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Poverty and American National Priorities

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Thank you to the Boisi Center for inviting me to speak as part of today's panel. Today I will talk about findings from my book, *Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty* [University of Chicago Press, 2011], about the role of religion in the lives of urban mothers in poverty, and I will conclude with some implications for public policy. Although there have been countless studies of women on welfare or poor mothers, there has been little research on the role of religion in their lives. This is particularly surprising given the public policy emphasis on the role of religion in poverty reduction since the 1996 welfare reform law and on through to the Bush and Obama administration today. I will first tell you a bit about my findings. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

I. Introduction

Maria, a twenty-four year old unmarried mother with three small children, is in many regards a highly religious Pentecostal. Despite her high levels of personal religious practices like

prayer, she is not currently part of a religious congregation. She used to be deeply involved in her Hispanic Pentecostal church community and she attended services weekly, where she received a lot of practical support which she needed as a single mother on welfare – food, help in the housing crisis, as well as spiritual and emotional support. But after moving in with the father of her children, she was no longer welcome at her conservative church. She and her family have also become homeless and moved to a family shelter, which removed her from the immediate vicinity of the church. Maria currently practices her faith in an individual way, isolated from a religious community.

Her story presents several paradoxes. Here is a woman whose deep traditional religious faith is a defining part of her life, yet she is not a part of a religious community. As a mother on welfare, she has pressing needs that could in part be met by the support of a congregation. And although she is not currently part of a congregation, religious faith pervades and shapes the ways in which Maria responds to challenges, parents her children, and makes meaning of her circumstances.

In writing this book, I wanted to listen to poor women, have their voices heard, and also to further develop theory on religion and poverty.

II. Methods

I conducted in-depth interviews with 45 low-income mothers in the Boston area, which were recruited from ten social services facilities. I wanted to go through social services instead of congregations to get range of beliefs and practices. They were almost all single and had never married, and were of a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. About half were living in family shelters, and all had at least one young child. Most had a Protestant or Catholic background, while a few had no religious background (that's who I found in the social service programs).

Most had a high level of personal practice (prayer, etc), which was measured in a questionnaire, but most did not attend a congregation, or did so only on holidays. I later interviewed Catholic and Protestant pastors working in poor urban areas

III. Partnering With God

The most prevalent way low-income mothers draw on religion in facing challenges imposed by poverty is in seeing themselves as “working in partnership” with God. Similarly, this is a common way that psychologists find non-poor people draw on religion in facing challenges.

Maria explained how she “worked with God” when she lost her housing:

When I had nowhere to go, and I would ask God, please, if you are not doing it for me, do it for my kids. I don't want my kids to be sleeping in a car. I never got to that point because God was always there to help me.

Although the women are the ones taking actions such as filling out housing and job application forms or seeking government help, they believe the partnership with and assistance from God brings results. It is not as if they are just waiting passively on a divine being. In this case, prayer yields hope, which provides perseverance and strength to take action.

V. Three important sites of everyday religion for poor mothers:

A. Work and welfare:

Welfare has been intimately connected with issues of morality in recent decades in the United States. Welfare recipients can be viewed as women living a cultural pathology of laziness and promiscuity. Most women I interviewed believe that religion (God/church– usually God) view short-term welfare use positively, but would disapprove of long-term welfare use or people living off the system. One mother told me:

But people not trying, I think the church would shun them. People making welfare their career. God made somebody think of welfare reform!

A small minority do say their religious conscience calls them to be home caring for their children. One white Evangelical said:

I think that God would rather have a mother be on welfare and stay home with her children, because that is the most important thing, the mother raising the child.

But these were a minority and given welfare reform time limits, most will have to work. I found that the majority of women connected faith with their work lives, most often in terms of praying for help at work in times of stress.

B. Parenting

Parenting is challenging even under the best of circumstances. Studies show wealthier families drawing on religion to teach children their tradition, instill morals and values, and to be part of a community. Most women I interviewed wanted to instill strong personal religious faith in kids so they will know they are never alone, have self-confidence, moral guidance to resist peer pressure, but also to be in churches. Many poor mothers send their children to church with others, and urban pastors have confirmed this phenomenon.

C. Making meaning

The majority of women – unasked – offered theological interpretations of their suffering and hardship. They drew on narratives of divine will and redemptive suffering. It was very common for them to see suffering as part of God’s plan for good, and it was actually the most common way women viewed their hardships. For instance, becoming homeless and having to move to a shelter can become for poor mothers part of God’s plan to bring about good for them, such as working with shelter workers to get better housing than housing they had previously lost.

I would not suggest that women's explanations for suffering are unproblematic or that social change is unimportant, but I do want to highlight that from their point of view, very marginalized women interpret suffering in ways that they say give them hope and the ability to act.

VI. Churches and the poor

Although people often think of churches as a haven for the poor, studies show the poor are less likely to attend church despite often higher levels of personal faith, though this is less true for African Americans. My interviews showed that the main sources of explanation for this are *capacity* and *stigma*. Capacity is fairly straightforward; with shelters, transportation, job schedules, and dealing with children, it is hard for even very religious women to attend. But in my study, one third of mothers felt stigmatized by churches. The stigma arises from single motherhood, cohabitation, poverty, welfare, or some other aspect of their lifestyle. Though this small sample can't give definite answers, logistics seemed to more affect African American women and stigma white women.

All pastors interviewed were aware that such stigmatization existed, either in their own congregations or in others, due to lifestyle or poverty. One pastor of a working class African American church told me that some church members don't want the poor. One woman said to him:

'Reverend, why is it that that's all we can attract? The alcoholics and the drug addicts and the people who just got out of jail? What can they do for us? I mean they can't give us collection. They are uneducated, so what can they do for us?'

The pastor continued:

There's the issue [among church members] that we've struggled long and hard, and we've managed to make it, and you haven't and that's your shame. I think there's a whole idea that there's a sort of element that we want to keep away from our children.

Other researchers have found similar things.

VII. Conclusions on Findings

Everyday religion is important for many mothers in poverty, including those who do not attend religious liturgies or services. Women are more likely to draw on religion in ways that promote resilience and action, although some draw on negative religious interpretations in ways likely to be unhelpful, mainly in how some see themselves, such as thinking that God would think they are bums. However helpful women find personal prayer, relying on it alone leaves them fundamentally disconnected from a network of religious support that may help with practical or emotional problems.

Counter-examples posed by the few mothers in the study involved with congregations make it clear that personally religious poor women who are embedded in supportive religious communities have far greater resources available in confronting their challenges. A white Catholic woman, who was encouraged by her priest toward her goal of getting her GED and working with special needs children, said, “I felt like sometimes that there was no way I'm going to make it...It's just the church helps me to feel like I can do it.” While her remarks do not sound much different than those of the mothers who state that personal prayer helps them feel that they can accomplish a difficult task, this woman’s sense that the *church* helps her feel that she can do it reveals the myriad of church-based support available to her.

Doing this research raised questions for me about the disconnect between churches and the very poor. It is a very different relationship to be providing charity to a needy other in a soup kitchen, like many congregations do, than welcoming that person as a member of the

congregation. I don't lay all the blame at the feet of the churches because some residents of poor urban neighborhoods also feel a cultural distance from churches, thinking of them as stuck up or not for people like them. But I do think many churches could do a better job of including the very poor, and so did a number of pastors I interviewed.

VIII. Public policy issues and faith-based social services

The 1996 welfare reform law codified religion as a prominent feature in the battle against poverty. The Charitable choice provision of welfare law: mechanisms set in place to help government agencies contract with explicitly religious organizations, including congregations. These groups can have religious symbols and art and can choose to hire on the basis of religion and can have religious components of programs that don't use government funding, though proselytizing clients, funding explicitly religious activities, or turning away beneficiaries on the basis of religion is prohibited.

In 2001, President George W. Bush established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives to further government partnerships with faith-based organizations. By 2008, there were Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives in eleven federal agencies and over 35 states, including the Departments of Labor, Commerce, Justice, and Health and Human Services. Despite controversies over issues of separation of church and state, the issue of religious discrimination in hiring, and Bush's use of executive orders, among others, President Obama kept the faith-based office, renamed the Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, focusing on domestic poverty, responsible fatherhood, preventing unintended pregnancy, and interreligious dialogue.

A 2009 Pew survey found 69% of Americans supported congregations and other faith-based organizations applying for government grants to provide social services, with younger

Americans and Democrats more likely to support it. 31 percent of Americans think that churches and other religious organizations can do the best job in helping the needy, and two thirds of Americans cite the power of religion to ‘change people’s lives’ as a reason to support government funding of faith-based organizations. Despite this, relatively few congregations apply for and get government grants, only about five percent, though half of congregations in a nationally representative sample express interest.

But lost in the public policy debates are the voices of poor women themselves, since researchers have not sat down to listen to what they say about religion. Here’s what poor mothers have to say:

Use of church-based social services

In my study, a few women indicated they are not comfortable receiving social services from a congregation to which they do not belong and several did not know that many congregations provide social services. However, most knew many congregations had services and did not feel they need to be part of a church in order to receive church-based social services. Overall, relatively few women in the study used congregation-based social services but those who did spoke positively of them.

Views on government funding of church-based social services

Women seem well aware of a gap between churches and residents of low-income neighborhoods, leading many to be suspicious of policy initiatives increasing churches’ roles in social service provision. Most believe the government should have primary responsibility for helping those in need, as opposed to churches. Even women who think churches have “more heart” than other service providers express concern about the capacity of churches to provide

more than very short-term assistance. A minority of women I interviewed think increased government partnership with funding of church-based social services is a good idea, because they feel churches are more compassionate and better able to help people.

But for others, concerns about inclusion and accountability overrode the potential for churches to provide more compassionate or effective assistance. A Latina Catholic who attends weekly, fears non church members will be left out. She said, “A lot of people don’t go to the church, so nobody knows about the programs in the church.” Women also bring up concerns about church accountability for funds. Said one African American Baptist that attended church once a month:

My pastor and his wife drive very luxury cars...Can you imagine what they would be driving if the government gave them all this money? They can fudge paperwork like you cannot believe...All their family members would probably be driving around in Rolls Royces.

Obviously, this is a small study done in one geographic location, but my findings suggest that mothers in poverty worry government funding of church-based social services would have trouble with exclusion, financial accountability, and church capacity. While stating that churches are often more compassionate, human, and helpful than government agencies and noting the good that many churches already do, poor women do not necessarily see more government-funding for church-based social services as a solution.

Given the emphasis on domestic poverty reduction as a key focus issue for Obama’s faith-based office, it’s important to take into account the views of the people who receive social services. It is important to figure out ways that religious organizations which provide services can best reach residents of poor neighborhoods. Policy initiatives promoting church-based solutions to the problems of the poor must also acknowledge a gap between the churches and many impoverished urban residents.

I wrote this book to let these mothers’ voices be heard more widely, and to help scholars more deeply understand everyday religion. But I hope that this account will also help religious

leaders, congregations and others to walk with mothers in poverty in working together toward a fuller human community and a more just society.