

MSE231 Assignment 4

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Part II

The subject of religion and those it attracts has long fascinated philosophers and scholars. Karl Marx wrote in his *Philosophy of Right* that “Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.” The connection between religiosity and hardship is an intriguing notion that warrants further investigation.

Although not directly related to religious motivations, a study conducted by Stanford and Yale researchers examined religion and income as predictors of voting (De La O et al). The study viewed individuals who both regularly and never attended church as well as their income to predict voting behaviors. They found that those who attended church and were struggling financially were more likely to vote Republican and those who were non-religious and affluent voted Democrat. While the main purpose of the study was not to directly analyze income and religiosity, the researchers posture that there is likely a connection between the two. Thus, for our natural study we would build upon their work to determine a link between level of religiosity and income. We hypothesize based on Marx’s statement and the research paper’s results that impoverished individuals will turn to religion as a form of escapism from their current financial struggles.

For our natural experiment, we would survey families of four in the United States selected based on the following income categories: below the federal poverty line, lower middle class, upper middle class, and upper class. The survey would ask if a given family self-identifies

as religious or non-religious. It is important to note that a classification of non-religious is not limited to atheist families. Those who do not attend religious services on a regular basis or do not participate in regular prayer would also fall into this category. Our control group is the lower middle class income level since the majority of Americans falls into this category and can set a baseline level of religiosity, and the test groups would be families in all other income brackets. Since we obviously cannot experimentally control our independent variable of income and dependent variable of religiosity level, as the families have been naturally determined, our study falls under the category of as-if natural selection.

The clear advantage of using a natural experiment is that such a study could never be implemented with traditional experimental practices where participants are assigned an experimental or control category. That being said, this type of survey study is limited by those who choose to respond and the implicit, necessary assumptions regarding participants. First, we assume a representative sample of the United States population within each income bracket will respond to the survey. If religious families were to respond more than non-religious families, our data would be incorrectly skewed to show a higher percentage of religious families in each income category. Second, we specify family size to provide participants at similar life stages. This assumption hopes to provide stronger likeness between respondents since, for example, comparing a family of four to an unmarried person's level of religiosity would not reveal useful results. These assumptions prove to be the largest cons of such an experimental method since we are relying on a representative sample of similar families to respond to our survey in order to collect accurate results. Additionally, unlike a laboratory experiment, there could be other variables involved in the lives of our respondents that can, and likely, impact their religiosity that

could skew our results. We unfortunately cannot fully safeguard against this possibility as well as in a fully controlled experiment.

Using the collected data, we could analyze the results on religiosity levels per income category and determine if there is an association between religion and income. For example, if we observe a statically significant higher percentage of religious families in the impoverished and lower middle class categories, we could conclude that there is an association between religion and income. Such an outcome would provide interesting insight into the process by which individuals become religious. Further research into this area could raise questions regarding the legitimacy of religion as an institution if credence is given to the Marxian belief of religion as a distraction from harsh realities.

Work Cited

De La O, Ana L., Jonathan A. Rodden (2008) "Does Religion Distract the Poor? Income and Issue Voting Around the World." *Comparative Political Studies* 41(4-5): 437-476. doi: 10.1177/0010414007313114