

Religion may have evolved because of its ability to help people exercise self-control

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Self-control is critical for success in life, and a new study by University of Miami professor of Psychology Michael McCullough finds that religious people have more self-control than do their less religious counterparts. These findings imply that religious people may be better at pursuing and achieving long-term goals that are important to them and their religious groups. This, in turn, might help explain why religious people tend to have lower rates of substance abuse, better school achievement, less delinquency, better health behaviors, less depression, and longer lives.

In this research project, McCullough evaluated 8 decades worth of research on religion, which has been conducted in diverse samples of people from around the world. He found persuasive evidence from a variety of domains within the social sciences, including neuroscience, economics, psychology, and sociology, that religious beliefs and religious behaviors are capable of encouraging people to exercise self-control and to more effectively regulate their emotions and behaviors, so that they can pursue valued goals. The research paper, which summarizes the results of their review of the existing science, will be published in the January 2009 issue of *Psychological Bulletin*.

"The importance of self-control and self-regulation for understanding human behavior are well known to social scientists, but the possibility that the links of religiosity to self-control might explain the links of religiosity to health and behavior has not received much explicit

attention," said McCullough. "We hope our paper will correct this oversight in the scientific literature." Among the most interesting conclusions that the research team drew were the following:

- Religious rituals such as prayer and meditation affect the parts of the human brain that are most important for self-regulation and self-control;
- When people view their goals as "sacred," they put more energy and effort into pursuing those goals, and therefore, are probably more effective at attaining them;
- Religious lifestyles may contribute to self-control by providing people with clear standards for their behavior, by causing people to monitor their own behavior more closely, and by giving people the sense that God is watching their behavior;
- The fact that religious people tend to be higher in self-control helps explain why religious people are less likely to misuse drugs and alcohol and experience problems with crime and delinquency.

McCullough's review of the research on religion and self-control contributes to a better understanding of "how the same social force that motivates acts of charity and generosity can also motivate people to strap bomb belts around their waists and then blow themselves up in crowded city buses," he explained. "By thinking of religion as a social force that provides people with resources for controlling their impulses (including the impulse for self-preservation, in some cases) in the service of higher goals, religion can motivate people to do just about anything."

Among the study's more practical implications is that religious people may have at their disposal a set of unique psychological resources for adhering to their New Year's Resolutions in the year to come.

Source: University of Miami

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