

Three Questions on the Relation between Religious Studies and Cybernetics

Laurence D. Richards
Indiana University East, USA
laudrich/at/iue.edu

> Abstract • If I accept that (second-order) cybernetics provides a way of thinking about studies of religion and religious behavior, with religious studies researcher-scholars accounting for their own world views and biases, then expressing explicitly what I, as a consumer of the results, would like to get from those studies (reflecting my world view) must be taken as desirable. After I offer such an expression, I generate three questions on the relevance of cybernetics to the conduct of these studies. The pursuit of these questions could then contribute to the insights on society and social transformation that I want from religious studies.

« 1 » I previously wrote an open peer commentary entitled “Three Questions on the Relation between Theatre Studies and Cybernetics” (Richards 2017b) in which I suggested that introducing cybernetic thinking into the study of theatre could produce insights into the role of cybernetics (and theatre) in society. In his target article, Philip Baron offers an argument for introducing cybernetic thinking into the study of religion and religious behavior, proposing a researcher-dependent, personalized and relational approach to these studies. The proposal calls for those conducting the studies to be upfront and explicit about the world views they bring to their study and, if their world views shift as a consequence of the study, to be explicit about that shift at the conclusion of the study. That shift then becomes a significant contribution of their research.

« 2 » Of course, religion has a much more direct and obvious connection to societal issues than theatre. So, in the spirit of Baron’s proposal, I wish to state upfront and as explicitly as I can what I want to get from religious studies (RS), whether I conduct the studies or not. This reflects my bias with re-

spect to religion and my current world view, including my desires with respect to society and the role of cybernetics (and religion) in society.

« 3 » If I take religion as a “set of beliefs” (§4), I see the current role of organized religion as more of a destructive force in the world than not. By institutionalizing an adherence to a specific universal, absolute and unchangeable “truth,” reinforced by dogma, rituals and authoritarian structures, this form of religion fosters and harbors extremist behavior in the interest of protecting the institution and the way of life it supports. This extremism occurs despite the significant efforts of the vast majority of followers to dissuade and disown this behavior. Historically, religion has played an important role in society, providing people with an anchor to which to cling, a way to cope with the misery of their everyday lives, a hope for the future. It still performs this role in many places in the world and pockets within our societies. However, the historical attempts and more recent ability to globalize institutions of religion has led to conflict, conflict that has often been addressed by violence rather than conversation, as systems of belief present obstacles to the cybernetic version of conversation – the non-violent alternative to war, torture and oppression.

« 4 » I see a possible role for organized religion in a peaceful society, an as-yet-to-be-imagined society without violence and oppression. However, I see this role as a local phenomenon, rather than a global one, and with more of an orientation to “spiritual” experience than to a “system of belief.” It might still serve the role of providing stability in a community, a nod to the status quo, but it would do so without violence or proselytizing, and with respect for alternative versions of spirituality. There might even be an acknowledgement of social change as an aspect of the spiritual. As a consequence, the separation of church and state, religion and government, would be greater than in most current nation-states, while maintaining the freedom of individuals to practice whatever rituals and traditions they choose at the local level, as long as they do not impinge on the freedom of others to do the same.

« 5 » I also see a connection between the idea of spirituality and ideas in cybernetics. In his article, Baron references Ran-

ulph Glanville more than any other author. I wrote a tribute to Glanville following his untimely death in which I mentioned that he described himself as an atheist while also acknowledging a spiritual orientation (Richards 2015: 119). He drew on cybernetics in making this connection. For me, cybernetics recognizes that all we know we know in language. That leaves what we might call the “mystical,” all that we do not know and of which we cannot speak, for if we could speak it, it would be known and not mystical. For Glanville, this great unknown becomes the source of wonder (Glanville 2009: 282f) and delight (Westerman 2019: 238–241), inspiring us to seek creative alternatives, descriptions, explanations – to invent the new.

« 6 » With this bias, I offer three questions on the relation between RS and cybernetics. My hope is that RS will take up questions like these seriously, generating conversations in response to the conflicts they engender, helping to move our world to a more desirable state, possibly a new order of things (Richards 2013a).

« 7 » If and when I take cybernetics to be a way of thinking about ways of thinking, can the study of religions as ways of thinking throw some light on how they can become a temporary choice rather than hard and fast dogma? Q1 The premise here is that, with an awareness of alternatives, different ways of thinking (and the world views that they support) can be useful in different circumstances. That is, I might move from one religion to another, with impunity and without contradiction. Calling the alternatives “religions” may not be accurate, although each religion, as a way of thinking, would be kept alive, so to speak, in some community, there for others to explore and take up temporarily when they find it useful to do so. More importantly, religion as a temporary choice could raise awareness of the ways of thinking one employs in everyday life and of the possibility of alternatives. This would contrast with the blind acceptance of the prevailing way of thinking that drives one’s actions, with no awareness of alternatives. (It may be worth noting that in some cultures the idea of “religion” is not even in the lexicon. While anthropologists may identify a system of belief and a moral code, and rituals and traditions that sustain that system, and then call it a religion, for

the people it is simply integrated into their everyday way of life. They know of no other way.) Acceptance of religions as alternative ways of thinking implies a world not yet imagined: hence, my point – use RS to encourage and support imagining a world currently unimaginable.

« 8 » What and how can RS contribute to the cybernetics of consciousness, mind and thought? Q2 Certainly, ideas drawn from various religions have influenced the development of the cybernetic perspectives on these human phenomena. Heinz von Foerster mentions the influence of Taoist thought, and in particular the parables of Chuang Tzu, on his thinking (Foerster & Broecker 2010: 295–298). For Francisco Varela, Buddhism exerted a strong influence (Varela, Thompson & Rosch 1991: 226–228). In *Mind and Nature* (Bateson 1979: 231f) and *Angels Fear: Towards an Epistemology of the Sacred* (Bateson & Bateson 1987), the concept of “the sacred” emerges as essential to any theory of mind, which was further emphasized by Rodney Donaldson in his editing of *A Sacred Unity: Further Steps to and Ecology of Mind* (Bateson 1991). Even Gordon Pask (in personal conversations, 1988–89) claimed that religion provided him with useful perspectives on his long-time interest in human consciousness. Sentience (consciousness and mind) plays a motivating role in virtually all religions, although it tends to get conflated with the concept of the “soul” in many. Theologians conduct their studies from the point of view of a particular religion (of which they are an advocate) and therefore tend to leave the soul intact. RS scholars, on the other hand, conduct comparative studies of religions, where describing and explaining differences might require distinguishing mental phenomena. In particular, I have an interest in how the idea of purposefulness, and its accomplices hierarchy and achievement/reward (Richards 2013b), gets so strongly embedded in some religions and not at all in others. I regard as one of the greatest potential contributions of cybernetics the generation of alternatives to the consciousness of purpose (Richards 2017a: 365–366).

« 9 » Can the cybernetic idea of conversation become an integral aspect not only of RS, but of all religions? Q3 Baron's

proposal takes the point of view of the individual researcher-scholar, suggesting that the ethical conduct of research requires that they be explicit about their own world views and how those views shift as a consequence of their studies. Implied is that these individual studies be shared and differences explored after completion of the study. I would take it a step further and encourage every RS study to be conducted separately by multiple researcher-scholars. Then, the various researcher-scholars along with other stakeholders (including scientists, as science serves as an alternative to religion in some circles) would get together in a facilitated conversation (the cybernetic version) to explore conflicts and see what new perspectives and insights might be generated, perspectives and insights that none of them would have generated alone. The idea is not just to accept that shifts in world views can happen during a study, but to foster and encourage them. Then, if these conversations are deemed desirable in RS, it raises the question: should they not also be deemed desirable in the religions themselves? My own observation is that this form of conversation is discouraged in many religions, as it challenges the authoritarian and reward structures of those religions, and consequently the systems of belief upon which those structures rely. I want RS to take up that challenge.

« 10 » Baron's target article forced me to think about some things I have not thought about before, and for that I am grateful. Based on my history with academic communities, I do not expect the proposal to be taken up by RS scholars anytime in the near future. Despite its call for openness, honesty and responsibility, the way that science and scholarly work in general is conducted is simply not compatible with the proposal or the broader implications of cybernetic thinking. I acknowledge self-change as a consequence of writing this commentary, so perhaps there is hope.

References

- Bateson G. (1979) *Mind and nature*. Bantam Books, New York.
- Bateson G. (1991) *A sacred unity: Further steps to an ecology of mind*. Edited by R. E. Donaldson. Harper-Collins, New York.
- Bateson G. & Bateson M. C. (1987) *Angels fear: Towards an epistemology of the sacred*. Macmillan, New York.
- Foerster H. von & Broecker M. S. (2010) *Part of the world*. Translated by B. Anger-Diaz, edited by J. Hutchinson. Originally published in German as: Foerster H. von & Broecker M. S. (2002) *Teil einer Welt: Fraktale einer Ethik. Ein Drama in drei Akten*. Carl-Auer-Systeme Verlag, Heidelberg.
- Glanville R. (2009) A cybernetic musing: Machines of wonder and elephants that float through air. In: Glanville R., *The black box*. Volume 3: 39 steps. Edition Echoraum, Vienna: 273–286. ► <https://cepa.info/3012>
- Richards L. (2013) Difference-making from a cybernetic perspective: The role of listening and its circularities. *Cybernetics & Human Knowing* 20(1–2): 59–68. ► <https://cepa.info/924>
- Richards L. (2013) Idea avoidance: Reflections on a conference and its language. *Kybernetes* 42(9–10): 1464–1469. ► <https://cepa.info/2300>
- Richards L. (2015) What I learned from Ranulph Glanville. *Cybernetics & Human Knowing* 22(2–3): 115–120.
- Richards L. (2017a) New directions in second-order cybernetics. In: Riegler A., Müller K. H. & Umpleby S. (eds.) *New horizons for second-order cybernetics*. World Scientific, Singapore: 359–372. ► <https://cepa.info/4107>
- Richards L. (2017b) Three questions on the relation between theatre studies and cybernetics. *Constructivist Foundations* 12(3): 333–334. ► <https://constructivist.info/12/3/333>
- Varela F. J., Thompson E. & Rosch E. (1991) *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience*. MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Westerman C. (2019) The poetics of designing. In: Fischer T. & Herr C. M. (eds.) *Design cybernetics: Navigating the new*. Springer, Cham: 233–245.

Larry Richards is Professor Emeritus of Management and Informatics at Indiana University East, where he served as Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs. He is a past President of the American Society for Cybernetics (1986–88), from which he received its Norbert Wiener Medal (2007).

RECEIVED: 25 AUGUST 2019

ACCEPTED: 11 OCTOBER 2019