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Self-regulation, the way we adjust and guide our behavior in pursuit of goals (Carver & Scheier, 2016) plays a pivotal, yet often unexamined, role in the evolution of religion. In particular, self-regulation provides a crucial pathway through which social processes can influence individual behaviors. Currently, however, theories that connect religion with self-regulation explain the relationship primarily in terms of effortful modes of regulatory behaviors. For example, the divine punishment hypothesis and the more general big gods hypothesis both suggest that specific religious beliefs shift incentives and self-monitoring in such a way that individuals effortfully restrain their selfish instincts in order to act prosocially. There is solid evidence that these particular beliefs do foster effortful restraint (e.g., Watts et al., 2015), but focusing on this mode of self-regulation may obscure other important routes by which religious systems shape individual behaviors.

This paper presents a theoretical model articulating other ways that religious practices and beliefs shape effortless modes of self-regulation. One pathway of the proposed model helps to balance the growing psychological research on social norms. These studies highlight the ontogeny of cultural learning by articulating the psychological tendencies—such as over-imitation (Nielsen, Muthén, Tomaelli, & Whiten, 2014), conformity biases (Haun, van Leeuwen, & Edelson, 2013), and prestige biases (Henrich & Gil-White, 2001)—that make infants ready to absorb culture (e.g., Legare & Harris, 2016). Currently this work connects to religion by suggesting that the same psychological processes support and shape the character of ritual behaviors (e.g., Legare & Watson-Jones, 2015). In other words, this research primarily articulates the theoretical pathway from psychology to cultural learning and religion.

The pathways from culture and religion back to psychology, however, are less well articulated. This paper presents a model describing these pathways and clarifies one in particular by bringing the work on social norms into connection with research on effortless regulatory behaviors (Papies & Aarts, 2016). Specifically, the relationships and practices involved in religious engagement shape an individual's emotional appraisal of the surrounding environment. These basic psychological appraisals are often implicit while also being particularly susceptible to influence from social forces (Parkinson, Fischer, & Manstead, 2005). Therefore they help highlight one of the ways that social norms effortlessly guide