

THE CRISIS OF MODERNITY OF THE ARAB-ISLAMIC WORLD

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Abstract

The Westernization of Islam, which began at least two hundred years ago, has two major consequences: a positive one, meaning the enlightenment of the elites which tried to reform Islam; and a negative one, "the perverse effect of contact with the West", as the experts often call it, which consists of the development of religious sects within the Muslim societies. The direct and striking conclusion, upon first analysis, is that Islamic fundamentalism is the product of Western modernity. Of course, the line of explanation has its origin in colonial times, seen as a major disappointment by those Muslims who believed in the benefits of a European-style modernity, and continues with the Cold War period, with the examples of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Afghanistan, where the mobilization of Islamist elements was beneficial in the fight against the Soviet enemy and the active proselytism practiced by the latter.

Keywords: Islam, Jihad, fundamentalism, Terrorism, Faith, Shiite, Sunni, Kamikaze, ISIS

Introduction

There's a lot of talk nowadays, in the Western world, rather than the Arab-Islamic world, about a crisis of modernity crossing from one end to the other the territories which are under the rule of Islam. Modernity, in its common Western meaning, is a notion most often associated in Islamic environments, with the Western way of life, with the laicism of Western social structures. Of course, there are different types of modernity or manifestations of it in different contexts, and taking this notion as a unitary block is, as we shall see, to the detriment of an accurate perception of the phenomenon of modernity in the Arab-Islamic space.

In the course of time, three attitudes towards modernity became apparent.

Law and rights in Islam

*"A defining characteristic of the Muslim legal discourse is the assumption that **the Quran (Qur'an / Koran)** is God's Communication to humanity... God speaks in the Quran and among the things He transmits there is also the law to which He requests His community to submit."¹ So here we have a law of sacred origin, which may not be violated except under the threat of sanctions emanating from the same resort, the same*

¹ Robert Gleave, *The 'First Source' of Islamic Law: Muslim Legal Exegesis of the Quran*, in Richard O' Dair, Andrew Lewis, (ed.), *Law and Religion. Current Legal Issues*, 2001, vol. 4, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 145, et.al.;

way it can only be amended by the original resort. In addition to this text, Islam has additional regulatory means, such as *Sunna* – the model of the sinless life Prophet Muhammad led², *ijma* – the community consensus on carrying out the law, as well as the **comments to the Quran** – done by means of a "complex hermeneutic theory, with the help of which jurists were able to interpret the Quran (and the words of the Prophet) in a manner as extended as possible. The theory was, in the beginning, quintessentially teleological. It was conceived in such a manner as to provide a jurist with the tools allowing him to discover what God meant to say in the Quran."³

On the other hand, the Quran "presents itself as <discerning> (*furqan*) between truth and error."⁴ In other words, God's Word is the discernment between truth and error! From here results the difficulty in separating the two, hence the value of initiation and knowledge, and, therefore, the privileged place that theoretical knowledge used to have/has (*epistheme*, as the Greeks would say!). Therefore, everything outside knowledge is inevitably under the sign/spectrum of falsity, error and inadequacy. Which is what characterizing the frenzy and the binding trait of fundamentalism. Also, knowledge cannot take place at once, it happens in time and according to the demands of time! Each jurist will advance from one meaning to another up to the point where his instruments of knowledge lead him. "The availability of this important written information, which is indeed crucial, inevitably influences the position in the social hierarchy of people who can read, the learned, cultured people."⁵

The rejection of modernity

There is a first group that has rejected and still rejects the ideas promoted by modernity, associating them with westernization, with the fear of loss of identity. This fear of the Muslims stems from the absolute opposition between the fundamental views of the two worlds. In the Oriental world, the individual is literally "absorbed" by the family, and in a broader sense by the community. The West only takes into consideration the individual. For all Muslims, private life is governed by the rules of the clan society, the status of a believer requiring membership to the community.

Muslims consider themselves superior to Westerners in all respects. The neurosis occurred when Islam was confronted with the technical and military superiority of the West. From their perspective, only Satan could make the materialist and atheist West triumph. This explains the immense hope brought into the Muslim world by Khomeini in 1979. Islam no longer bent before the West, but asserted itself violently. The broad support received by Saddam Hussein from the Muslim public opinion, during the Gulf War, as well as the events that led to the 2003 crisis could be interpreted according to the same pattern.

But the refusal of modernity may also have non-violent expressions, as demonstrated by the Wahhabism developed in Saudi Arabia. This integrating movement, which has existed since the 18th century, denounces any innovation brought to Islam by secondary sources of law and requests a return to the fundamentals of the desert.

² "It is true that, on its part, the Quran speaks of *Allah's Sunnah*, meaning by it God's principles of action in humans; however, tradition has reserved the word for the manner of acting, for customs or Muhammad's parables. These precedents are the norm of Muslim life, at all levels.", F. Schuon, *op.cit.*, p. 107;

³ Idem, pp. 145-146;

⁴ Idem, p. 49;

⁵ Ernest Gellner, *Condițiile libertății. Societatea civilă și rivalii ei (Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals)*, Editura Polirom (Publishing House), Iași, 2008, (Penguin Books, London, 1996), p. 39;

Traditional values and modernity

Another group combines modern ideas with traditional values, proposing a reconciliation of Islam with modernity and science. The initiators of this reformist current are Jamal al-Din al Afghani, Muhammad Abdouh Rashid Rida, Fadil bin Ashur, Ben Badis and Allal al Fasi. From their perspective, Islam is tolerant and rational; it is not hostile to progress and agrees with the technical innovations of the West.

Modernity and Westernization

The third approach fully supports the association of modernization with Westernization, promoting the exclusion of the religious factor from political life. The first step in this direction was taken by Kemal Ataturk in Turkey. One can also give the examples of Iran in the time of the Shah, Tunisia – during the reign of Habib Bourguiba or the Ba'athist regimes in Iraq and Syria, based on a non-religious nationalist ideology. However, the last two never went as far as an outright declaration of laicism.

The modernity of a society does not exclusively manifest itself through its degree of economic development, although this could be a good indication, but on several levels of development, of which the mental one seems to me to be vital when associating modernity with the Muslim space. It is known that the modernization of the Arab-Muslim society began in the mid-eighteenth century and is partly due to the first contacts the Maronite Christians in Lebanon had, through Catholic missionaries, as well as through the itinerant theater companies from France and Italy, with the Europe of the Enlightenment, and especially with its spirit. The spiritual discovery of Europe had profound echoes that were not limited to the Christian communities in Lebanon and Syria, but slowly included Muslim and Christian intellectual circles alike, through contact with the philosophy of the Enlightenment, then with the great convulsion of European nationalism which produced nations and destroyed empires.

Arab awakening under the rule of the Ottoman Empire coincided with the awakening of the Balkan peoples under Turkish rule, an intense process of rebirth and formation of new entities amidst the turmoil generated by the ideas of the French Revolution and supported in the field by the increasing awareness of the dismantling of the great empire. The Turkization policy pursued by Sultan Abdel Hamid II, accompanied by the national affirmation of the Balkan peoples and of their national language, caused a response from the Arab intellectual elites, which resides in the revitalization of literary Arabic language, promoted by a number of societies which were established in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. At the time we are referring to, the Arabic language was the connection uniting the Muslims and Arab Christians from Syria and Lebanon in their joint efforts to gain recognition of their identity. Arabic is used not only by Muslims to define their own identity, but also by Christians who never forget to mention that the Arabic language existed before the revelation of the Quran.

The Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire experienced, in different forms, the same disintegration social phenomena which are cultural and political at once, or, in other words, an identity disintegration. Modernity and the acceptance of the forms it takes resulted, within the Arab-Muslim society, in the most diverse reactions. Unfortunately for the course of modernity in the Arab-Muslim world, it did not enter the space to which we refer only through cultural and civilizational influences, but remained connected to the

colonization process, which marked in a negative way the relations between Western Europe and the Muslim world. In the common perception of Muslim societies, modernity and its spirit are characteristic of the colonizers, whose presence in the colonized countries left memories that are not always pleasant or enticing to extend or imitate.

The ever more acute impression that modernity and all the structures it proposes, especially laicism, make up a sort of script written in the West according to which Muslims are supposed to play a particular role, is among the explanations of the near-failure in implementing certain patterns with a Western background in this space. For the vast majority of Muslims, the first contact with the West happened when these territories were conquered by the great powers of the time, England, France and, in certain areas, Italy. The very idea of taking over a model which is that of the occupant, the same occupant who, in Egypt, for instance, used the rifle in its relations with the natives, instead of any other method, is rejected as a whole.

Reforming Islam from within, through a reconsideration and reassessment of attitudes towards the fundamental texts that regulate social and civic life and their adaptation to the pace of modernity, was the main objective of the reformist current, *nahda*, in Arabic, which animated the life of the elites from the second half of the 19th century through to the Second World War. The two directions developed within the Arab renaissance, one going toward the adoption of a lay system in state government, the other seeing the secularization of the Muslim state as a loss of identity, each in its own way understood the need to modernize Islam, seen not only as religious reality, but as a social one, too. In fact, this is one of the important issues that we need to keep in mind when talking about Islam, what is commonly called -islam- is not only a religion, but an entire conglomerate which includes social, cultural life, sometimes even political life, specifically the Arab monarchies. The claim of separating religion from politics, as required by the principles of Western laicism, is firstly not understood, and subsequently, rejected. Therefore, the debates regarding Islam's inability to separate the temporal from the spiritual, which is the cause for the failure of its modernization attempts, suffer from irrelevance. From the very beginning, the Islamic society was conceived as a unitary whole, wherein the religious dimension was never well defined, and I am referring primarily to the lack of clerical hierarchies in Islam (in the majority Sunni Islam). The caliph always had the title of "Prince of the Faithful", but the religious factor did not manifest itself in political situations, unlike in the case of the Catholic Church. Religion in Islam is a component of civil life, because this is the area in which it manifested itself in the course of time, so it is pointless to expect Islam to separate the temporal from the spiritual. That would be impossible, given that spirituality never interfered with political power throughout the long history of Islam.

Of course, things are different nowadays, with Islamic parties and movements having been associated with the government by the current political regimes in the Arab-Muslim world, for reasons that are most often referred to as a "legitimacy crisis". Attracting the religious factor, which enjoys strong popular support, and removing it from the civil action area, followed by the institutionalization of religion are, we must say this, a result of the contact with Western-style modernity. There is no need to look far for examples: the anomaly that occurred in the Iran of the Shahs, in 1979, through the establishment of a strange kind of republic (an Islamic republic) as a result of the absolutely hallucinatory merging of two concepts of different origin and interpretation; this is still happening in

other Arab countries where desperate regimes draw to their side religious factions that were, until recently, marginalized and ostracized; see the case of Egypt, Tunisia or the Moroccan kingdom, as well as the Hashemite kingdom.

Arabness and Islam, two concepts that have been in an involution/evolution relationship in the Arab space during the last half of a century

For a better understanding of the current political framework in Arab countries, we believe it is necessary to make a brief analysis of the two currents that are in opposition to each other, disputing their right to govern. We are reminding you that the **lack of good governance** is identified by the latest United Nations Development Report as one of the main causes of the undemocratic situation in the Arab space. The two terms, **Arabness and Islam**, are, above all, two representative identity categories in the Arab-Muslim world. These are the two concepts around which identities were formed and which continue to polarize attention in the claim of belongingness to a certain form of identity.

The analysis of the two words, Arabness and Islam, involves, in fact, an analysis of **two different mental grids**, on the basis of which the Arab world is structured into two political and social thinking systems, which are different, even opposite. The two terms, corresponding to different realities, involve a number of concepts in their evolution, which are divided into two clearly defined groups.

Arabness is a trend known in Arab history since the 8th-9th centuries, when contact with the Persian civilization and the Persians' claims to supremacy in the Caliphate primarily justified by their obvious cultural superiority and civilization at that time, triggered a response reaction from the Arabs, a kind of nationalism *avant la lettre*, with an emphasis rather on the ethnic component. Arabness, the fact of being an Arab, of belonging to the Arab community, *al-umma al-arabiya*, gained new values, placing it in a context meant to differentiate the Arabs from the rest of the Muslim world or, to say it better, within the Muslim world⁶.

In the modern period, Arabness and Islam became associated with the two currents that make up the political structure of governance in Arab countries; Arabness is most often associated with two other concepts, laicism (which refers to the scientific basis of social organization) and secularism (bringing the profane into social organization). Laicism takes different forms and is perceived in different ways from one country to another. Laicism does not have the same value nor the same meaning that can be generalized for the entire Arab space, it is a phenomenon which is closely related to the modernization of societies.

Those who are concerned with the Arab space and the matter of compatibility between Arab systems, whether lay or based on religious structures, and democratic values, notice differences in the Arab world between the concepts of laicism and secularism, which, although most often used as synonyms, cover different realities in this space. Secularism designates the tendency towards desecration of a vast field of activities among which social organization. The secularization of a society requires a rearrangement of the public space according to the values of political emancipation and freedom, as in the case of the **British model**. In the case of *laïcité*, mostly associated with the **French model**, the struggle for political and social emancipation cannot be separated from the struggle against the domination of religious ideology.

⁶ Vasile Simileanu, *Centre de putere și actori islamici regionali (Power Centres and Regional Islamic Players)*, Editura Top Form (Publishing House), 2009, p. 85.

In the Arab world, which should not be submitted to an overall analysis, but rather to a study that should take into account each Arab society individually, the dissociation between the two words, laïcité and secularism, is more clearly defined. There are at least **two reasons** for this: the first is related to the very process of modernization of the Arab countries which manifests itself, at least in the first phase, as the fight against colonial occupation. In this fight, **religious** solidarity was the key factor of social unity. Religion came out of this battle strengthened, having also gained a **geopolitical dimension**, religion ceased to be a mere cult and became an identity carrier. **Current criticism never concerns Islamic religion itself, but the false interpretations it has been given.**

The second aspect which explains why Arab societies may be qualified rather as "secular" than lay is that the call for the modernization of Arab societies came primarily from the **Ulama** (Muslim scholars, doctors of Islamic sciences who can only envisage the project of Arab societies renaissance as a renewal coming from within and sustained by Islam), the initiators of the modern trend, of revival of Arab society⁷.

Moreover, it has become a tradition in the Arab world in the last half century that modernist Muslims should be the privileged allies of the State in the governing process. Their role is twofold: first, the State relies on them to annihilate Muslim conservatives and extremist movements, and secondly, they are useful to the secular political power by giving it additional legitimacy, in a context where many regimes of lay orientation in the Arab world suffer from a lack of legitimacy and low popularity. The Muslim Brotherhood group in Egypt, although officially banned and unrecognized, seems to have made a pact with the power, which allowed it, in the latest legislative elections, to enter Parliament. We notice the "kind behaviour" of the regime in relation to the Muslim Brotherhood group as compared to the fate of the main lay opposition party, Al-Ghadd, whose leader Ayman Nur was sentenced to five years in prison, being accused of various violations he is assumed to have committed when enrolling his party in the election race.

Another example is the Kingdom of Morocco whose king has been financing the opposition of moderate Muslims whom he encourages to the detriment of fundamentalist movements. Of course, the list of examples must include the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan which has Islamist associates in the government.

Religion cannot be ruled out when making an analysis of Arab modernity, especially after Arab and Pan-Arab nationalism, which was in its heyday in the '60s and '70s of the last century, has failed miserably in achieving the ideals proposed. In the consciousness of the Arab masses, nationalism is connected to the failure of Arabs in the Palestinian issue, culminating in the defeat of the great Arab leader Gamal Abdel Nasser and the subsequent recognition of the State of Israel by his successor, Anwar Sadat. Failure in the Palestinian issue, which for Pan-Arab nationalists became a permanent landmark of their doctrine, caused an overturn in the dominant political trends in Arab countries. I am talking about the return to religious spectrum on the political stage, showing a clear need for another landmark with the force of representativeness in the collective mind, that of the street.

The relationship between religion and modernity is different in different areas of the Arab space. Thus, in societies of the Near East where cultural modernity known as the *Nahda* (Arabic Renaissance) began before colonial occupation (but not without suffering

⁷ Vasile Simileanu, *Statele islamice. Actori geopolitici contemporani* (The Islamic States. Contemporary Geopolitical Players), Editura Top Form (Publishing House), 2009, p. 69.

influences of Western modernity), **the relation between religion and political identity is weaker.** In these societies, Arabness, which is an entirely lay concept, occupies a significant territory.

In the Gulf countries, where modernity is purely technical, **religion remains the dominant force in society.** An eloquent model is that of Saudi Arabia where the Wahhabi rigorism is the State religion and the social norm. Gulf countries, be it the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar or Oman, are among the important, strategic, allies of the United States in the Middle East, which supported Washington's intervention in Afghanistan. The wish of the United States to turn the Greater Middle East into a space of democracy and security turns out to be a difficult task which cannot be imposed from outside. In the case of Iraq, the organization of free elections did not ensure the democratization of society, if we are to bring into question the most recent development. Also, the Palestinian society did not become more democratic after the Islamist group Hamas won the elections in a free and fair manner (according to international observers). It also appears that freedom of choice did not guarantee the coming to power of a democratic president in the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These three cases have shown, as Ignacio Ramonet noticed, that organizing free elections is not enough to guarantee the installation of democracy in a society. Following the same paradigm, being lay in the Arab world does not necessarily mean being democratic (see the cases of Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Iraq, until recently), although many Western leaders hid behind this idea to justify their support for secular (lay) dictatorships in the East. It is also equally false to think that all Islamic democrats or liberals are necessarily lay. They do not claim to be attached to realities that do not belong to Islam, but have found in the distant or recent history of Islam reformist, liberal trends, which propose internal versions and methods of modernization. There are inside Islam liberal models that combine religion with a rational way of understanding things, Mu'tazilites being such an example, or the reformists from the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries. It is shocking to the common Western perception of Islam to speak of liberal Islam. In the same way, it may seem bizarre to talk of Islamic pluralism, which is, however justified in historical terms. Islam is pluralistic, by its very constitutional nature; the first argument in support of this assertion is the manner in which Islamic religion relates to the prophets of the other religions, recognizing their mission and integrating them in its own religious reality. Starting from this comprehensive vision, to which we may add the attitude of Islam towards non-Muslims living in *dar al-islam* (the territories of Islam), now, as well as throughout history, we arrive at a more realistic picture of what is meant, in the common usage, by pluralism, which is exemplified in Islam both in ethnic and religious terms.

Religion and politics are today, in the Arab world, in a sort of compromise maintained with the agreement of both parties. The Islamic fundamentalist movement, which is in a visible upward trend nowadays, as a result of the failure of the political system proposed by the current governments, and which rejects any form of laïcité, threatening all modernization efforts made so far, is not the manifestation of an ideological continuity in the history of Islam. On the contrary, it represents a break with its recent history. This integristism is not supported by any Islamic dogma, and even less by the reformist and moderate Islam which lately seems to have become a possible dialogue partner in Arab societies.

Islamism embodies the rejection by the broad masses of a failed model of modernization of society; it is an orientation towards another option. Should we consider this return to religion as a general tendency that characterizes the West and the East alike?

Could this be a confirmation of Malraux's prediction? A reorganization of the world grouped around the three monotheistic religions, this time in the Judeo-Christianity versus Islam formula? According to an increasing number of specialists (among whom Georges Corm), the Judeo-Christian roots of modern Western laïcité, after giving up the pluralism of the Greek-Roman system of thought on which Renaissance was built, exclude from the equation the third largest monotheistic religion, Islam. There are also talks about a false laïcité of the West, with the looming presence of the religious unconscious, which did not disappear along with modern nationalism, but underwent a transmutation of its epicenter, from the church, understood as a community of believers, towards the ethnic or national community.

However, we tend to believe that the relations established between the two worlds cannot simply be explained through the conflicting interpretations grid, with religion as a starting point. As we have tried to show, other issues must be considered, as well, especially when the discussion goes towards the ability of Arab countries to become democratic, to adopt a system of organization which is alien to them, both by structure and mentality. The troubling question for Western intellectual circles regards the ability of these societies to appropriate a system that Europe built for centuries and which was generated by its own culture. Is Islam capable of creating its own system of revival, beyond Western intentions? The answer could be yes, but not in the political conditions present in Arab countries nowadays. Reform from within must be based on a well-developed civil society which should support the huge social effort.

Islam in the West

The situation of minority Islam, meaning that which is outside of what Muslims call *dar al-islam* (house of Islam or Islamic territories)⁸, is different for at least one reason, that of the need to adapt to the characteristics of Western societies. In this case, there are two dominant directions: either integration in the respective society, by recognizing all its components, as attempted in France, or choosing a way of life inside Muslim communities, as seen in the United Kingdom (Britain).

The line that separates the modern West from the archaic and fabulous Middle East, is strongly maintained by the Western media because this two-sided image is too convenient to allow giving it up; it serves as an explanation in far too many cases to be left aside without remorse. Unfortunately, an increasing number of observers of the phenomenon think that the Middle East has its share of blame in this game, through the pathetic way in which it responds the challenges from the West.

How does the West maintain this clear line between him and the Oriental world? Let's take a sneak peek into the concerns of Western Orientalists (by taking over a topic launched several years ago by Edward Said in "Orientalism"); what is the predominant concern for them? Which are the most frequent topics they are persistently interested in? If we look in the bookshops of the major Western capitals, we will be surprised to find side by side dozens of volumes whose titles contain words like "terrorism", "fundamentalism", "Islamic movements", etc.

⁸ Anghel Andreescu, Nicolae Radu, *Jihadul islamic (Islamic Jihad)*, Editura Ministerului Internelor și Reformei Administrative (Publishing House of the Ministry of Interior and Administrative Reform), 2008

At the moment, the interest of Western cultured media is entirely focused on explaining the universal phenomenon of Islamic terrorism. It is the only subject that publishing houses aware of the market value of such a book are interested in.

But there are, in the Arab-Muslim world, other realities outside the marginal phenomenon of fundamentalism and religious integristism. There are prominent intellectuals with concerns worthy of the highest interest, and the author gives the example of the Syrian Muhammad Shahrur who proposed a new interpretation of the Quranic text, using the modern means of linguistics, thus placing the concepts conveyed by the Quran in their historical context, which was much different from the one we live in today. Shahrur's book has enjoyed tremendous success in the Arab world, but it has remained totally unknown in the West, ignored, deliberately, according to the author, by translators and by those who manage the translation market. It could not be told to the Western public that in the Arab world the Quranic text is openly discussed or that there is an exegesis of such a text, which all common Westerners should know about is that Bin Laden and the likes are inspired by its verses. This is not a carefully sought minor example, it is a characteristic of the pluralistic Islamic spirit. This is, of course, another bizarre combination of terms according to the common Western perception.

Another idea that the West wants to have well established in the Western collective mind is dealing with Islam as a global phenomenon, without shades and colours. The attempt to level a highly diversified reality, as that of Islam, is done, without a doubt, with a definite purpose in mind. One can easily see, from a simple language analysis analysis, how convenient and justifying such an approach is. Consider, for example, the way in which the various Islamist organizations operating in the regions of the Arab-Muslim world are viewed, and therefore imposed the general perception. They are all classified as terrorist, a term which unifies them and is intended to divert attention from their specific character. Putting on the same plane the global terrorist organization al-Qaeda with the Hamas organization or the Hezbollah party movement, whereas their motivations clearly and undeniably separate them from each other, is not only wrong, it is also dangerous for the understanding of certain situations and especially for finding the proper solution for them⁹.

Conclusion

Manipulating concepts can be a double-edged sword; oversimplification of situations to the point where they become caricatural, can come at a huge price. In the past few months, there have been more and more talks about a new hallucinatory concept, the Islamo-fascism or Islamo-Nazism, a trouvaille of the US administration (the term was used for the first time on August 7th, 2006, in a speech by President George W. Bush, who also put in circulation the term "crusade", used as a description for the war against Iraq, launched in March 2003; cf. Stefan Durand, "Fascisme, Islam et grossiers amalgames" in *Le Monde Diplomatique*, November 2006), circulated by one of the greatest American Orientalists, Bernard Lewis, currently adviser at the White House. An increasingly provocative terminology is used in Western discourse, and those who use it rely on its emotional charge. The association made between Islamist groups and Nazism generates horrific images in the mind of the receiver, thousands of Hitlers threatening to destroy the West.

⁹ Bârna C, *Terorismul și religia islamică (Terrorism and the Islamic Religion)*, *Revista Geopolitica (Geopolitical Magazine)*, Bucharest, 2014.

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