Testing the Effect of a Course on Sociology of Religion on the Religiosity of College Students

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Abstract—This study aims to see how students' religiosity as measured by two scales – the Sta. Clara Strength of Religious Faith and the Centrality of Religiosity scales – are affected by a semester of taking a class on a course that subjects religion to scientific inquiry: Sociology of Religion. The course was chosen because of its subject matter which treats religion as a mere social construct devoid of any divine origin as well as its discussions on potential scientific explanations for religious experiences. A survey questionnaire was administered twice to all students of the course after being briefed on the nature of the study. The first run of the questionnaire (pre-test) was done at the start of the semester before the course content was discussed. The second run (post-test) was done at the end of the semester after the course content has been discussed. The pre-test and post-test religiosity scores of the students as measured by the two scales were then compared to check for significant differences. The results indicate that taking a class on Sociology of Religion for one semester may cause a statistically significant decrease in the religiosity of students in terms of their cognitive appreciation of religion, private religiosity, and religious conviction. However, despite their religiosity depreciating, these students continue to follow social expectations of public religious performance and are still susceptible to religious experiences.

Keywords— Cognitive Dissonance, Education, Faith, Religion.

I. INTRODUCTION

Religious conservatives and social thinkers alike have recognized the potential impact of education on religiosity. Modern education has often been viewed as a possible factor for the loss or weakening of one's faith and adherence to religious practices, primarily because of the supposed emphasis on scientific principles which are perceived to inevitably conflict with religious beliefs. This has led to an averse relationship between some religious members of society and the academe. Indeed, as far back as the dawn of the industrial society, social thinkers such as Thomas Masaryk considered the presence of secular, scientific, education as a major factor the leads to the decline of religiosity which then leads to other social crises [1]. More than a century since Masaryk expressed this concern on the relationship between religion and education, the two institutions of society can still be found to be at odds on several instances. One of the most famous instances of the volatile relationship between religion and education is on the issue of teaching of the Theory of Evolution and the Big Bang Theory in the classroom. The topics of evolution and the big

bang theory, as some sectors would claim, is detrimental or even directly against the doctrine of certain religious ideologies. This is due to the perception that the specificities of these scientific knowledge are in conflict with the religious claims on how humans came into being and how the world was formed. Much of the attention has been focused on the opposition to the teaching of these natural science topics in the classroom.

Little to no attention has been given, on the other hand, to the impact of a class on the Sociology of Religion on the religious identity of students. This study was conducted to determine how taking a class on the Sociological inquiry of religion – which regards religions as mere social constructs and religious experiences as by-products of social phenomena such as manifestations of Durkheimian social currents, altered states of consciousness, or groupthink – will affect the religiosity of Sociology students taking the course. The impetus for this study is personal for the researcher. He was a devout Roman Catholic during his days as a high school student in a Roman Catholic school. Upon enrolling in the course, Sociology of Religion, in a secular university where he studied for his college education, his religiosity was significantly shaken. This eventually led to a drastic change in worldview for the researcher. Indeed, the experience is not isolated. It is often said by the students of Sociology in the university that Sociology of Religion is a course that is not for the easily-offended. This is because it will challenge the foundations of the student's long-held worldviews which may consequently lead to discomfort. In fact, it was often said in jest by the students that, "*Sa Sociology of Religion ang sem na hindi mo maiisipang sumimba.*" [It is during the semester of one's Sociology of Religion course that one will forget about the idea of going to a Sunday mass]. With that in mind, this study will be guided by the following research question:

"*Is there a significant difference in the religiosity of students after taking a course on Sociology of Religion for one whole semester?*"

II. RESEARCH DESIGN

Students of a Sociology of Religion class were engaged as participants in the study after being informed of its purpose. All students were asked to answer a survey questionnaire twice during the semester: first during the start of the semester and second during the end of the semester. A copy of the course outline of Sociology of Religion during the semester that the study was conducted is also provided in the appendix of this article.

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The survey instrument used for the study is comprised of three parts. The first part is comprised of questions designed to obtain information about their socio-economic characteristics. The second part is the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SCSORF) constructed by Plante and Boccaccini [2]. It was designed to measure the strength of the subjects' religious faith, regardless of their religious denomination or affiliation based on their answers to 10 items measured in a Likert response format ranging from (1) Strongly disagree to (4) Strongly agree. The scores obtained from the SCSORF can range between 10 and 40. Higher aggregate scores in the SCSORF reflect stronger levels of religiosity or religious faith.

In addition to the SCSORF, the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS) by Huber and Huber [3]. This instrument presents a more complex approach to measuring religiosity. Instead of treating religiosity as a single construct, the CRS measures the subject's intensity of religiosity in five dimensions which are assumed to represent the totality of religious life. These dimensions are as follows:

Public Practice Dimension. This dimension is measured through elements such as the subject's frequency of public participation in religious rituals and communal activities. It also includes the degree to which participation in these religious rituals are considered by the subject as important as well as the degree to which inclusion in a religious community is valued by the subject. Subjects who obtain high scores in this dimension can be said to possess high valuation on the sense of belonging that can be obtained from a religious community.

Private Practice Dimension. As opposed to the Public Practice Dimension, this dimension is measured through elements such as the subject's subscription to individualized religious activities and rituals despite the lack of an audience. It includes elements pertaining to the importance and frequency of the subject's prayer and meditation or any other method to connect personally with the "divine". Subjects who obtain high scores in this dimension can be said to possess high devotion to transcendence and spirituality.

Religious Experience Dimension. This dimension is measured through elements that pertain to the subject's emotionality when it comes to religious phenomena. This includes elements such as self-reported experiences of feeling a supreme being intervenes in one's life or is communicating with the subject, feeling that a supernatural entity is present, or feeling of oneness with the cosmos. Subjects who obtain high scores in this dimension can be said to possess high belief in the authenticity of religious experiences.

Ideology Dimension. This dimension is measured through elements such as the subject's belief in the plausibility of the existence of deities and other supernatural concepts such as

the afterlife. Subjects who obtain high scores in this dimension can be said to possess strong convictions about the authenticity or veracity of their religious beliefs.

Intellectual Dimension. This dimension is measured through elements such as the subject's frequency of thinking about religious issues, interest in learning more about religious topics, and his or her active agency in seeking out further information pertaining to religious matters. Subjects who obtain high scores in this dimension can be said to be knowledgeable about religion and are capable of explaining their views on matters of religion, spirituality, and transcendence. It is worth noting that this dimension encompasses one's cognitive interest about religion in general instead of being limited to just one particular religion.

The mean scores obtained from the pre- and post- tests of the SCSORF and CRS were then analysed through a Paired Samples T Test procedure. All cases with missing data on the pre- and/or post- test scores were omitted pairwise. A total of 53 cases were viable for the statistical procedure when comparing the mean scores obtained from the SCSORF. Meanwhile, the CRS scores have 36 viable cases for comparison – except for the Religious Experience dimension which has 35 viable cases for the statistical procedure.

III. Results And Discussion

This part of the article is divided into three parts. The first part introduces the participants of the study in terms of their socio-economic characteristics. The second part discusses the results obtained from the SCSORF instrument of the study. The third part discusses the results obtained from the CRS instrument of the study.

The Participants of the Study

Sixty-six students of the course, Sociology of Religion, were involved in the study. These students are from ages 16 to 22, most of which are 17 (33.8%) and 18 (27.8%). A greater proportion of these students are females (65.3%). In terms of student classification, the class is comprised mostly of sophomores (55.6%). Almost half of these students (47.2%) reportedly live in an urban area while 27.8% reportedly live in a rural area. A quarter of the participants did not identify their place of residence. In terms of religious affiliation, these participants are comprised of students coming from 12 different religions, though almost half (45.8%) declared themselves as Roman Catholics.

Results of the Sta. Clara Strength of Religious Faith Instrument

The SCSORF is designed such that the scores of the participants will range from 10 to 40, with the higher scores indicating greater strengths of faith. The results of the SCSORF are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1. T-TEST RESULTS OF THE STA. CLARA STRENGTH OF RELIGIOUS FAITH INSTRUMENT.

Sta. Clara Strength of Religious Faith Scores	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-Test	27.89	53	7.863	1.080	1.783	52	.080*
Post-Test	26.25	53	8.095	1.112			

*significant at α=0.10

The study found that the participants as a group are moderately faithful during the start of the semester (mean score=27.89). The strength of their religious faith was observed to have decreased during the end of semester (mean score=26.25). With t(52) = 1.783, p < 0.10, this indicates that there is a statistically significant decrease in the religious faith of the participants as measured by the SCSORF.

Results of the Centrality of Religiosity Instrument
A comparison of means was conducted for each of the five dimensions of the Centrality of Religiosity Scale. The results of these statistical tests are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2. T-TEST RESULTS OF THE CENTRALITY OF RELIGIOSITY SCALE BY DIMENSION

Centrality of Religiosity Scores	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Intellectual Dimension							
Pre-Test	4.129630	36	.8480707	.1413451	6.363	35	.000*
Post-Test	2.805556	36	.7862913	.1310485			
Ideological Dimension							
Pre-Test	3.202381	36	1.1737533	.1956255	1.809	35	.079*
Post-Test	2.773810	36	1.0331954	.1721992			
Public Practice Dimension							
Pre-Test	3.342593	36	1.4040443	.2340074	1.073	35	.291
Post-Test	3.101852	36	1.0685087	.1780848			
Private Practice Dimension							
Pre-Test	3.810185	36	1.4075492	.2345915	1.843	35	.074*
Post-Test	3.277778	36	1.3386798	.2231133			
Religious Experience Dimension							
Pre-Test	3.071429	35	1.1424559	.1931103	.630	34	.533
Post-Test	2.930952	35	1.0754779	.1817889			

*significant at α=0.10

The results of the study shows that when it comes to the Intellectual Dimension, the mean score of the participants decreased from 4.129630 during the pre-test down to 2.805556 during the post-test. With t(35) = 6.363, p < 0.10, this indicates that there is a statistically significant decrease in the centrality of religiosity among the participants in terms of their Intellectual dimension. As such, it can be said that after taking a semester of classes on Sociology of Religion, the student participants had a decline in their willingness to subject religion to sceptical inquiry.

The results also shows that when it comes to the Ideological dimension, the mean score of the participants decreased from 3.202381 during the pre-test down to 2.773810 during the post-test. With t(35) = 1.809, p < 0.10, this indicates that there is a statistically significant decrease in the centrality of religiosity among the participants in terms of their Ideological dimension. This means that taking a whole semester worth of classes in Sociology of Religion causes a substantial disturbance in the students' religious convictions.

When it comes to the Public Practice dimension, the mean score of the participants decreased from 3.342593 during the pre-test down to 3.101852 during the post-test. With t(35) = 1.073, p < 0.10, this indicates that there is no statistically significant decrease in the centrality of religiosity among the participants in terms of their Public Practice dimension. In other words, taking Sociology of Religion classes for a whole semester does not decrease nor increase the tendency of students to participate in public religious activities. The old joke amongst the students of the course, "Kapag kumukuha ka ng [Sociology of Religion], ito ang semestreng hindi ka magsisimba!", appears to be unfounded in the context of the current generation of students of the course.

The data also pointed out that when it comes to the Private Practice Dimension, the mean score of the participants decreased from 8.810185 during the pre-test down to 3.277778 during the post-test. With t(35) = 1.843, p < 0.10, this indicates that there is a statistically significant decrease in the centrality of religiosity among the participants in terms of their Private Practice dimension. This means that there is a significant change in the behaviour of students when it comes

to private religious acts such as praying and meditating after taking one semester of classes in Sociology of Religion.

Finally, the results shown in Table 2 indicate that in terms of the Religious Experience Dimension, the mean score of the participants decreased from 3.071429 during the pre-test down to 2.930952 during the post-test. With $t(34) = 0.630$, $p < 0.10$, this indicates that there is no statistically significant decrease in the centrality of religiosity among the participants in terms of their Religious Experience dimension. This suggests that what O'Dea (1966, as cited in Roberts and Yamane, 2016) termed as "mysterium tremendum" which fills the believer with great wonder in the face of a religious experience is not significantly affected by taking a class on Sociology of Religion.

In summary, the students of Sociology of Religion, who were predominantly 17-18 year old females living in an urban area and are members of the Roman Catholic Faith, have moderately religiosity during the time that they took the course. After one semester of taking the course, they experienced a small but significant decline in the strength of their faith (SCSORF) as well as in their interest in subjecting religion to scientific inquiry (Intelligence dimension), their religious conviction (Ideology dimension), and their observance of private religious activities (Private Practice dimension).

IV. CONCLUSION

The results of this study provides strong support to the assumption that taking a class on Sociology of Religion will have a detrimental impact on the religiosity of the students. This is shown through the statistically significant decreases observed in the religiosity of the students as measured by the Sta. Clara Strength of Religious Faith (SCSORF) instrument as well as a the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS). However, it is worth noting that when it comes to the CRS, it was found that taking a semester-long class on the Sociology of Religion has no statistically significant impact on religiosity of students when it comes to their Public Practice and Religious Experience dimensions.

It may be inferred that taking a class on the Sociology of Religion does have a detrimental effect on the religiosity of students. This much has been proven by the results of the T-test in the SCSORF. The results of the CRS functions mostly to provide richer insights into the effect of Sociology of Religion on religiosity. The students reported lesser willingness to make scientific inquiries about religion during the end of the semester. This is shown in the statistically significant decrease in the Intelligence dimension. This may be because of their aversion to the discomfort experienced after a whole semester of looking at religion, which is cognitively and emotionally important to them, as nothing more than a social construction. This is especially the case when the topics delve into the discourses of social thinkers such as Freud, Marx, and especially, Feuerbach, whose discussions could very easily be considered antagonistic to a religious worldview. Feuerbach here is emphasized due to his

claim that atheism, or the absence of a religious worldview, is the only solution to humanity's problem. Despite their resistance to further sceptical inquiries into religion, the depreciation in their religious fervour has already transpired. This has caused them to give less importance to the execution of their private religious rituals, as shown in the statistically significant decrease in the Private Practice dimension. Despite the decrease in their personal religiosity, these students are still human beings who are coerced by the external structures around them – slaves, so to speak, to the dynamics of the group. As such, though their personal religious beliefs have been shaken, they still adhere to the public methods of pronouncing one's religious faith. This is manifested in the lack of any statistically significant decrease in the Public Practice dimension despite the decrease in the other domains. Finally, while the students who took the course might have been affected cognitively, and by extension, behaviourally, by the course, the same cannot be said about their emotions. This is understandable; religious experiences, after all, are primarily products of social currents. Therefore, it is within expectations that those who participate in public religious activities can find themselves caught in the collective effervescence of religious activities.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This study serves primary as a first step to further inquiries into the effect of instruction in the subfield of Sociology of Religion on the religiosity of its stakeholders. Future studies are advised to conduct longitudinal studies following a similar design to see if the findings of this study will hold true in other classes with a different composition or a different source of instruction.

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APPENDIX

Course Outline of Sociology of Religion

I. Introduction to the nature and importance of Sociological Inquiry of Religion
    a. Defining "Religion"
    b. Importance of the Sociology of Religion
    d. Methods of Sociological research on   religion
II. Theorizing Religion: Its Strengths and Discontents
    a. Anthropological theories of religion
    b. Socio-psychological theories of religion
    c. Sociological theories of religion
    d. Secularization theory
III. The tools of Sociological Inquiry of Religious Experience and Commitment
    a. Factors of religiosity
    b. Measures of religiosity

      b. Comparative methods of religiosity

      c. Factors and processes of religious conversion, commitment, and apostasy

IV. Religion and Society: From the Philippines and Beyond

  a. Defining Filipino religiosity

  b. Factors of Filipino religiosity

  c. Comparing Filipino religiosity with the rest of the world

  d. Filipino religiosity and its impact on Philippine society

The author, Mark Anthony M. Quintos, was born on January 19, 1990 in Calamba City, Laguna. He graduated cum laude from the University of the Philippines – Los Banos under the Bachelor of Arts in Sociology program in 2011. Following his attainment of a bachelor's degree, he immediately proceeded to enroll into the university's Master of Arts in Sociology program and graduated in January 2016. As a graduate student, he has conducted various studies which have been accepted and presented in different national and international scientific conferences.

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