10-2008

Religion and Mythology in a Sample of Undergraduate Psychology of Women Courses

Christina J. Taylor
Sacred Heart University, taylorc@sacredheart.edu

Rosemarie Galasso
Sacred Heart University

RELIGION AND MYTHOLOGY IN A SAMPLE OF UNDERGRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY OF WOMEN COURSES[1]

CHRISTINA J. TAYLOR AND ROSEMARIE GALASSO

Department of Psychology
Sacred Heart University

Summary.—The coverage of religion and mythology in undergraduate courses in the Psychology of Women was explored by (a) surveying a sample of undergraduate instructors ($N=72$); and (b) examining coverage in textbooks on the Psychology of Women ($N=95$). 48.6% of teachers said they include some coverage, while 43.1% said they never do. The total percentage of coverage in textbooks is small, ranging from a mean of 2.0% in the 1970s to 1.1% in the current decade.

According to Jung's depth psychology (1964), religion and religious myths provide an avenue for accessing the collective unconscious (shared human predilections, perceptions, emotions, attitudes, and action tendencies) or what Jung called archetypes. Accordingly, ancient mythic and religious symbols are the origin of a nonconscious ideology—widely accepted and subtle ideas and beliefs which influence behavior largely without overt awareness (Bem & Bem, 1970). Attitudes and beliefs about women originating in religion and mythology, such as images of feminine evil and dualistic images of women as erotic and virginal, continue to be expressed in a myriad of conscious and unconscious ways (Hyde, 1985). Given that religious and mythical images of women may underlie sexual inequality and discrimination against women, promoting an understanding of the central role of religion and mythology in the subordination and exploitation of women is important to include in undergraduate courses in the Psychology of Women (Fawcett, Andrews, & Lester, 2000; Glick, 2002; Duriez, 2003; Schumm, 2003).

In this research, the coverage of religion and mythology in undergraduate courses in the Psychology of Women was examined by (a) surveying a sample of instructors and (b) examining textbooks for the percentage of words dealing with these topics. It was hypothesized that the absolute coverage of religion/mythology in textbooks has decreased over time. In surveying the instructors, the goal was to assess how important instructors rate the coverage of the topic. If they say it is worthy of attention, it buttresses the argument that authors of relevant texts should provide substantial coverage of religion and mythology.

An electronic survey (and follow-up request) was sent to 394 under-

graduate instructors of the Psychology of Women. Their e-mail addresses were obtained through online searches of university and college websites. Seventy-two instructors responded to the anonymous 13-item survey; 34% of the e-mailed requests were returned as undeliverable, indicating that the e-mail addresses were not valid so the request was not received by the addressee. Of the 260 who did receive the email, 28% responded to the survey. In addition to the survey, a sample of 95 textbooks published between 1976 and 2006 was analyzed by two judges to estimate percentage of coverage of religion or mythology. Each judge counted the pages in the text focused on these topics. Fractions of pages were calculated by counting the number of words on religion and mythology divided by the total number of words on the page. They identified the content by examining chapter headings, subheadings, and key words in the subject index on religion, mythology, mythic images of women, types of religion, religious beliefs, etc. The number of pages focused on religion or mythology was counted, and this was divided by the total pages in the text to obtain the total percentage of the text concerned with religion and mythology.

Of the 72 respondents, 93% held doctoral degrees and the remaining respondents had master's degrees. Instructors taught courses over four decades since 1973, and 57% reported they taught the course during 2004-2005. In response to the question about including the topic of religion/mythology in their course, 26.4% ($n = 19$) said always, 22.2% ($n = 16$) said sometimes, 43.1% ($n = 31$) said never, and 8.3% ($n = 6$) said other. Regarding the percentage of lecture/discussion time on religion/mythology: 41.7% ($n = 30$) said 0%, 47.2% ($n = 34$) said 1–5%, 5.6% ($n = 4$) said 7–10%, and 5.6% ($n = 4$) said 15–30%. The percentage of reading assigned on religion/mythology was 47.1% ($n = 33$) said 0%, 41.4% ($n = 29$) said 1–5%, 5.7% ($n = 4$) said 6–10%, and 5.7% ($n = 4$) said 11–20%. The instructors rated the importance of covering religion/mythology in undergraduate psychology of women textbooks as follows: 22.7% ($n = 15$) said not important, 47.0% ($n = 31$) said somewhat important, 19.7% ($n = 13$) said important, and 10.6% ($n = 7$) said very important. Instructors were also asked how satisfied they were with the coverage in their current text: 5.3% ($n = 3$) said very satisfied, 19.3% ($n = 11$) said satisfactory, 33.3% ($n = 19$) said somewhat, 7.0% ($n = 4$) said not at all, and 35.1% ($n = 20$) said other.

The two judges' analyses of the 95 textbooks yielded 98% agreement on how many pages focused on the topics of religion and mythology. The percentages of the texts' coverage of religion/mythology by decade were 2.0% for texts ($n = 6$) published in the 1970s, 1.6% ($n = 23$) for texts in the 1980s, 1.4% ($n = 42$) for the 1990s, and 1.1% ($n = 24$) for the 2000s. The small percentages preclude statistical analysis.

The patterns in the instructors' answers suggest a mixture of opinion on

including the topic of religion/mythology in the Psychology of Women. While 48.6% ($n = 35$) of the teachers said that they always ($n = 19$) or sometimes ($n = 16$) include some coverage, 43% ($n = 31$) said they never cover it at all. Also only 22.7% ($n = 16$) of instructors thought that it was not important for religion/mythology to be covered in undergraduate psychology of women textbooks. The bifurcation of views may, on one hand, reflect the traditional distancing of scientific psychology from religion, and on the other, the conviction of some feminist psychologists that discussion of religion and mythology must occur to weaken their oppressive effects on women (Eckhardt, Kassinove, & Edwards, 1992; Schumm, 2003). The limited coverage of religion and mythology in Psychology of Women texts signifies these contradictory trends. Increasing the coverage of religion and mythology in Psychology of Women texts could assist instructors in their efforts to change sexist attitudes and beliefs related to subordination of women.

REFERENCES

BEM, S. L., & BEM, D. J. (1970) Case study of nonconscious ideology: training the woman to know her place. In D. J. Bem (Ed.), *Beliefs, attitudes, and human affairs.* Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole. Pp. 89-99.

DURIEZ, B. (2003) Religiosity and conservatism revisited: relating a new religiosity measure to the main conservative political ideologies. *Psychological Reports,* 92, 533-539.

ECKHARDT, C. I., KASSINOVE, H., & EDWARDS, L. (1992) Religious beliefs and scientific ideology in psychologists: conflicting or coexisting systems? *Psychological Reports,* 71, 131-145.

FAWCETT, J., ANDREWS, V., & LESTER, D. (2000) Religiosity and attitudes about abortion. *Psychological Reports,* 87, 980.

GLICK, P. (2002) Education and Catholic religiosity as predictors of hostile and benevolent sexism toward women and men. *Sex Roles,* 47, 433-441.

HYDE, J. (1985) *Half the human experience: the psychology of women.* Lexington, MA: Heath.

JUNG, C. (1964) *Man and his symbols.* Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

SCHUMM, W. R. (2003) Interpreting past religious discrimination today. *Psychological Reports,* 93, 513-514.