Review of Susan Crawford Sullivan, *Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press 2011, xii+287 pp., ISBN 978-0-226-78161-7

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In early October, 2012, American newspapers were abuzz with news about shifting religious demographics in the United States. 'Nones on the Rise,' a report by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, in partnership with the PBS program *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, documented the ongoing decline of American Protestantism and the continuation of the decades-long rise of the religiously unaffiliated. One in five American adults, the study claimed, have no religious affiliation, but 68% believe in God or a higher power, 65% see themselves as spiritual and 41% pray at least weekly. The report found that this shift was strongest among middle and upper class Americans and was most prevalent among white people. Arguments ensued about the cause of this rise, whether the 'nones' should be considered non-religious, and what kinds of spiritual practices the religiously unaffiliated were pursuing. But very little attention was paid to a group of people highly reliant on religious ideas and practices in their daily lives, highly disconnected from communal religious life, and targets of highly moralized religious discourses: low-income single mothers.

This population is the subject of Susan Crawford Sullivan's excellent new book *Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty*. Based on in-depth interviews with 45 poor mothers in the Boston area and 15 urban pastors with ministries focused on the poor, the book explores how these women with few other resources use religious beliefs and practices to navigate the complexities of their lives and why, despite intense personal faith, these women were largely disconnected from congregational life. This paradox itself is finding enough to make the book an important one; the public conversation of the last decade and a half regarding organized religion's role in alleviating poverty in a post-welfare

nation makes Sullivan's investigation more significant and the paradox at the heart of her book somewhat more dispiriting.

Sullivan places her study in the context of the literature on lived religion. Drawing from that model, she begins her investigation of the religious lives of these women by looking at the ways in which they express their religious beliefs and the ways they do not. She finds that prayer and sacred reading are two practices that were widely engaged in by her respondents. Prayer has many significant elements in the lives of poor women: it is always available, is confidential, is something that women without many resources can do for others, and gives some of the most socially disconnected people a sense that they are not, in fact, alone. Engagement with the Bible, either through the actual text or through wide-spread cultural beliefs about its content, provided guidance around work and right living. Rather than being compensatory measures for lives filled with deprivation, Sullivan finds that these practices generate resilience and agency in the lives of her subjects.

This resilience and agency are apparent in chapters on how these women use religion in their work lives, in their parenting and in making sense of suffering. The chapter on work begins with an investigation of interview subjects' perceptions of the relationship between morality, welfare and work. It demonstrates how deeply welfare recipients have internalized dominant cultural messages about hard work and deservingness, especially in relation to welfare. 'Women think God is pleased when they try hard,' Sullivan writes. 'Welfare may be part of the picture, but women contrast themselves to a stereotypical welfare recipient by underscoring their hard work. [...] It is by emphasizing how hard they try that mothers attempt to maintain their claim on being moral citizens or godly women despite welfare receipt' (p. 76). The chapter then explores how much her respondents rely on spiritual practices in their work lives. Prayer is used to petition God for help with both the physical tolls and, poignantly, the emotional tolls of low-income service labour. Contrasting her subjects' experience with the literature on religion in the workplace which focuses on meaning-making, Sullivan argues that '[f]or a considerable number of poor urban mothers, a theory of survival more appropriately described the work-faith connection' (p. 104).

In the chapter on parenting, Sullivan investigates the contradictory moral messages single mothers on welfare receive about the importance of work and the importance of staying at home to care for young children. While having children is often an important point for engagement with a local congregation, because many women want to provide their children with religious rituals and education, it is also frequently a point for disconnection as well. Respondents seem to find church a site of tension regarding their family lives, whether it is their choice to work or receive welfare and stay home with their children, their choice to cohabitate with a partner rather than marry, or the many other ways in which their lives deviate from the family norms celebrated in churches. The chapter on suffering highlights again the highly individualistic ways in which low-income women interpret their suffering and God's role in it. 'The negative events befalling them,' Sullivan writes, 'result not as unfortunate consequences of being on the losing end of capitalism without strong safety nets but as part of an overall plan orchestrated by God with the women's greater well-being in mind' (p. 145).

The remaining two substantive chapters focus on why these women are disconnected from churches and congregational life. The first looks at her

respondents' views of why they do not, or no longer attend. Here Sullivan focuses on their capacities for participation and how those capacities are limited by poverty, and their fears and experiences of stigma based on religious norms, class norms or perceived norms. The second turns to her interviews of clergy in low-income communities to understand their vantage point on the issue. The clerics validate the reality of stigma in the churches – although some see it as an excuse for not coming to church – while focusing on the need for intensive outreach to invite and support low income women and the frequent lack of congregational and pastoral resources for such work. The book concludes with lessons for churches, policy makers and social service providers.

Living Faith is a very significant contribution to the literature on lived religion, on religion and work, on religion and poverty and religion and class more generally. Its findings on the depth of religious individualism in American society are important as is its depiction of the results of that individualism for those that cannot afford endless shopping in the spiritual marketplace. The book's only weak note, in my view, is Sullivan's argument against 'feminist theologians' 'social activists' and others that she imagines will be disappointed or critical of how these women use their faith to get through their lives. True, the individualism they express may be disheartening to these frequently unnamed theologians and activists, but I do not think it would terribly surprising to anyone actively engaged in low-income communities or scholars of class in American life, and certainly would not be the occasion for condemnation. If these imagined critics were as orthodox in their Marxian perspectives as Sullivan anticipates, they should not be surprised to find poor people adopting religious beliefs that rendered invisible the structural dimensions of their lives. But I do not think most actual feminist theologians and social activist are that orthodox, nor are they that dismissive of poor people's experience and this part of Sullivan's argument has a straw man edge to it.

That concern notwithstanding, the book is important and should be read and discussed widely. It brings voices to the conversation on religion and poverty that have been unsolicited for too long. It gives important class-based dimensions to central conversations about American religious life, especially regarding the social costs of religious individualism and the very real problems with religious disaffiliation for the lives of the most socially disconnected. And it has the potential to change the conversation about religious 'nones' from fretting about the social implications of yoga to a critique of how social disinvestment in civil institutions like congregations may further disconnect the already deeply disconnected.