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RELIGION IN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SQUARE

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## The Second Opinion: Religion, Democracy, and Community

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# The Second Opinion: Religion, Democracy, and Community

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Andy Ver Steegh

## I. Introduction

Should there be a role for religious discourse in public deliberation?<sup>1</sup> Answers to this question fall along a continuum. On one pole, there are those who say “No, religious reasoning has no place in the deliberations of a secular republic.” In this view, not only are the contributions of religion to public debate dubious at best, religious reasoning harms the cohesive fabric necessary for our political community to function as a democracy. On the opposite pole are those who claim the United States as a Christian nation whose identity is inextricably linked with Christianity. They demand, therefore, the presence of a specific religion’s type of reasoning in public deliberation; the health of the Republic necessitates a Christian public sphere. In this essay, I engage with the secular pole of this continuum in the interest of making a case for religious discourse in the deliberations of a secular Republic.

I argue that religious reasoning is a beneficial feature of democratic deliberation because it brings in an outsider’s perspective. It functions as an “alien discourse.”<sup>2</sup> Stated differently, because religious reasoning is distinct from secular public reasoning, it can provide a valuable alternative view on the state of our collective public life.<sup>3</sup> As this perspective interacts with American public life, I characterize it as forming something of a “second opinion.”

To explicate the phenomenon of *religious reasoning*, I draw on *The Myth of a Christian Nation*, by Gregory Boyd, and *The Great Awakening*, by Jim Wallis. These works are recent examples of normative thought

on the intersection of religion and politics coming from within evangelical communities. These two authors draw on a long theological tradition of understanding Christians in America as a community of “resident aliens,” as outsiders in the modern world able to access a religious space fundamentally different from the here-and-now. This is not, of course, the only theological vision of how Christians should interact with the world, but it is one that is garnering increasing attention and represents a cutting edge of normative theory from within evangelical communities. I emphasize the obvious point that “Evangelical Christianity” does not represent “Christianity,” and “Christianity” is not a synonym for “religion.” Although recognizing this, for the sake of the essay’s flow, my usage of these terms is somewhat interchangeable. I do not mean to substantially conflate them.

To characterize the concept of *secular reason* I draw on the work of John Rawls and Richard Rorty. Here, I focus both on their stances regarding the introduction of religious reasoning in public deliberation and the underlying values that this viewpoint seeks to protect. In this vision, the religious community is digested by the secular public reason; religion is only allowed on secular terms. The animating concern is defense of the democratic community—the creation of an accessible and viable public sphere.

The thesis of this article is not new. However, as we renegotiate the boundaries of religiosity in the public square post-Bush, I believe that investigating the relationship of religion and public life with reference to evangelical thought is particularly timely.

I begin my discussion by explicating the worldview found in *The Great Awakening* and *The Myth of a Christian Nation*. Through these two recent examples, I develop the idea of religion as an alien discourse, using a powerful vision coming from within Christian theology as an example. In the next section, I turn to the public sphere. Drawing on the work of John Rawls, I characterize the idealized vision of public democratic life that we all share as a community that seeks to digest religious reasoning. In other words, to the extent that religion is made public, it must become secularized. Examining recent poll data, I emphasize that this is simply impractical. I conclude by going one step further, arguing that the presence of alien discourse in our public life is both politically ambiguous (in partisan terms) and ultimately beneficial.

## II. Religious Communities, Secular World

Two pastors have recently taken stock of the intersection of faith and politics in light of the Bush years.<sup>4</sup> Jim Wallis, a best-selling author and public religious intellectual, published *The Great Awakening* in 2008.<sup>5</sup> With a foreword by Jimmy Carter, he takes direct aim at the close association of evangelicalism and Republican electoral strategy: “People know now that God is neither a Republican nor a Democrat, and we are all learning that religion is not supposed to be in the pocket of any political party, but rather calls them all to moral accountability.”<sup>6</sup> Throughout this book, Wallis writes to a very broad slice of the American public, outlining a new evangelical social and political agenda that directly confronts the detrimental involvement of the evangelical church in partisan politics.

From a different perspective comes Gregory Boyd’s 2005 work, *The Myth of a Christian Nation*.<sup>7</sup> A pastor in St. Paul, Minnesota, Boyd examined the religious-political alliance during the 2004 election season and attracted national attention for the controversy caused within his own congregation.<sup>8</sup> Boyd’s argument is theologically intense, based on a specific interpretation of scripture, and enmeshed in a comprehensive political cosmology. His thesis is straightforward: “I believe many of us American evangelicals have allowed our understanding of the kingdom of God to be polluted with political ideals, agendas, and issues.”<sup>9</sup> The church should get out of partisan politics, but more importantly, partisan politics should get out of the church.

My focus is *not* on specific theological, moral, or political ideas that either of these authors may or may not advocate. In this essay I am not taking a stand on any political or policy issues, and I am certainly not a theologian. My focus, rather, is on *how* these two authors reason. How does their identity as persons of faith inflect their method of argument? Despite their different audiences and theses, both Boyd and Wallis construct their Christianities as a moral standard that is alien to modern politics. That is, people of faith are—and *should be*—on the outside looking in.

### A. *Myth of a Christian Nation*

In Boyd’s conception, the identity of being a Christian and the identity of being an American could not be more different. Drawing on the actions of Jesus, Boyd conceives of a fundamental dividing line split-

ting the cosmos into the *kingdom of the world* (also called the *kingdom of the sword*) and the *kingdom of God* (also called the *kingdom of the cross*). The governments of this world, the civil authority that is the bedrock of the modern constitutional state, are “kingdoms of the world,” defined by a specific relationship to power. “Kingdoms of the world” exercise *power over* others through coercion and control. They are backed up by a monopoly on violence. As he states:

Wherever a person or group exercises power over others...*there* is a version of the kingdom of the world. While it comes in many forms, the kingdom of the world is in essence a ‘power over’ kingdom. In some versions—such as America—subjects have a say in who their rulers will be, while in others they have none. In some versions, subjects may influence how their rulers exercise power over them—for example, what laws they will live by—while in others they do not. There have been democratic, socialist, communist, fascist, and totalitarian versions of the kingdom of the world, but they all share this distinctive characteristic: they exercise ‘power over’ people.<sup>10</sup>

The laws of temporal governments, no matter how just or democratic, regressive or totalitarian, fundamentally rely on force (or the threat of force) to keep the peace and enforce their will.<sup>11</sup> Power comes from the top down. In the broader sweep of Boyd’s cosmology, the kingdoms of the world have no inherent value; they are instruments used to further the Divine Will and to the extent that they promote law and order, they are good.<sup>12</sup> However, he says, we must remember that “power over” is the method of a fallen world and thus, “Functionally, Satan is the acting CEO of all earthly governments.”<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to this earthly vision of fallen power stands the *kingdom of God*, embodied in the person and actions of Jesus Christ. It exercises a fundamentally different type of power (if it can be termed *power* in the conventional sense at all): “The kingdom of God advances by people lovingly placing themselves *under* others, in service to others, at cost to themselves.”<sup>14</sup> He continues:

The character and rule of God is manifested when instead of employing violence against his enemies to crush them, Jesus loves his enemies in order to redeem them. The kingdom is revealed when instead of protecting himself, Jesus allows himself to be murdered. God’s love is marvelously put on display when instead of clinging to his perfect holiness, Jesus puts himself in the place of sinners.<sup>15</sup>

Following the example of Jesus, Boyd argues, it is incumbent on faithful Christians to commit their lives to a radical “power under” ethic of transformational service, not because it will “secure a good outcome” by any societal or political measure, but rather because this is what it means to be a Christian.<sup>16</sup>

How is this ethic transformational? Through their “power under” actions, Christians stand as an example against the fallen notions of worldly revenge and “us vs. them” retaliation<sup>17</sup>: “When we respond to violence with violence, whether it be physical, verbal, or attitudinal, we legitimize the violence of our enemy and sink to his level. When we instead respond unexpectedly—offering our other cheek and going a second mile—we reveal, even as we expose the injustice of his actions, that our nemesis doesn’t have the power to define us by those actions.”<sup>18</sup> The example of Christ cannot be digested or appropriated by the kingdom of the sword.

Indeed, the world that members of the kingdom of God should aspire to turns all conventional definitions and boundaries inside out through the radical mechanism of “power under” living:

The kingdom of the world is intrinsically tribal in nature, and is heavily invested in defending, if not advancing, one’s own people-group, one’s nation, one’s ethnicity, one’s state, one’s religion, one’s ideologies, or one’s political agendas. That is why it is a kingdom characterized by perpetual conflict. The kingdom of God, however, is intrinsically universal, for it is centered on simply loving as God loves. It is centered on people living for the sole purpose of replicating the love of Jesus Christ to all people at all times in all places without condition. The kingdom-of-God participant has by love transcended the tribal and nationalistic parameters of whatever version of the kingdom of the world they find themselves in.<sup>19</sup>

As Boyd puts it, “Jesus didn’t buy into the limited options the culture placed before him. He rather exposed ugly injustices in all kingdom-of-the-world options by offering a radically distinct alternative.”<sup>20</sup> In Boyd’s view, to be a Christian—to be a follower of Christ—is to be a member of a community that has a fundamentally different worldview, a fundamentally different understanding of how to be in the world, and to possess, by earthly standards, a fundamentally different relationship to power. To be a member of the kingdom of God, further, is only incidentally political because to live in the path of Christ is an imperative from a different world, and that imperative understands

the power of this world as something instrumental and subservient to a higher community.

### **B. *The Great Awakening***

The relationship of the community of Christ to the community of Americans is couched in much different terms for Wallis in *The Great Awakening*. The concept, however, is similar. Wallis constructs a vision of the Christian community as “countercultural,” as using the life of Jesus Christ to bear witness to temporal injustice.

“The church,” Wallis writes, “must...offer an alternative view of the world, an alternative narrative of cultural values, an alternative model for human existence, and an alternative vision for politics” that would stand in contrast to the injustices of business as usual.<sup>21</sup> Political stands through adherence to the example of Jesus are unavoidable, because Jesus himself was a political figure: “For the early Christians, and for us, to say that ‘Jesus is Lord’ is a profoundly political statement. It means that nobody else is Lord, including Caesar and the Roman Empire, our own political rulers, and the totalitarian claims of any state or empire.”<sup>22</sup> He continues:

The early Christians were actually accused of ‘atheism’ because they rejected the gods of the Roman world. One wonders whether our churches today would be so accused for rejecting the modern gods of our consumer culture and market economy, or the political patriotism of the American superpower. The problem comes when the church is so conformed to the values of the world that it offers no real alternative to the ruling societal values and has virtually nothing to say to the world’s cultural norms or political ethics. It’s when the church becomes a mere thermometer that takes the temperature of the world and adjusts accordingly, instead of a thermostat that actually changes the social temperature.<sup>23</sup>

To be a Christian, for Wallis, is to be a world apart. Wallis phrases this idea in very direct terms: “Here’s an insight that is fundamental, and yet profoundly obvious: we are to be Christians first and citizens of our country second – not the other way around.”<sup>24</sup> This is not an injunction to abandon our American political community:

For Christians, people are always more important than causes. That’s why human rights, in the face of regimes that regularly violate those

rights in the name of ideology and the state, have often been so important to communities of faith. Rather than seeking to construct perfect social orders, which are impossible, we should instead seek concrete reforms of the actual social situations and circumstance in which the church finds itself.<sup>25</sup>

This ethic of engagement “invites us to the very social participation that societies and states need, evaluating them by a specific set of standards outside of themselves. Not to engage is to accept the status quo.”<sup>26</sup> On a communal level, the function of the church in the modern state is to be “the conscience of the state, holding it accountable for upholding justice and restraining its violence.”<sup>27</sup>

As Wallis articulated above, the example of Christ, in modern partisan terms, is ambiguous: “religion and public life” does not mean “conservative Christians and Republicans.” The issues that Wallis identifies as being the objects of Christian ethical imperatives do not adhere to any electoral agenda. Wallis writes about a laundry list of issues, including poverty (both domestic and global); climate change; race (focusing on the legacy of slavery and white privilege); class; gender; immigration; the sanctity of human life that underpins many issues including abortion, genocide, torture, and human trafficking; rethinking a pro-family stance; and the use of force abroad.

In both of these accounts of contemporary Christian evangelical communities, to be a Christian is to be out of step with the modern world. “We must always remember,” writes Boyd, “that we are ‘resident aliens’ in this oppressed world, soldiers of the kingdom of God stationed behind enemy lines with a unique, all consuming, holy calling on our life. We are called, individually and corporately, to look like Jesus to a rebellious, self-centered, and violent world.”<sup>28</sup> Through the emulation of Christ, the fallen world can be transformed.

### III. Secular World, Religious Communities

Having detailed two examples of the use of Christianity as an alien discourse, I now focus on the second half of this normative equation: public life.

The American public sphere creates its own type of community (against which religion can be considered “alien”) and its own ideal of how we should reason together. It is not a neutral space where we come together as atomized individuals, but rather a community unto

itself. In what follows, I sketch out the general boundaries of the public sphere. Second, I identify the defining characteristics of the kind of discursive community that is considered the secular ideal-type of how we should collectively reason. This ideal-type is deeply suspicious of public religious reasoning. Third, I point to recent poll data indicating that our moral/ethical worldviews are a conglomerate of a variety of influences. It is simply impractical to expect that we enter the public sphere as monolithic beings animated only by pure reason. To conclude the essay, I go one step further by arguing that aside from questions of practicality, having our democratic deliberations “polluted” by forms of alien discourse is a good thing, provided, of course, that deliberation occurs within a democratic context.

### A. The Public Sphere

Following in the tradition of one of the most prominent theorists of public life, Jurgen Habermas, Nancy Fraser defines the public sphere as “the space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, hence, an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction. This arena is conceptually distinct from the state; it is a site for the production and circulation of discourses that can in principle be critical of the state.”<sup>29</sup> Through this common deliberation, we become, as Stout puts it, a “community of reason-givers.”<sup>30</sup> The question is what kind of reasons should we give?

While the public sphere is indeed separate from the state, the two are highly articulated. The philosophy of secular constitutional liberalism, which underpins the legal separation of American church and state, also (to a greater or lesser degree) anchors the American public sphere, which is nominally secular.

Anchored by the legal principle of the separation of church and state, many would see the further separation of explicitly religious reasoning and political reasoning in the public sphere as beneficial and good. This view is articulated by in one of the most prominent philosophers of our time, John Rawls. In *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*, he writes that religion “may be introduced in public political discussions at any time, provided that in due course proper political reasons...are presented that are sufficient to support whatever the comprehensive doctrines [religious doctrines] introduced are said to support.”<sup>31</sup> While Rawls notes that people engaged in debate using religious justification will have natural incentives to “make their views acceptable to a broad

audience,” this is not a point that is left open to natural dynamics.<sup>32</sup> For Rawls, the only legitimate religious reason is one that could also be a secular reason, and will eventually be transformed into one.<sup>33</sup> In this view, there is an ethical mandate for the secularization of religious reason.

The function of this “proviso” (as he calls it) is to preserve the identity of the public community and the type of reason it engenders. Alien discourse detracts from the strength and vibrancy of democratic political debate, with potentially detrimental consequences, and our first allegiance as public actors is to the secular community that we all share. Religious reasoning must essentially become secular reasoning to ethically enter the public sphere. Religion can only matter to the extent that it is secular. The “otherness” of religious reasoning—a feature that I argue makes religious communities so valuable to a secular democracy—is in this view precisely the reason why religious public reasoning is detrimental to our public life. This alien discourse should not compete against the already tenuous bonds we have as a democratic community.

This fundamental interest, the defense of the democratic community, is also given voice by Richard Rorty. “The main reason religion needs to be privatized,” he writes, “is that, in political discussion with those outside the relevant religious community, it is a conversation-stopper.”<sup>34</sup> The particularity of religious reason and language is here again gnawing away at the fabric of democratic life. In this view, democracy works because we all come together on co-equal terms; religious reasoning undermines this egalitarian accessibility to our shared deliberations.

As a recent survey by The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life states: “A majority of adults (56%) say religion is very important in their lives, and more than eight-in-ten (82%) say it is at least somewhat important.”<sup>35</sup> On a practical level, entering the public sphere thinking only as secular, rational agents is not tenable. When we enter the public sphere, we do so as individuals with a complex mix of beliefs, identities, and personal experiences. A person’s worldview, the framework used to make sense of public life, is not formed solely by one conviction, nor does one aspect of a person necessarily always enjoy interpretative primacy. If recent poll data is any indication, religion—predominantly some form of Christianity—is an important aspect of many Americans’ worldviews.

Data further indicates that Americans experience the injunctions of religious teaching on morality as part of a broader mixture of influences that color “walking around” notions of right and wrong:

Americans demonstrate a practical bent when it comes to the sources to which they look for guidance on such matters. Roughly three-in-ten (29%) cite religious teachings and beliefs as their biggest influence, but a slim majority of the public (52%) says that they look most to practical experience and common sense when it comes to questions of right and wrong.<sup>36</sup>

In very broad strokes, religion matters to Americans, but not in an exclusive way. Our moral-ethical worldview features a variety of influences, some formally religious and others based in the here-and-now: “Although the U.S. is a highly religious country, Americans are not dogmatic.”<sup>37</sup> The United States is home to a pantheon of religious identities: “Whatever we once were, we are no longer just a Christian nation; we are also a Jewish nation, a Muslim nation, a Buddhist nation, a Hindu nation, and a nation of nonbelievers.”<sup>38</sup> In the two examples of normative Christian thought presented above, to be a Christian is to be embedded in contemporary life as an outsider. This is a specific example, perhaps, but it does not seem unreasonable to posit that, on some level, we have within ourselves (and more broadly within the United States) a multitude of alien discourses.

#### IV. Conclusion

I have characterized religion (using examples from within evangelical Christianity) as a form of alien discourse *vis-à-vis* the type of communal reasoning theorized for the secular public sphere. I have argued that, in a practical sense, religion will continue to be a prominent actor in the public sphere for the time being. Rather than being a brute statistical fact, however, the alien discourse of religious reason has an inherent benefit: it functions as a second opinion. The type of religious thinking found in Boyd and Wallis provides a normative vision for what a just world looks like, and moral and ethical guidelines for how to get there from here based on an ancient text and an ancient life. If one of the main features of our shared public life is to get together and debate the values that should underpin our public policy at home and abroad, to forge a vision of what life in the United States should be, then how

is having more input a bad thing? It seems to me that when it comes to finding a way forward in political life, "the more the merrier."

The underlying interest that I take secularists (represented here by Rawls and Rorty) to be defending is this: religious reasoning will harm the cohesive fabric that creates the possibility for democratic deliberation in the first place. Religious reasoning shatters egalitarian accessibility to the public sphere. This interest is a fundamental one. Democracy does not just happen. We have to make it happen. By way of conclusion, I want to address this interest.

As a result of appealing to a broad population that holds highly heterodox views, what is likely to happen is a process of translation.<sup>39</sup> Translation is a dynamic that will occur naturally for a very simple reason: Christian language will not be convincing to all, or even a majority, of the American public, because not all of us are Christian, and all of the Christians do not share the same Christianity. To further a political agenda, advocates will have to appeal to a diverse (and sometimes hostile) public. Theoretically, however, Rawls seeks to stop religious reasoning at the water's edge. Any type of argument that relies on religious premises must be collapsed into secular terms.

One person's religious justification for her political beliefs does not threaten my secular justifications for my political beliefs. In fact, our democratic life is best served when everybody is open and honest about the real justifications they hold for their beliefs. As Stout puts it: "If a large segment of the citizenry is in fact relying on religious premises when making political decisions, it behooves all of us to know what those premises are. Premises left unexpressed are often premises left unchallenged."<sup>40</sup> Our political beliefs are oftentimes either explicitly religious or firmly grounded in religious belief. No one is under any obligation to be convinced by religious appeals, but that does not make them illegitimate. Public life benefits not from restricting the types of reason that can and cannot be legitimately proffered, but rather by rigorously and critically interrogating all public viewpoints. This is the function that makes democratic life tick.

Regardless of the language in which speech is eventually made public (and it should be left to the discretion of the speaker), religious communities are powerful sites for critical reflection on the state of the modern world. Through bringing in such an outside perspective, public debate is enriched.

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## Notes

1. I would like to thank Aurora Sekine '09, Brian Stephenson '10, and Johan Lorenzen '09 for reading and providing feedback on various drafts of this paper. All errors are my own.
2. I first encountered the phrase "alien discourse" in Martha Minow, "Religions and Public Life: Problems of Translation," in *Debating the Divine: Religion in 21st Century American Democracy*, edited by Sally Steenland (Washington, D.C.: Center for American Progress, 2008). While my usage has substantial overlap with hers, this term also resonates with the language used by the evangelical writers examined here.
3. Answering these questions of *ought* rests on developing visions of two big concepts (*religion* and *public life*) and then providing an outline of how they *should* ideally interact. These two categories are hotly contested and any expansive definition is sure to gloss over important nuances. What do I mean by "public life"? In terms of public life, we have a tendency to analytically conflate three distinct, yet highly articulated, realms: the public sphere, electoral politics, and the administrative structures of the state. Due to space constraints, I will not address the relationship of church and state in American law or history. Suffice it to say, I take an officially secular state as a given. I understand the public sphere as the site of "discursive practices of ethical deliberation and political debate" where we, as democratic individuals, exchange reasons and justifications, and become a "community of reason-givers." See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, New Forum Books (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 293. Quite simply, the public sphere is where we get together and talk things out.
4. My selection of these two works is somewhat arbitrary. However, these two books are serious attempts from a religious perspective to negotiate the contemporary boundaries of American public life.
5. Jim Wallis, *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post-Religious Right America* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).
6. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
7. Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2005).
8. Laurie Goodstein, "Disowning Conservative Politics, Evangelical Pastor Rattles Flock," *New York Times* (30 July 2006).
9. Boyd 2005, p. 11.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
11. Weber would find little to disagree with in this formulation.
12. Boyd 2005, p. 22.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

20. Ibid., p. 120.
21. Wallis 2008, p. 64.
22. Ibid., p. 65.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., p. 75.
25. Ibid., p. 67.
26. Ibid., p. 68.
27. Ibid., p. 70.
28. Boyd 2005, p. 85.
29. Nancy Fraser, "Was There Ever a Public Sphere? If So, When? Reflections on the American Case," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere: Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought*, edited by Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), p. 110.
30. Stout 2004, p. 293.
31. John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples: with "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited"* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 152.
32. Ibid., p. 153.
33. Indeed, Rawls subsequently asks of his proviso: "when does it need to be satisfied? On the same day or some later day?..." (p. 153).
34. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), p. 171.
35. The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, and Pew Research Center. *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, 2008* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2008). Accessed online at <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>, 22.
36. Ibid., p. 62.
37. Ibid., p. 21.
38. Barack Obama, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), p. 218. I thank Aurora Sekine '09 for pointing out this quotation.
39. See especially Minow 2008.
40. Jeffrey Stout, quoted in Minow 2008, p. 38.

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