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Variation and consistency in the links between religion and emotion regulation

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Emotions play a central role in the religious experience. This suggests that religious institutions, practices, and beliefs may actively shape the emotions of adherents, such as by influencing how they regulate emotions. An emerging literature has documented the various links between religion and emotion regulation. This article reviews these links with regards to various elements of emotion regulation, including beliefs about the controllability of emotions, desired emotions, emotion regulation strategies, and intrinsic versus extrinsic emotion regulation. For each link, emphasis is given to whether it is variable or consistent across religious affiliations, and if variable, what might explain such variation.

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¹The New School for Social Research, United States²Artis International, United StatesCorresponding author: Vishkin, Allon (allon.vishkin@mail.huji.ac.il)**Current Opinion in Psychology** 2021, 40:6–9This review comes from a themed issue on **Religion**Edited by **Vassilis Saroglou** and **Adam B Cohen**For a complete overview see the [Issue](#) and the [Editorial](#)

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Emotions play a central role in the religious experience [1]. Religions may actively shape emotions, such as by prescribing what to feel or what not to feel, and by providing strategies to alter one's emotional experience [2]. This article reviews associations between religion and emotion regulation, with an emphasis on links which are consistent across religions versus links which are variable across religions. I identify two different types of variation that cut across the links between religion and different elements of emotion regulation: variation arising from the interaction of religion with the national context and variation arising from religion-specific characteristics. For the former, features of the national context may alter or override links between religion and emotion regulation. For the latter, unique characteristics of specific religions, such as particular beliefs and values, may shape how religion is tied to specific elements of emotion regulation. These religion-specific beliefs and values

shape diverse elements of emotion regulation, leading to syndromes, or patterns of emotion regulation, that are unique to particular religions. The review proceeds by providing a conceptualization of religion and religiosity as cultural systems. Then, it reviews associations between religion and elements that unfold sequentially in the process of emotion regulation, including beliefs about the controllability of emotions, goals in emotion regulations (i.e. desired emotions), and methods of enacting emotion regulation (i.e. intrinsic or extrinsic emotion regulation strategies). Finally, it integrates these associations to identify religion-specific syndromes in emotion regulation.

For the purpose of this review, religion is viewed as a cultural system [3,4] comprising a set of beliefs, practices, communal structures, and moral concerns [5]. Some of these elements are common across many religions, such as belief in supernatural agents and the practice of prayer or meditation, whereas others vary by religion, such as belief in a particular type of god, endorsement of a particular eschatology, or recitation of particular prayers. Insofar as some characteristics are common across religions, whereas other characteristics vary between religions, links between religion and emotion regulation may also apply across religions or vary between them. In addition, within a given religion, people who are more religious are more likely to be immersed in their religion than people who are less religious. For example, two people may identify as Catholic, but only the more religious of the two regularly attends confession. Consequently, when addressing consistency and variation in the links between emotion regulation and religion *as a cultural system*, particular religions serve as different subcultural manifestations within the culture of religion, while religiosity serves as a manifestation of differing levels of immersion in the culture of religion. On the basis of such a conceptualization of religion as a cultural system, this article integrates the existing findings on religion and emotion regulation.

Beliefs about controllability of emotions

People hold beliefs about the controllability of emotions, in general, as well as about how much they can control their own emotions (i.e. self-efficacy in emotion regulation; [6]). By instilling the expectation that one can successfully alter one's emotional experience in line with one's desired emotional state, these beliefs promote successful emotion regulation [7]. Religion may promote the belief that emotions can be controlled by prescribing what to feel (e.g. 'give thanks to Me and do not be

ungrateful to Me', Quran 2:152) and what not to feel (e.g. 'Fear thou not; for I am with thee', Isaiah 41:10, King James Version). Indeed, across samples of Christians, Jews, and Muslims, religiosity is associated with the belief that emotions are controllable, in general, as well as with the belief about one's own ability to control emotions [8**]. However, this association is strongest for Jews and weaker among Christians and Muslims. One intriguing explanation for such variation is in the different standards adherents to different religions may have for the acceptable level of control over one's emotions. Jews believe that people aren't liable for thoughts without actions [9], and therefore may experience self-efficacy in emotion regulation simply by altering the action tendencies that an emotion arouses, even if the emotion experience persists. In contrast, Christians believe that people are liable for thoughts as well as actions [9], and therefore may experience self-efficacy in emotion regulation only when successfully altering both the action tendencies that an emotion arouses and the subjective experience of the emotion.

Desired emotions

As in other types of self-regulation, emotion regulation is directed towards desired end-states [10]. The attainment of these desired end-states, or desired emotions, is the very purpose of engaging in emotion regulation. A recent investigation found that, across several religions, people who are more religious desire emotions that strengthen foundational religious beliefs, include more other-praising emotions (awe and gratitude) and less self-praising emotions (pride [11*]). However, the association between religiosity and desired pride varies significantly by national context, though not by religion. For example, religiosity is negatively associated with pride in Singapore ($r = -.31$), but not in the United States ($r = .01$). One explanation for this variation is that characteristics of the national culture suppress characteristics of the religious culture. In particular, American social life is characterized by situational affordances that foster and enable the expression of pride [12], such as institutionalized award ceremonies, and these affordances may override any influence that religion may have on desiring pride in such a national context.

In addition to desiring specific emotions, people who are more religious consistently desire more positive affect and less negative affect [8**]. While this is consistent across several religious affiliations, the particular type of desired positive affect varies between religions: adherents to Christianity value high arousal positive affect, such as excitement, whereas adherents to Buddhism value low arousal positive affect, such as calmness [13]. In this study, desired positive affect varied between Christians and Buddhists even within a single national context. Such variation may be due to different underlying values in each religion. Christianity values influencing existing

realities to mold the environment in line with its values [14], an orientation which is associated with desiring high arousal positive affect [15]. In contrast, Buddhism values accommodating oneself to existing realities [14], a value which is associated with desiring low arousal positive affect [15]. In support of this account, Buddhist-inspired meditation, which involves accepting one's emotions rather than influencing the environment, increases the desirability of feeling calm [16].

Emotion regulation strategies

Desired emotions are pursued via emotion regulation strategies. Emotion regulation strategies span a range of psychological processes, including the regulation of attention, meaning-making, and the regulation of expression [17]. Since meaning-making is a primary concern of religion [18–20], religion may be associated with an emotion regulation strategy concerned with meaning-making in particular. Such an emotional regulation strategy, called cognitive reappraisal [21], involves altering the meaning of an emotional event in order to shape its emotional impact. Across several religions, religiosity is associated with more frequent use of cognitive reappraisal [8**,22]. In addition, people who are more religious are more effective in using cognitive reappraisal.

Cognitive reappraisal is a nuanced emotion regulation strategy because it can leverage a broad range of meaning-making frameworks [23]. To the extent that certain meaning-making frameworks are common across religions, the link between religiosity and cognitive reappraisal will be consistent across religions. For example, common across Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim sources is a framework that re-interprets the apparent outcome of events, suggesting that reality is deeper than it appears to be at first glance [24]. However, to the extent that certain meaning-making frameworks are idiosyncratic to a particular religion, the link between religiosity and cognitive reappraisal will vary by religion. For example, Jehovah's Witnesses possess a clearly defined eschatological vision for the arrival of paradise on earth [25,26]. Congruently, Jehovah's Witnesses regulate their emotions by discounting negative emotional experiences in the face of expectations for positive emotional experiences in the idyllic future [27*]. A direct comparison of how different religions leverage different meaning-making frameworks when engaging in cognitive reappraisal is a promising avenue for future research.

In addition to supplying meaning-making frameworks, religion orients people to accept and adjust themselves to existing realities [1]. Accordingly, across adherents to Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, people who are more religious are more likely to engage in the emotion regulation strategy of situational acceptance — recognizing the reality of a given situation in order to accommodate it [8**]. In contrast, across adherents to Christianity,

Judaism, and Islam, people who are more religious are less likely to engage in emotional acceptance — recognizing one's emotions in order to accommodate them, without trying to alter them. This reflects an emphasis in religious teachings to feel some emotions and not feel others (e.g. Hate: Leviticus 19:17; Love: Leviticus: 19:18; Fear: Isaiah 41:10). However, adherents to Buddhism are more likely to engage in emotional acceptance than adherents to Protestantism [28*]. This is in line with an emphasis in Buddhist teachings to refrain from influencing one's emotions. Thus, while acceptance is common across religions, different religions are linked to more frequent use of different types of acceptance.

Intrinsic versus extrinsic emotion regulation

The research reviewed up to this point refers predominantly to intrinsic forms of emotion regulation, which are processes that originate from within the self [29]. Specifically, an individual who pursues his or her desired emotions, supported by a belief that emotions are controllable while wielding emotion regulation strategies, is utilizing intrinsic processes of emotion regulation to alter his or her emotional experience. However, emotion regulation may also be extrinsic, such that they originate and operate outside of the self and in one's social environment. For example, people may seek to alleviate emotional distress by sharing their emotional experience with others [30]. The tendency for religion to encourage intrinsic or extrinsic processes in emotion regulation may be moderated by national context [31]. To the extent that individualist cultures value personal agency, a religious tradition nested in such a context may promote intrinsic emotion regulation. Conversely, to the extent that collectivist cultures value social affiliation, a religious tradition nested in such a context may promote extrinsic emotion regulation. Indeed, Christianity has been associated more closely with secondary control – adjusting oneself to fit the environment, which is characteristic of intrinsic emotion regulation – than with social affiliation in the United States, but has been associated more strongly with social affiliation than with secondary control in Korea [32]. Both processes may shape the regulation of emotion, but do so using methods that fit the dominant cultural orientation.

Conclusion and future directions

In the links between religion and emotion regulation reviewed above, it is possible to identify two sources of variation. One source of variation arises from religion-specific characteristics. As reviewed above, religions that place greater value on internal states may foster lower beliefs about the controllability of emotions; religions that place greater value on shaping the environment may foster greater desire for high arousal positive affect than low arousal positive affect; religions with a clearer eschatological vision may foster greater use of the reappraisal tactic of emotional forecasting. A second source of variation arises from the interaction with national context,

which may suppress or emphasize links between religion and emotion regulation. As reviewed above, religiosity may be unassociated with a weaker desire for pride in the United States because the prevailing national culture places a high value on pride, and a given religion may be associated with intrinsic emotion regulation in an individualist context, but with extrinsic emotion regulation in a collectivist context. When examining links between religion and emotion regulation, it is necessary to account for variation by religious affiliation, as well as by national context.

Different elements of emotion regulation are linked to each other. For example, desired emotional states are associated with emotion regulation strategies that are most effective at attaining those states [33]. Consequently, religion-specific associations with one element of emotion regulation may affect associations with another element of emotion regulation. Indeed, the variation across different religions identified above point to religion-specific syndromes across several elements of emotion regulation. Buddhism is distinct from other religions for valuing adjustment to the environment [14], which may bear the consequences of desiring calmness [13] and using the emotion regulation strategy of emotional acceptance [28*]. Christianity places greater value on internal states [9] which may bear the consequences of weakening self-efficacy beliefs in emotion regulation [8**] and using more active and intrinsic emotion regulation strategies [28*,32]. A fruitful avenue for future research is to expand on these cultural syndromes to other elements of emotion regulation and to identify religion specific syndromes for other religions as well.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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