



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

The Religious Lives of American Women in Poverty

Susan Crawford Sullivan

Assistant Professor of Sociology, College of the Holy Cross

*In conversation with **Erik Owens**, Associate Director,
Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life, Boston College*

February 26, 2013

- OWENS: It was pleasure to read through your book, *Living Faith* [University of Chicago Press, 2011], which you gave the subtitle *Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty*. Perhaps we should start by explaining what you mean by “everyday religion,” and why it’s so important to distinguish that from other scholarly and popular views about religion.
- SULLIVAN: By everyday religion I mean lived religion in terms of how people experience religion, not necessarily centered in religious institutions but rather, as part of their daily life. For the mothers I interviewed—most of whom weren’t taking part in religious organizations but yet had a lot of strong religious beliefs and actions in their daily life—it was really looking at what [Northwestern University historian] Robert Orsi calls lived religion, where religion comes into contact with daily life. Other scholars like [Boston University sociologist] Nancy Ammerman have written that traditional ways of measuring or studying religion were congregational, through attendance or looking at different congregational styles, whereas lived religion really looks at how people are experiencing their beliefs in their realm of their daily lives.
- OWENS: One of the key background facts of the book is that the low income mothers you interview are socially isolated in lots of important ways. This has crucial implications for their religious experience and for their lives as a whole. Can you speak about how this isolation disconnected the mothers you spoke with from the institutional religious organizations they might otherwise take advantage of?
- SULLIVAN: Sociological research shows that the poor are more likely to lack social capital than the non-poor overall, though that’s not always true. Three quarters of the

women I interviewed were on welfare, half of these were homeless and living in long-term family shelters. This is a sub-population who may have lacked even more ties than usual, since they were clearly utilizing their last resorts—nobody wants to be in that situation—but they were definitely disengaged from organized religion for reasons that I go into in the book. I saw high levels of personal prayer, but logistical reasons may have kept them away: if you have a couple young kids, maybe you work a night shift, maybe you live in a shelter and you don't have transportation. So there's a logistical piece, but about a third of the women I interviewed also felt stigmatized by or unwanted by churches. Some of them had been previously involved in churches in their adult lives, and for various reasons, most of them were not involved at the time that I spoke to them.

OWENS: Was that an unexpected finding for you?

SULLIVAN: Well, surveys do show that the poor have fewer contacts and are less likely to say they have a best friend or rely on neighbors. But I didn't start out to write a book about everyday religion. I was interested in the aftermath of welfare reform, and I wanted to explore poor women's conceptions of faith and work. I knew that welfare reform required them to work yet some conservative religious traditions, which I imagined some of these women might have been affiliated with, emphasized the mother's hands-on care for the child, perhaps at the expense of paid work. What I really didn't expect to find was how much religious beliefs and religious faith seem to pervade aspects of their life, given that they weren't involved in churches.

It was disheartening to hear some of the stories of people feeling stigmatized or unwanted by churches, when you think that churches or religious organizations are supposed to be welcoming. Some people I had spoken with had had experiences that were less than welcoming.

OWENS: How did these women's everyday religious practices help them understand their place in society and their roles as mothers?

SULLIVAN: As other studies have found, I found the primacy of motherhood to be very important for these women. As I mentioned in the book, one time I brought my baby along with me to one interview when I didn't have a babysitter, and my research assistant was going to watch with him along with the children of the respondent. I found that the women related to me in such a different way, not as a university researcher but as another mother who had to juggle the stresses of work and parenting. Although I certainly wouldn't pretend I know what it feels like to walk in these mothers' shoes, this sort of shared motherhood really did seem to open an avenue for our conversations. A lot of women did express a sense that God has a calling for their life, and for almost all of them it lay in motherhood. This didn't necessarily exclude paid work, but the primary role they felt called to in life was to be good mothers.

OWENS: You write early in the book about many of these women seeing God as a father figure rather than as a personal Jesus that is sometimes invoked in times of suffering or crisis. What does that say to you?

SULLIVAN: I tried to keep the language open and really listen and let their language guide the conversation. They most often spoke of God as a father figure—as a loving father, sometimes as a father disappointed in them, but always in the context of a loving father who had their best interests in heart. Some of the women, a minority, who felt they had disappointed God used negative language where they'd say "God sees me doing nothing. God thinks I'm a bum." But they were in the minority.

I found a few evangelical women invoking the personal Jesus. One jumps to mind off the top of my head that really invoked this notion. She was in a homeless shelter and suffering with poverty and homelessness along with her four children, but when I'm interviewing her she's telling me how she is sharing in the sufferings of Christ and even the early disciples. She's talking about her sufferings in a way that united her with the sufferings of Christ. But that wasn't common in the women I spoke with; it was much more of a generic God as a loving father figure.

OWENS: How did the mothers you interviewed come to experience the distance you describe between their personal beliefs and the religious institutions that might otherwise nurture them.

SULLIVAN: For the ones with the logistical problems, it sort of just happened: "Now I'm living in a shelter but when I get my life back together, I want to go back to my church." Some of them had traumatic stories like "I tried to have my baby baptized but the priest wouldn't baptize my baby because he said it took a man and a woman to conceive a child and raise a child." Another woman I'll talk about tonight was very involved in her Hispanic Pentecostal church, but when she moved in with the father of her children, she was no longer welcome to attend.

So some of them had stories of a dramatic exit. One woman told me that her pastor wouldn't help out when she became homeless, and that made her angry; another woman had been very involved in contributing financially to her church over many years, but when she was going through a divorce they wouldn't help with legal fees, and that made her angry. The pastors definitely agreed that stigmatization exists in churches, both for poverty and also lifestyle issues, though less so in the African-American church. Black women were definitely less likely to say they felt stigmatized in church, but the pastors said that it happens. Sometimes, though, pastors say it's a person's internal self-esteem that is stigmatizing; sometimes people fear that others are looking at them or being unwelcome when that's not really the case.

OWENS: Since the major welfare reforms in 1996 that added “charitable choice” provisions, a lot of the social services and job training have been done through religious organizations. How did this impact the women you discuss?

SULLIVAN: Only a minority of congregations get government grants. As much interest as there is among congregations—and surveys that say they are interested—in partnering with the government to do social services, the actual number that have taken them up on it is fairly small. Still, the women I spoke with were suspicious of this connection. Even the mothers who were involved in churches worried about people being excluded. The minority of my study who did attend weekly or monthly were worried about people who weren’t in the church or people don’t know there are programs in the church, or they worried about the church’s capacity to do more. They said that churches do a lot already. One woman talked about how her pastor and all his family members would be driving around in Rolls Royces if he partnered with the government to do social services. I would say that the majority of women I spoke with were suspicious of it, and about a quarter thought it was a good idea because they thought churches were more compassionate than government. But they were still suspicious of it.

OWENS: After having done all this research and spent so much time with these women and the communities of which they’re a part, what can you extrapolate about the general American view on poverty today? Obviously you can’t speak for all Americans, but I’m interested in hearing what you can take out of this experience as a citizen. How do we—how *should* we—understand what poverty looks like today?

SULLIVAN: That’s a great question. The main thing I took away from this research was really a sad sense of how divided we are. Even in churches, which are supposed to be more united or more welcoming, there’s just—part of it is just residential economic segregation leading the poor and non-poor to have only fleeting contact (if any) with each other. [Harvard University sociologist] Chris Winship talks about seeing the poor as a kind of “other,” that there are ways that lead us to see the poor as other and that we fail to see people as our neighbors or as brothers and sisters of one human family. There is a tremendous sense of separation. My suburban parish is not far from downtown Worcester but it could be a million miles away in terms the lifestyle and its concerns. How to bridge that impasse is—I’m not sure.

[Harvard University sociologist] Robert Putnam finds some evangelical churches have members that are more likely to say they know or knew people from different social classes. Similarly, a theologian I cite in my book, Vincent Miller, talks about how his urban Catholic parish is the only place he has been able to develop friendships with immigrants in his city. Otherwise, he said, they are the people cleaning his office or running the restaurant where he grabs his fast food. Churches provide the space for that human contact to occur.

My own research backed up the understanding that churches are more likely to see the very poor as charity recipients than potential congregants or fellow travelers. UNC-Chapel Hill sociologist Margarita Mooney wrote a great book about Haitian immigrants in which she talks about this notion of a moral community. Participating equally as a member, not as a needy “other” awaiting a charitable handout, even if all you can offer is a prayer for someone—it’s a much more dignified way for people to have their needs met. You’re still a part of that community.

So, that’s what I really took out of it, but I don’t have a solution. Living in a middle class suburb myself and looking at my parish, which is full of other families that reflect the composition of the town... how do you build those bridges?

OWENS: It’s a challenge.

SULLIVAN: It really is. There is one woman I interviewed for the book who gets groceries or food bank stuff every week from a Catholic parish and decided to try to go back to Mass at one point before I had interviewed her. She went, and said that the visiting priest preached a homily that denigrated everything she had ever done. He talked about drugs and sex outside of marriage, she said she left feeling so small; she never went back. While this visiting priest was probably not trying to make her feel unwelcome, she now believes that poor women like her who have troubled life histories are not welcome in the congregation. She still goes to the food bank every week, and she still knows parishioners who donate the food to her, but she doesn’t feel welcome to be a full member. I know that’s not true of all congregations—there are many congregations that welcome the very poor—but from my read of the research, the churches could be doing a lot more. I don’t lay it all on the feet of the churches, though, because there are cultural divides that go both ways. Survey data says that the poor or people with less than a high school education are more likely to say that churches are full of people who are stuck up or not like them. The cultural divide can go both ways.

[END]