

## The Concept of Lived Religion in Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty by Susan Crawford Sullivan

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Inputted : July 2, 2026

Revised : July 25, 2026

Accepted: August 26, 2026

Published: August 29, 2026

### Abstract

*This article examines the concept of "lived religion" as developed in Susan Crawford Sullivan's Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty. The study focuses on how religion is practiced in the everyday lives of low-income mothers in the United States. Drawing on Sullivan's qualitative-ethnographic study, the article shows that religion for these women does not depend primarily on institutional participation but is sustained instead through personal, flexible, and context-sensitive practice. The article analyzes Sullivan's principal findings and assesses her contribution to the sociology of religion, arguing that religion functions simultaneously as a coping mechanism, a source of meaning, and a resource for moral negotiation under conditions of structural constraint. The discussion closes by considering the concept's relevance for contemporary religious studies more broadly, including its potential application to Islam as a discursive tradition.*

**Keywords:** *lived religion, everyday religion, poverty, sociology of religion, Susan Crawford Sullivan.*

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#### Citation:

Setiawan, T., Hanan, A., Truna, D. S., & Rosyad, R. (2026). The concept of lived religion in Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty by Susan Crawford Sullivan. *MSJ: Majority Science Journal*, 4(3), 166–174. <https://doi.org/10.61942/msj.v4i3.636>

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, the study of religion in the social sciences has been dominated by approaches that foreground its institutional, doctrinal, and normative dimensions. Religion, in this view, is understood chiefly as an organized belief system, embodied in formal structures such as the church and codified in fixed, prescriptive doctrines and rules. While this perspective has contributed importantly to understanding religious structure and authority, it tends to overlook the practical, lived dimension of religion — how religion is actually experienced in everyday life, particularly by groups in vulnerable social and economic positions.

Critiques of this institutional bias have driven a paradigm shift in religious studies, from an orientation toward “religion as system” to “religion as lived experience.” Within this framework, religion is no longer treated as a static, normative entity but as a dynamic phenomenon that is continually produced, negotiated, and interpreted within concrete life contexts. The approach is especially productive for the study of marginalized groups, who often lack full access to formal religious institutions yet continue to display a distinctive and highly contextual religious intensity.

It is within this intellectual context that Susan Crawford Sullivan’s *Living Faith: Everyday Religion and Mothers in Poverty* makes a significant contribution to the development of the lived-religion perspective. Through an ethnographic study of low-income mothers in the United States, Sullivan demonstrates that religious practice does not typically operate within a formal institutional framework but instead appears more often as personal, flexible, everyday practice, adapted to lives marked by considerable constraint.

More fundamentally, Sullivan challenges the dominant assumption in the sociology of religion that equates religiosity with participation in religious institutions. She shows that individuals can remain deeply religious even while largely absent from formal structures such as the church. In this light, religion functions as a source of meaning, a coping mechanism, and a moral framework that helps individuals navigate the complexity of social life — particularly amid poverty, family instability, and limited access to resources.

This approach also opens a wider analytic space for examining the relationship between religion and social structure. Religion is no longer viewed as standing outside social reality but as an integral part of lived experience, shaped by class, gender, and economic condition. Among the poor mothers who form the subjects of Sullivan’s study, religion operates not merely as a spiritual practice but as one with strong social and psychological dimensions as well.

Accordingly, this article critically examines the concept of lived religion in Sullivan’s work, with particular attention to how religion is practiced in the daily lives of a marginalized group. It further explores the theoretical implications of this concept for contemporary religious studies, including its potential application to the study of Islam. In doing so, the article aims to contribute to the enrichment of methodological and conceptual approaches to understanding religion as a living, dynamic phenomenon.

## 2. Method

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive approach using library research. Sullivan’s book serves as the primary source and is analyzed through three complementary lenses:

- the sociology of religion
- the anthropology of religion
- conceptual analysis of lived religion

This combined approach enables the article to explore both the theoretical and empirical dimensions of religion as it is practiced in everyday life

## 3. Results and Discussion

### ***a. Theoretical Framework: Lived Religion and Everyday Religion***

The concept of lived religion represents one of the most important developments in contemporary religious studies, shifting the analytic focus from religion as a normative system

to religion as lived experience. The term was popularized by scholars such as Robert Orsi and Meredith B. McGuire, who argue that religion cannot be reduced to official doctrine, formal institutions, or normative texts alone, but must instead be understood through the concrete experience of practitioners in their daily lives.

From this perspective, religion is a phenomenon embedded in complex social practice. It is not merely “believed” but also “done” — enacted in the ways individuals pray, make sense of suffering, build social relationships, and arrive at moral decisions. The central question, then, is not how religion ought to be practiced according to official norms, but how individuals and communities actually live it out within the realities they face.

The approach also emphasizes the centrality of subjective experience as the primary locus of religiosity. Religious experience is rarely uniform or fully consonant with orthodoxy; it is often personal, ambiguous, and even contradictory. Individuals have room to interpret religious teaching creatively, according to their own needs and circumstances. Lived religion, in this sense, makes space for recognizing a plurality of religious practices that institution-centered analysis tends to overlook.

Lived religion is also inherently contextual and dynamic. Religious practice is always in interaction with social factors such as class, gender, culture, and economic condition; it never exists in a vacuum but is continually negotiated within concrete situations. Among marginalized groups — such as the low-income mothers in Sullivan’s study — religion undergoes intense adaptation, producing flexible forms of practice that do not always conform to the formal standards of religious institutions.

This concept is closely related to the notion of everyday religion, which holds that religious practice is most fully realized in the ordinary, unspectacular routines of daily life. Everyday religion draws attention to small acts — spontaneous prayer, expressions of gratitude, ways of coping with crisis, and social interactions inflected by religious values. Religion, accordingly, is present not only in grand rituals or sacred spaces but also in domestic space and daily activity.

Both lived religion and everyday religion are, at root, a critique of institutional reductionism in the study of religion. Conventional approaches tend to measure religiosity through formal indicators such as attendance at worship or compliance with doctrine, thereby neglecting the practical dimension that lies at the heart of religious experience. In many cases, individuals who are institutionally inactive nonetheless display high levels of everyday religiosity.

This theoretical shift accordingly demands a methodological move from normative to empirical analysis, one that is more attentive to context. It requires researchers to:

1. observe religious practice directly as it occurs in everyday life;
2. understand the subjective meanings individuals attach to that practice; and
3. examine the relationship between religion and the surrounding social conditions.

Within this framework, lived religion functions not merely as a descriptive concept but as an analytical approach that allows for a more comprehensive understanding of religion as a living, dynamic phenomenon rooted in social reality.

### ***b. Religion as a Coping Mechanism in Poverty***

One of the central findings of *Living Faith* is that religion functions as a coping mechanism for mothers living under conditions of structural poverty. Amid economic hardship, family instability, and limited access to social resources, religion operates not merely as a belief system but as a practical resource for psychological and moral survival.

In this respect, religion serves as a source of hope, allowing individuals to sustain a forward-looking orientation even amid deep uncertainty. Religious hope is often expressed through the conviction that suffering carries meaning, that God has a purpose, or that hardship is temporary. Such beliefs supply the existential energy needed to keep going rather than succumb to despair.

Religion also functions as a means of coping with stress. The mothers in Sullivan’s study face numerous pressures — economic hardship, the responsibilities of single

parenthood, and, in some cases, social trauma. Religious practices such as prayer, spiritual reflection, and a personal sense of communication with God become an important medium for easing anxiety and emotional strain. Religion, in this sense, functions as an effective mechanism of emotional regulation under chronic stress.

Furthermore, religion provides an interpretive framework for suffering — a meaning-making framework. Suffering ceases to be experienced as absurd or meaningless and instead becomes part of a divine test, a moral consequence, or a process of character formation. Through this framework, individuals are able to reinterpret negative experience in psychologically more bearable terms. This process of meaning-making proves crucial for maintaining self-integrity and forestalling psychological disintegration under difficult conditions.

Within the sociology of religion, this finding points to both latent and manifest functions of religion in the lives of marginalized groups. Latently, religion provides psychological stability and a sense of order amid uncertainty. Manifestly, it shapes the moral orientations that guide everyday decision-making, even where the range of available choices is narrow.

Moreover, religion's coping function is not passive but active and productive. Individuals do not simply "rely" on religion; they creatively draw on religious resources to navigate their lives. This reflects a form of religious agency, in which individuals use religion as a tool for building resilience and preserving self-dignity under structural pressure.

It should be noted, however, that this coping function is also ambivalent. On one hand, religion can strengthen individual resilience; on the other, it risks fostering an acceptance of inequality when suffering is consistently interpreted as an unquestionable fate. Analysis of religion as a coping mechanism therefore needs to attend to a critical dimension: the extent to which religion functions as a tool of emancipation as opposed to a mechanism that legitimizes an unjust social structure.

Taken together, Sullivan's findings affirm that in conditions of poverty, religion carries a strong functional dimension. It operates not only at the level of belief but also as a practical resource that allows individuals to maintain psychological stability, construct life meaning, and negotiate a constrained social reality. Religion, in this context, must be understood as an integral part of the survival strategy of marginalized groups.

### ***c. Flexibility of Religious Practice***

Another key finding of Living Faith concerns the high degree of flexibility in religious practice, particularly among mothers living in poverty. This flexibility indicates that religion is not always practiced rigidly according to institutional norms but instead undergoes intense adaptation in response to individual needs, constraints, and life circumstances.

Within the lived-religion framework, religious practice is not measured by conformity to formal rules but by how individuals integrate religious values into everyday life. Departure from institutional norms is therefore not, in itself, evidence of weaker religiosity; rather, it reflects an adaptive capacity to sustain religiosity under less-than-ideal conditions.

First, religious practice in this context frequently does not conform to institutional norms. Constraints of time, access, and resources often prevent regular participation in formal rituals such as congregational worship. This does not, however, eliminate the religious dimension of these women's lives; instead, they develop alternative forms of practice better suited to their circumstances.

Second, religious practice is flexible and adaptive. Individuals actively adjust how they practice religion to fit the situation at hand, whether in crisis or in daily routine. This flexibility confirms that religion is not a static system but a practice under continual negotiation — a symbolic resource that can be drawn upon in varying ways as needed.

Third, religious practice tends to be individual and personal. In many cases, the relationship with God is not mediated by formal institutions but built directly through personal experience. This is evident in practices such as:

- spontaneous personal prayer without formal ritual, offered in specific situations such as economic hardship or family conflict;

- contextual interpretation of religious teaching, in which individuals read religious values in light of their own circumstances rather than deferring strictly to official authority; and
- syncretism, the blending of different religious elements — consciously or not — as an adaptive response to a complex social reality.

These patterns show that the boundary between orthodoxy and heterodoxy becomes increasingly fluid in everyday practice. Individuals do not always feel bound to a single religious system in its pure form; instead, they emphasize the practical function and personal meaning of the practice itself.

Theoretically, this flexibility confirms that religion is not a rigid, monolithic entity but a practice under ongoing negotiation, involving the interaction of:

- normative teaching
- lived experience
- socioeconomic conditions
- individual psychological needs

Religious practice, accordingly, emerges from a dialectic between structure and agency. On one side stands a normative structure that supplies the basic framework of religious teaching; on the other, the individual as agent retains the capacity to interpret, adapt, and even reconstruct that practice.

The implications of this finding are considerable. The flexibility of religious practice challenges the assumption that religiosity must always be measured by conformity to formal norms, pointing instead toward a more inclusive, empirically grounded approach capable of capturing the diversity of religious expression in real life.

Among marginalized groups in particular, this flexibility itself becomes a form of religious survival strategy. By adapting religious practice to constrained life conditions, individuals are able to sustain religious identity and meaning without full dependence on institutional structures that may, in any case, remain out of reach.

#### ***d. Tension between Religious Norms and Social Reality***

One of the most complex dimensions Sullivan's work brings to light is the persistent tension between ideal religious norms and the social reality faced by low-income mothers. This tension is not merely theoretical; it is a concrete feature of everyday experience, arising whenever the moral demands of religion collide with structural constraints that are difficult to avoid.

Normatively, religion generally holds up an ideal set of moral values — family integrity, household stability, parental responsibility, and an ethically ordered life. In empirical reality, however, the mothers in Sullivan's study often confront circumstances far removed from that ideal, including:

- chronic poverty
- divorce or unstable family relationships
- limited access to education and employment
- layered social pressures

This situation produces an internal conflict between the desire to meet religious moral standards and a lived reality that makes fully meeting them impossible. Classical approaches would often predict that such conditions lead to declining religiosity or even alienation from religion. Sullivan's findings, however, point in the opposite direction.

Rather than abandoning religion, these mothers engage in a process of religious negotiation through two principal mechanisms. First, they reinterpret religious teaching: ideal moral values are not rejected outright but are read anew in ways more relevant to lived conditions. The failure to sustain an intact family, for example, need not be understood as a moral transgression but rather as part of life's trials or the consequence of circumstances beyond the individual's control.

Second, they adjust their religious practice. Religious observance is no longer carried out rigidly according to formal standards but is calibrated to one's actual capacity and situation.



Religion here becomes functional rather than strictly normative — a means of maintaining life balance rather than simply fulfilling formal obligation.

This pattern reveals a form of moral agency: the capacity of individuals to continue making reflective moral decisions amid structural constraint. Such agency does not imply absolute freedom but rather the ability to navigate a limited set of choices while still holding onto a value orientation. Individuals are not merely objects of social structure or religious norm but active participants in interpreting and enacting those values.

From the standpoint of the sociology of religion, this moral agency demonstrates that religiosity is not deterministic. Religious norms do not automatically dictate behavior; rather, they are mediated through lived experience, social condition, and personal reflection. Religious practice, in other words, results from a dialectic between normative structure and individual agency.

This tension can further be understood as a productive space for the formation of religious meaning. Conflict between norm and reality is not inherently destructive; it can instead push individuals toward a more reflective and contextual understanding of religion. Far from losing relevance, religion becomes more vital precisely because it proves capable of adapting to the complexity of human life.

It is important to note, nonetheless, that this process of negotiation has its limits. In some cases, excessive tension can produce psychological strain or moral guilt. Analysis of this phenomenon must therefore also attend to religion's ambivalent character — as both a source of strength and a potential normative burden.

On the whole, Sullivan's findings suggest that the tension between religious norm and social reality is not a sign of failed religiosity but an inherent feature of religious practice itself. It is precisely within this space of tension that individuals can be seen actively building, interpreting, and sustaining religious meaning in their lives.

#### ***e. Deconstructing the Role of Religious Institutions***

Living Faith also mounts a forceful conceptual challenge to the classical assumption in the sociology of religion that places formal institutions — the church, above all — at the center of religious life. Conventional approaches tend to measure religiosity through institutional indicators: attendance at congregational worship, involvement in religious organizations, or deference to religious authority. Sullivan shows that this framework is inadequate for understanding the religious practice of marginalized groups.

Her empirical findings reveal that the church is not always the primary locus of religiosity for low-income mothers. Economic constraint, work demands, domestic responsibility, and experiences of social alienation frequently limit their active participation in formal institutions. Low institutional involvement, as a result, does not straightforwardly indicate weaker religiosity; it instead reflects a shift in the site and shape of religious practice.

Religious practice instead unfolds more intensely within domestic space and everyday life. The home becomes the primary arena in which religious values are lived, negotiated, and transmitted. Activities such as private prayer, raising children according to religious moral values, spiritual reflection in the face of difficulty, and religious conversation within the family constitute concrete, non-institutionalized forms of religiosity. Domestic space, in this sense, functions as a religious "micro-institution" no less significant than formal institutions.

This finding affirms that religion cannot be reduced to institutional structure alone; it must instead be understood as a practice diffused across multiple dimensions of social life. What emerges is a shift from institution-centered religion toward practice-centered religion, in which analysis is directed at how religion is lived rather than merely how it is organized.

This deconstruction also reveals a gap between formal religious authority and personal religious authority. In many cases, individuals do not rely entirely on institutions to determine the meaning and practice of their religion; they instead build an internal authority through experience, reflection, and lived need. Religious legitimacy, in other words, is no longer an institutional monopoly but is also produced individually in the course of everyday life.

Theoretically, this finding aligns with broader critiques of institutional reductionism in religious studies, which tend to overlook the practical dimension and subjective experience of

religion. To deconstruct the role of institutions is not to deny the importance of the church or religious organizations, but to reposition them as one among several arenas of religiosity rather than its sole center.

The implications are considerable. First, this approach calls for a redefinition of religiosity indicators that does not rest solely on institutional participation. Second, it opens space for recognizing non-formal forms of religiosity often invisible in religious statistics. Third, it broadens the scope of analysis to include domestic space, family relationships, and everyday experience as important loci for the study of religion.

For marginalized groups specifically, this deconstruction carries a critical dimension as well. Reliance on institutional indicators tends to produce a bias that marginalizes those without access to formal institutions. By recognizing forms of religious practice that exist outside institutions, Sullivan's study lends academic legitimacy to forms of religiosity that have long been overlooked.

Overall, Sullivan's deconstruction of the role of religious institutions affirms that religion is a far broader phenomenon than formal structure alone. It lives in practice, relationship, and everyday experience. A comprehensive understanding of religion, accordingly, requires an approach that looks beyond institutions to trace how religion is lived in the most intimate and concrete spaces of life.

#### ***f. Gender Dimensions of Religious Practice***

Living Faith also makes clear that religious practice cannot be separated from the gendered structures within which it takes place. Among the low-income mothers who are the subjects of Sullivan's study, religion functions not only as a value system but as a framework that both shapes, and is shaped by, gendered roles in daily life.

In many cases, mothers occupy a central position as agents of religious transmission. They play an active role in:

- instilling religious belief in their children
- teaching religiously grounded moral norms
- cultivating spiritual habits within the family

This role positions them as the primary mediators between religious teaching and the next generation. Within the lived-religion framework, this transmission rarely occurs through formal mechanisms; it happens instead through everyday practices — advice, behavioral example, and domestic interaction saturated with religious value.

Mothers also function as moral guardians of the family, bearing responsibility for ensuring that family life remains within the bounds of what is considered religiously "right." Amid social instability, this role becomes both more important and more complex, as they must navigate a range of challenges that could otherwise threaten the family's moral order.

This central position, however, does not come without cost. It gives rise instead to what might be called a double burden. On one side, mothers must meet economic demands — earning income or managing severely limited resources. On the other, they carry substantial spiritual and moral responsibility, both for themselves and for other family members. The combination of economic and spiritual burden creates considerable pressure in their lives.

Their role as moral guardians also generates a high degree of normative pressure. Mothers are often held most responsible for the family's moral successes or failures. When departures from religious norms occur, they frequently experience:

- guilt
- moral anxiety
- social pressure from their surroundings

Here religion functions ambivalently — as both a source of strength and legitimacy for the maternal role, and as a source of normative pressure that adds to psychological burden.

This analysis shows that religion is not gender-neutral; it interacts closely with the social construction of women's roles. Religious values often reinforce expectations of women as primary caregivers, moral guardians, and the stabilizing center of the family. Religious practice, accordingly, does not merely reflect individual belief but also reproduces a broader social structure.

It is important to note, however, that the mothers in Sullivan's study are not merely objects of this construction; they also display a gendered-religious agency. They actively:

- interpret their own roles within a religious framework
- adjust normative expectations to fit lived reality
- draw on religion as a source of legitimacy for maintaining their dignity and identity

In this sense, religion does not only constrain; it also provides women with a space to construct meaning and authority in their lives.

Theoretically, this finding confirms that any analysis of religious practice must treat gender as a key variable. Religion operates not only at the individual level but also within the structures of social relations that shape gender identity and roles. The lived-religion approach is therefore especially valuable, since it can capture the complex dynamics among religion, women's experience, and the social realities they confront.

The gender dimension of religious practice thus reveals religion as an arena in which value, power, and identity are continually negotiated. For low-income mothers, religion becomes simultaneously a source of strength, a responsibility, and a challenge that deeply shapes their religious experience.

#### 4. Conclusions and Suggestions

This analysis of the Hadith-collection methodology in Musnad Ahmad shows that Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal employed a systematic and comprehensive approach to compiling the traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), driven above all by a desire to safeguard the Sunnah for future generations. To this end, he undertook decades of scholarly journeys (rihlah fi thalab al-hadith) to major centres of Islamic learning in order to acquire Hadith directly from highly credible Living Faith affirms that religion is not merely a system of doctrine but a dynamic, lived practice. In the lives of low-income mothers, religion functions as:

- a source of meaning
- a coping mechanism
- a tool for moral negotiation

The lived-religion approach offers a fresh perspective in the study of religion by placing individual experience at the center of analysis. It is, accordingly, a highly relevant framework for the further development of contemporary religious studies, including the study of Islamic teachers.

His method attended not only to the sheer volume of narrations gathered but, more importantly, to the quality of the chains of transmission and the narrators themselves. By applying the foundational principles of Hadith scholarship — continuity of the chain (ittisal al-sanad), narrator integrity ('adalah), precision of memorisation (dhabt), and comparison across multiple lines of transmission (muqaranah al-asanid) — Imam Ahmad ensured that the compilation process involved rigorous verification, resulting in a work of substantial scholarly value.

In its organisational structure, Musnad Ahmad differs from other Hadith collections in being arranged by the names of the Companions who served as the initial narrators. This arrangement facilitates the tracing of sanad and the identification of all narrations attributed to a given Companion, though it is admittedly less convenient for locating hadiths by fiqh theme. This limitation does not diminish the work's scholarly standing; rather, it points toward a productive direction for future research — namely, the development of thematic indices (faharis) and cross-referencing tools that would complement the Companion-based structure of Musnad Ahmad and further enhance its accessibility for both classical and contemporary Hadith scholarship.

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