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## Chapter 13

# Religion, Emotion Regulation, and Well-Being

Allon Vishkin, Yochanan Bigman, and Maya Tamir

Emotions play a central role in religious experience (Emmons, 2005). This point was highlighted by William James (1902), who suggested that what differentiates religious experience from other experiences is “[an] added dimension of emotion, [an] enthusiastic temper of espousal” (p. 48). James contrasted the calm and collected philosophical stoicism with passionate religious experience. Such emotional experiences, James argued, are a defining feature of religion. Research on religion and emotional experience has since confirmed that greater religiosity is linked to more intense experiences of emotions (Burriss & Petrican, 2011). In this chapter we propose that one of the ways in which religion is linked to emotion experiences is through processes of emotion regulation. We suggest that religion regulates emotions and highlight several processes by which it might do so.

Emotions are responses to external or internal events that are significant to the individual (e.g., Frijda, 1986). Emotional experiences are typically reactions to changing events. However, in addition to responding to events as they occur, individuals can also shape their emotional experiences by actively engaging in emotion regulation (Gross & Thompson, 2007). As depicted in Fig. 13.1, emotion regulation involves the set of processes by which individuals change their current emotional state to bring it closer to their desired emotional state (Mauss & Tamir, 2014). These changes can occur as a result of intrinsic emotion regulation, which are processes that originate from within the individual (e.g., as when an anxious baby diverts her gaze from a threatening stranger and looks at her mother instead). These changes

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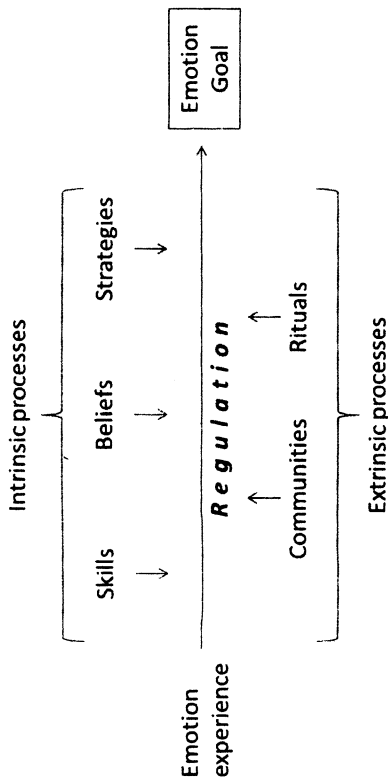


Fig. 13.1 Processes in emotion regulation that may be affected by religion

can also occur as a result of extrinsic emotion regulation, which are processes that originate outside the individual (e.g., as when an anxious baby is soothed by her mother).

We propose that religion can influence multiple points in the process of emotion regulation. Although religion likely influences emotion generation as well as emotion regulation, the present chapter focuses on the potential impact of religion on emotion regulation, in particular. We begin by discussing how religion might shape desired emotional states. We discuss the potential impact of religion on intrinsic emotion regulation, and continue with a discussion of the impact of religion on extrinsic emotion regulation. Finally, given that emotion regulation influences emotional experience and psychological health, we discuss the role of religion as a regulator of emotions and its possible implications for adaptive functioning and well-being.

### 13.1 Culture and Emotion

Emotional experiences are constituted within a cultural context. As highlighted by Mesquita and Albert (2007), cultures shape both the experience and the regulation of emotion. First, with respect to emotion generation, by setting values and shaping models of the self and the world, cultures can determine the significance of events to the individual, and in doing so, shape emotional experiences (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For example, cultures of honor highlight the importance of personal honor and respect, leading people to react more negatively to behaviors that could be interpreted as insults (Cohen, 2009).

Second, in addition to changing how people actually feel, cultures can change how people want to feel. For example, Tsai and her colleagues have shown that Americans value high-arousal positive affect and Chinese value low-arousal positive affect (Tsai, Miao, Seppala, Fung, & Ycung, 2007). These differences were

mediated by culturally-prescribed goals. Influencing others is a goal that is consistent with American culture. Pursuing this goal may benefit from positive affect and higher physiological arousal (Tomaka, Blascovich, Kelsey, & Leitten, 1993). Correspondingly, adjusting to others is a goal that is consistent with Chinese culture. Pursuing this goal may benefit from relatively lower physiological arousal (Tomaka et al., 1993). Whereas the valuation of high arousal positive affect was mediated by the goal of influencing others, the valuation of low-arousal positive affect was mediated by the goal of adjusting to others.

Third, cultures actively help individuals to move from current states toward culturally-desired states. One way in which they do so is by facilitating forms of intrinsic emotion regulation that are culturally congruent. For example, cultures that value hierarchy and collectivism encourage the suppression of emotional expression to help maintain group cohesion and harmony (Matsumoto, Yoo, & Nakagawa, 2008).

Another way in which cultures contribute to successful emotion regulation is through extrinsic emotion regulation. Such regulation processes operate, in part, through cultural rituals or institutions that facilitate the experience of culturally-desired emotions (Mesquita & Albert, 2007). For example, institutionalized award ceremonies, which are common in American culture, create opportunities to experience pride and further reaffirm the value of personal achievement. To summarize, culture can influence emotion regulation in multiple ways.

### 13.2 Religion as a Unique Cultural System

We define religion as a cultural system that is characterized by unique features that include rites, belief systems and worldviews, which relate humanity to presumed super-natural entities (Cohen, 2009). We argue that because religion is a cultural system, religion can influence the experience and the regulation of emotion. Indeed, like other cultural systems, religion may influence emotional reactivity, desired emotional states, and the process of emotion regulation, via both intrinsic and extrinsic processes. However, we also suggest that religion is a unique cultural system. Because it emphasizes faith and the relationship with the divine (Cohen, 2009), religion has substantial power over its adherents and a unique ability to guide behavior and self-regulation (James, 1902). Perhaps more so than with cultures, therefore, people tend to follow religion with exceptional faith and conviction (Sheikh, Ginges, Coman, & Atran, 2012). This, we argue, makes religion a particularly powerful regulator of emotion.

In what follows, we describe how religion shapes some of the key aspects of emotion regulation. First and foremost, religion defines which emotions are desirable and which are undesirable. Second, it influences the process of emotion regulation by shaping both intrinsic and extrinsic processes of emotion regulation. At the intrinsic level, religion cultivates skills in self-regulation, influences implicit beliefs about emotion, and trains and encourages the use of particular regulation strategies. At the extrinsic level, religion offers a social support network that propels

changes in emotional experience, and fosters rituals that can regulate emotions. With respect to each stage, we discuss the potential impact of religion and provide specific examples.

### 13.3 Religion Sets Emotion Goals

Emotion goals are cognitive representations of emotional states that serve as desired endpoints (Mauss & Tamir, 2014). Although people often seek to experience pleasant emotions and avoid unpleasant ones, emotion goals can vary dramatically across situations and across people (e.g., Tamir, 2005; Tamir, Mitchell, & Gross, 2008). This is, in part, because people can be motivated to experience emotions that maximize pleasure as well as utility (e.g., Tamir, 2009). To the extent that an emotion helps individuals attain goals that are important to them, they may be motivated to experience that emotion, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant to experience.

For example, Tamir and Ford (2012a) found that participants who needed to be confrontational in a negotiation preferred to engage in anger-inducing activities as they prepared to negotiate. Such preferences were fully mediated by the expected utility of anger. Participants who expected anger to result in better performance showed stronger preferences for anger. When participants engaged in anger-inducing activities, in turn, they became angrier and performed in a more confrontational manner, as a result. These and similar studies demonstrate that emotion goals can be determined, in part, by instrumental considerations, even when such considerations involve hedonic costs.

Utility can be determined by the situational context, as shown in the example above. Utility, however, can also be determined by one's cultural environment. By setting values and norms, cultures can shape emotion goals. In particular, cultures can increase the desirability of specific emotional experiences that promote the attainment of culturally-valued goals (e.g., Tsai et al., 2007).

Here, we argue that religion shapes emotion goals by prescribing which emotions are desirable and which are undesirable, both in particular contexts and in general. We propose that religions define an emotional experience as desirable to the extent that it helps reaffirm religious values. We suggest that certain religions prescribe these emotional experiences and that such experiences, in turn, might assist in the fostering and preservation of relevant religious values. Below, we offer several examples that demonstrate how religions can prescribe emotional experiences, focusing on awe, gratitude, joy, guilt, and hatred.

#### 13.3.1 Awe

Awe is an emotional experience that typically occurs in reaction to a natural wonder, a powerful or prestigious person, beauty, or a moral exemplar. It is experienced when one encounters something that is much larger than one's self, in size, power,

or prestige and it typically requires adjusting mental structures to accommodate such new experiences (Keltner & Haidt, 2003). As a result, awe typically leads to less focus on the self and to greater respect and admiration toward an external source (Shiota, Keltner, & Mossman, 2007). In addition, people who are prone to experiencing awe are more open-minded and willing to revise their mental representations of the world (Shiota et al., 2007). In a religious context, awe can be elicited by thinking about one's relations with the supernatural (James, 1902).

Given the implications of awe, one might expect awe experiences to strengthen belief in and commitment to religion. Indeed, there is some evidence that awe plays a role in religious experiences. For example, participants who were led to experience awe, by watching videos about childbirth and natural wonders, rated themselves as more religious relative to those who saw a neutral or a funny video (Saroglou, Buxant, & Tilquin, 2008). If awe promotes religious commitment, one might expect religions to set awe as an emotion goal. Indeed, awe appears to be central in Christianity and Buddhism (Haidt, 2003), as well as Judaism (Wettstein, 1997).

The most basic requirement of many religions is knowing of or believing in a divine being. In Judaism this was articulated by Maimonides, the twelfth century Jewish legal scholar, in the opening sentence of his legal work, the *Mishneh Torah*: "The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know that there is a Primary Being who brought into being all existence" (Laws of the Foundation of the Torah 1:1, Moznaim Trans.). This requirement is also articulated in the New Testament (John 6:29) and in the first of the five pillars of Islam. To the extent that awe fosters awareness of something greater than oneself, then in a religious context awe fosters awareness of the divine. By deeming awe a desirable emotional experience, religions can facilitate awareness of the divine, strengthening religious belief.

#### 13.3.2 Gratitude

Gratitude is an emotional response that accompanies the recognition of other people's contribution to one's positive experiences and outcomes (McCullough, Emmons, & Tsang, 2002). Gratitude involves acknowledgement of the source of these contributions (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; McCullough, Kilpatrick, Emmons, & Larson, 2001) and motivates reciprocation (Algoe & Haidt, 2009; Clark, 1975; Goldman, Seever, & Seever, 1982; McCullough et al., 2001; Moss & Page, 1972). Moreover, the motivation to reciprocate that is elicited by gratitude can extend beyond the benefactor and include other people (Bartlett & Desteno, 2006).

Gratitude is a common experience across Judaism (Schimmel, 2004), Christianity, and Islam (Emmons & Crumpler, 2000), and has been found to be positively correlated with religiosity (McCullough et al., 2002; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003). The experience of gratitude may occur naturally, but it is also prescribed in many religions, and most clearly so in prayers and blessings. For instance, Jewish law requires the recitation of certain blessings which explicitly express gratitude (e.g. the morning blessings: "blessed is he who dresses the naked...").

who fulfills all my needs... who gives strength to the sleepy"). These blessings concern the most mundane matters, including waking up in the morning (Shulchan Aruch O.H. 46:1), going to sleep at night ("blessed is he who makes sleep fall upon my eyes", Shulchan Aruch O.H. 239:1), using the restroom (Shulchan Aruch O.H. 6:1), and eating (Shulchan Aruch O.H. 85). One is required to make a blessing on speciously negative outcomes as well: "One is obligated to make a blessing on bad [outcomes], just as he makes a blessing on good [outcomes]" (Tractate Berachot 9:5). A compilation of Jewish laws and folklore that was written roughly from the first century, B.C.E., through the fifth century, C.E. The Talmud says that one must recite one hundred blessings every day (Tractate Menachot 43b) and this has been codified into Jewish law (Shulchan Aruch O.H. 46:3).

Likewise, Islamic prayer dictates the expression of gratitude (Padwick, 1997). Islam also requires the recitation of certain blessings which explicitly express gratitude for mundane actions, including waking up in the morning (Sahih al-Bukhari 80:16), going to sleep at night (Sahih al-Bukhari 80:7), using the restroom (Sahih al-Bukhari 80:15), and eating (Sahih al-Bukhari, 70:2, 54). Prayers, therefore, may explicitly require adherents to express and experience gratitude.

Different religions prescribe the experience of gratitude, in part, because it facilitates the acknowledgement of the divine as the source of one's well-being. The expression of gratitude for the most mundane affairs guarantees that this awareness of contribution of the divine is continuous and ever present. The prescription of gratitude may serve another purpose. One of the goals of religion is to create a community of people with shared values (Durkheim, 1915/1965; Graham & Haidt, 2010). To the extent that experiencing gratitude fosters pro-social action tendencies, gratitude may also help create positive interpersonal interactions within religious communities.

### 13.3.3 Joy

Joy is a pleasant emotion which is typically experienced when desired goals have been achieved (Carver, 2001). It reflects positive evaluations, signals safety, and facilitates interpersonal trust (Forgas, 2011; Krumboltz et al., 2007; Smith, Haynes, Lazarus, & Pope, 1993; Van Doorn, Heerdink, & Van Kleef, 2012). To the extent that religions prescribe emotional experiences that support religious goals and values, they might deem the experience of joy desirable when safety and trust are consistent with religious values, and deem the experience of joy undesirable when they are not.

In the Talmud, there are several explicit references to joy. The Talmud explicitly dictates that joy is desirable only when experienced in moderation, by stating that it is forbidden for one to be overly joyous (Tractate Berachot, 31a). The Talmudic discussion explains that it is forbidden for one to be completely joyous before the messiah arrives. One explanation of this decree is that it is propelled by the concern that the intense experience of joy may lead people to be overly satisfied with their current state and, as a result, neglect their religious duties, which would delay the

coming of the messiah (Tractate Sanhedrin 97b). By discouraging the intense experience of joy, the Talmud may help adherents fulfill their religious duties, setting the stage for the coming of the messiah.

Proscription of joy is also reflected in relation to the destruction of the holy temple in Jerusalem (70 CE). Certain activities which can induce joy, such as playing musical instruments and wearing ornaments, are prohibited, and these have been codified into the authoritative and binding source of Jewish law, The *Shulchan Aruch* (O.H. 560). The Talmud's justification for these prohibitions is that it is inappropriate to experience joy when the temple lies in ruins. According to the Talmud, these prohibitions are to be lifted when the temple is rebuilt in the messianic era.

Interestingly, according to the Talmud, although intense joy is generally undesirable, moderate joy may be desirable, but only to the extent that it arises from the fulfillment of religious duties (Tractate Shabbat 30b). Likewise, in Islam, only joy which arises from the fulfillment of a religious duty is encouraged (Koran 3:170), while joy which arises from nonreligious duties is discouraged (Koran 13:26). By encouraging the experience of joy in this manner, the religions motivate both the performance of religious activities and their positive evaluation.

The examples above suggest that religions can dictate the desirability of specific emotional states across contexts. However, religions may also prescribe specific emotional experiences in specific contexts. Such prescriptions can promote religion-congruent appraisals of certain contexts and encourage behaviors that are consistent with religious values. For example, in the Jewish tradition, there are particular contexts in which increasing or decreasing the experience of joy is explicitly proscribed. In particular, the Talmud dictates that: "When [the month of] Adar begins, we increase joy" (Tractate Ta'anit 29a, Schottenstein Trans.). This instruction is not merely a description of what typically happens during the month of Adar, it is a decree that is as binding as other rabbinic decrees that relate to ritual or ceremonial law. In this sense, it is a clear example of a case in which religions set explicit emotion goals in a specific context.

Why is the experience of joy desirable during the month of Adar? During this month, Purim is celebrated to commemorate the deliverance of the Jewish people from their Persian enemies. The story of Purim serves as a prototype for the divine deliverance of the Jewish people from its enemies, and modern enemies, including Hitler, are often equated with the Persian enemy in the original story (Yerushalmi, 1982). To the extent that joy elicits positive evaluations and a sense of safety, the up-regulation of joy in this context promotes gratitude and trust in God's ability to deliver the Jewish people from its enemies.

In contrast, the Talmud dictates that: "When the month of Av begins, we curtail our joy" (Tractate Ta'anit 26b, Schottenstein Trans.). Why is the experience of joy undesirable during the month of Av? According to the Jewish tradition, both holy temples in Jerusalem were destroyed in the month of Av (586 BCE and 72 CE), a month during which other calamities also took place throughout Jewish history. The down-regulation of joy in this context promotes the negative evaluation of such events and reaffirms the symbolic meaning of the holy temples. The Talmud similarly dictates the attenuation of joy in contexts commemorating other calamities in Jewish

history, including the fast commemorating the beginning of the Roman siege of Jerusalem, and a fast commemorating the breaching of Jerusalem's walls. By calling to decrease joy in these contexts, the Talmud may strengthen the perceptions of loss and promote remorse and repentance.

Together, these examples demonstrate how religions can explicitly prescribe certain emotional experiences in general, as well as in particular contexts. In addition, although further evidence is required, these examples are consistent with an instrumental account. They demonstrate how religions may prescribe emotional experiences that promote the maintenance of religious values.

### 13.3.4 Guilt

Guilt is an unpleasant emotion that arises primarily when one senses he has wronged another (Baumeister, Stillwell, & Heatherton, 1994, 1995). Guilt makes people aware that their conduct is unfitting and facilitates reformative actions to correct the misdeed. Engaging in corrective action (e.g., apologizing), in turn, deactivates guilt (Watts, 1996, 2007). According to Geyer and Baumeister (2005), in a religious context, guilt serves as a feedback mechanism which lets adherents know when their behavior is not in line with religious values and prompts corrective action. If so, religions might prescribe guilt in order to promote adherence to its value system.

Indeed, at least some religions seem to accommodate the experience of guilt. Much as institutionalized award ceremonies, common to American culture, create opportunities to experience pride (Mesquita & Albert, 2007), the Catholic ritual of confession creates opportunities to experience guilt (Martinez-Pilkington, 2007), guaranteeing a pardon on condition that resolutions are made to amend one's behavior (Watts, Nye, & Savage, 2002). Jewish rituals also encourage experiences of guilt, particularly during the time leading up to *Yom Kippur*, the day of atonement. During this period, confessions are recited every morning. The culmination of the period is *Yom Kippur* itself. As with confession in Catholicism, *Yom Kippur* guarantees a pardon only on condition that resolutions to amend one's behavior have been made (Maimonides, *Laws of Repentance*, Ch. 1). Thus, both the Catholic ritual of confession and Jewish rituals associated with *Yom Kippur* provide opportunities to experience guilt, and guarantee forgiveness only when resolutions are made to amend one's behavior. Because guilt arises primarily when one senses that he has wronged another (Baumeister et al., 1994, 1995), guilt plays an important role in maintaining harmonious community relations, which is important in all religions.

### 13.3.5 Hatred

To the extent that religions prescribe emotional experiences that are consistent with religious values and goals, differences in emotion goals may reflect differences in underlying values. This may be reflected in the different attitudes of Judaism and

Christianity toward hatred. Hatred is elicited when another person or group is viewed as evil and impervious to change (Elster, 1999). Hatred promotes a willingness to harm the hated object (Halperin, 2008).

On the one hand, hatred is consistent with a fixed moral worldview, where reward and punishment are commensurate with behavior. On the other hand, hatred is inconsistent with a more malleable moral worldview, where any act can be forgiven and any character can be transformed. These world views may differentially map on to Judaism and Christianity, respectively (Cohen, Malka, Rozin, & Chertaf, 2006). Judaism maintains, generally, that one's reward and punishment is commensurate with one's behavior (e.g. Tractate Avot 2:7; Tractate Rosh Hashanah 12a; Tractate Sotah 1:7). Christianity maintains, generally, that divine grace can correct all human ill-doing (McGrath, 1994). To the extent that hatred is based on the idea that evil cannot be changed, hatred may enforce the Jewish theological value that reward and punishment are commensurate with behavior. In contrast, hatred clashes with the Christian theological value that grace may extend to all, regardless of their past behavior. Accordingly, hatred of evil is encouraged in Judaism and discouraged in Christianity.

Consistent with this analysis, it appears that in Judaism, one should hate that which is evil (Tractate Pesachim 113b; Soloveichik, 2003, 2005; Soloveichik, 1958/2003). This is reflected in the Jewish Bible, where hatred of evil is explicitly prescribed: "Lovers of God, hate evil" (Psalms 97:10). In contrast, in Christianity, one should not hate, but learn to forgive evil doers (Hesburgh, 1997). This is reflected in the New Testament: "Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you (Matthew 5:43-44, KJV)." Hatred, in other words, is never justified in Christianity (Soloveichik, 2003). Religions, therefore, may prescribe the increase or decrease of hatred, in a manner that reinforces religious worldviews.

In conclusion, in this section we have argued that religions set emotion goals. In particular, religions can prescribe emotional experiences that serve to promote the religion's values. We provided several examples. The experience of awe may be encouraged to increase awareness of God. The experience of gratitude may be encouraged to increase awareness and appreciation of God and to build social relations in a religious community. The experience of joy may be encouraged (or discouraged) to motivate the pursuit of religious duties and as an expression of trust in God. The experience of guilt may be encouraged to promote religious values and to help maintain social relations. Finally, the experience of hatred may be encouraged to enforce the theological value of reward and punishment, or it may be discouraged to enforce the theological value of divine grace.

Although they are anecdotal, the examples presented above are consistent with the argument that religion can determine which emotions people are motivated to experience. Thus, one way religion shapes emotion regulation is by setting desired emotional end-points. When concurrent emotional experiences differ from the desired emotional experiences, individuals might attempt to regulate their emotions. Here too, religion might play a role. In particular, we suggest that religion may influence the process of intrinsic emotion regulation, as discussed in the following section.

### 13.4 Religion Influences Intrinsic Processes in Emotion Regulation

Religion may influence intrinsic processes of emotion regulation. We propose that it does so by promoting basic self-regulation skills, by influencing adherents' beliefs about the malleability of emotions, and by teaching adherents strategies for emotion regulation. We describe each of these processes below.

#### 13.4.1 Self-Regulation Skills

McCullough and Willoughby (2009) observed that many religious settings require exercise of self-regulation. For example, religious communal affairs require exercise of self-regulation in order to be in line with behavioral norms for socially approved or censored behaviors. Likewise, many religious rituals require the exercise of self-control. For example, fasting, a central ritual of the Muslim month of Ramadan and a ritual that occurs six times a year in the Jewish tradition, requires exercising self-control.

According to the strength model of self-control, resources for self-control are limited (Muraven & Baumeister, 2000). By regularly exercising self-control, these resources decrease in the short term, but increase and replenish in the long term (Denson, Capper, Oaten, Friese, & Schofield, 2011; Muraven, 2010; Muraven, Baumeister, & Tice, 1999; Oaten & Cheng, 2006). By setting strict rules of conduct, religion requires the constant exercise of self-control. By doing so, over time religion may help increase adherents' general self-regulatory resources. Such resources enable all forms of self-regulation (Baumeister, Vohs, & Tice, 2007), including the regulation of emotion. Therefore, by instructing adherents to exercise self-control, religion increases self-regulatory resources that enable the successful regulation of emotion.

There is now empirical evidence for the link between religion and general self-regulation skills, and some have argued that religion facilitates self-regulation (e.g., McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). There is evidence that religious individuals are more likely than non-religious individuals to engage in self-control and self-regulation (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009). Another study has found that parents' religiousness was positively associated with their children's self-control (Bartkowski, Xu, & Levin, 2008). There is even some evidence for the causal role of religion. In particular, Rounding, Lee, Jacobson, and Ji (2012) found that priming religious concepts increased performance in self-control tasks, including enduring discomforts and delaying gratification. We propose that such developed self-regulation skills are likely to facilitate all forms of self-regulation, including emotion regulation.

#### 13.4.2 Religion Influences Beliefs About the Malleability of Emotions

People differ in their beliefs about the malleability of personal attributes. Dweck and colleagues have referred to such beliefs as implicit theories (for a review, see Dweck, 1999; Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). Entity theorists maintain that a given attribute is fixed and cannot be changed by intervention, practice or habit. Incremental theorists maintain that a given attribute is malleable and may be changed. Implicit theories have cognitive, emotional, and behavioral consequences. For example, implicit theories of intelligence can determine how much effort is exerted (Dweck, 1999). Entity theorists of intelligence exert less effort than incremental theorists of intelligence (Hong, Chiu, Dweck, Lin, & Wan, 1999).

Tamir, John, Srivasta, and Gross (2007) have shown that people also differ in their implicit theories of emotions. Individuals with an incremental theory of emotion believe that emotions are controllable, whereas individuals with entity theories of emotion believe that emotions are relatively less controllable. Individuals with an incremental theory of emotion have a greater sense of self-efficacy in emotion regulation, and use more adaptive regulation strategies, whereas the opposite is true for individuals with an entity theory of emotion.

By prescribing to its adherents what to feel, religion promotes an implicit assumption that emotion can be regulated. In doing so, religion can indirectly promote an incremental theory of emotion. This point is demonstrated in the following quote by Rabbi Dr. Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1969/2003):

Man, Judaism, maintains and insists, is capable of determining the kind of emotional life he wants to live... Man must never be overwhelmed by his emotions. He can invite emotions as well as reject them, opening the door and inviting feelings and sentiments if they are worthy, and slamming the door on those which are degrading and unworthy of attention. (p. 10)

It appears, therefore, that by implying that emotion can be regulated, religion can facilitate an incremental theory of emotion. Endorsing such a theory, in turn, may have important implications for emotion regulation and emotion experience. The belief that emotions are malleable is essential for the initiation of emotion regulation (Tamir et al., 2007). In order to try to regulate one's emotions, one must first believe that active change of emotional experience is possible. By fostering the belief that changing emotions is possible, religion enables adherents to initiate emotion regulation processes.

#### 13.4.3 Religion Fosters the Use of Specific Emotion Regulation Strategies

In addition to developing general self-regulatory skills and the belief that emotions can be controlled, religion may directly contribute to the effective use of specific emotion regulation strategies. We propose that religion identifies, demonstrates, and

encourages the use of specific emotion regulation strategies, including reappraisal, distraction and expression modulation. We will discuss each strategy and provide examples for the role of religion in disseminating it below.

### 13.4.3.1 Cognitive Reappraisal

Cognitive reappraisal involves giving a new meaning to a situation in a way that changes the situation's emotional significance (Gross & John, 2003). Religion, as a symbolic meaning-making system, provides ready reappraisals of negative events (Davies, 2011; Pargament, 1996; Watts, 2007). One of the ways by which this is accomplished is prayer. Sharp (2010) investigated the mechanisms by which prayer manages negative emotions. She found that one way in which it does so is by reinterpreting situations in a way that makes them less negative. For example, religion offers explanations for (i.e., reappraisals of) human suffering.

Human suffering, according to most religions, is not random, but rather is governed from above for a purpose that may not be known to man but is known to the divine agent. Reappraising negative life events as resulting from God's will can cause the event to be perceived as less negative. For example, McIntosh, Silver, and Wortman (1993) found that the more important religion was in the life of parents who lost an infant, the greater meaning they found in the loss and the greater well-being they reported by a year and a half after the loss. By reinterpreting events as being willed by a divine agent, religion provides a different overreaching and comforting meaning to negative events that can make them relatively easier to bear.

More generally, many theological systems have dealt with the problem of theodicy – the question of innocent human suffering *vis-à-vis* a just, benevolent, and omnipotent God or Gods. How is it possible that someone who is innocent suffers, while an all-powerful benevolent divine agent looks on (Weber, 1968)? First, religions may suggest that what appears as innocent human suffering is not actually so: all humans are guilty, as in the Christian conception of original sin (McGrath, 1994). Second, religions may suggest that suffering has positive qualities. For example, suffering may be construed as a redemptive act which actually elevates the sufferer (Soloveitchik, 1960/2003). Third, religions may suggest that the benevolent divine agent may compete against another divine agent, such as a satanic figure, and it is he who causes innocent human suffering (e.g., The Book of Job, Ch. 1). Framing suffering as part of a divine struggle provides a transcendental meaning to suffering. By reinterpreting events as being willed by a divine agent or as being part of a divine struggle, religion provides a framework that adherents can use to reappraise other events. Such an exercise not only helps adherents apply reappraisal to resolve the issue of human suffering, it also provides the opportunity to practice and apply reappraisal to cope with other undesirable emotional states.

### 13.4.3.2 Distraction

Distraction refers to the reduction of emotion by deploying attention away from the emotion eliciting object (Gross, 1998). Religious texts encourage and demonstrate how distraction can be effectively used to regulate emotions. There are several examples for using prayer to distract one's self from negative events or from temptation. The Talmud, for instance, encourages the distraction from evil and immoral thoughts by prayer and religious studies (Tractate Berachot 5a). Religious prayers can help individuals focus their attention away from temptation (e.g., Sharp, 2010).

A powerful example for using prayer as a form of distraction comes from the Talmud (Tractate Berachot 61b), in a story about Rabbi Akiva following the revolt of the Jews in Israel against the Roman Empire between 132 and 135 CE: When the Romans took Rabbi Akiva out to be executed, it was time to recite the daily nighttime prayer. As the Romans tortured Rabbi Akiva, he recited a prayer. In this story, Rabbi Akiva is able to use his ritualized religious obligations to distract himself from physical pain. By demonstrating how prayer can be used as a form of distraction, and by motivating people to do so when confronting intensely negative emotional stimuli, religion may cultivate and encourage emotion regulation. So far, we have demonstrated that religion recommends its adherents to change the way they appraise negative emotions and the attention they give to stimuli that arouse negative emotions. However, it remains unclear if once the emotion is experienced religion prescribes control over the expression of emotion.

### 13.4.3.3 Expressive Suppression

Expressive suppression is a form of emotion regulation which involves modulating overt emotional expressions (Gross & John, 2003). Religions often prescribe certain emotional expressions in certain contexts. For instance, Maimonides (Hilchot De'ot 2:3, Moznaim Trans.) suggested the following: "He should school himself not to become angry... If he should wish to arouse fear in his children and household... to motivate them to return to the proper path, he should present an angry front to them to punish them, but he should be inwardly calm." On the one hand, Maimonides identifies anger as an undesirable emotion. On the other hand, Maimonides suggests that given certain circumstances it can be justified, but only if it is faked. Maimonides assumes that the inner state of emotion may be divorced from the outer experience. Since the expression of anger can have positive consequences, Maimonides recommends modulating the emotional response such that anger will be expressed without being experienced.

We have seen therefore that religion fosters the use of specific intrinsic emotion regulation strategies. More specifically, religion enhances cognitive reappraisal by providing powerful schemas for reinterpreting events that elicit negative affect, provides means for distraction from the adversities of life, and instructs its followers to modulate the expression of their emotions.

### 13.5 Religion Influences Extrinsic Processes in Emotion Regulation

In the previous section, we suggested that religion may contribute to intrinsic emotion regulation. Religion, however, may also contribute to extrinsic emotion regulation. It can do so, in part, by creating communities and developing rituals that provide external sources of emotion regulation. We elaborate on each of these processes below.

#### 13.5.1 Religious Communities

Religion creates social communities (Durkheim, 1915/1965; Graham & Haidt, 2010), which provide a network of social support (Diener, Tay, & Myers, 2011). Most religions involve regular communal meetings that afford people the opportunity to engage in social interactions on a regular basis. Christians go to church on Sundays, Muslims meet in the mosque on Fridays, and Jews meet in the synagogue on Saturdays. These regular meetings provide a basis of social support for members of the religious community. Diener et al. (2011) found, in a large worldwide survey, that people who were more religious reported receiving greater social support.

One of the important benefits of social support involves emotion regulation. Receiving social support helps individuals decrease unpleasant emotions when dealing with negative life events (Lakey & Orehek, 2011). Similarly, the negative association between social support and depression may be mediated by increased interpersonal (or extrinsic) emotion regulation (Marroquín, 2011). Social sharing of emotions helps individuals cope with negative emotional events (e.g., Rime, 2007). Indeed, some evidence suggests that merely holding another person's hand can alleviate emotional pain (Coan, Schaefer, & Davidson, 2006).

By creating and maintaining tight social communities, religion may foster networks of social support. For instance, McIntosh et al. (1993) examined how parents who lost a child coped with that loss. They found that perceived social support among religious practitioners was positively correlated with adaptive coping both 3 weeks and 18 months after the tragedy. The more parents were involved in a religious community, the better they coped with the loss. Thus, it appears that religion provides social support, which in turn, provides extrinsic emotion regulation.

#### 13.5.2 Religious Rituals

Previously, we showed that religions prescribe specific emotional states. One of the ways religions foster these emotional states is through rituals (Alcorta & Sosis, 2005; McCauley, 2001). Rituals refer to standardized behaviors which are endowed with symbolic meaning (Kertzer, 1988). An aphorism that guides ritualized practices in Judaism states: "The heart is pulled by the deed" (Sefer HaChinuch,

Commandment 20). Having previously elaborated on the emotions of awe and guilt, in what follows we describe how religious rituals help up-regulate these emotions.

Ritualized blessings require acknowledgement and awareness of life's most minor details and considering the wondrous quality of such details. Therefore, religions, including Judaism, foster awe through ritualized blessings (Wettstein, 1997). Earlier, we mentioned that blessings can teach adherents the importance of gratitude, but before they do so, they induce some degree of awe. For example, according to Jewish law, people must recite a standardized blessing upon awakening in the morning. The act of awakening, however, is not described merely as such. Instead, it is described as God returning man from a temporary state of near-death, where God is described as "the one who gives life to the dead" (Shulchan Aruch O. H. 6:8). By describing the mundane act of waking up in the morning in such terms, religion directly increases the experience of awe through prayer. Similar descriptions apply to blessings concerning the wonders of a functional digestive system (Shulchan Aruch O.H. 6:1), the wonders of the first fruit blossoms of the new year (Shulchan Aruch O.H. 226:1), hearing lightning or seeing a rainbow (Shulchan Aruch O.H. 227:1, 228:3, 229:1), and others. These ritualized blessings take a natural phenomenon, some of which are quite mundane, and presenting it as a wondrous and miraculous act of God. Such descriptions are perhaps intended to increase the experience of awe, thereby strengthening religious beliefs.

Similarly, there are Jewish and Christian rituals which are explicitly attuned to regulate guilt. Leading up to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement for transgressions, Jews recite *Slichtot* in which they confess their personal and collective misdeeds. These confessions are recited when one is bent forward, banging on one's chest. The purpose of banging on one's chest is to promote the feeling of unpleasant emotions, such as sorrow and guilt. These feelings are conducive to repentance, which is the theme of Yom Kippur. Indeed, in line with research on embodiment (for reviews, see Barsalou, 2008; Barsalou, Niedenthal, Barbey, & Ruppert, 2003; Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2005), slouched postures can induce negatively valenced states (Stepper & Strack, 1993).

Consistent with these ideas, the fourth century Christian theologian Augustine argued that behaviors associated with prayer are meant to intensify emotional states (Matthews, 1980). By bending one's knees, stretching out one's hands, and prostrating during prayer, "the heart's affection which preceded... grows because they [these behaviors] are made" (On Care to Be Had for the Dead, 7, Browne Trans.). The postures dictated in these rituals may play a causal role in promoting unpleasant emotional experiences, such as guilt.

### 13.6 Implications for Well-Being

Religious individuals tend to have higher subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Diener et al., 2011). Subjective well-being, in turn, is comprised of both cognitive (i.e., satisfaction with life) and emotional (i.e., positive and negative



affect) components (see Diener, 1984). Religious individuals may have higher well-being due to differences in cognitive evaluations, including a stronger sense of meaning in life (Diener et al., 2011; Steger & Frazier, 2005), or due to differences in emotional components, including more positive than negative emotions over time (Diener et al., 2011; Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003). We propose that processes of emotion regulation may contribute, to some degree, to the links between religion and the cognitive and emotional components of well-being. Below, we focus on the different ways reviewed in this chapter in which religion shapes emotion regulation, and discuss possible implications for well-being.

### 13.6.1 Emotion Goals and Well-Being

We have argued that religion sets emotion goals which are instrumental to achieving religious goals. By setting clear goals for regulation, religion initiates the process of emotion regulation and determines its direction. Such effects could influence well-being at both a molecular and a molar level. At the molecular level, the short-term emotional outcome depends on the emotion goals prescribed. Specifically, to the extent that religion prescribes the increase of positive emotions (e.g., awe, gratitude) or the decrease of negative emotions (e.g., hatred), religion may contribute to a more positive hedonic balance, which would increase well-being. In contrast, to the extent that religion prescribes the increase of negative emotions (e.g., guilt) or the decrease of positive emotions (e.g., joy), religion may contribute to a less positive hedonic balance, which would decrease well-being.

At the molar level, however, there may be positive implications for having clear emotion goals, regardless of whether they target positive or negative emotions. First, merely having personal goals is positively associated with well-being (Diener et al., 1999; Emmons, 2003, 1986). Having personal goals in which one is invested and considers important promotes a sense of meaning and purpose in life (Emmons, 1986; Pomerantz, Saxon, & Oishi, 2000). Since religion has a strong influence over its adherents, religiously prescribed emotion goals should be deemed meaningful and important.

Second, there is evidence that some emotion goals may be instrumental for the attainment of higher-order goals (e.g., Tamir, 2009). Goal attainment, in turn, leads to positive affect and greater meaning in life (Carver, 2001; Emmons & Diener, 1986). To the extent that the emotion goals prescribed by religion are instrumental for the attainment of valued religious goals, such emotion goals can promote higher-order goal achievement, and in doing so, contribute both to meaning in life and to greater hedonic balance over time. Indeed, there is evidence that the more people are willing to experience pleasant or unpleasant emotions in the service of higher-order goals, the greater their subjective and psychological well-being (Tamir & Ford, 2012b).

### 13.6.2 Self-Regulation Skills and Well-Being

Self-regulation requires the ability to pursue long-term goals despite immediate temptations and obstacles. Greater self-regulation resources enable people to pursue their goals more effectively. Effective self-regulation has been related to greater competence, including academic and social competence, verbal fluency, and attentiveness (Mischel, Shoda, & Peake, 1988). In addition, effective self-regulation has been related to better coping with stress (Mischel, Shoda, & Rodriguez, 1989), lower delinquency (McCullough & Willoughby, 2009), and lower substance use (Walker, Ainette, Wills, & Mendoza, 2007). To the extent that religions helps promote self-regulation skills (Geyer & Baumeister, 2005; Koole, McCullough, Kuhl, & Roelofsma, 2010; McCullough & Willoughby, 2009), they may facilitate people's ability to effectively pursue their long-term goals and contribute to the development of other competencies, thereby increasing well-being.

### 13.6.3 Implicit Beliefs and Well-Being

We proposed that religion promotes an incremental theory of emotions, which refers to the belief that emotions are malleable and can be regulated. Such beliefs are necessary in order to initiate the process of emotion regulation (Kuhl, 1984; Mischel, Cantor, & Feldman, 1996). Holding an incremental theory of emotion, as opposed to an entity theory, is related to greater well-being (Tamir et al., 2007). Individuals who believe that emotions are malleable experience more positive and less negative greater well-being, less depression, better social adjustment, and less loneliness. If an incremental theory of emotion promotes emotion regulation and greater well-being, religion should promote well-being, in part, by promoting an incremental theory of emotion.

### 13.6.4 Emotion Regulation Strategies

Some emotion regulation strategies are more adaptive in some contexts, and some are more adaptive in others (Sheppes, Scheibe, Suri, & Gross, 2011). Having options for emotion regulation strategies allows the regulator to select the strategy that is most adaptive in the given context. It is possible, therefore, that by increasing adherents' repertoire of emotion regulation strategies, religion not only provides adherents with a more sophisticated tool box, it also enables them to fit the strategy to the given context. If so, religion may contribute to more effective emotion regulation, which in turn, contributes to greater well-being.

### 13.6.5 Social Communities and Well-Being

Earlier we proposed that religion regulates emotions, in part, by creating social communities. Such communities help create novel emotional experiences (e.g., joy), and they help regulate existing emotional experiences (e.g., sadness). This form of external emotion regulation has both emotional and social implications, both of which can impact well-being. At the emotional level, extrinsic emotion regulation is quite effective in regulating emotions. To the extent that religion contributes to effective emotion regulation, it is likely to contribute to well-being as well.

At the social level, extrinsic emotion regulation can help strengthen social bonds and facilitate social support. For instance, experiencing emotions with others can draw people closer together (Rime, 2007). Strong interpersonal relationships and social support, in turn, are among the strongest predictors of well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Tay & Diener, 2011). By strengthening social bonds and facilitating social support, religion can promote greater well-being. Indeed, there is evidence that social support mediates the relation between religion and well-being (Diener et al., 2011). We propose that at least some of the beneficial effects of social support on well-being are mediated by emotion regulation processes. Consistent with this idea, McIntosh and colleagues (1993) found that following the loss of a child, religious parents reported higher social support, better coping with loss and higher levels of well being, compared to nonreligious parents.

### 13.6.6 Rituals and Well-Being

Rituals turn self-regulation into a regular habit, making self-regulation a relatively more automatic process (Koole et al., 2010). Automatic self-regulation is more efficient in demanding situations, since it requires less conscious effort (Koole, Jostmann, & Baumann, 2012). Thus, rituals can help automatize emotion regulation, and in doing so, make it more efficient. This could benefit well-being, but only to the extent that the regulation process that is automatically triggered is itself adaptive.

## 13.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, we argued that religion is a powerful regulator of emotion. As a cultural system that includes faith and relationship with the divine, people follow religion with exceptional faith and conviction. Religion shapes emotion regulation by influencing three important components. First, religion sets emotion goals which may be instrumental in serving higher-order religious values. Second, religion influences intrinsic processes in emotion regulation, including developing self-regulation skills, fostering beliefs about the ability to regulate emotions, and teaching specific emotion

regulation strategies. Third, religion influences extrinsic processes in emotion regulation, including forming religious communities and dictating religious rituals. By shaping emotion regulation in this way, religion impacts emotional experiences and well-being, broadly construed.

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