way of being (wise or confused) changes in the course of one's spiritual development, the contemplative psychology that relates to one's way of being needs to change. That change is also reflected in a change of its terminology. Put differently contemplative psychologies often contain different levels of language that have their meaning relative to a particular state of being (see Wilber, 1984).

Psychology of religion however does not possess this kind of relativity. Fundamentally it works with (or strives for) one fixed image of "neutral" man, that would only change on the basis of research results. Along with that the language of psychology of religion is fixed to (preferably) one general level; the language of scientific psychology. Religious man (whether he likes it or not) is then discussed in terms of this language.

All this reflects another difference, which has to do with the function of theories. Within contemplative psychologies, theories are fundamentally *a posteriori* means to convey or to point at a way of being. Language and theories are relative to that way of being and in that sense they only contain relative

truths. Through realizing (that is understanding experientially) the truth of a relative truth one's being is transformed. That transformation itself opens up a further perspective that involves awareness of the relativity of that relative truth, as well as awareness of the possibility to realize further (relative) truths. This is how theories are means or conceptual tools for the awareness strategies of the contemplative path.

Within scientific psychology of religion, theories fundamentally are an *a priori* means for 'conceptual strategies', that is for strategies of conceptualizing reality and to answer our self conceived questions about reality. The theories both provide information and concepts by means of which we can state our questions. They structure our research and our experience in (preferably) one fixed way or paradigm, unless conflicting theories or counter-evidence prevent this. Theories articulate our conceptual representations or images of reality. They might obscure however awareness of these theories as theories. This obscuration involves confounding 'reality as we know it' with 'reality' or confounding the representation with the represented.

#### 4,5, *Role of the teacher*

The last implication I would like to mention here refers to the teacher-student relationship. Within the contemplative traditions the teacher (director spirituals, mentor, guru) relates to the totality of the student's existence. Therefore this relationship is all encompassing and personal. In this relationship the teacher applies the contemplative psychology (whether he calls it such or not) of his tradition and thereby he or she guides the students.

Within the scientific tradition of psychology of religion the relationship between teacher and student is partial and possibly impersonal. For the teacher needs only relate to those aspects of the student's being that involve his being a student of psychology and of its methodology of research.

So much for this slightly black and white clarification of the differences between contemplative psychology and scientific psychology of religion. Nevertheless the black and white might point out the necessity of research into contemplative psychologies. In order to bring that about psychologists and contemplatives need to work together intimately. Only by studying and practicing each others methods and disciplines, the scientific and the contemplative traditions of psychology could begin to enrich each other and thereby become of greater help to man as a religious being.

*This paper introduces the concept of contemplative psychology, and reviews the concepts of contemplative traditions. It then discusses the difference between contemplative psychology and scientific psychology of religion. In view of the problematic state that pastoral psychology is in, the need for research into the often implicit psychologies of contemplative traditions is emphasized.*

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