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A Case Study of Christian Cowboys in Kansas, US.

Anna Kira Hippert

Introduction

- 1 Cowboy Christianity is a phenomenon – irrespective of their subsequent institutionalization – that can be traced back to the latter part of the 19th century in the broadest sense. Cowboy Churches experienced rapid growth, especially at the end of the 20th century, when the Baptist General Convention (BGCT) initiated church planting systematically and predominately in Texas, and the term Cowboy Church became popular. In general, Cowboy Churches are Protestant Evangelical churches due to their specific orientation and a paragon of what scholar of the history of religion Randall Balmer calls Niche-Evangelicalism (see Balmer 2019, 490-491).
- 2 Niche-Evangelicalism means that Evangelicals, particularly in the 21st century, have developed a keen sense to reach specific subcultures or a particular target group. They do so by adapting to the group's behavior, language, and lifestyle. Their ulterior motive is the aim of evangelizing, which stands in accordance with their theological doctrines. Among other things, this is facilitated by the application of modern elements and the mass media as the target audience has specific needs, which can be made accessible very quickly.
- 3 As the term Cowboy Church indicates, the respective target group, in this case, is closely related to American Cowboy culture and belongs mainly to the white lower and American middle class. Most of the members also have professions in an agrarian culture, breed cattle, own a ranch, and earn their money with professional western riding or bull riding. Therefore, Cowboy Church leaders try to incorporate all aspects of this Cowboy culture and use it as the foundation of their church. In doing so, the preferences of the church members are taken firmly into account.

- 4 Of particular importance in this regard is the figure of the Cowboy himself, with whom the majority of the members of Cowboy Churches identify. Not only are historical aspects essential and the work profile of the hard-working Cowboy who drove cattle from Kansas to Chicago, especially in the 19th century, but they also strongly identify with the image of the heroic, God-fearing man propagated by the film industry. e.g., 3 *Godfathers* (1948), *Angel and Badman* (1947), *Stars in my Crown and Bravados* (1950), *The Outcasts of Poker Flat* (1937) (see Taylor 1983). The latter goes hand in hand with the visual appearance of Cowboy Churches, as the church's main buildings and its surroundings manifest Western lifestyle. Noteworthy are the significant characteristics of a ranch, including the church building, which may look like a barn from the outside. Cowboy Churches also own a remarkable land area, including an arena for activities such as horse riding, roping, or bull riding. Special church services are held in this arena, most called »arena devotional« (see Dallam 2018, 124). Some Cowboy Churches do not even possess a church building but center everything around this arena.
- 5 The atmosphere mainly evoked by its specific design, which bears little resemblance to an »ordinary« church building, plays an important role for churchgoers. Hence, what most clearly distinguishes Cowboy Churches from mainstream Protestantism is how it feels like a place of worship and organization (see *ibid.*, 124). To complete the picture of a church devoted to the Cowboy culture, country music with Christian lyrics is an integral aspect of the liturgy. Additionally, it is not uncommon that Cowboy Churches have their own bands that »support the most crucial part of the church service, which is the pastor's sermon« (see *ibid.*, 113). The service itself is »defined by an atmosphere of unpredictability« (see *ibid.*, 114).
- 6 An important point that distinguishes Cowboy Churches from other Evangelical Churches is their »low barrier« method and only marginally structured church life since the target group takes the »stereotypical« American Cowboy as a role model, placing significant importance on the concept of individualism. The average Cowboy Churchgoer does not want to be bound to a strict church structure or forced into any religious activity, be it Bible studies or discipleship groups. Therefore, pastors of Cowboy Churches propagate phrases such as »Come as you are«, »God loves all no matter what«, and a »Come and go culture«.
- 7 In most cases, the (usually male) pastor occupies an important position and — like the churchgoers — often has had a »difficult« past tracing back to a hard-working life in the lower or middle class and all its attached problems (e.g., sudden unemployment due to industrialization, or former military officials that have issues to settle back into everyday life). His personal experiences and sympathy towards the congregation's hardships in life establish the leader as a central lynchpin in Cowboy Churches. He is often considered a role model by the church members. Until today approximately 1000 Cowboy Churches emerged within a short amount of time and spread in the Midwest and the Southern States of America (see *ibid.*, 15-31).
- 8 Although Evangelicals make up a large number of Christians in the U.S.¹ and are known for targeting specific niches and for using techniques of modern marketing from the business world (see Forbes and Mahan 2017, 3; Einstein 2008), the current state of research on Cowboy Churches is somewhat limited. Marie Dallam's book »Cowboy Christians« (2018) is the first one providing an ethnographic overview of »Cowboy Christianity«.

- 9 There are also a few sources that deal with Cowboy Churches from a theological perspective, such as the article »Worship at the O.K. Corral« by Linda Owen published in 2003 in the (online) magazine »Christianity today«. Also mentioned should be the article concerning the subject of Cowboy Churches published in the Journal of »Ranch & Rural Living« from the year 2011, written by Kevin Weatherby called »Going to Cowboy Church« and the article written by Katy Williams, Robert Strong, and Landry Locket called »Expanding Cooperative Extension's Audience: Establishing a Relationship with Cowboy Church Members« from the year 2013. The article did not take theological references and other sources mentioned above into account, as these sources cover topics in a complementary manner regarding Cowboy Churches, but are of marginal use for a study of religion approach and as material for analysis from the methodological perspective this article has taken
- 10 Marie Dallam focuses on the historical development of Cowboy Churches, and she describes their role within the American religious field. However, this article will focus on a more sociological aspect and explores how the ideal of a »Christian Cowboy« is formulated and implemented in Cowboy Churches.
- 11 The respective target group, in this case, is closely related to American Cowboy culture, which in itself is very complex. It is a conglomerate of different influences, both of a historical nature and similarly influenced by popular culture. As a result, formulating an exact distinction or definition is a difficult task. These difficulties of defining the term Cowboy culture lead to the impression that the Cowboy Churches do not always correspond to what the church attendees understand by this Cowboy culture. This divergence leads to problems, e.g., concerning the church structure, the hierarchy, expansion, and acceptance of issues in society. They strongly propagate the Cowboy lifestyle, simultaneously criticizing modern America and its changes with modernity. Therefore, Dallam also speaks of Cowboy Churches having characteristics of new religious movements (Dallam 2018). I would agree with Dallam's assumption, but at the same time, I would like to demonstrate »why« these problems occur in Cowboy Churches and supplement the ethnographic work of Dallam with my sociological work concerning the construction of a Christian Cowboy ideal. To answer the question stated above, extensive fieldwork in two Cowboy Churches in Kansas, U.S., was conducted and evaluated with the method of Objective Hermeneutics as developed by Ulrich Oevermann and colleagues.

Theoretical Considerations

- 12 As indicated above, the Cowboy image plays a significant role for Cowboy Church attendees, for it is appealing to and corresponding with their interest in the »Western world«. This Cowboy image is a conglomerate of historical data and characteristics shaped by mass media, such as the film industry, making it a product of American popular culture. This conglomerate is mainly used as the foundation of the church. Bruce David Forbes and Jefferey Mahan collected a series of essays in their book »Religion and Popular Culture in America« that analyze the various ways in which religion and popular culture are mutually influential. Popular culture is defined as something that most often becomes widespread, and thus popular, through mass media (television, radio, movies, books, magazines, and cyber-communication) and is marked by a large audience (see Forbes and Mahan 2017, 3). According to them, it can be

determined that popular culture seems to portray our yearnings or provide »moments of escape« (ibid., 5). What needs to be considered is that this reflection is highly selective and influenced by personal understanding. For example, when referring to Western films, one might describe the Cowboy as a hero who fought bravely against Americans Indians, standing his ground, when historically accurately speaking, he entered their territory without permission and thus had to protect himself when attacked by a people that felt threatened. In this example, attitudes like honor and bravery are projected onto the Cowboy, simultaneously reflecting one's deepest desires to be just like him, the brave man »fighting for righteousness«, e.g., Buffalo Bill. That is because »popular culture reflects values we already hold, that reflection also serves to reinforce our values and deepen our commitment to them« (ibid., 2).

- 13 I extend this assumption by looking at the field of cognitive psychology to understand why it might have such importance for the individual. Religious studies also rely on cognitive psychology theories, which has become so widely accepted in recent years that it became a subdiscipline. The Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) is an academic subdiscipline that studies the mental capacities and processes that underlie recurrent patterns of religious thought and behavior. The main focus of CSR is on unconscious processes such as thoughts, biases, emotions, and motivations. Unlike the related field of the Psychology of Religion, whose primary level of analysis is the individual, CSR is interested in accounting for cultural forms and explaining why these particular forms are more widespread than others (see Xygalatas 2014, 343).
- 14 Hence, when Forbes and Mahan speak of the reinforcing of the individual's values and the deepening of the commitment to them, we must not forget that this is not only very selective but also might result in a particular delusion, where historical data and certain »stereotypes« mass media creates, blend in with historical data (see the Cowboy example above). Yet, even though individuals presumably know that certain popular culture depictions might not be historically evident or exaggerated by media, they still may feel attached to them. From a cognitive psychological approach, this might cause a feeling of belonging and affirmation. The irrationality that may resonate here becomes a rather irrelevant fact. This warping is called »cognitive bias« (Haselton, Nettle and Andrews 2005, 724-726.). A cognitive bias can be divided into several categories such as fundamental attribution error, priming bias, affinity bias, self-serving bias, belief bias, framing, hindsight bias, and embodied cognition (see ibid., 724-726.).
- 15 In the context of popular culture and religion, a confirmation bias seems interesting to add, as it refers to
»the tendency to search for or interpret information in a way that confirms one's preconceptions. In addition, individuals may discredit information that does not support their views« (Mahoney 1977, 161).
- 16 Furthermore, confirmation bias is related to the concept of cognitive dissonance, which says that individuals may reduce inconsistency by searching for information that re-confirms their views (see Jermias 2001, 146). As anthropologist and cognitive scientist Dimitris Xygalatas has indicated, the main focus of Cognitive Science in general and Cognitive Science of Religion, in particular, are the unconscious processes such as thoughts, biases, emotions, and motivations occurring in the brain. Conversely, this means that it is not a question of accusing individuals of a certain ignorance or lack of education, as the focus is on the human brain and its internal processes.

- 17 However, we should not forget that the information spread by the media, especially in the television and film industry, is mainly visual. It might be helpful to consult David Morgan's theory of »images«. If we transfer David Morgan's approach to images in the form of movies or TV programs, we find that visual images have symbolic power.

» [Images] do not merely symbolize these unseen dimensions of personal and collective identity. They are the material interface with them-surfaces that turn seeing into feeling and vice versa« (Morgan 2008, 97).

- 18 Of particular importance is the function of these images, as they selectively illustrate reality and persuade the viewers that the depicted image corresponds to the truth. Morgan mentioned the example of »The Heathen Mother« (1863), a picture illustrating a black woman who fed a white child to a crocodile, successfully causing the fear of children during this time, even though this picture was not reflecting the truth (see *ibid.*, 104). It is worth mentioning that Morgan assigns a superior role to the process of seeing or visualization. Images »live« depending on the human body's reaction, i.e., on the emotion of the respective actor towards the image. He divides this process yet further into conscious and subconscious (primal) reactions. The suggestion of reality by such images is to be emphasized here. According to Morgan, the observer believes the reality is presented to him (see Morgan, p. 97). So, if Hollywood portrays the Cowboy as a God-fearing man or as a victim of American Indian aggression, then at a certain point, we believe in the truth of this image, as visualization can be that influential, according to Morgan. Suppose we add to this assumption the thesis Forbes and Mahan suggest. In that case, that popular culture is portraying our yearnings or moments of escape (see Forbes and Mahan 2017, 5), the effect of these images may increase naturally. Hence, referring to popular culture again, mass media is the perfect vehicle to satisfy the yearning for a certain »world view«, which is likely not true or rather blurred. However, from a scholarly point of view, we must be careful about the »presumption« of feelings and emotions, as they are challenging to collect and prove.

Yet »feelings [are] arguably the most important psychic function for every religion, from the decisive experiences of its founders to everyday decisions in the lives of its adherents.« (Haule 2014, 668-669.)

- 19 Additionally, Boehm (2012) already stated that images are highly significant as a means of representation and speaks of a closely linked triad of presentation (Präsentation), representation (Repräsentation), and presence (Präsenz) (see Boehm 2012, 16). Especially in the course of the new mediality and the explicit use of mass media, the medium of images is of great relevance since images, along with language, are among the most important sign-mediating instruments for the representation, interpretation, and appropriation of the world (see Klemm/Stöckl 2011, 7). The serving of a particular »world view« through images might be one explanation why Cowboy Church attendees feel highly attracted to the concept that Cowboy Churches provide a place that reflects their values and beliefs. What strengthens the written above is that Mahan and Forbes highlight the difficulty that (nowadays) religion can be perceived on several levels. Many individuals have their own unique, personal religious beliefs and practices that do not fit any particular group (see *ibid.*, 8). The individualization of religious belief, on the other hand, is precisely what Cowboy Churches are targeting. They use popular culture to gain as much growth as possible, to address certain niches, and also to compete in the highly competitive religious market in the U.S., as already emphasized by the scholars Roger Finke and Rodney Stark in their book »The Churching of America 1776-2015. Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy« (Finke and Stark 2005, 9).²

Data Collection and Methodological Considerations

- 20 The data collection took place between March 2019 and May 2019 in Kansas, U.S. The first sample church is called Prairie Trail Cowboy Church (established 2010)³ (hereafter referred to as PTCC), a nondenominational church located in Haysville, Kansas, with an average of 400-500 church attendees. As in the majority of Cowboy Churches, the members of PTCC have not been to church since their childhood or never attended church. Besides Western outdoor events in the arena, PTCC focuses on discipleship groups to proselytize. The second church to be examined is named Crossroads Cowboy Church (established 2009)⁴ (after that referred to as CCC), affiliated with the Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal church association, and located in Perry, Kansas, with approximately 100-150 members, focusing on bible studies.⁵ At CCC, as at PTCC, most of the members are unchurched. Here the so-called arena also plays a major role as a linchpin, as does the »come and go culture« described in the upper section of this article.
- 21 The evaluated data were analyzed with the method of Objective Hermeneutics. This method will be briefly explained below.
- 22 As the name already suggests, the approach of Objective Hermeneutics is a hermeneutical⁶ method of empirical social research founded by the German scholar of sociology Ulrich Oevermann and colleagues. The conviction forming the foundation of this method is that individuals in their socialization internalize principles of coexistence, whose meaning remains unknown.
- 23 Objective Hermeneutics assumes a latent meaning behind all human behavior, which is initially hidden and only emerges when engaging with those actions in detail, in contrast to the manifest purpose (the intentions of actors).
- »This difference between manifest and latent meaning, similar to the difference between manifest and latent functions, formulated by Robert K. Merton (Merton, 1968) and to the difference between the manifest topic of a dream and its latent idea [Freud], is of great importance for the methodological point of view of objective hermeneutics.« (see Wernet 2014, 235-236).
- 24 Social science analysis needs to reveal the patterns disguised by human behavior (Flick 1995, 4). Objective Hermeneutics does not attempt to reveal a subjective meaning of this behavior. Instead, it tries to understand the meaning of »forms of expression«, especially of texts. The interpretation of an actor's social behavior is not the subject of the analysis. Rather it is about discovering the so-called (hidden) »latent structure of meaning«, which is considered to explain social behavior. Additionally, the method of Objective Hermeneutics assumes that there is a »coded« meaning behind every behavior and that every behavior is rule-governed, thus determined or limited by rules. As established within the cultural context of a respective society, these rules limit the »course of actions« or behavior. When evaluating a text, it is important to detect for or against which behavior a person decided to act out.
- 25 The latent structure of meaning is reconstructed by following the four principles described by Andreas Wernet: »to (I.) exclude the context, (II.) to take the literal meaning of a text seriously, (III.) sequentially, and (IV.) extensivity. « (Wernet 2014, 239).

- 26 Sequence analysis is used primarily when interpreting in-depth dimensions, such as habitus, or with research subjects that are somewhat difficult to access. It is about the reconstruction of relationships, relations, connections, references. The latter played a significant role in the initial question of this article, as it was mainly the social context and the habitus of the members that made it possible to conclude the ideal of a Christian Cowboy, which was also not discussed openly.
- 27 Upon my return to Germany, I transcribed the selected interviews and analyzed them with the aforementioned method within a group, which consisted of four scholars of the Study of Religion, History, Art History, and Japanese Studies. I then deduced the case structure generalizations, using my field notes from the participant observation; these case structure generalizations (PTCC and CCC) are used as the foundation of the discussion of the results. In this article, a summary of the reconstructed case structure of the collected data is used to provide a condensed answer to the major results regarding the research question. In order to be able to follow the reconstructed case structure more easily even without its complete integration into the article, the analyzed interview passages are cited in the text at important points.

Field Reflections

- 28 Access to Cowboy Churches is difficult since they are relatively closed communities, which are not very receptive to new people as they want to stay among themselves, or in most cases, only accept like-minded people into their ranks. Access is also made more difficult because Cowboy Churches are located in rural areas, sometimes do not even have a website, and can only be reached by car. My entry into the field was facilitated by the fact that I learned English-style horse-riding at the age of four and switched to the Western-style at the age of ten. However, my first Participant Observation and immersive experience in Cowboy Churches began during a visit to CCC's Bible Study for Children, which I had gained access to through my contacts in other Evangelical churches. Unlike what you would expect from Evangelical churches, I was treated politely but also eyed suspiciously by church members. Their behavior toward me changed, when the youth pastor came to me after the Bible study with a big smug smile on his face asking me: »Sweetheart, did you ever ride a horse before?« The pastor was daring me. These people misjudged me, thinking of me as being a sophisticated German student observing them. I accepted the youth pastor's challenge and demonstrated my riding skills on the most stubborn horse they gave me as a test. This horse named Joey was so lazy, but so was my mare, and I could handle him very well, leaving » y'all« speechless. The youth pastor was sitting on his mare, and his shocked eyes were meeting my self-pleased ones. »You didn't tell us you were a cowgirl, Anna. Let me tell ya, you got some nerve coming here out of nowhere, Germany, loping Joey around like it is nothing.« He paused and looked over to the others standing with impressed facial expressions at the fence. I was smiling. He, however, held my gaze, not forging a mine. After a few seconds, he could no longer maintain his seriousness and smiled back, welcoming me as »one of them«. Later on, another man handed me his business card, offering me a job at his ranch, saying he would only hire the toughest women in the country. I suppose that this is the biggest compliment you can get as a woman in the Cowboy world. Though it did not impress me because I knew – from my experience in Germany – that women especially have a hard time in this world, although they are used to hard work and to the rough Cowboy

culture. As a woman, you have to prove yourself constantly, and the successful riders were and still are mainly men in Germany and America.⁷ The women at CCC were also – what men at CCC would call – tough, some broke wild mustangs, were good with the cattle and the rope too. The best coach at church responsible for the arena ministry was a woman, and some men did not like this situation and questioned her way more often or ignored her instructions. Later in my interviews, I learned that women have a difficult stand regarding the general distribution of roles in the church. I was nevertheless treated with respect and was never called sweetheart again. I suspect it was because I was used to asserting myself in such a »rough« environment, like the other women, and passed the riding test. The situation in the arena, riding one of their horses, was the pivotal point of my fieldwork, as I could tell from their behavior that I was accepted as »one of them«. My time at CCC showed me important aspects of the church's life, as I delved deeply into the member's lives, ideas and struggles.

- 29 In summary, I assume my understanding of the Cowboy lifestyle made this immersive field experience possible, as I could follow certain trains of thought of the members. When someone prayed for their sick horse, I immediately understood it, probably unlike someone who has no understanding of horses. If someone spoke of freedom and individualism in the context of Cowboy culture and that they hate being constricted, I understood that as well because I felt the same back in the days at Silver Diamond Ranch. I also realized that the Cowboy culture on which the church is built saturates the religious images, and both are mutually dependent. Due to my scientific education, I was also able to distance myself from the object of research. Of course, you do not need a western riding education to conduct interviews in a Cowboy Church or participant observation. Nevertheless, it accelerated my entry into the field immensely.

Discussion of the results

- 30 First and foremost, the evaluated data shows that a certain Cowboy masculinity seems to dominate a significant part of the Christian Cowboy ideal in both churches. When dealing with the term Cowboy, most associations made during the analysis were of a masculine nature. The latter is especially noticeable, e.g., in the term »Cowboy« itself, since it was examined as a very masculine one since the word »Cowboy« adventitiously refers to masculinity (as seen in »boy«). Additionally, in a broader sense, modern Cowboy life is affiliated with connotations such as pick-up trucks, shooting ranges, and adjectives like rural/traditional/conservative. All of the semantic potentials of the term »Cowboy«, are linked to »masculine roots«. This image of masculinity is implemented in daily church life in horse riding, bull riding, and roping, performed in arenas. All these sports or activities also seem to embody the epitome of masculinity in the Cowboy culture. When considering the history of Cowboy culture, its origins, and the influence of the media, the Cowboy can be described as a conglomerate of different characteristics. One of these characteristics is the masculinity mass media creates, portraying the Cowboy as a bold hero. Historical sources (Lewis 1961; Groves 2006; Carlson 2006; Taylor 1983) indicate that the working environment of Cowboys was also male-dominated due to heavy physical work.
- 31 Secondly, most Cowboy Church attendees also seem to blend this masculine image with the conservative outlook of Evangelicalism, as they probably assume that this masculinity corresponds to their archetypical Christian Cowboy ideal. This assumption

can be traced back to the semantic potential of the term »church« itself, claiming that Christianity emerged (and was presumably forged) within patriarchal societies which mainly place men in authority, even after the Reformation. Despite all the liberal trends in Christian traditions worldwide in recent years, Evangelicalism rather strengthens the conservative gender roles in many ways. In the interviews I conducted and during my participant observations, it also became clear that women always have to prove themselves in the everyday life of the church. They also sometimes have been treated in a hostile way and criticized; e.g., in one part of the interview, the woman quoted a male church member who complained that women are part of the board meeting at CCC. »[...] There shouldn't be any women on this board. There should too, I am one and Becky, Becky is the other [...]« (in addition, see also Kirsi 2009).

»Double masculinity«

- 32 Lastly, the ideal Christian Cowboy seems to merge the masculine ideal from the Cowboy culture and the conservative Evangelical worldview. Because of this, I would suggest using the term *double masculinity*, which underlies the Christian Cowboy ideal, as the two crucial »concepts of masculinity« seem to be intertwined in the culture of the Cowboy Church. Nonetheless, we must not forget that women are part of the Cowboy culture and – even more importantly – a significant part of the Cowboy Churches, despite this dominating twofold masculinity. I will briefly discuss this issue as an additional aspect of Cowboy Christianity. There naturally are men and women in Evangelical churches, as Christianity theologically excludes no one in general. The interesting thing about Cowboy Churches, however, is this *double masculinity* which seems to make it difficult for women to find an appropriate role from their perspectives. However, and this is a critical aspect, they also seem to embody parts of the Cowboy culture as their identification and feel a part of it (i.e., individualism, independence, and performing horse riding). The results of the data analysis also reflect the latter. For example, derived from the statement: F: »Ahm a Cowboy Church for me is because it, it represents our lifestyle, [...]«. Here the woman uses the multilayered term »lifestyle«. Initially, »lifestyle« means a combination of behavioral characteristics of a person or a group in a broader sense. The lifestyle typically reflects an individual's attitudes, way of life, values, and/or worldview, which presumably implies that attending a Cowboy Church is not just a one-time thing, but rather that it is about living this »Cowboy lifestyle« as a whole. In addition, the historical data consulted indicate that women in rural areas are used to working hard, even though men may assign them to work (see Bock and Shortall 2006, 47-53). The fact that women worked does not necessarily have to do with equality, for women are presumably engaged in work to gain acceptance. However, certain emancipation most likely arises from this since they have learned to assert themselves in this environment, which might tempt them not to submit to the classical distribution of roles in Cowboy Churches. At the same time, it may be precisely because they belong to the Cowboy culture and are attracted to it that they are attendees of Cowboy Churches. Nonetheless, the struggle women face in this world of *double masculinity* may also be an area for change when contrasting Cowboy Churches with societal change (e.g., the emancipation of women), as at CCC, a woman is leading the arena devotional despite the harsh critique of its male members. It can be assumed that in both churches observed in this study, this twofold masculinity prevails, with the distinction that at

PTCC, the roles and the balance between the »church part« and the Cowboy lifestyle are well established. In contrast, at CCC, the relations presumably have shifted in favor of the Cowboy lifestyle as seen in the members' complaints about anything that seems to restrict them, e.g., L: »And one of the biggest problems is that I probably would not have joined this church if I had known they are affiliated with the Assemblies of God. [...]«

Church life vs. Cowboy lifestyle

- 33 This imbalance of Cowboy lifestyle and church organization does not only concern the women's role in Cowboy Churches. Cowboy Churches seem to have problems with the complex and entangled Cowboy culture itself, which is supposed to be the foundation of Cowboy Churches. For example, at CCC, Linda quotes Pastor Terry, who complained that this church might become a »Saddle Club« if they don't do the church part. L: »[...] Terry gets upset with us because he's like, you know, »If we're not gonna do the church part, we just may take the church sign down and put Saddle Club up, you know?«
- 34 Hence, the Cowboy culture used by evangelical leadership more as a tool to reach this suburban niche seems to contradict the conception of Cowboy culture that the members aim at. As a result, the church attendees construct their own Christian Cowboy ideal. The latter resulted from the analysis of the following Interview passage: »[...] you don't have to be Christian to be a Cowboy, but Cowboys normally are Christians. Because of how they lived their life.« The first part of the interview line implies that, according to her, Cowboys are not Christians because they are attending church, believe in God, or following specific tenets; but because of their »way of life« their »lifestyle«. Consequently, this more or less seems to dominate the church life and deviates from the actual church's aim, which from an Evangelical point of view may be the devotion to God and adherence to his teachings.
- 35 Moreover, as the historical and theoretical part of this article already stated, the main goal of a Cowboy Church is to bring this subculture closer to God and missionize it. In the theoretical part, however, I already alluded to a possible cognitive bias, in which a conscious effort is made to find the »facts« that serve their worldview or fit their personal opinion. Although Cowboy Church attendees know that a close relationship with Jesus might be important, they maybe consider other points more relevant. Let me provide an example for a better understanding. As has already been made clear, the concept of individualism for Cowboy Church members presumably plays an overarching role, which derived from the Cowboy's life who was doing whatever he wanted while simultaneously being on his own in the Prairie. This image continues to be strongly promoted and romanticized by the mass media and, as Dallam notes, turns the Cowboy into a paragon of virtue to be followed by the mainstream (see Dallam 2018, 32).
- 36 The Evangelical leadership is aware of this and promotes a »come and go culture« in their churches. Nevertheless, confident individualism plays a role in the Cowboy culture and partly in an Evangelical worldview. Hence, if we consider the shift during the Protestant Reformation from relying on the church's institution to giving each believer responsibility for his relationship with God, the equality of each person before God may resonate with the individualism in American culture in general and in Cowboy culture in particular. As a consequence of this view, each person can study the

scriptures individually, and each believer can know God personally. Moreover, each person has their testimony of how God changed them that they can share as a way of sharing the gospel, a personal tool that does not require theological training. Thus, a personal relationship with Jesus and each person's ability to share their faith and pray for others – the priesthood of all believers – may be considered the essence of Evangelicalism. In turn, this could strengthen the idea of Cowboy Church members that their own beliefs are sufficient or even confirm the notion that the Cowboy in the Prairie was Christian after all. This understanding could then lead to the assumption that more structured and traditional activities such as Bible studies and discipleship groups are obsolete since Evangelicals also seem to be individualists.

- 37 Moreover, Cowboy Church leaders take up the »Cowboy individualism« by advocating a »come and go culture«, so a formal membership is not required. This would also make Cowboy Churches more attractive to possible members because most members do not have a church education and are therefore called by Dallam »new Christians« (see *ibid.*, 126-128). In this case, the concept of an Evangelical church is misinterpreted or selectively perceived, which can be explained by referring to the theory of cognitive bias, as Cowboy Church attendees incorporate this individualism and attribute this quality to their ideal Christian Cowboy image while taking it very seriously.
- 38 In addition to the Christian Cowboy values of masculinity and individualism, other ideas drawn from the Cowboy lifestyle seem to suffuse the belief system of Cowboy Church attendees. An interview passage, in which one interviewee states that some people find it too »churchy« sometimes, demonstrates the distorted focus well. She refers to Bible studies and reading Bible passages during the service, even though both activities are common in an Evangelical church. However, her complaint indicates that the Cowboy is not tied to a formal creed or typical Christian activities that may be found in other churches from some attendees' point of view. Therefore, it is suggested that in the Cowboy Church members' individual belief system, a »visible« religiosity (in the form of praying and reading scripture) may not be of primary importance. This reluctance to religious practice may have developed because the religiosity of Cowboys was rather rudimentary, most definitely used as a coping mechanism to alleviate the loneliness and hardness of his life (see *ibid.*, 37). As a result, Cowboy Church attendees very likely romanticize this and conclude that since Cowboys turn to God when hard times come, they can be considered strongly religious. This understanding of the Cowboy's faith implies that the religiosity – practiced (very rudimentarily) by the Cowboy in the Prairie – simultaneously becomes a symbol and role model for an ideal image of lived-out Christianity, one that is simple, with directness and not necessarily conforming to traditional church practices.
- 39 Lastly, what completes the Christian Cowboy ideal is that great importance is attached to (Cowboy) activities such as riding bulls, horses, and getting dirty in the arena (see *ibid.*, 98-105). This characteristic is also attributed to the ideal Christian Cowboy, although this »masculine« image is probably also a product of popular culture. The principles of cognitive bias might also be relevant to explain how this Cowboy image is formulated. Hence, it can be assumed that this Christian Cowboy ideal presumably causes a feeling of belonging and affirmation. Simultaneously, the irrationality of this mixed-up idea (pop cultural portrayal of Cowboy life and the Christian notion to follow specific norms and rules) may become irrelevant, for it does not fit the constructed

image of the ideal Christian Cowboy and consequently not the members' individual belief-systems.

- 40 This process of blurring the lines between what is real and what is not concerning the Cowboy is supported by what Forbes and Mahan suggest: popular culture portrays our yearnings or moments of escape. As a complementary measure, popular culture is also described as a reflection and a shaping force of society, and, even more importantly, it has a significant effect on religion like it has on any other part of society. Suppose Evangelicals from a church leadership perspective now incorporate the Cowboy culture, which has been saturated by popular culture for years, to reach a specific niche. In that case, they risk that the Cowboy Church members have a different understanding of how this Cowboy culture should be interpreted and implemented in church. I would like to refer to Storey, as he indicates that popular culture is an empty conceptual category that can be filled in by a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context of use (see Storey 2018,1). In addition, David Morgan's theory demonstrates that visualization, in this case, media visualization, can help strengthen the members in their assumptions.
- 41 As a final point, I would like to address the (materiality) style of the physical buildings of the churches, as the Cowboy ideal is also visible in its (physical) environment. It is supposed that the appearance of the Western-styled Cowboy Church evokes a sense of belonging among the attendees by making the Cowboy culture and its abstracted semantic potential (loneliness, freedom, hard work, cattle drive, Wild West, American Indians, and traits spread by the media, e.g., Marlborough Man, gunfights, etc.) immersively accessible. It is assumed that the Cowboy Church »represents a lifestyle«, most likely based on the formulated Christian Cowboy ideal. As a lifestyle is probably not only a mental approach but is most definitely reflected in a material (visible) way, the church's appearance in Western-style is important, because this aesthetic style presumably serves as a sign of recognition and of identification. Also conceivable in the sense of Durkheim, who describes that every society needs a distinctive mark, which evokes a collective feeling (see Durkheim 2007, 284). As a result, by building the churches in Western-style, they firstly frame the congregation, and, secondly, they preserve the (formulated) Christian Cowboy ideal. The idealization of the Christian Cowboy results from the aspect that the members are given the opportunity to live out their Cowboy ideal within the church, which allows an immersion into Cowboy culture and may also further disseminate Christian and Cowboy culture.

Concluding Remarks

- 42 This article outlined the relatively young phenomenon of Cowboy Churches by showing how effectively Evangelicals are reaching out to certain subcultures, using mainly pop-cultural images to increase their outreach. In this context, it was argued that especially the Cowboy culture in all its facets seems to set the tone for the foundation of Cowboy Churches. This strategy has allowed Evangelicals to reach the broad masses of Cowboy culture adherents in the Midwest and the Southern States of America in a short time – from 1999 onwards.
- 43 However, referencing Mahan and Forbes, we may say that if Evangelicals incorporate the Cowboy culture to reach a particular niche, they risk that the church members have a different understanding of how this Cowboy culture should be interpreted and

implemented in church. This implementation of the popular cultural Cowboy means that what should be their greatest tool – »to speak the idiom of the culture« (see Balmer 2019, 490-491) – may turn into their misfortune. Hence, Cowboy Churches seem to formulate their own Christian Cowboy ideal. This ideal Christian Cowboy that serves as the basis for Cowboy Churches can be described as predominantly male, individualistic, true to his values, and a role model for others. Additionally, the Cowboy's religiosity during the cattle drives is intensely romanticized and taken as the basis of the ideal Christian belief. This idealized religiosity is then intermixed with the American Cowboy culture, a conglomerate of historical data and popular culture. Simultaneously, this Christian Cowboy ideal represents a specific guideline and does not necessarily stand in context with an Evangelical worldview or their tenets.

- 44 Lastly, the architecture and the Western-style environment play a significant role in visualizing and simultaneously confirming the Cowboy culture. Architecture frames the (mental) Christian Cowboy ideal by visually manifesting it. I agree with Dallam's final statement that Cowboy Churches are a very young movement, and the future will show how they develop and cope with struggles like the ones emphasized in this article.

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NOTES

1. According to the American Pew Research Center, the United States has the largest number of Evangelicals globally, as they mark the country's single largest religious group of total religious groups in the U.S. with 25,4%. (<https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>)
2. Even if this model is sometimes criticized, it still makes the fluid religious American field accessible. Common criticisms of the religion-economy market model are its reductionist perspective and its lack of consideration regarding the social constitution of markets. Moreover, it is assumed that actors always act rationally concerning their choice of action, desires, and beliefs. Thus carefully consider different options in terms of costs and rewards, which can be questioned. (see Stolz 2018, 97-122)
3. See <https://www.prairietrailcowboychurch.com>.
4. See <https://crossroadscowboychurch.net>.
5. In Bible studies, the relationship with Jesus plays a subordinated role. Bible studies are even more lecture-oriented, have no maximum number of participants, and usually have a beginning and an end. Additionally, one important difference is that the goal of discipleship groups is to mature disciples who make other disciples afterward, whereas, in Bible studies, the focus is on understanding biblical texts and ideals.
6. »Hermeneutics as the methodology of interpretation is concerned with problems that arise when dealing with meaningful human actions and the products of such actions, most importantly texts. As a methodological discipline, it offers a toolbox for efficiently treating problems of the interpretation of human actions, texts and other meaningful material.« (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hermeneutics/>)
7. See <https://oklahoman.com/article/2698029/women-strive-for-respect-in-reining>.

ABSTRACTS

Nur wenige Assoziationen sind so eng mit den Vereinigten Staaten verbunden wie das Bild des Lassos schwingenden Cowboys, der auf seinem Pferd Rinderherden durch die Prärie treibt. Daher wird gemeinhin gesagt, dass Amerika die Heimat der Cowboy-Kultur sei. Gleichzeitig ist Amerika auch für seine religiöse Fluidität und Vielfalt bekannt. Wenn wir uns jedoch das Christentum in den USA genauer ansehen, ist es höchst bezeichnend, dass vor allem evangelikale Gruppen einen großen Teil der Christen und Christinnen in den USA ausmachen. Dies liegt primär daran, dass Evangelikale trotz einer konservativen Ausrichtung dafür bekannt sind, moderne Technologien sowie Medien zu nutzen, um u.a. ihr Ziel der Evangelisierung zu erreichen. Zu deren Zielgruppe gehören mitunter Subkulturen, deren Akteure und Akteurinnen meist nicht religiös sind. Im Fall dieses Artikels handelt es sich bei der untersuchten Subkultur um jene Menschen, die sich stark mit der Figur des Cowboys identifizieren, also vor allem um Teile der weißen Unter- und

Mittelschicht, die in den Vorstädten oder auf dem Land lebt. Die Missionierung dieser Subkultur stellte sich als sehr erfolgreich heraus und Anfang der 2000er Jahre sprossen im Mittleren Westen und in den Südstaaten Amerikas sogenannte Cowboy Churches aus dem Boden. Dieser Artikel wird anhand von zwei Fallbeispielen zeigen, welche Probleme auftreten, wenn man eine Subkultur zu missionieren versucht, die sehr freiheitsliebend, individualistisch und patriotisch ist, und wie problematisch es sein kann, wenn Evangelikale Populärkultur und Medien nutzen, um die Evangelisation zu erreichen.

Very few pictures are as closely associated with the image of the United States as that of the roping Cowboy on horseback, driving cattle through the prairie. Hence, it is commonly said that the United States is the homeland of the Cowboy culture. America is also known for its fluidity and diversity within the religious field. However, if we take a closer look at Christianity in the US, it is highly significant that especially Evangelicals make up many Christians in the US. This is mainly because evangelicals, despite a conservative outlook, are known to use modern technologies to achieve, among other things, the goal of evangelization. The target groups also include subcultures, most of whom are not religious. In the case of this article, the focused subculture involves those who strongly identify with the Cowboy figure, hence mostly the white lower and American middle class living in the suburbs or the country. This outreach was quite successful, as, at the beginning of the 2000s, so-called Cowboy Churches sprouted up in the Midwest and the southern states of America. This article will use two case studies to illustrate the problems that occur when reaching out to a very freedom-loving, individualistic, and patriotic subculture and how challenging it can be when evangelicals use popular culture and media to achieve the goal of evangelization.

INDEX

Keywords: Evangelikalismus, Cowboy Church, USA, Religion und Populärkultur, Materialität

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