UNACCOMPANIED CHILDREN IN CHURCHES: LOW-INCOME URBAN SINGLE MOTHERS, RELIGION, AND PARENTING*

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Social scientists know relatively little about how low-income urban single mothers engage religion in parenting, particularly their rationales for involving children in religious practices and the strategies they use for doing so. This article develops a theoretical model of religion as a resource that poor urban mothers access in negotiating the many demands of parenting. I analyze both personal religious faith and organized religion as parenting resources. Given the stressors that low-income mothers confront, the studies showing religion as a resource across a wide range of situations, existing scholarship on poor mothers that neglects religion, and evidence linking religion to better child outcomes, this research addresses a substantial and important gap in knowledge. Based on forty-four in-depth interviews with low-income urban mothers, it draws implications for theoretical and pastoral consideration.

Social scientists know relatively little about how low-income urban single mothers engage religion in parenting, particularly their rationales for involving children in religious practices and the strategies they use for doing so. Parenting can be challenging under the best of circumstances, and mothers on or transitioning off of welfare face similar challenges to their middle class counterparts in balancing work with caring for one's family, yet do so with many fewer marketable skills and resources. Low-income single mothers often face daunting situations. The poor urban single mothers interviewed by Holloway, Fuller, Rambaud, and Eggers-Pierola (1997) all found it very challenging to fulfill even their children's most basic needs for food, shelter, and clothing. Much of their stress resulted from worrying about their children (Hayes 2003). A number of other studies affirm that low-income single mothers are as concerned with being good mothers as with providing economically for their children, but they often lack the necessary support to fulfill their parenting role (Edin and Lein 1997; Kim 2003). Poor mothers raising children on their own are more likely to live in dangerous neighborhoods, have jobs with inflexible schedules, have difficulties in finding reliable and safe child care, and have troubles with transportation and housing (Hayes 2003). Not surprisingly, many poor single mothers experience high levels of parenting stress (Kim 2003).

Although researchers have examined a number of ways that poor single mothers try to manage parenting—from Carol Stack's (1974) seminal work on the intentional communi-

ties poor mothers construct to help raise their children to Holloway *et al.*'s (1997) work on cultural models of child rearing for poor mothers—very little research has directly examined how low-income mothers draw on religion to help them parent. A 2003 Gallup poll found that six out of ten American adults say that faith is involved in every aspect of their lives, and seven out of ten say they find purpose and meaning in life because of their religious faith. In light of this finding and the many challenges faced by poor mothers, I hypothesize that poor mothers draw upon religious resources in raising their children. It seems likely that many low-income mothers might draw upon religious resources in confronting their challenges, especially since they often lack access to resources that more affluent individuals take for granted. Anthropologist Marla Frederick (2003) contends that social scientists emphasize race, class, and gender in understanding how people navigate their worlds, while neglecting spirituality. Because social scientists have neglected religion in the many studies of low-income urban mothers, scholars know little about how they practice religion or the role it plays in their parenting practices.

In this article, I develop a theoretical model of religion as a *resource* that poor urban mothers access in negotiating the many demands of parenting. Religion can serve as a resource in several ways. *Institutional resources* refer to resources associated with a church or faith-based organization, such as pastors, networks of fellow congregants, and material aid. The contribution of church-based institutional resources has been assessed by social scientists in areas ranging from the Civil Rights movement (Morris 1986) to mental health (Ellison 1995; Seybold and Hill 2001). Pastors provide people assistance such as help with personal problems, financial assistance, and emergency shelter (Krause *et al.* 2001; Taylor, Chatters, and Levin 2004). Churches provide opportunities for companionship and participation in social programs (Seybold and Hill 2001). Ellison (1995) found that church-based social support has independent effects on positive mental health outcomes, above and beyond secular social support. In particular, researchers contend that churches provide a powerful source of social capital, *i.e.*, social networks and the trust and reciprocity they engender (Putnam 2000; Wuthnow 2002).

In addition to church-based institutional resources such as pastoral aid or networks of congregants, religion also provides *cultural resources*—the beliefs, views, and symbols that people draw on to structure their experience of the world. Ann Swidler (1986, 2001) writes that culture shapes people's "strategies of action," a notion I draw on in investigating religion and parenting for poor mothers. Wood (1994, 2002) contends that religious faith can shape political mobilization by giving people a toolkit of cultural resources—religious language, symbols, and worldviews—that can foster political action. Religious beliefs can provide a powerful resource for coping, allowing people to reframe a negative situation positively (Pargament 1997). Many religious beliefs promote a worldview that provides meaning to adherents (Koenig and Larson 2001). Religious beliefs and practices are associated with higher levels of life satisfaction, hope, purpose and optimism (Koenig and Larson 2001), and less depression (Johnson 2002). They can help develop a framework to interpret life that can enhance self-worth by means of a relationship with a divine being and provide hope for change (Nooney and Woodrum 2002). Since religion—both institutional and personal—has been found to provide resources across a broad range of areas, I hypothesize that it provides a potentially powerful resource for parenting for low-income mothers who lack access to resources.

RELIGION AND PARENTING

Popular titles about religion and parenting abound. Examples include *10 Principles for Spiritual Parenting*, *Jewish Parenting Wisdom, Talking to Your Children about God, The Tao of Parenting,* and *Keys to Interfaith Parenting*. Conservative Protestants in particular produce substantial amounts of literature and media on Christian parenting. Child psychologist James Dobson's Focus on the Family organization generates an extensive array of evangelical parenting books and magazines, as well as an internationally syndicated radio program of parenting advice. Wanting a religious upbringing for children is not, however, confined to the conservative Evangelical subscribers of Dobson's and similar philosophies. Fay (1993) found in interviewing middle and upper class families that religion becomes more important for many people once they have children.

Parents look to churches, synagogues, and other religious institutions to teach children traditions, reinforce morals and values, and to provide a community. Even "Golden Rule Christians," who do not hold traditional religious beliefs or attend church every week yet want to be part of a church, desire the contribution of churches to raising their children (Ammerman 1997). In a study of highly religious non-poor Christian, Jewish, Mormon, and Muslim families, parents most valued the family cohesion provided both by churches and religious practices in the home. The less-mentioned factors included helping transmit beliefs to a new generation, teaching children a moral way to live, and providing a coping resource for children in times of stress (Marks 2004). This literature gives some indication of what poor mothers might seek from religion with regard to parenting. But since low-income mothers are not a population that has been studied in this research, it is unknown whether these findings apply or whether poor mothers seek different things from religion in terms of parenting.

The research into parenting and religion that does exist about poor mothers falls into a larger body of generally quantitative research analyzing the link between religion and various parenting practices. Among predominantly low-income urban African American mothers in the South, mothers with high levels of religious belief and personal religious practices were more responsive to their infants (Cain 2007). Among poor rural African American mothers, religious mothers (measured by church attendance and personal beliefs) reported using fewer coercive parenting techniques (Wiley, Warren, and Montanelli 2002). A 1990 study of low-income African American families found that mothers who were more religious used child rearing practices that were more cooperative and interactive and less hostile (Strayhorn, Weidman, and Larson 1990). While useful, these and other similar studies (Brody and Flor 1998; Kelley, Power, and Wimbush 1992) assess parenting techniques as associated with various measures of maternal religiosity for poor mothers, rather than looking at how and why low-income mothers actually *engage* religion in raising their children. Consequently, the dynamics of how and why low-income women integrate religion as part of parenting remain little understood.

Understanding the link between religion and parenting for poor mothers is particularly pressing in light of recent research that finds a link between parental religiosity and better child outcomes. In a study over 16,000 first grade children, Bartkowski, Xu, and Levin (2008) found that religious participation of parents is associated with better behavioral, emotional, and cognitive development for children. Children of parents who attended serv-

ices frequently and talked about religion with their children at home were rated by both parents and teachers as having better self-control, social skills, and learning approaches than did children of non-religious parents. Bartkowski theorizes that church-based social support, pro-family church norms, and the imbuing of parenting with sacred significance contribute to increased child well-being (see also Schottenbauer, Spernak, and Hellstrom 2007 on third graders' health and social skills). A recent longitudinal study found that children from disadvantaged families were less affected by childhood disadvantage and had better young adult outcomes if their parents were involved in religious organizations (Dehejia, *et al.* forthcoming). These large scale quantitative studies provide important evidence that religion is associated with better child wellbeing, but they do not "get inside the black box" to investigate how parents engage religion in parenting. If religion contributes to better child wellbeing and buffers childhood disadvantage, then it is important to investigate the mechanisms at work.

Given the stressors that low-income mothers confront, the studies showing religion as a resource across a wide range of situations, the research on poor women that neglects religion, and the evidence linking religion to better child outcomes, my research addresses a substantial and important gap in knowledge. In developing a model of religion as a parenting resource for low-income urban mothers, this article tests the following hypotheses:

H1: Poor urban mothers draw on religion as a resource in parenting.

H2: Since the poor are less likely to attend church or participate in organized religion (Stark 2003), and poor women's church participation can be impeded by logistical challenges and feeling unwelcome in church (Sullivan 2005), personal religious cultural resources such as private prayer and beliefs will be particularly important to low-income urban mothers as a parenting resource.

H3: Due to the particular stressors in their lives, low-income mothers desire specific things from religion for their children that are not emphasized in research on more affluent parents.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on forty-four in-depth semi-structured interviews with low-income urban mothers in a large northeast U.S. city. Because of situating my larger study in the context of welfare reform, I focused on mothers of young children (with at least one child age six or under) who were on or had recently left or experienced welfare. I chose in-depth interviewing for the methodology because of wanting to understand deeply how and why mothers integrated religion in parenting, something not easily obtained in survey research. Furthermore, the population of women I wanted to study is not always well-represented in survey research. In the expensive northeastern city where I conducted the interviews, many mothers on or transitioning off of welfare lack stable permanent housing and may not be represented in large scale surveys.

I recruited women for the study from transitional living facilities (five facilities that also provided other services such as housing search assistance, job training and search assistance, GED programs, and child care), non live-in welfare-to-work job training and job search assistance programs (two programs), and three other social service agencies. I surmised that recruiting through social service agencies as opposed to churches would provide respondents ranging from those who were motivated by religious faith and attended

religious services, those who had some involvement with faith and religion, and those for whom religious faith played little role in their lives.

Given the difficulty in getting access to programs, it was not possible to set up a perfect balance of race/ethnicity and religious background in the study, but I did obtain a sample of diverse racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. In beginning this research, I had assumed that because I had planned to modestly compensate people twenty-five dollars for their participation, I would easily find welfare mothers wanting to be interviewed. The difficulty lay mostly in gaining access to social service facilities, and once I was "in," eligible women wanted to do the study. But getting in was not easy. I finally gained access to a group of three affiliated government transitional housing facilities and was then able to access to other social service programs throughout the city. After gaining access to an agency, I advertised for participants by putting up posters and through word of mouth by agency staff. I emphasized that women did not need to be religious to participate in the study and that I was there as an academic researcher not representing any religious view. Generally, almost every eligible person at a given agency that day volunteered to do the interview if there was time. Women from a variety of backgrounds participated in the study, including those who said they were not religious and for whom faith seemed to play little role in their lives. That being said, any small in-depth interview-based study faces methodological limitations. My study is limited in generalizability, as the sample is not a random sample, and the study takes place in one northeastern city.[1] Given the dearth of information on this pressing topic, and the power of in-depth interviews to contribute a deep understanding of people's experiences, this study makes a valuable contribution to understanding how and why low-income urban mothers engage religion in their parenting.

Many of the interviews took place in the mothers' homes, including apartments within transitional living facilities; others took place at the social service facilities. For analysis, the interviews were fully transcribed and coded, and to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms are used throughout the article.

The Sample

Seventy-five percent of the women (n=33) were receiving public assistance at the time of the interview. Of the women not on public assistance at the time of the interview, all but two had received welfare in the past, generally recently. However, there were very few long-term welfare recipients. Most had gone onto welfare with the birth of a child, had recent work experience, were aware of welfare time limits, and were involved in job searching or training. Eighteen women described their race/ethnicity as white, 10 as black, 11 as Hispanic, 4 as mixed race, and one as Native American. Ninety-three percent of the women were single, separated, or divorced (n=41). Thirty percent of the women (n=13) described their educational level as less than high school, 45% had a high school degree or GED (n=20), and 25% (n=11) had some college. No one in the sample had completed college. The women ranged in age from late teens to early forties, with a mean age of twenty-eight.

Seven respondents identified their religion as Catholic, nine were in an Evangelical tradition such as non-denominational Bible church, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist, or Baptist, one described herself as a mainline Protestant, and twenty-seven had no religion or were not currently practicing any.[2] Only seven of the 44 women attended a religious service once a month or more often; nineteen attended very infrequently, such as on holidays, and eighteen never attended at all. However, half of respondents said that faith and/or reli-

gion was very important to them and sixty-four percent prayed at least daily.[3] Thus, although over half the respondents said they were not practicing a religion currently, I argue that the majority fall into the category of what Hout and Fischer (2002) call "un-churched believers." Eighty percent of the women who said that they had no religion or were not currently practicing said that religion was of medium or higher importance in their lives, over 75% prayed privately, and 85% had been raised in a religious tradition. Although they were not currently involved in formal religion, faith was an important part of many of their lives.

FINDINGS

Interview results reveal that the majority of mothers in this study engage religion as an active part of their parenting, wanting their children to have both personal religious faith and to be involved in organized religion. Thirty-two of the 44 women want their children in involved in churches, including 68% (n=25) of those who infrequently or never attend themselves. The vast majority of mothers also want their children to have personal religious faith, including over 80% of those who do not themselves attend church.

Religion became more important to many women in the study (n=21) once they had children. For example, Annie, a nineteen-year old white single mother of an eight-month old baby was raised Catholic but has not been involved in church since she was sixteen. Annie relates:

> Now that I have a child, it's [religion] even more important than it was before…I think it's very important now…I've never paid too much attention to religion, but if I'm going to have her christened, it will mean that I'm obviously doing it for a reason, so I'm responsible to follow through…I want to bring her to church…If I'm not going to follow through with religion, I don't think there's a point in my having her christened.

Echoes Rebecca, a white single mother who fled her husband due to domestic violence, "I used to think [religion] was not very important at all, but when I started reading the children's Bible with my daughter it became more important.…I never grew up having faith in anything. I'd like her to have faith in the belief that there is a higher power."

In general, either the birth of a child or about the time a child turns three (when respondents seemed to think children understand more about religion) often functions as a catalyst for low-income urban mothers to become more interested in and engaged with religion. Although women do not appear to approach religion consciously for their children from a utilitarian point of view, they acknowledge several ways in which religion serves to aid them in raising their children. I divide these into personal/cultural religious resources for parenting and institutional religious resources for parenting.

Personal Religiosity as a Parenting Resource

Although only seven out of forty-four women in this study attend church even once a month or more, the majority engage in religious practices with their children in the home. Nearly two-thirds (n=27) of the mothers in this study engage in religious practices such as praying with their children, reading the Bible with their children, praying for their children, and praying for themselves as parents, including over half of mothers who rarely or never attend church.

For example, Rebecca says that she feels uncomfortable when she attends church because of being on welfare, yet she places high importance on instilling her daughter with reli-

gious faith. Rebecca faces obstacles to participating in organized religion, as she perceives stigma due to being on welfare and has trouble with transportation to the Catholic mass which she attends irregularly. However, she spends time every evening reading the Bible with her three-year old daughter and teaching her about religion. "I'd like her to have faith and belief that there is a higher power…I would like for her ideally to have faith to help her to have faith in herself. For her to believe that there is somebody there to guide her or help her, but also somebody to watch her if she does wrong." Another mother, Jane, a white evangelical Protestant married mother who stopped attending church when she moved to a shelter with her family, explains how she tries to instill faith into her four children:

> I want to raise them in a godly way, to be a godly mother for them, raise them so that they will read the Bible. I speak scripture verses to them, like when a situation is going on, I try to comfort them, and I give them scripture verses so they get the word of God in them, so that they will—if they are not reading the Bible, they will be getting it in them, and we pray.

"Never alone": Self-confidence and Comfort

Mothers give a variety of reasons for wanting to instill personal religious faith in their children. One of the main reasons women give for trying to instill religious faith in their children is that they want their children to derive self-confidence and comfort from the fact that God is with them; they are never alone.

Aletta, a twenty-two year old black/Hispanic Seventh Day Adventist, says that she wants her three young children to pray and believe in God so that they will know that God will help them. Although Aletta stopped her twice-weekly church attendance when she encountered transportation problems after moving into a family shelter, she wants her children to have religious faith and spends time every day teaching them about religion.

> I just want them to learn that there is somebody out there watching over us and there is somebody to pray to…Because they are going to get older and…I'll want them to know that there will be somebody there for them and they're not going to be alone…I want to teach them that…God is always there for you, and if you pray to Him and you follow Him, He is going to help you and everything is going to be all right.

Claire, a white single mother who attends a Baptist church about once a month, prays with her toddler daughter every night. When I asked her why she did this—what she thought religious faith would give her child—she replied, "Faith, a lot of courage, and I think a lot of pride in herself…She would know that He loves her. He gave her this world. She is breathing every day because of Him. She can go out and do anything."

Mothers believe the self-confidence that comes from faith can give their children strength to resist peer pressure. Mothers also think that children's awareness that "God is watching them" will help them turn away from harmful behaviors. Juliana, a twenty-year old Latina single mother neither raised with nor practicing organized religion, thinks that raising her children with belief in God will give them "hopefully a better life…I want them to be guided through the right path. I am hoping He would guide them…There's peer pressure out there."

Thus, a large number of mothers in this study, while not necessarily attending church themselves, teach their children in the home to "follow God." They pray with their children, read the Bible with them, and teach them about religion. They sense that religious faith

enhances their children's sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem and provides them with moral guidance that will enable them to choose the right path when confronted with peer pressure.

Assistance in Parenting

Low-income urban mothers also turn to prayer and other forms of personal religiosity for direct assistance in parenting. Over ninety percent of women interviewed are single mothers, often themselves raised in troubled family circumstances; many poor single mothers have high levels of parenting-related stress. Perceiving themselves as lacking resources and skills needed to effectively parent, some mothers turn to prayer. This phenomenon is most vividly illustrated by the case of Vicky, who felt stigmatized by her Catholic church as a single mother when she attempted to return to organized religion. Although she does not attend church, she relies on her high level of personal religiosity in helping her to parent. She says she wants to raise her young son in a happy, well-balanced home, which she did not have growing up with two alcoholic parents.

> I ask God for help a lot. I don't know the right way to parent. I know the wrong way. I've seen the wrong way, so it's hard for me sometimes. I second guess myself a lot. I'm very insecure sometimes about it, but I just do what's right in my heart, and I just think that God is guiding me so that I can give this child what he needs. I want to have the strength to give him the support, and love to nurture him. I ask God for a lot of help in the way I discipline him; like the amount of time we spend together, and the things we do when we're together. I have depression and sometimes it's hard for me to get out of bed. I ask God to help me get up, get dressed, take him to the zoo or somewhere.

Another mother who perceived stigmatization by a pastor over being a single mother and consequently stopped attending church said, "I ask God for help every single day. I know that much. To be a better parent. To keep my depression from kicking in. I ask God for a lot of things." These women perceive prayer to be a powerful resource that they can access to help them contend with parenting stresses, compounded at times by depression or anxiety. Although they may have lacked effective models of parenting in their own lives, they believe that God will help guide them to be better parents.

These data suggest that many poor urban mothers may place a high value on instilling personal religious faith in children. Giving children personal and cultural religious resources such as prayer and knowledge of God is perceived to protect children from feeling alone or isolated, help them to feel guided, and imbue them with self-confidence. Mothers also rely on personal prayer and religious beliefs to help them be better parents. Mothers highly value these resources as powerful aids in parenting, helping both their children and themselves as mothers. But many of these mothers also desire organized religion for their children. It is not enough for children to access only personal religious resources, as most of the mothers themselves do. They also want their children connected with churches.

Organized Religion as a Resource for Parenting

Many mothers divulged in their interviews that they can't provide all of the religion that they would like their children to have. Thirty-two of the 44 mothers want their children involved in churches, including over two-thirds (n=25) of those who infrequently or never attend church themselves. Mothers give a number of reasons for wanting their children involved in churches.

Help in Teaching Children about Religion

One basic reason that poor urban mothers want their children in churches is that they believe they cannot teach their children everything they would like them to know about religion. Aletta, mentioned above, used to take her children to church twice a week before moving into a transitional housing shelter and stopping all church participation. "The kids don't know about God, so they need somebody to sit there and teach them, because I can't tell them everything. It's good, because Sunday school is excellent for kids. They go, they learn about God." Elisa, a twenty-three year old Latina single mother of three children ages three and under who stopped attending her Pentecostal church due to transportation problems three years ago, echoes these sentiments.

> I want my kids to go to church and to have faith in God and to know that God loves them. That God is always with them, and He is going to guide them to the right path.…There are some things that they can learn going to church that I can't teach them…how to be a better person, following God.…I want to teach them that without God you're nothing, because God is always there for you.

Rhonda, a Protestant African American single mother who attends church once or twice a month with her five-year old son, wants a church upbringing to teach her son to work hard and be grateful: "And hopefully that will influence him to hopefully raise his children the same way to be grateful for what they have; work hard for what you want; thank God for waking up in the morning and having working limbs." Annie wants to raise her daughter in church though she does not herself attend, so that the child can learn about her religion.

> Otherwise she won't know anything. It will be, "I'm Catholic, and I've been baptized." And that will be it. This way she'll know more about her religion; she'll know more about God, and—the church teaches a lot about having faith, and teaches about God and praying and confession, the church. I want my daughter to know about her religion, not just know she has one.

These and other mothers interviewed want their children to learn the tenets of their religion, which they say they cannot impart on their own. They perceive church services and Sunday school to be important in teaching children about God, faith, and religious practices. Some churches do provide parents with religious resources to help them teach their children. Maggie, a white single mother on welfare who is a practicing Catholic, received from her parish a prayer book for mothers and a children's Bible which she reads with her daughter. She also participates, along her daughter, in a weekly Bible study run by her parish for parents and children. She says that raising her children in the church increases her confidence in her parenting. "I see myself raising my kids that way, they [the church] have that support, anything I want and need, and I know I'm doing the right thing."

Protection from Negative Environments

Mothers raising their children in low-income urban areas are often mothers raising children in dangerous and difficult environments. They are aware of the violence, drugs, and teen pregnancy endemic in their neighborhoods; much of their parenting stress stems from trying to protect their children. Not surprisingly, an important reason that low-income urban mothers give for wanting children in churches is protection from negative environments and peer pressure. Almost half of the women who were frequent attendees and half of the women not attending but who wanted their children in churches mentioned protection as a

reason. In this study, African American mothers in particular believe that churches will help protect their children from negative influences and behavior. Explains Shantelle, an African American single mother who does not currently attend church:

> I want them to know right from wrong. I want them to know what is good and what is bad as far as being out in the world. What they should be doing and church is a good way to let them get into the gates of heaven. Because there's a lot of kids that get mixed up on the street, young ages. They got kids my daughter's age out there in the wrong stuff. Little boys, nine years old, ten years old. I do not want my girls going that way. *(Int: And why do you think church would help keep them from that?)* Because they teach the Word of God. They do teach you what is right and what is wrong. You don't hear them preaching saying I want to go rob me a bank…I want them to know God and believe in God.

Echoes Latoya, an African American single mother also not currently attending church, "Because I think if I was to bring my kids up into the church, that they would learn the way of life, they would learn the right way…that they wouldn't get into any crime, and you know, they would go to school and get an education." Shannon, an African American single mother who does not go to church but prays privately every day, says that she wants her children raised in church so they will not repeat her mistakes. "Have them go to church too. So they won't do bad things. I don't want them to do what I did when I was younger. I know I was bad. So I'm going to stop them from doing it."

Lindsay, one of the few study participants who attends church weekly, is an African American on welfare, living in a transitional housing shelter. A twenty-three year old single mother, she brings her three children ages three to seven to church every week. "It will give them a better understanding about life around them. Let them understand more about peer pressure, the drugs around. There are sinners everywhere. I mean it's going to be really hard to keep them away from it. But if they deal with it face to face, knowing what they believe in, it will be a snap."

All of these African American low-income urban single mothers strongly believe that church involvement will help protect their children from negative influences and behaviors. Both Latoya and Shantelle state that they feel a sense of guilt and "being a sinner" that keeps them from returning to church at this time. Shannon has not been involved in organized religion as an adult, despite high levels of individual religiosity. Although they are not themselves involved in churches, they see it as something important that will help protect their children. Lindsay, the churchgoer, exhibits strong confidence that church attendance will make it easy for her children to face down peer pressure.

Although the notion of "protection from the street" is strong among African American mothers in this study, it is not limited to them. White and Latina mothers brought this up in interviews as well. Interestingly, mothers draw on their own past experiences in highlighting the benefits of church for their children. Those who had been involved with many negative behaviors as youth think, like Shannon above, that church involvement will keep their children from repeating their mistakes. Others credit their church upbringing for helping them avoid negative behaviors. Isabella, a Hispanic Catholic, notes:

> I go with my children [to church] on Sunday. I try to tell everything. I believe in God, so I want my son and my daughter to believe in God. When you believe in God, you don't do a lot of things bad, because you think somebody else sees you…Maybe I'm not perfect, but I don't do nothing bad. I don't drink, I don't smoke.

Similarly, Maggie reiterates how high levels of church involvement kept her from drugs and other negative behavior, and hence she wants her children similarly involved. "I think when you raise your kid the best possible way, the child will go along with that, and not go into the bad, not smoking and doing drugs and drinking. I never drank; I never smoked; I don't do drugs."

Reinforcement of Values

Low-income urban mothers perceive churches to reinforce the values that they are trying to instill in their children. In a church, some mothers see the resources of other adults who are modeling and reinforcing values and behaviors that they are trying to teach their children. Sheila, an African American single mother, was not raised in a church and does not attend as an adult, although she prays every night and reads a children's Bible with her young son. Sheila explains how churches can aid in child rearing by reinforcing values. "I think [church] helps everything. It's not only mom saying you should respect her and you should do this and you should do that. It's other people too. The whole church is preaching and feeling the same thing." Rebecca notes, "Children that go to church, I've seen that they learn to be respectful." Jamila, an African American single mother of two young children, thinks that regular church attendance and Catholic school will give her five-year old daughter "a lot of morals."

As directly reported by these and other women, low-income mothers often contend churches will help reinforce the values that they want children to learn. Other adults in the church reinforce lessons of respect and discipline, so that mothers are not left on their own in trying to impart these values to their children.

Making Meaning out of Difficulties

Given the challenges faced by very poor urban families, children are often faced at a young age with difficult circumstances that are hard for them to understand. Thus another reason poor urban mothers give for desiring children's participation in churches is to help their children make sense of difficult circumstances. Some mothers believe that church involvement will help their children to better understand these difficult events. Lindsay relates, "If something happens, my children ask, 'Mommy, why did God let this happen?' You know and I try to teach them more about that. It's pretty hard but they're learning." As Lindsay is on welfare and currently homeless living with her three small children in a shelter, her children certainly might have questions about why such events have befallen them. Lindsay perceives her frequent participation in the church community to give her greater resources for shaping her children's religious understanding of life's challenges. Ann Marie, a white single mother who stopped attending church when her toddler became too active to sit still, says she wants to start taking him again when she can. She states that raising her children as Catholics will help them understand the difficulties of life. "That life is life. Life is up and down. Life is not easy for my son. There are no's…It's like trying to explain when you're in a store, sorry, I got no money. That's life."

Sullivan (2005) finds that low-income urban mothers for whom religious faith is important use religious resources in trying to make sense of their own difficult situations. Psychologists such as Kenneth Pargament (1997) find that religious coping mechanisms are most helpful to people in times of greatest stress. Low-income single mothers facing welfare time limits, stressful low-wage jobs, child care problems, lack of affordable housing,

and family problems can feel pushed to their limits, with many events seeming out of their control. My findings here indicate that in addition to drawing on religious resources to help make sense of their own challenging situations, some low-income urban mothers also draw on religious resources in trying to help their children understand difficulties and challenges.

Getting Children to Church

One problem with organized religion serving as a resource for parenting for poor single mothers is the fact that the very poor are less likely to attend church, particularly in low-income urban areas (Smith 2001; Stark 2003). Poor single mothers in particular may be impeded in church participation by logistical challenges or feeling stigmatized by churches (Sullivan 2005). In my study, the vast majority of women want their children involved with churches for clearly elucidated reasons, yet few of the mothers themselves attend.

Interestingly, a substantial minority of women who themselves never attend send their children to church regularly with others. These mothers want their children to be part of a church community, though they themselves are not. Adrienne, a white single mother, says she feels unwelcome in her Catholic church after the priest refused to baptize her child because she was a single mother. She still, however, wants her child raised as a Catholic. She had the baby baptized in a neighboring parish, and she sends her now three-year old to Mass weekly with her mother. "Church is important. I want to start going… Like my mother brings my son, but I just don't go." Shantelle, whose sense that she is a "sinner" prevents her from returning to church at this time, sends her children to church with relatives. She has also signed her children up for a church summer camp, another strategy that mothers use for involving children in churches. "I haven't been in church in a while, but my kids go every chance they get." In the place where she previously lived, she sent her children to church with relatives every week. "I went every blue moon… [but] they went every Sunday."

Sarah, an African American thirty-one year old single mother, has intense personal religious practices but left organized religion (the Pentecostal church) as a teenager. She prays many times a day, reads the Bible daily, and devotes Saturdays to prayer. Despite her strong personal religiosity, Sarah thinks that she fell "off the track" when she stopped attending church. She believes that leaving organized religion led to her current problems. Now raising a three-year old daughter, she wants to imbue her child with strong faith. "I want her to know about God, and I try to teach her that." And although she does not participate in organized religion herself, Sarah sends her daughter to church regularly with her sister. "I send her to church. She goes to my sister's church, the Pentecostal. I was raised that way. So I want to do the same for her. When you don't do that, they depart from it and it's awful… I want her to know about God. I want her to know about God and I want her to know about the Bible and that she didn't come here alone. [Church] will give her balance, hope. She would try to stay focused and keep that straight way." Gabriella, a seventeen-year old Latina single mother who does not attend church, sends her son to Pentecostal services with her mother. "I send him to church with my mother….I'm not in church, but I like church….I want him to learn about God just like I learned about God."

These and other mothers see church participation as so valuable for their children that they make the effort to find other people with whom to send them. Some of these women do not feel welcome at church, because of single motherhood or some other aspect of their lifestyle. Yet they perceive church participation, not just individual religious practices, to

be important in teaching their children right from wrong, protecting them from the street, and placing them into a community of other adults who will reinforce values that they want instilled in their children.

The issue of urban children attending church without their parents has not been analyzed in detail in the research literature. Urban pastors confirm that their congregations frequently have children attending church without their parents. In my study, the children were young and thus sent to church with relatives rather than sent alone. However, urban pastors relate how mothers who do not attend church themselves often send their older children to church alone. In Laudarji and Livezey's (2000) study of black churches near a low-income housing project in Chicago, one pastor estimates that only about one-third of the fifty to sixty children at church services come with their parents, while the rest are not related to the adults who are there. As part of my study, I interviewed a Methodist minister who has long served in low-income urban areas in the Northeast. This pastor stated that about half of the children in his Sunday School are sent to church by their mothers who do not themselves attend church. He said that although the mothers may face logistical challenges in attending or feel embarrassed that they have no money for the collection plate or nice clothes to wear, they want their children to participate.

> It's one of the growing edges of our young people… It's not a majority [of the children in the Sunday School] but close, almost 50%… Some mothers are looking for things to do that don't cost anything and a place they can see as safe and a place that is close to home and where there may be some material benefit, whether it's food, clothing, recreation. And I think a place they can trust, that is safe, a church where they know somebody, whether it's me or another parishioner. And I think they're looking for some type of community life, some kind of way of engaging them with other people in a context of not feeling so isolated.…There is a group of moms who make sure their kids come on Sundays…."We're sending you here so you get some more direction…to learn a Christian way of life."

The findings from interviews with low-income mothers and urban pastors suggest that it may not be uncommon in low-income urban areas for mothers to draw on organized religion as a parenting resource but not participate themselves.

Despite the substantial minority of mothers who send their children to church with others, the majority of children do not currently attend church. Many women provide detailed reasons why they want their children to be involved with a church, but most children do not actually attend. Some mothers state that they will get their children involved in a church when their circumstances become more stable. Getting children involved in organized religion is something they say they will do in the future, when job, housing, and general life circumstances are more stable. Other mothers see school as the way to involve their children in organized religion, and state that they will send their children to Catholic schools. Many of the children of mothers in this study are still young and are not actively confronting the temptations of the street. Perhaps their mothers do not thus perceive church involvement as an immediate and pressing issue. Despite the mothers' stated desires, it is unclear whether or not these children will end up involved in a church community.

CONCLUSION

These findings, based on interviews with urban women who are mostly single mothers on or transitioning off of welfare, expand existing theory on religion and parenting prac-

tices in low-income families. Existing research, while useful in revealing associations between measures of religiosity and various parenting practices by poor mothers (*e.g.* Cain 2007; Wiley *et al.* 2002), does not delve into why and how mothers might consciously integrate religion into their parenting. Although my sample size is small and results are thus suggestive at best, I have shown that even in an interview set of women who do not frequently attend church services, the majority of mothers actively engage religion as part of their parenting. These low-income mothers pray with and for their children, teach their children about religion at home, and pray for themselves to be good parents. Many of them want their children to be involved in churches.

My first hypothesis—poor mothers draw on religion as a parenting resource—was supported. Mothers turned to personal and cultural aspects of religion to help provide their children with self-esteem and a sense of self-efficacy stemming from religious beliefs and prayer. Mothers looked to organized religion as a parenting resource to help protect their children from negative environments and reinforce values. Although mothers look to religion to provide parenting assistance, it is important to avoid a utilitarian view of poor women's religious faith. In interviews, many mothers genuinely seemed to want to provide their children with deep faith and a church community. While acknowledging benefits to their children that they perceived religion to offer, they did not seem to be calculatedly "accessing" religion in a purely utilitarian way.

The second hypothesis, personal religious resources would be important in child rearing due to poor women's lower rates of formal religious participation, was true in practice. I had surmised that because very poor urban mothers are less attached to churches (Smith 2001; Sullivan 2005), they would rely more on personal religion as a resource for childrearing. Poor women indeed draw heavily on personal faith and prayer in parenting, and for most women in this study, it is the primary way that they engage religion as a parenting resource. But the data revealed the surprising degree to which poor mothers also want their children involved in organized religion. While they do not always put this desire into practice, many poor mothers want their children involved in churches. In this regard, parenting appears unique from other challenging areas of poor women's lives. In conducting interviews for other research on areas such as work, housing, or mental health, I have rarely heard personally religious mothers who are not involved in congregations say that being involved in a church would help them with a particular challenge they were facing. Yet for childrearing, many poor mothers think that church involvement is important.

The data find evidence to support the third hypothesis partially, that due to their unique stressors poor women would desire from religion somewhat different things for their children than more affluent families. Some things that poor mothers seek from religion in parenting do overlap neatly with findings from previous research on non-poor families. The role of churches and other religious institutions in teaching children traditions, reinforcing morals and values, and providing a community (Ammerman 1997; Fay 1993) is emphasized by non-poor and poor parents alike.

The issues of self-esteem and protection from "the street" that dominate poor urban mothers' discourse on religion and parenting, however, do not find a prominent place in existing research on non-poor families. While non-poor families certainly would want their children to have self esteem and be protected, these concerns press more heavily on poor urban mothers. Perhaps because their children live in environments more likely to challenge their sense of self-efficacy and self esteem, low-income mothers stress the impor-

tance of their children knowing they are never alone and that they can do anything with God's help. The real dangers and temptations confronting their children on "the street" lead low-income urban mothers to stress the protective function of religion. Mothers speak of churches helping their children avoid things such as drugs and alcohol (concerns shared by more affluent parents) but also crime and gang violence. Marks' (2004) respondents emphasized family cohesion as a key benefit of religion; giving children coping resources in times of stress played a relatively minor role. My respondents did not mention family cohesion and religion, but giving children coping resources plays a paramount role for religion in their parenting.

Existing research does not generally address how parents draw upon religion to help them cope with difficult parenting situations, with the notable exceptions of parents coping with children with developmental disabilities or serious illness (Mahoney, *et al.* 2001). My findings indicate that an important role of religion in parenting for poor mothers is to help in parental coping. In this study, women particularly draw upon the cultural and personal resources of religion—the beliefs, worldviews, and personal religious practices—in facing their parenting challenges. Low-income single mothers, many of whom have lacked effective role models for effective parenting, turn to the divine for assistance.

While rejecting a reductive and utilitarian view of poor women's religious practices, I contend that religion serves as an important resource for a potentially large number of low-income mothers in parenting. I propose a model that integrates both personal religiosity and institutional religion. The cultural/personal religious resources such as beliefs and personal religious practices are more accessible to poor mothers and hence most utilized. Church-based religious resources are less easily accessed by extremely poor mothers due to barriers to their participation, and more mothers desire these resources than actually use them. My data indicate that in seeking church-based religious resources, mothers seek the social capital that churches can provide their children (Putnam 2000; Wuthnow 2002). Low-income mothers speak of community, adult role models, and reinforcement of values—in other words, social capital. They hope this social capital will help protect their children from negative influences and lead them in a good direction. Research on religion and coping finds that people who have less access to secular resources and power are more likely to use religion in confronting challenges (Pargament 1997). Churches are one of the few remaining social institutions in disadvantaged neighborhoods (Smith 2001). In this light, my findings that poor urban mothers draw on religion as a parenting resource are not surprising.

My findings also help explain why statistical studies find religion to be associated with more effective parenting techniques for poor mothers and with better child wellbeing outcomes. As noted, studies have found that low-income mothers with greater religiosity are more responsive to their infants (Cain 2007), use fewer coercive parenting techniques (Wiley *et al.* 2002), and use child rearing techniques that are more cooperative and interactive and less hostile (Strayhorn *et al.* 1990). The interview data suggest that personal religious resources such as prayer provide mothers with a sense of strength and comfort which may allow them to respond more patiently and effectively to their children. Women aware of the challenges posed to effective parenting by their own upbringing or mental illnesses, and who address these challenges by drawing on faith find prayer a positive resource to help them in raising their children. Mothers who are part of a church community deal with their parenting stresses in less isolation. Pastors and networks of other congregants may be avail-

able to help; one of my respondents in particular was greatly supported in her parenting role by her church.

In terms of explaining associations between religion and increased child well-being, low-income mothers who draw on religious concepts and practices to help instill a sense of self esteem and self efficacy in their children may help their children gain more optimism, less depression, and greater life satisfaction. While studies linking religious beliefs with higher levels of greater life satisfaction and happiness, greater levels of hope and meaning, and less depression (Johnson 2002; Koenig and Larson 2001) and church involvement with higher levels of social support (Bradley 1995; Ellison and George 1994) have been conducted on adults, children may benefit from religion in similar ways. Religion has been found to be beneficial in large-scale studies on older children; Christian Smith (2003) argues that the moral directives, spiritual experiences, role models, and community and leadership skills associated with religious involvement contribute to adolescent wellbeing. The practices exhibited by some of the mothers in my study—reading children stories in Bible every night, teaching children they can do anything with God's help—may instill in children greater self efficacy, hope, and perseverance. Mothers in my study who integrate children into church networks provide children the beneficial social capital associated with church participation. Bartkowski (forthcoming) theorizes that church-based social support and pro-family church norms contribute to increased child wellbeing. Increased levels of family social capital predicted markers of economic success in early adulthood in a longitudinal study of disadvantaged youth (Furstenberg and Hughes 1995), and parental religious participation was found to buffer childhood disadvantage in another longitudinal study (Dehejia *et al.* forthcoming). I contend that religious resources may be particularly important for disadvantaged children, whose families have access to fewer resources.

Questions for Future Research

Several lingering questions remain. First, recent research on religion and child wellbeing focuses primarily on parental religious attendance. Dehejia *et al.*'s forthcoming study, the only study specifically on disadvantaged children, finds parental religious participation, not belief, to buffer disadvantage. But parental belief is narrowly measured in terms of items such as literal belief in the Bible and does not speak to religious practices in the home. Bartkowski *et al.* (forthcoming) find benefits to child well-being associated with parents attending church and discussing religion with children, but this study does not analyze religion in the home in depth. In light of social capital theory indicating that churches provide a strong source of social capital (Putnam 2000; Wuthnow 2002), it makes sense that placing parents and children in this environment of increased social support could benefit children. Because most of the extremely disadvantaged mothers I interviewed do not attend church even if they are strong religious believers, they primarily engage their children in home-based religious practices such as prayer and Bible reading. Are the children of very poor single mothers, often on welfare and living in shelters, buffered at all from disadvantage by their mothers' integrating personal religious beliefs and practices in child rearing? In general, future research on religion, parenting, and child outcomes needs to more carefully detangle what religious beliefs and practices in the home might contribute versus what church participation contributes.

Furthermore, existing studies on religion and child wellbeing measure the impact of parental church attendance, as opposed to the attendance of children. I find that some chil-

dren of low-income urban single mothers attend church while the parents do not, a finding bolstered by observations from urban ministers. Does religious participation benefit these low-income children if they attend but not their parents? It is also important to further investigate why mothers who feel stigmatized in participating in churches due to single motherhood or some other aspect of their lifestyle are eager for their children to be involved in churches that they perceive to reject them. My data indicate that these mothers see the benefits of church as very strong for their children and think that churches will help prevent their children from taking a life path which has led the mother herself to feel unwelcome at church. Some of these mothers also experience guilt over their lack of church involvement and state that they want to find a church where they can feel comfortable. However, this is a complex phenomenon which warrants more research and analysis. Interestingly, low-income urban single motherhood seems to both push women away and pull them towards organized religion. Women who are personally religious may have powerful pulls towards organized religion because of their children, but as poor single mothers they may feel too overwhelmed by logistical challenges to participate in church or otherwise feel unwelcome in church.

Future research should also be done to further analyze the effects of race, ethnicity, denomination, and geographic region on the parenting practices of low-income mothers. In addition, the experiences of low-income mothers in religious traditions other than the Christian one must be addressed. Despite the limitations of the present study, it begins to fill substantial research gaps in our knowledge of how low-income mothers involve religion in childrearing. The findings illuminate the benefits low-income mothers perceive religion to have for their children, as well as strategies they use to provide children with personal religious faith and participation in organized religion. While not claiming to be representative of all low-income urban mothers, the findings suggest that many low-income mothers may be actively engaging religion as a resource in raising their children. By modeling why and how poor urban mothers engage personal religious practices and organized religion in raising their children, this study extends existing theory and research. It also provides practical implications for urban pastors, who try to reach low-income mothers, welcome them and their children to church, deal with unaccompanied children in urban churches, and provide support for mothers in their childrearing efforts. Even if personal religious practices in the home turn out to help buffer disadvantaged children from negative outcomes, social capital theory suggests that church participation will benefit children above and beyond. If this is the case, then it is incumbent upon more priests, ministers, and church volunteers to reach out to further include very poor mothers who may wish for themselves and/or their children to participate in church life but face logistical and other barriers.

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NOTES

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[1]Also, although women from diverse backgrounds wanted to be interviewed, there still may be some difference between those who ended up being interviewed and those who were not.

[2]There are no Jewish or Muslim respondents in the study. There were no Jewish women with children and no Muslim women at all in the programs where I recruited.

[3]Sixty-four percent (n=28) of the sample had some Catholic background, although many times it was nominal; 25% (n=11) of the women were raised in an Evangelical, Pentecostal, Seventh Day Adventist, or Baptist tradition; 4% (n=2) were raised mainline Protestant, and 7% (n=3) were raised with no religious tradition. The relatively high preponderance of respondents with some Catholic background is due to the large number of low-income white and Hispanic families of Catholic heritage living in the city where the study took place.

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