

Han F. DE WIT, *Contemplative Psychology*. Translated from the Dutch by Marie Louise Baird. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1991. xviii+248 pp. Cloth \$32.50; ISBN 0-8207-0228-5.

Han F. de Wit's *Contemplative Psychology* is a work fully deserving of the sometimes overused epithets "timely" and "pioneering." It is timely in the sense that it could not have been written even just twenty years ago, least of all by a specialist in academic psychology like de Wit, who is professor of theoretical psychology at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam. The book became possible only with the growing understanding of Eastern contemplation among Western intellectuals and the concomitant broadening of academic psychology that accompanied the humanistic and transpersonal trends recently seen in that field. That the work is a pioneering one is evident from the author's goal: to "establish a dialogue between contemplative psychology and academic psychology" (p. 233). I know of no other study that has taken up this challenge, although Ken WILBER recently moved in this direction when he advocated the "hermeneutical reading of authentic texts" on what he calls the "superconscious stages" (1984, p. 125).

A review of this length obviously cannot do full justice to the many challenges offered by this book, so I shall attempt first to indicate something of its unique approach and then give a short presentation of its contents.

In view of the novelty of de Wit's undertaking, it is not surprising that he feels obliged to define the nature of his endeavor in several different ways. Taken together, these definitions provide us with a relatively clear picture of his goals. On page 3 the author says that he wants "to suggest a framework...in which a full-fledged contemplative psychology may be developed." This tells us that the work does not intend to present "a" systematic contem-

plative psychology, but rather “to outline the contours and the view of contemplative psychology” (p. 4). “Contemplative psychology,” however, is not something that the author wishes to create from scratch, but rather something he finds—as a *techné*, rather than an *epistémè* (science)—in various religious (and even “profane”) traditions. The first points he addresses are thus “to point out a position from which the ‘excavation’ and exposure of the... contemplative psychologies seems possible and fruitful” (p. 115), and “to make explicit and clarify the nature and position of the psychological *know-how* that contemplative traditions contain” (p. 14). This involves, of course, a comparative study of different traditions, in the conviction that these traditions have enough in common to make “the search for a general contemplative psychological perspective and approach” meaningful (p. 4). The author warns, however, that in the present volume he wishes only to present general contours and not enter into detailed comparison.

If I am not mistaken, de Wit’s overall project—of which this book represents the first step—might be seen as follows: to “excavate” and explicitate the psychology embedded in various contemplative traditions (although often in an implicit and not fully developed state); to compare these different psychologies and derive more general rules from them; and to refine and systematize these findings further through a confrontation with contemporary academic psychology, which will in turn be further enriched by this confrontation. Whether or not he believes that contemplative psychology will be lifted thereby to the rank of a “science” is not directly clear to me.

In the first chapter, de Wit delineates the specific entity he envisages under the name “contemplative psychology,” differentiating it from the adjoining disciplines of theoretical theology, practical theology, and the psychology of religion. He indicates the *raison d’être* of contemplative psychology in the context of an academic psychology that knows only “profane man” and religious traditions that are on the point of losing their contemplative “know-how.” Chapter 2 defines the object of contemplative psychology as a “Way” and examines the psychological implications of this notion, one that is central to contemplative traditions that focus on spiritual development.

The remaining three chapters are devoted to an exploration of the “contours of a contemplative psychology” (p. 67) according to the traditional schema of “thoughts, words, and deeds.” The sections discuss the approaches and methods of various traditions, together with their underlying presuppositions and the problems they give rise to.

Chapter 3, “The Mental Domain in Contemplative Psychology,” is undoubtedly the core of the book, and rightly so, since “mind” is central to all contemplative paths. The chapter “tries to describe the conceptual framework and practical methods within which and through which the contemplative traditions try to realize their claim...that they point the way toward a [higher] form of insight” (p. 69). In his discussion of the “conceptual framework,” de Wit defines the distinctive characteristics of “contemplative epistemology” and “contemplative cognitive psychology.” The term “conceptual experi-

ence” is central here, indicating that which the contemplative path attempts to break down. Contemplative epistemology accepts, in addition to conceptual knowledge, nonconceptual, “perceptual” knowledge or awareness. Buddhist meditation can be defined, for instance, as “the systematic use of non-conceptual mindfulness” (p. 85). It thus has a quite specific way of conceiving of the relationship of experience and thought, maintaining that experience also includes the mental domain: “One can think about experience and one can experience one’s thoughts” (p. 78). Turning to “practical methods,” de Wit notes that contemplative methodology, in its efforts to break down the fictitious world we build up by our “conceptual experience” (confusing thoughts about experience with experience), utilizes both conceptual and nonconceptual (“awareness”) strategies, the latter being defined as “perceiving one’s field of experience without bias” or “conscious experience of our thoughts” (p. 108).

Chapter 4, “Communication in Contemplative Psychology,” analyzes the uses of descriptive, prescriptive, and evocative language in the transmission of the contemplative path. The chapter devotes particular attention to the truth of that language, insisting that “path language” is true both relative to the practitioner’s stage on the path and as a function of its efficacy in promoting contemplation. It also contains a thought-provoking treatment of theistic and nontheistic language, both as they relate to one another and as they relate with the contemplative path as such.

Chapter 5, “Body and Behavior in Contemplative Psychology,” first considers “the intimate relationship between the mind and the physical world” envisaged in the contemplative traditions, which tend to see “the bodily as a manifestation of the mental” or as a “key to the mental” (p. 183). It then turns to the uses of dualistic and nondualistic language with regard to mind and body, and to mind and the phenomenal world. It further treats the dialectics of engagement and renunciation and the varieties of “contemplative action” in liturgy and daily life.

In section 6 of chapter 5, which figures as a kind of afterword, the author summarizes his hopes for his endeavor: that a working basis will be established for the investigation of the specific contemplative psychologies of particular religious traditions; that the contemplative way will be made clearer and more available to practitioners; that those engaged in interreligious dialogue will see that an anthropological level of spirituality exists capable of bringing people together from different religious traditions; and that “such research can establish a dialogue between contemplative psychology and academic psychology, and thus offer a contribution to the development of a broad and profound psychology” (p. 233).

Since I fully agree with these objectives, I will leave this as the final word in this review, hoping that it will tempt many to read this book and induce a select few to continue and refine the lines of research opened by the pages of this pioneering work.

REFERENCE

WILBER, Ken

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