

On Contemplative Psychology

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This paper is a revised version of a seminal paper, written as early as 1986, that introduces the concept of contemplative psychology as a psychology that is an intrinsic part of the contemplative traditions of most world religions. It refers to the psychological insights and methods that are—often implicitly—present in the spiritual traditions themselves. The paper delineates this psychology as a psychology in its own right and in dialogue with the conventional view of psychology and science. Later research by the author has been published in two books entitled *Contemplative Psychology* and *The Spiritual Path: An Introduction to the Psychology of the Spiritual Traditions*.

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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 that clarify and guide one’s 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 refers to all practices and perspectives that are part of the contemplative traditions.

1.1. Contemplative Psychology to Be Found in All World Religions

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 (e.g., Guenther 1976; LatiRinbochai 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 somewhat according to the contemplative traditions that they are embedded in, but as these psychologies are all about

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cultivating human beings, there seems to exist some common ground between all of them as well.

1.2. Contemplative Psychology as 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 our current 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 human beings (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 human mind and experience. 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. Unfortunately, pastoral care takers nowadays trust and lean more on the academic psychology and psychotherapy 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).

1.4. The Meaning of the Term “Contemplative Tradition”

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.

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 of some sort. In these monasteries, the abbots are supposed to be trained in and to possess a practical knowledge of how to transmit its religious vision and its expression in word and deed. This know-how is psychological and methodological in nature. It is contemplative psychology.

In a less strict sense, the concept of a contemplative tradition covers religious disciplines that are practiced in the context of normal everyday life. Again there exists a particular kind of knowledge and know-how in lay contemplative traditions of a psychological nature, and that could be coined “contemplative psychology” as well.

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 the idea that human beings have the possibility to uplift themselves and others from their unenlightened, “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, notions like “corrupted state” 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.

2. 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 pretends to be 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 psychological image of human beings in which religious concepts play a very small part, if at all.

On the other hand, scientific psychologists might become aware to what extent their “neutral” theories are not particularly adequate when it comes to understanding the human being 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. We might then investigate how contemplative psychology could complement conventional psychology. If we are not aware of it, it becomes a weakness. We might then fear that promoting contemplative psychology is a devious attempt to undermine and undo the independence of psychology as a religiously neutral scientific discipline.

3. 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.

3.1. 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 (e.g., the “acid test of truth” in Roberts 1985, 171) which is somehow supposed to guarantee the objectivity or reliability 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 objectivity or reliability of its research results.

3.2. *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 from a contemplative perspective? How could one cultivate 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* 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.

3.3. *Aim and Method of Both Psychologies*

Put briefly the aim of contemplative psychology is primarily “first person knowledge;” 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” (De Wit 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 way of being right now.

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.

3.4. *Relativity of the Image of the Human Being and of 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 the human being implicit in contemplative psychologies is not static either. 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 along. That change is also reflected

in a change of its terminology. Put differently, contemplative psychologies often contain various levels of language that have their meaning relative to a particular state of being (Wilber 1984).

Psychology of (read: about) religion however does not possess this kind of relativity. Fundamentally, it works with (or strives for) one fixed image the human being 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. Experiences of contemplatives (whether they like it or not) are 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 a way of being and experiencing. 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) a relative truth one's being is transformed. That transformation itself opens up a further perspective that involves awareness of the possibility to realize further (relative) truths. This is how theories are helpful means or conceptual tools for the awareness strategies of the contemplative path.

Within scientific psychology of religion, theories fundamentally are an *a priori* means of conceptualizing reality, to be used to test our self-conceived questions about reality. The theories provide information and concepts by means of which we can formulate our research questions. They give direction but also limit our research and our experience, till conflicting theories or counter-evidence make us change direction. Theories articulate our conceptual representations or images of reality. They might obscure, however, awareness of these theories as jusytheories. This obscuration involves confounding "reality as we know it" with "reality" or confounding the representation with the represented.

4. 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 spiritualis, 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 or she calls it such or not) of the contemplative 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. Nevertheless, the black and white might point out the necessity of research into contemplative psychologies, in order to make them visible. In order to bring that about psychologists and contemplatives need to work together intimately. Only by studying and practicing each other methods and disciplines, the scientific and the contemplative psychological path to knowledge could begin to enrich each other and thereby become of greater help to human beings to understand themselves.

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