

FROM DADDY GRACE TO THE COWBOY CHRISTIANS

An Interview with Professor Marie W. Dallam



WRSP: You have been interested in religion for a long time, having first received a BA in religious studies in 1996 and then stayed on that track throughout your career. What is it about this subject that fascinates you?

Prof. Dallam: Religious belief can be such a strong motivator in human lives, yet often in ways that are more like undercurrents rather than being readily observable, identifiable, and nameable. I find it endlessly fascinating to peek under the blanket and try to understand how the whole picture fits together.

WRSP: Your first book was *Daddy Grace: A Celebrity Preacher and His House of Prayer* (New York University Press, 2007). Could you tell us something about who this figure was and what led you to devote your attentions to him while in graduate school?

Prof. Dallam: Daddy Grace was an immigrant from Cape Verde who founded a church in the Pentecostal tradition, called the United House of Prayer for All People. I first came across his name in a seminar during my master's degree and wound up writing my term paper about his church. My research led me to see that the academic treatment of Grace and his church was not only scant but polemical, with many people boldly dismissing him. Even though he built an organization that served tens of thousands of people over the years, almost no one had investigated his work in a serious and balanced way. Was that because he presented as a bit of a caricature? Was it because he did things that made people uncomfortable? Was it because poor, black people have often been overlooked as a matter of course? It's probably all of these things, and others. In any case, it struck me as deeply sad. I thought his work and his legacy were worthy of recovering and I set out to do that for my doctoral dissertation, eventually published as the book with New York University Press.

WRSP: You were previously a steering committee member on the American Academy of Religion's (AAR) "Religion, Food, and Eating in North America" seminar and subsequently brought out a co-edited volume on *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America* (Columbia University Press, 2014). What interests you about the relationship between religion and food, and how did this particular project get off the ground?

Prof. Dallam: Within religious contexts, I am interested in material objects and the range of relationships people have with them. I like to reflect on ways that both the objects themselves and the relationships function in religious meaning-making, and in turn how that affects peoples' everyday lives and behavior. Our AAR seminar on food and the anthology that came out of it were followed by an AAR seminar on Religion, Attire, and Adornment in North America, and it too has a volume that is now in press (Columbia, 2023). There was some overlap in the group of scholars involved in both projects because of our common interests in the material culture of religion and the types of questions we explore. For the newest volume I both co-edited, with Dr. Benjamin Zeller, and I contributed a chapter about the Church of Body Modification. And who knows, there could even be a future third volume in this series!

WRSP: Your most recent monograph, *Cowboy Christians* (Oxford University Press, 2018), looked at the growing number of self-described 'cowboy churches', especially in Texas and Oklahoma. Could you give us a rough idea of what cowboy Christianity is and how you came to study it?

Prof. Dallam: Cowboy Christians are people who feel personally grounded in a subculture of the American West, which they themselves tend to call "cowboy culture," and for whom Christianity blends with that culture on a deep level. Of course, some of this cowboy culture is real and some aspects of it are based on an entrenched mythology about cowboys and the "Old West." Many cowboy Christians feel they have been marginalized from mainstream churches over the years, and cowboy churches have sprung up to make an intervention on that. The cowboy church itself is defined mostly by behaviors and structures, and perhaps somewhat by values and expectations, but not really by theology; theologically they are on the conservative end of evangelical Protestantism.

In its ideal form, the cowboy church eschews formality and deliberately lowers social barriers in order to welcome people who don't typically feel comfortable in traditional churches. The attire is casual, the atmosphere is informal, the music is identifiable, the sermons are relatable, and the social activities are things that interest a cowboy culture crowd. They won't ostracize people who demonstrate "sinful" behavior; the idea is that through involvement with the church, you will gradually shed your sinful tendencies, but no one expects it to be a quick, easy, or permanent process. In the meantime, everything might look a bit messy.

Every book begins with a question. I began studying cowboy Christianity simply because I didn't know what it was, and I was trying to get my questions answered. And as with most things, the deeper I looked, the more I found. That's part of why I think of it as a cowboy Christian "movement," rather than just a type of church.

WRSP: You characterize cowboy Christianity as a new religious movement (NRM), a concept that I feel (in the popular imagination at least) often tends to be associated more with groups that are wholly distinct from mainstream religions (Wicca, Scientology etc) rather than new variants of established traditions. That

being the case, I wondered if you had any additional thoughts about the value of the NRM framework for understanding new denominations or trends within existing religions like Protestantism?

Prof. Dallam: My interests skew toward alternative religions, rather than “new” religions, because they can actually be more controversial. What I mean by that is that people are less likely to fear something that they perceive as dramatically different from themselves (“new religions”), whereas something that is similar to them but slightly different can be more deeply disturbing – the “variants of established traditions,” as you phrased it. Daddy Grace’s church is a slightly different type of Pentecostalism, and for that reason most Pentecostals prefer to significantly distance themselves from it. The same is true of the cowboy church: it’s just a little bit different from “mainstream” Christianity, and that causes discomfort for some. I find that dynamic interesting.

But that’s not what you asked, is it? The answer to your question is that yes, much of the sociological work that has been done on new religious movements can readily be applied to more mainstream religious developments. The social dynamics themselves are largely the same across religions. They’re just points on a continuum.

WRSP: Have you had much of a response to the book from cowboy Christians (or other Christians) since it was published?

Prof. Dallam: I had some positive responses from several of my interviewees, but I suspect that the ones who didn’t like the end result are too nice to hunt me down and tell me that. Cowboy Christians are, after all, polite! I spoke on the phone for a couple hours with one gentleman I’d interviewed, and he really grilled me about some things I’d written, but it was all a good-natured effort to come to a peaceful understanding about it (which we did). I also had one man who pointed to a part of my introduction in which I acknowledged that some readers in the cowboy Christian world would not agree with my take on things; he said that was true and that he was glad I’d written the book nonetheless. I really appreciated him saying that. Honestly, though, people of faith were not my target audience. It’s a book for scholars. It’s a book for the history shelves. It’s a book that gives insight into how this movement is unfolding and self-styling, and I suspect it will be more intellectually valuable in a few decades when scholars are trying to puzzle through the past.

WRSP: In your book you refer to a comparative lack of overt politicisation within the cowboy Christian churches, and I wondered if that had potentially changed in the past few years given the growing ideological polarisation of U.S. society? Do you think that there are connections between the cowboy Christian movement and what is now often being called ‘Christian nationalism’?

Prof. Dallam: That’s a good question, but I don’t know the answer. Certainly, many cowboy Christians would identify closely with the feeling that they have been long been left out and tossed aside from the world of mainstream politics. So a safe bet would be that political issues and candidates have become discussion points in cowboy churches in recent years. However since the conclusion of my research I have distanced myself from engagement with the cowboy Christian milieu, so I don’t really know that for certain. Hopefully another young researcher is out there as we speak, gathering the answers.

WRSP: Has there been an expansion of the cowboy Christian movement outside its U.S. heartlands? Has it extended into either Canada or Mexico, for example?

Prof. Dallam: Yes, absolutely. There are cowboy churches and cowboy Christians all over the world. Canada, Mexico, Australia, several countries in Asia. I don't have any idea what those communities are like, nor what aspects of the cowboy church model they do and don't choose to follow. But I know some leaders have deliberately undertaken mission efforts in those places and they intend to stick closely with the model while also incorporating local relevance.

WRSP: Are there any future research projects or publications of yours that we should be looking out for?

Prof. Dallam: In the past couple of years I've been exploring intersections of religion and the arts. I published an article last year in the *MAVCOR* journal about Mormon art (<https://mavcor.yale.edu/mavcor-journal/art-religious-memory-and-mormon-polygamy>). Now I'm in the earliest stages of a project that is a consideration of religious theater. I am interested in different genres of theatrical performance that are deliberate efforts at evangelism, particularly (but not solely) among new religious movements, and I'm looking at the phenomenon across time periods and geography.

Professor Dallam, thank you for participating in the WRSP Forum!

**This interview is also being made available at the personal blog of the interviewer,
Dr Ethan Doyle White (<http://ethandoylewhite.blogspot.com/>)**

Professor Dallam is a professor of religious studies at the University of Oklahoma. She received her PhD from Temple University in 2006 and is the author of both *Daddy Grace: A Celebrity Preacher and His House of Prayer* (2007) and *Cowboy Christians* (2018). She is also co-editor of *Religion, Food, and Eating in North America* (2014) and *Religion, Attire, and Adornment in North America* (2023), as well as the co-general editor of *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*.

WRSP Interviewer:

Dr Ethan Doyle White