Introduction

Native American cosmologies are diverse, but share a number of patterns. Stephen C. McCluskey writes that the

> two principal cosmological themata shared by main Native American cosmologies are a theme of fourness, of which the four-directionality of space seems primary, and a theme of duality, which relates the spatial pair of the below and the above, the temporal dualities of night and day and of winter and summer, and the related pair of that which is to come (the future) and that which is (the present).[1]

John Sedgwick, who wrote the sprawling story of the Cherokee nation, *Blood Moon*, noted something similar: "To the Cherokee, balance was everything. It started with men and women, but extended to the sun and the moon, winter and summer, war and peace. In the grand Cherokee cosmology, everything was poised against its opposite." The behavior of the elements was humanly significant such that a lunar eclipse caused social and behavioral pandemonium, according to early witness testimony.[2]

Elsewhere in the United States, in Kansas and today, water is running out. The Ogallala Aquifer, which covers an immense area

[1] Stephen C. McCluskey, "Native American Cosmologies," in *Cosmology: Historical, Literary, Philosophical, Religious, and Scientific Perspectives*, ed. Norriss S. Hetherington (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 9–24, 10.

[2] John Sedgwick, *Blood Moon: An American Epic of War and Splendor in the Cherokee Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 16.

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beneath the Great Plains and which has existed since the retreat of the last ice age, is largely depleted due to overuse, primarily by industrial agriculture. Lucas Bessire, who is an anthropologist at the University of Oklahoma, went to his ancestral home in Kansas to study the water policy, the farming practices, and the physics of the aquifer.[3] What he found is a population of farmers who cannot agree on a single policy and who often compete for water due to economic stress, greed, politicians who refuse to lead, climate change and rain-pattern shifts, and even underground geological shifts. The author tries to be optimistic about future water resources, but the reader cannot join him.

The reader of the present book must wonder: what are the two cases doing on the same page? What can they possibly have in common? The answer is this: the purpose of including both is not to do a comparison between a cosmology of complementary opposites and a tragedy of the commons. There can be no attempt to identify similarities, differences, or shared facts. Instead, both are instances of a single phenomenon: systems.

The Cherokee system is a cultural product that encompasses every aspect of their known world, which possesses a distinct structure and function. As a product of that function, natural events are signs to which humans respond in distinct ritual and emotional ways. Humans and human society are both the authors of this system and constitute an explicit element within that system. Their behavior exhibits information such as thoughts and actions in response to a lunar eclipse that is also information, that is, a sign.

The Ogallala Aquifer system also includes the natural world and human individuals and groups, but this system is entirely distinct. The aquifer itself, like other natural entities, responds to the material input of (originally) melted ice and precipitation and the output by human usage. This is a classic cybernetic physical system, but

[3] Lucas Bessire, *Running Out in Search of Water on the High Plains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

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lacking homeostasis or regulation. Meanwhile, human water consumption is an element within a complex system that includes the physical system of the aquifer but also technology, economics, government, psychology, and even religion. Unlike the Cherokee system, where natural information informs and influences human response, here human action controls the physical behavior of the aquifer – its depletion. In both cases, the actions encountered by an observer – panicked conduct in one case and water depletion in the other – does not depend on a single cause, but on a highly complex interaction of systemic elements leading to what is known as emergent product.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary summary definition, a system is "a group or set of related or associated things perceived or thought of as a unity or complex whole." We shall see in Chapter 1 that there is much more to a system, but this briefest of definitions already draws attention to the distinction between ontological and epistemological systems.

It is important to draw this distinction between the two systems above. The Cherokee system is epistemological and normative. It is a theory of how the world is structured and how it acts. The aquifer system is ontological: more water is drawn than replenished. But there is more to that system because it involves human decision-making based on complex factors. This, too, is ontological. The actions and even values and desires of human actors constitute aspects of the depletion process. The metaphysical distinction we are accustomed to making between physical facts (rain) and mental intentions (desire for profit) is an equal factor within this ontological system. Few of the actors who determine the fate of the aquifer have conceived of an epistemological global system that is explicitly modelled on all the known facts of the underground water and which is also normative. Ecologists and Bessire may do so; his book shows and explains the system, but experts tend to be ignored.

In the study of natural and cultural events, scholars must be careful to distinguish between the two types of systems.

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Epistemological systems are theoretical constructs, while ontological systems are empirical facts. Some scholarship constructs systems as a way of understanding phenomena where it is not clear that a system actually exists. This is systemic thinking, and it tends to be holistic. Another type of scholarship, which is analytical, may actually isolate single causes for single effects in order to derive "true causality," and this may take place even where an ontological system exists. The first type of scholar must be able to point out the features and boundaries of a system they claim to explain, while the second type of scholar needs to justify the causal inference and the exclusion of systemic influences.[4]

This book will study epistemological and ontological systems that include or overlap with religion. Or, to be more precise, this book will look at the products, the emergent properties, of such systems. These phenomena include the destruction of the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya, India, in 1992; the settlement of Palestinian Hebron by Gush Emunim of Israel; the festival of Saint Efisio in Sardinia; the blood libel of Andreas in Rinn, Austria; religious clowns; the visual and auditory perception of God; the alimentary ailments of Saint Bernard, and others. Some of these phenomena fall under the categories of religious processions, the worship of saints, theodicy, pilgrimage, and so forth. In every case, a system will be identified as the organized dynamic pattern that produces the subject of study.

This systemic approach is familiar to anthropologists and sociologists, but has been quite rare in the fields of religious studies, especially now, when so-called meta-narratives are rejected.[5] When

[4] Ludwig von Bertalanffy did not reject analytical and atomistic science but regarded it as insufficient in ignoring scientific teleology and holistic organization: *General System Theory: Foundations, Development, Applications* (New York: George Braziller, 1969), 43–45.

[5] Emil Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, Edward Shils, Clifford Geertz, Roy Rappaport, Marvin Harris, Richard Sosis, Claudio Baraldi, Elena Esposito and too many others to list. None has discussed in detail the concepts of systemic dissonance and mitigation, the topics of this book. Some, like Mary Douglas, who uses systemic theory extensively,

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systems theory is applied, such as in the work of Niklas Luhmann, the primary criticism of systems theory in the study of religion is the apparent disregard for human intention and conscious autonomy.[6] The systemic approach seems to situate actors and actions within a bounded informational pattern that determines, albeit in complex ways, the ends and means of human action. Religion scholars will find this approach to be highly reductive because it appears to diminish human intentionality and autonomy within particularly structured situations. This is an unfair understanding of systems theory, where human intentions and choices are not ignored but situated in a broader and more holistic context, and where they are not privileged. In fact, cultural systems as informational structures imply meaning, and discriminate against meaninglessness – noise – beyond the boundary of the system. Luhmann writes that "on the phenomenal level, meaning appears as a 'horizon' of further possibilities, co-presented with every focus of actual attention or communicative thematization."[7] Furthermore, concern over the loss of intentional agency in systems theory is mitigated in the present work by a feature of systems that will be discussed shortly, namely, dissonance and signals produced by dissonance that register in human consciousness.

Systems theory also offers several advantages as a tool of understanding religious phenomena, illustrated by means of a familiar topic in theology and religious studies: theodicy or the problem of

features terms such as "consonance" to describe various forms of consistency, without explicit reference to dissonance, as a trigger. See Mary Douglas, *The Two Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2004), 5. Timur Kuran and others study "dissonance reduction" in "Social Mechanisms of Dissonance Reduction," in *Social Mechanisms: An Analytical Approach to Social Theory*, ed. Peter Hedstrom and Richard Swedberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 147–171.

[6] Ilana Gershon, "Seeing Like a System: Luhmann for Anthropologists," *Anthropological Theory* 5, no. 1 (2005): 101.

[7] Niklas Luhmann, "Membership and Motives in Social Systems," *Systems Research* 13, no. 3 (1996): 343.

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suffering. This is a subject that exercised some of the best minds in theology and philosophy from biblical authors through St. Augustine to John Hick and others in our time. The conceptual theological issue with suffering is both moral and logical, and it demands the sorting out of contradictions between faith and experience. In contrast, a systemic approach takes us out of the academy and into the world where practical religious solutions to the mystery of suffering are imagined and implemented. Such a system encompasses every conceivable element of experience, including medicine, economics, weather patterns, farming, politics, urban design, population trends and many other factors. The disasters that evoke the question of suffering can implicate all of these, and due to this complexity, will produce urgent solutions, which in the domain of religion can take the form of relic and saint worship, processions, penitential self-hurting, scapegoating, rogation, and many others. All of these are remarkably different from the theologian's intellectually constructed solution. Above all, each systemic solution is local and particular, and thereby transcends the rejected meta-narrative of a universal theodicy.

There is another advantage to the systemic approach: it allows a comparison of distinct religious phenomena in separate religious traditions, while avoiding the trap of looking for "similarity."[8] As already noted, religion scholars currently excoriate most cross-cultural comparisons for brushing over the cultural and historical distinctiveness of the compared phenomenon. Kimberly Patton and Benjamin Ray surveyed the field of comparative religion and both described the post-modern rejection of such studies and gathered several scholars who continue to conduct comparative work.[9] However, most of these scholars promoted a sort of creative

[8] Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), chapter 2.

[9] Kimberly C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray, *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2000).

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subjectivity in the work of comparison, a simultaneous attunement to difference and non-difference. All would reject a more unabashedly "scientific" approach. Such an approach can be seen in a recent article in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* by Francisca Cho and Richard King Squier, which begins with the following observation: "The turn to historical methods and suspicion of universal theories of religion has led to an ethos of particularism resulting in an 'atomistic and self-sufficient' units of knowledge concerning religions."[10] The authors propose, instead, seeing religions as complex and dynamic systems that allow, among other benefits, a comparison across religious systems. Cho and Squier do not actually compare, but merely lay the ground for such work. In the present book, comparison figures prominently, although I am not interested in entire religious traditions but focus on specific and local religious communities and institutions. The ways such comparisons work are known in biology, for example, as isomorphism and homology. The phenomena I compare, for example, blood libel in Austria and saint procession in southern Sardinia, are not similar at all, but both either function in the same manner within their respective systems, or are derived from similar systemic interactions within their respective cultures.[11] As it turns out, both are responses to suffering associated with plagues.

In fact, phenomena that do look very similar, like the destruction of a mosque in India and the assault on Palestinians in the conquered territories of Palestine, turn out to function in entirely distinct ways within their respective systems. The systemic approach allows us to discover patterns across cultures in some cases, and disabuse us of false similarities in others. Even within a

[10] Francisca Cho and Richard King Squier, "Religion as a Complex and Dynamic System," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 2 (2013): 357–398; J. Z. Smith writes: "The only mode to survive scrutiny, the morphological, is the one which is most offensive to us by its refusal to support a thoroughly historical method . . ." *Imagining*, 26.

[11] von Bertalanffy, *General System*, 33.

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single tradition, apparently related phenomena such as blood revenge and honor killing can be finely distinguished by means of systems theory. Honor killing is a male attempt to mitigate a systemic dissonance between his family and its broader social milieu, while revenge killing reflects a broader dissonance between custom-based and legal authority within the social system.

There is a third advantage to the systemic approach to the study of religious phenomena: it often produces surprising results. Consider the case of religious hypocrisy. On January 1, 2019, the Washington Post ran an interview with Jerry Falwell Jr. – the president of Liberty University and a leading voice within the evangelical world whose support for President Trump is well-known. The main topic of discussion, the highlight of the interview, was the apparent conflict between the life and values of a devout Christian and his or her support for a politician such as Trump. The interviewer emphasized the inconsistency between walking in the footsteps of Jesus and passionately supporting an adulterer, a liar, and a vindictive and cruel individual: "You and other white evangelical leaders have strongly supported President Trump. What about him exemplifies Christianity and earns him your support?"

The interviewer, Joe Heim, maintained a professional tone, but the underlying question could not be disguised: how do you justify this obvious hypocrisy? Falwell's lengthy response to this and to other questions concerning this glaring conflict can be boiled down to the following: "It's such a distortion of the teachings of Jesus to say that what he taught us to do personally – to love our neighbors as ourselves, help the poor – can somehow be imputed on a nation. Jesus never told Caesar how to run Rome . . . render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's."

The subject of evangelical religious hypocrisy is hardly new. It runs rampant through the discourse of the Hebrew Bible prophets (Jer. 7:4) and features prominently in the condemnation of the Pharisees in the New Testament (Matthew 23: 13, 27–28, 1 John 4:20, Mark 7:6). Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines

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hypocrisy as "a feigning to be what one is not or to believe what one does not; behavior that contradicts what one claims to believe or feel." Such forms of conduct in religious contexts are virtually universal.

The standard view of religious hypocrisy is a simple moral failure or a form of self-interested action in order to avoid censure or promote one's self-interest. But such people can only be termed "hypocrites" if we take their beliefs, words, and actions as a single system and part of a larger system. Such a system would then reveal an internal fissure, and so, the judgment of hypocrisy would be, in a sense, the system's own self-evaluation. Where there is no system, only politics and private conduct, the evaluation is "difference" or "failure to match," but not hypocrisy. It is natural, therefore, that hypocrites would deny that a system does in fact exist ("Render unto Caesar . . ."). Observers, like Joe Heim of the Washington Post, assume implicitly that a system does exist, but fail to pursue the systemic conclusions: hypocrisy is an internal contradiction within the system itself.[12]

This internal contradiction figures prominently in the present book, where I call it "dissonance." Religious systems are often rent by an internal dissonance, which is the conflict between two or more salient elements. The dissonance threatens the existence of the system but also often places actors in a conundrum from which it can be difficult to escape. The term for this conundrum is "cognitive dissonance," but that is just the individual actor's situation. The dissonance itself is far broader than merely cognitive and behavioral, and extends to every aspect of religious systems or even life itself. It is important to note that dissonance is not the same as

[12] Omar Yousaf and Frenand Gobet, "The Emotional and Attitudinal Consequences of Religious Hypocrisy: Experimental Evidence Using a Cognitive Dissonance Paradigm," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 153, no. 6 (2013): 667–686; Allen R. McConnell and Christina M. Brown, "Dissonance Averted: Self-concept Organization Moderates the Effect of Hypocrisy on Attitude Change," *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 46, no. 2 (2016): 361–366.

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difference, divergence, multiplicity, or asynchrony among systemic elements. It is a specific conflict between two or more elements. Systemic dissonance is also not the same as the Marxist conflict between ideology and power, nor the conflict between external and self-constraints in the writing of Norbert Elias.[13] In the absence of an explicitly identified system, social and psychological conflicts do not constitute a form of dissonance. Up to now, the term has been exclusively reserved for usage as "cognitive dissonance," but other conceptions of dissonance have seen some partial representation in terms such as paradox, chaos, or disorder, which are not precise.

This book studies religious systems but focuses primarily on several examples of dissonance that generate the types of conduct and phenomena that both resemble evangelical hypocrisy and go far beyond. What all of these cases share is the fact of serving as attempts to mitigate the dissonance in order to avoid the discomfort generated by dissonance or in order to save the system from chaos or stasis. The book begins with a theoretical chapter that details the nature and function of systems, both general and religious. I argue that dissonance is a common potential feature of all systems: every system can suffer from an internal conflict between organizing and chaos-inducing forces, which it must cope with in order to survive. In human systems, such a conflict, or dissonance, generates a signal that is sufficiently loud and unpleasant that it motivates actors within the system to respond. The second chapter of the book discusses the incursion of Gush Emunim – the messianic settlers in Israel – into the Palestinian city of Hebron. It also discusses the destruction of the Babri Mosque by Hindu nationalists. The chapter shows that both acts are not mere aggression, but responses to internal conflicts within the Jewish and Hindu traditional systems in which these actors operated.

[13] Norbert Elias, *Civilization, Power and Knowledge* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

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Some systems are the product of a single mind, in the case of Hippolytus Guarinoni of Austria, a fertile and influential mind. Chapter 3 describes a system he created of Jewish blood libel centering on the boy Andreas of Rinn, Austria. Guarinoni created this system in response to the difficult conditions that prevailed in Tyrolian Austria in the early seventeenth century. In contrast to such an individually produced system is the collective system in southern Sardinia that inspired the veneration and ritual celebration of Saint Efisio. This is the subject of Chapter 4. Both Andreas and Efisio are mitigations of a dissonance in the Catholic traditions of Austria and Sardinia. That is, both are responses – however, culturally distinct – to the problem of suffering.

The most basic and pervasive dissonance in religious systems is a metaphysical one, that is, the conflict between the affirmed existence and proximity of God and his absence in one's life. The firmer the belief in the intimacy of God, or the tighter the system in which God and humans coexist, the sharper this dissonance. Chapter 5 brings together two entirely distinct religious traditions, Vineyard Evangelicals in the United States and Chaitanya Vaishnavas in India, in a study of the response to the metaphysical dissonance. Neither tradition involves the use of vision-inducing drugs, and neither is mystical. In both cases, the subjects are ordinary householders, but in both cases, members report sensory experiences of God. Among the Evangelicals, the encounter is auditory, while in India it is visual. In both cases, the system generates embodied patterns of conduct that prepare the subjects to experience the divine with their senses, thereby overcoming the metaphysical dissonance of a hidden God. In contrast, Chapter 6 examines a dissonance in the body-system itself, specifically in the body of religious actors such as victims of spiritual possession, members of the Church of Body Modification, and Saint Bernard of Clairvaux.

Finally, religious systems often remain concealed behind the multiplicity of facts that constitute physical, social, and ideological

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realities. The internal contradictions and tensions that threaten the survival of such systems may generate signals, but these can go unnoticed due to the surrounding noise, so to speak. The final chapter of the book, Chapter 7, looks at the function of clowns and humor as communicators of such signals, or as the actual generators of dissonance signals. The material in this chapter derives from a wide range of cultures and traditions, but from a systemic perspective, the role of the clown is singular. The clown is a disrupter of the status quo, an exposer of social fissures, hypocrisy, and absurdity, an enabler of change in systems that resist change.

None of the topics covered in this book is particularly obscure. All of them have generated substantial scholarship, and the basic facts of each are fairly well-known. In fact, I am indebted to many of the researchers who came before, on whose work I often depended. However, the reader of this book would be hard pressed to find processions, blood libel, clowns, body modifications, and all the rest in a single work. *Religion, Dissonance, and Systems Theory* places all of these topics inside a single cover because the true subject of this book is systems and systemic processes in the domain of religion. The chapter topics are some examples of how systems behave or, more precisely, how humans act when they are the authors of, and elements in, systems.

The topics of the book do not represent every case of religious dissonance and mitigation. Moreover, it is important to emphasize that not every case of blood libel, procession, divine visions, and so forth is a response to dissonance. The cases described in this book, and the systems in which they are embedded, are unique. In fact, every system is unique by virtue of its distinctly local and historical components and their complex interaction, which is never precisely replicated elsewhere. This book does not offer a general theory of religion or of any particular religious phenomenon. What the book does is illustrate the way that systems theory can be applied to many cases of religious beliefs and actions. And it offers a comparative framework in which observers can sensibly consider such religious

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phenomena across cultural boundaries without a comparison of religions *in toto* and without falling into the trap of the old "phenomenology of religion."

This book often refers to religious systems and religion as a system. The difference between the two is important and must be clarified. The theory that religions are complex dynamic systems with bounded elements that interact in complex ways figures in the work of Cho and Squier, along with Purzycki and Sosis. It is an important theory, but it does not frame the present work. *Religion, Dissonance, and Systems Theory* focuses on specific and localized religious systems. I am not denying that religions are in fact systems, but I remain agnostic about this. Having studied with Wilfred Cantwell Smith, I am not sure that "religion" as an ontological concept is a useful heuristic category. Take for example the case of Christianity as D. A. Carson presents it: "Beyond the pages of the New Testament, even a casual knowledge of the history of the church discloses an incredible diversity of situations in which Christians have found themselves: persecuted and reigning, isolated and dominant, ignorant and well educated, highly distinguishable from the surrounding culture and virtually indifferentiable from it, impoverished and wealthy, evangelistically zealous and evangelistically dormant . . ." and active in Hong Kong, and New York, Ukraine and Romania, Saudi Arabia and Seoul and so forth.[14] It may be possible to think of Christianity as a single system in some sense, but the present work does not do this. The Vineyard Evangelical Church of the United States is as broad as I am willing to go in identifying an ontological social, institutional, and ideological system, and that is the case for all the other systems discussed in these pages.

This book also does not offer a theory of conflict, resistance, or sectarian schisms. The history of many religions, such as

[14] D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdmans Publishing, 2012), ix.

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Christianity, Islam and Hinduism, is rife with such "internal" conflicts, often violent. The word "dissonance" appears perfect to describe such conflicts. However, one would have to make the case, for example, that English Christianity in the seventeenth century was a single system in which the emergence of the Quakers with George Fox, is an example of internal systemic dissonance. The Quakers may have dissented from the mainstream religious hierarchy and its values, but that is not how *Religion, Dissonance, and Systems Theory* uses the concept of dissonance. In these pages, dissonance is an internal event within specific systems, not the conflict between groups, not even between different systems.

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