

# Preface

## BACKGROUND

What does it mean to talk about faith and its role in modern society? Is it the same as discussing structured religion of any kind, or does it also include non-institutionalized and/or non religious forms of spirituality, which can also impact upon - perhaps even have an assigned role - in public life? What does believing, or having any kind of meaningful spiritual life amount to, here and now?

Reflecting on such questions amounts to two things.

First, understanding the concepts and the rapport between them: without intending to be pedantic, we should at least acknowledge that not all faiths require an official, institutionalized religion, and that 'spirituality' is different from both, encompassing not only a wide range of manifestations (whether ascribed to a religion or not), but also allowing for non-religious forms of spiritual experiences, not necessarily faith-based. Mainstream Buddhism, for instance, is spirituality centred on self-discipline and liberation of the soul, without the need for a faith in a personal God. Meditation and other spiritual practices are equally open and non-prescriptive. At the limit, we can even talk about an atheistic type of spirituality, which is a form of deep morality, centred on altruism and other such ethical principles.

Second, we should reflect on the implications of discussing these concepts 'here and now'. If what this means is "in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Western world", then we should start by acknowledging the widespread secularism affecting contemporary societies in the West, and contrast that with some Eastern societies, on the one hand, and with how things were in the West a few centuries or millennia ago. Then we should look into what makes things so different in the West, but not in the sense of going into the history of the secularisation phenomenon, something already beautifully accomplished by Charles Taylor in his impressive *A Secular Age* (2007). Instead, it would be important to explore ways in which religion could address the challenges and anxieties of modern society, by looking at aspects of life that are important to the individual, for instance commerce, entrepreneurship, technology, charity, justice, race, or sexuality. Some of the chapters of the book address such topics, e.g. chapters 10 (on confluences between religion and economics), 11 (about a 'prosperity-oriented' theology), 15 (on chaplaincy interventions in prison and probation settings), 16 (on how far clemency should go vis-a-vis racial hate-motivated crimes), and 17, about homosexuality and spirituality in Nigeria.

This book does both. In its scope and diversity, it acknowledges secularism both implicitly (by highlighting the diversity of faith options, thereby also allowing for the possibility of no faith at all) and explicitly, for instance when, in chapter 14, it discusses the challenges faced by Pakistani converts to another religion, or to atheism.

So, what does it mean to talk about faith and the role it plays (or not) in modern society? Acknowledging that most Western societies are predominantly secular is not the same as saying that they are atheist; instead, it amounts to seeing religion as one out of many human possibilities: “The shift to secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace” (Taylor, 2007, p. 3). The authors of this book consider this option worth exploring. Some, like Scott Webster, even see it as a soteriological option, and talk about an “existential spirituality” that can help make the unbearable bearable. Others, like Ana-Maria Pascal and Annapurna Pandey, focus on the micro-level of spiritual rituals filled with meaning, and the depth of the kind of life experience they make possible, in the midst of (or away from) a hectic, secular society. The fact that both of these have as a reference point non-Western practices (Indian, Indonesian, Byzantine) is symptomatic of how secularism affects the world to varying degrees. There are still a lot of places on earth where faith remains the dominant world-view, rather than just one of multiple options. In a multicultural world, this has consequences, which are not entirely positive. Chapter 14, for instance, details the challenges faced by Pakistani people who change their religion, or decide to abandon it altogether, and live their life as atheists. At the positive end of the spectrum, societies heavily influenced by mysticism can flourish in ways that would not have been possible in the absence of that spirituality. Chapter 7, for instance, explains the role that Christian mysticism played in social movements in twentieth century Romania; and Chapter 13 explores the vast influence of Islamic mysticism on Iranian society and culture.

## **DIVERSITY**

Undoubtedly, the topic of the book has a wide scope and therefore lends itself to multiple interpretations. The sheer diversity of viewpoints from which it can be approached — linked with the multiple perspectives on faith, religion and spirituality we have touched upon — makes it inherently chameleonic. We have chosen to approach it from a historic, philosophical, theologic, cultural, economic, and sociological point of view. (See details of the Book Structure below).

But beyond and beneath this diversity of disciplines and perspectives — indeed, underpinning it — lies a more fundamental one, namely the multitude of human mindsets and behaviours. The way people live their lives, the kind of rapports they entertain with one another and with the absolute Other — be that an entirely different culture, or God — differs across borders and ages, which in turn influences the way they understand and reflect upon their behaviour. It is only natural that there be diversity within unity.

And there is value in that diversity. Not only can we learn from each other, but understanding another point of view can at times help understand ourselves and gain a richer life experience. Suffice it to consider the multitude of Western accounts of Eastern cultures and ways of life — their diversity and the degree of fascination therein — to appreciate the value of the perspective from elsewhere for both our personal and public lives. Equally valuable are the various ways in which science accounts for the abnormal (in the sense of clinical difference, due to either illness or deformation); see, for example, Jill Bolte Taylor’s (2009) account of brain injury to understand how different ‘purely’ scientific viewpoints can be from a deeper (and no less scientific) understanding, which is based on a life experience of that particular illness (in this case, a stroke).

## BEYOND THE MULTIPLE

“But there has to be more,” says Arseny Tarkovsky (the film director’s father) in one of his poems (Tarkovsky, 2005, p. 191). Or, to use Hegel’s metaphor, when the universal spirit travels through history, it encounters the other in all its diversity, thereby enriching its own life; at that point, it needs to return to itself and enjoy this newly acquired depth. Similarly, when we return from our travels, we like to reflect on our refined experience and enjoy the surprises it brings to us, the way it enriches us. We may gain a new understanding of the beauty of life, the value of suffering or laughter, and the role of family, work, play, or any other aspect of life on which a different culture might have a different view from our own. We might discover a new — deeper, and more tranquil — version of ourselves, in that restful return. At the limit, we might even reach a new level of humanity this way, which St Augustine referred to as partly divine, i.e. that part of us which is deeper than ourselves. This, incidentally, is what explains St Augustine’s emphasis on interiority, because it is the most accessible dwelling of divinity: “But you were more inward to me, than my most inward part; and higher than my highest” (Augustine, 1909, p. 57)

The same suggestion can be found in the sayings of the Desert Fathers, who often link mysticism (and monastic life) with the prayer of the heart, which is an invocation of the name of God accompanied by an effort to lower one’s mind into one’s heart. The heart (*kardia*), for them, was “not simply the physical organ but the spiritual centre of man’s being, man as made in the image of God, his deepest and truest self, or the inner shrine, to be entered only through sacrifice and death, in which the mystery of the union between the divine and the human is consummated” (Palmer, Sherrard & Ware, 1984, p. 359). See, for example, the teachings of St Hesychios the Priest (Ibid., pp. 164-197), St. John of Damascus (Ibid., p. 348), Ilias the Presbyter (Ibid., p. 57), and St Silouan (Archimandrite Sophrony, 1991, pp. 131-143). Rowan Williams (2003, 2012) is particularly attentive to the wisdom of the Desert Fathers, and that of Eastern Orthodox thinkers in general, not only with regards to mysticism and monastic life, but also — and more importantly for our purposes here — when he discusses the place of religion in society *today*. (See more details in the next section).

### Unity of the Soul?

There is an almost perfect equivalent of the interiority conundrum in neuropsychology, which concerns the issue of consciousness, or what provides us with a sense of unity of the self, despite the complexity and perpetual change of cell circuitry, and the variability of memory. Neuropsychologists have been grappling with this question for some time, since observing how the normal brain works does not seem to offer any significant clue on the matter of consciousness and self-identity; on the contrary, it seems to increase the sense of mystery, because all the cells of the brain are changing every second (Laszlo, 2007). How, then, can we have any continuity of the self? Moreover, given that memory is not linear, but instead is being shaped by various interactions with the environment, how is it that we can have a sense of a growing history of ourselves, a sense of progress in our lives? How much is memory and how much is imagining, in the process of constructing our sense of a united self? How much of what I’ll remember about the present moment, five or ten years from now, will actually be ‘true’ and how much will be the result of my imagination, or of external influences?

Neuropsychologists seem to agree that the whole system of memory- and self-creation is much more fluid than we realise, and that our memories change, over time, as much as we do. And yet, despite this continuous dynamic between the self, memory and the world, despite the constant renewal of our

brain system, there is a strong sense of unity there, insofar as the self is concerned. Consciousness, or the ‘soul’ of the machine, lies deeply beneath and beyond this diversity and its dynamism. That is why without memory, one cannot relate to either time/space or oneself anymore. At a recent exhibition at the Wellcome Collection (*States of Mind: Experiences at the Edge of Consciousness*, The Wellcome Trust, London, August 2016), artist Shona Illingworth presented the result of four years of collaborative work between a neuropsychologist, a cognitive scientist and Claire, a 44 year old who awakes from a coma to find she no longer remembers her past and is unable to form any new memories or to recognise any faces, including her own. Claire’s case vividly illustrates the link between memory and imagination, and between both and a sense of a self, which is continuous through time. Memory thus — albeit fluid — becomes the glue between time, self, and the world. Memory and imagination, or the ability to think in images which are connected with other images, help us in the process of understanding our rapport with the world (over and above the linguistic and analytical one). But of these two, it seems that memory has the primordial role in ensuring our sense of continuity — with ourselves, and in the rapport between us and the rest of the universe.

By analogy, faith — albeit fluctuant, diverse, and in perpetual change, under the influence of others and one’s own life experience — can provide a sense of unity to our social conscience. Indeed, religious faith (or spirituality, in a large sense) can be that force or impetus that takes us out of our individualistic sphere, towards the wider world — first, social and secondly, universal. But it may be the kind of faith that is uninhibited by social or even confessional norms; it may be the kind of free-spirited faith that moves the early riser rice-farmer on the shores of Indonesia to bring an offering to the gods, before he starts his work; or the young monk in a remote Orthodox monastery somewhere in Greece, Russia, or Romania, to do the same chores throughout the day — apparently unrelated to his spiritual practice — just out of obedience for his abba; the kind of faith that made Jesus thank the Lord for having listened to his prayer to raise Lazarus from the dead, even before this was uttered and granted: “Then they took away the stone from the place where the dead man was lying. And Jesus lifted up His eyes and said, Father, I thank You that You have heard Me. (...) Now when He had said these things, He cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come forth!’ And he who had died came out bound hand and foot with graveclothes, and his face was wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Loose him, and let him go.’” (John 11: 41-44)

This spiritual force or impetus could be seen as analogue to the Hegelian Spirit, which comes out of itself, opens up to the world, and ‘loses’ itself in its explorations of alterity, before returning to itself, enriched with this experience of the other. But it could also be understood as the kind of ‘insight’ that neuroscientist and stroke survivor Bolte Taylor (2009) associates with our “right mind”, that is the activity of the right hemisphere of the brain, which, unlike the analytical left, relies on intuition and thinking in pictures, rather than concepts, and is characterised by a sense of peace, unity with the universe, and lack of physical barriers. The result is a sense of the self as a fluid, at one with the universe, and freed from any limitations in time or space. It is this going beyond the perception of the self as an individual, and the focus on the unity with the world, which makes it such a good analogy with what faith (or spirituality) can bring. Indeed, Bolte Taylor refers to the activity of the right hemisphere as “the peaceful bliss of my divine right mind” (2009, p. 61).

Faith, in other words, is the capacity to transcend boundaries of individuality — including those of space and time (see stories about the lives of Desert Fathers and saints from other traditions), followed by the ability to unite oneself with (or feel part of) the world, in a way that no longer requires the specificities of the individual self, although it doesn’t require its annihilation, either.

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The intrinsic difficulty with faith and most spiritual experiences (or indeed their added value) is their incommensurability with language and conceptualisation. Just as the fruits of the right hemisphere tend to be non linguistic (because the locus of language is in our left hemisphere, otherwise known as our analytical mind), so does the human experience of the divine. Philosophers (from Plato to Heidegger and Wittgenstein) as well as theologians — from St Dionysius the Areopagite to Desert Fathers and, nowadays, Rowan Williams (2014) agree that neither God nor our religious experience can really be fitted into words, and therefore we should not even attempt to do so; instead, according to Wittgenstein (2001), “what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.” This, of course, does not mean an absence of meaning; on the contrary, as Williams (2014) explains, silence can sometimes say more (albeit differently) than words.

Likewise, there are things we cannot understand, or that we cannot understand in a conventional analytical way (which entails conceptualisation and categorisation). But simply because we do not understand something, because it defies both experimental and analytical types of rationality, we should not conclude that it does not exist. “And to deny the reality or logical significance of what we can never describe or understand is the crudest form of cognitive dissonance” (Nagel, in Faherty, 2016, p. 22).

## **The Coincidence of Faith and Practical Wisdom in Modern Society**

Since not a lot can be put into words about this sense of God, or unity beyond diversity — except to try and describe some mystic experiences, as Puiu Ionita attempts to do, in chapter 7, aptly titled “The Mystical Experience, or The Way to Transformative Union”, we should focus more on what *can* be said, exploring instances where faith does impact positively upon our lives, and searching for new ways to (re)integrate religion with our modern life and its preoccupations, in cases where the connection with the spiritual — our “divine right mind”, to use Bolte Taylor’s phrase (2009) — has been lost.

Rowan Williams dedicates a whole volume (2012) to such attempts to make religion more relevant for modern society. He invokes the wisdom of Eastern Orthodox monks and thinkers in relation to the sacred quality of the material world (which is relevant for the debate around responsibility for the environment), and to an ethical perspective on economics (“what we want growth for”); he also addresses issues of justice, religious hatred, and human rights. On all these, he tries to find links between key public questions in contemporary society and fundamental Christian beliefs.

This book attempts to do the same, only with a wider scope, encompassing more than one religious faith, and allowing space for doubt, critique, and revisionism. See, for instance, chapters 14 (a dialogue with Pakistani converts experiencing symbolic violence in their communities) and 16, which raises the issue of the value and purpose of the act of forgiveness, in the context of racial oppression and hate crimes in contemporary America. Chapter 2 is also relevant in this regard, as it highlights the ways in which religion and the religious instincts of great thinkers, musicians and scientists from the past and present have impacted on society.

One helpful suggestion might be to look at ancient philosophy for inspiration on how religion can be seen as more relevant to contemporary issues. Just like the Desert Fathers, ancient philosophers emphasise practical wisdom (over and above theoretical knowledge). This makes their approach still relevant today. In fact, many modern and contemporary philosophers, from Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Michel Foucault, to Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, have used it in their attempts to construct a moral, hermeneutical, and political framework that is appropriate for our times.

To give just a few examples, Foucault (2005) considers the apparently marginal Greek notion of “care of the self” (*epimeleia heautou*) to be key for the much more famous “knowledge of the subject” (*gnothi seauton*). Taking this new point of departure represents a turn towards the ethical in epistemology: relationship to the self and to a set of practices becomes central to self-knowledge, in a way that may not have seemed obvious to modern philosophers.

Heidegger (1962, 2005) uses the Greek conception of truth as *logos* understood as letting-something-be-seen (1962, pp. 56-57), or *aletheia*, “the unconcealed concealment” (2005, p. 49) to suggest, on the one hand, that truth is not a static property of anything, but rather some form of understanding that needs to be brought out from hiddenness (often through a practical experience, such as a journey, an artistic experience, or a near-death experience); and on the other hand, that truth (or Being) itself plays an active role in this process. In other words, the soul does not ‘discover’ anything alone; the meaning or the truth must show itself, for it to be seen.

Truth as it is encountered in human activities, and influenced by historical and social practices — as opposed to some ‘objective’ method — was the focal point of Gadamer’s seminal work (2013), initially published in 1960, which continues Heidegger’s work on hermeneutics. In it, Gadamer discusses Aristotle’s relevance for contemporary hermeneutics, and begins his life-long reflection on the Greek notion of practical knowledge (*phronesis*). It is not until the end of his long life that, in a series of interviews published in 2004, he explicitly links *phronesis* with the good (*agathon*) rather than the truth (*logos*) and explains how they are both connected to the notion of “dialogue” and “community with others”. And since the ultimate ‘other’ is God, what helps us achieve goodness is to overcome our human limitations, and aspire to what lies beyond: “The only way not to succumb to our finitude is to open ourselves to the other, to listen to the ‘thou’ who stands before us”. (2004, p. 29)

Charles Taylor (2007) talks about *agape* as a higher good than human flourishing or perfection, which brings a dimension of transcendence into our lives, thereby extending the meaning of our existence beyond *this* life: “the sense that there is some good higher than, beyond human flourishing. In the Christian case, we could think of this as *agape*, the love which God has for us, and which we can partake of through his power. In other words, a possibility of transformation is offered, which takes us beyond merely human perfection. But of course, this notion of a higher good as attainable by us could only make sense in the context of belief in a higher power, the transcendent God of faith which appears in most definitions of religion.” (Taylor, 2007, p. 20).

Finally, Alasdair MacIntyre’s starting point — indeed, a solution to what he considers to be a moral crisis in modern times — is a return to the Aristotelian notion of virtue. Or, as we recall, out of the many moral and intellectual virtues, greatness of the soul is the highest one for Aristotle (1996, p. 94); without this, no one can be considered morally virtuous, no matter how honourable, just, gentle, modest, or courageous one is.

To what extent are these connections between faith and Ancient philosophy — effectively, the search for practical wisdom — obvious, or at least present in modern society, rather than just in scholarly works? That is in effect the question explored by the authors of this book. Most chapters explore specific practices, which highlight such a connection, either explicitly (as in chapters 1, 5, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, and 17) or implicitly, as in chapters 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13, and 15. (See details below).

## **BOOK STRUCTURE**

The book consists of seventeen chapters, which are grouped in six parts covering historical, theological, philosophical, economic, cultural, and sociological approaches respectively.

In the first section, focused on historical approaches, two wide-ranging visions are provided – one looking at commonalities between China and Europe in terms of both geo-political history and culture; the other exploring practical examples of legendary figures with profound religious convictions, who also had a significant impact on society – whether in science, music, or social reform.

The opening chapter is a reflection on Aristotle's and Confucius' relevance both throughout history and today, in particular for how individuals relate to others and to the natural order, and for their understanding of the good life. The issue of faith, of course, is only implicit here, namely through the Aristotelian connection between virtue and greatness of the soul, on the one hand, and the Confucian threefold set of interconnected notions: *li*, a generic term for rituals of veneration for deities and ancestors, as well as social norms; *yi* – the principle of reciprocity, which forms the basis for the moral life; and *ren* – which is typically translated as 'benevolence' and encompasses the virtues. The fact alone that veneration of gods and social norms belong to the same category illustrates the point about the overlap between faith and social praxis.

Chapter 2 offers some practical examples of the beneficial impact of religion on society in three main areas of human endeavour: social reform (from the lives of Mahatma Gandhi, Annie Besant, Mother Teresa and the Dalai Lama), science (revealed by the profound religious convictions of Newton) and music (from the sacred works of Bach, Handel and Beethoven). Great stress is placed upon the fact that religion, properly understood and applied, has nothing to do with blind belief, wars or the opiate of the people; its immense benefits result from great persons who have engaged with religion in its universal meaning, free from rigid orthodoxy, sectarian attitudes and dogma.

In the philosophical section, one paper (chapter 3) looks at the fact-value split, which informs the secular-sacred divide in contemporary western societies, and argues that this should be overcome to acknowledge that moral and religious convictions can provide a kind of deeper knowledge – of the kind that (naturalistic) science cannot; this will inevitably impact on public policy and practice. Indeed, reverting to a moral and religious framework would be beneficial not only for those involved in religious practices, but also for public policy and thus for society at large.

Chapter 4 explores ways in which what the author calls existential spirituality (i.e. individuals assigning meaning and purpose to their life) can have a significant influence on practical life, effectively making otherwise unbearable experiences more bearable.

Chapter 5 continues this line of thought by looking at how particular life-forms (in Bali and the Eastern Orthodox tradition) are informed by such spirituality – which is existential, in that individuals' deeply held beliefs assign meaning and purpose to their lives. The way, for example, in which the Balinese mark each aspect of their every-day life (from food to work and commerce) with an offering is a case in point; it enriches their life while also linking it with nature, the social world, and their ancestors. Social practices (like a journey to Bali, another to Calabria, and a series of Christian rituals) become as many opportunities to capture an experiential sense of faith, which is closely linked to both Ancient practical wisdom and that of the Desert Fathers from the early centuries.

The first two chapters in the theological section are written from the viewpoint of practicing Christians — one of whom is a priest in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the other a doctor in literature with a thesis on poetry inspired by mysticism. They both explore very practical ways in which faith impacts upon life in the public square, whether through church or in the form of social movements centred on religious beliefs.

The section begins with an Orthodox priest's view of the ontological link between human and divine (including the mundane aspects of human existence). On this view, the church provides the path of genuine communion with God, which is often forgotten in modern society, and should be recaptured.

Chapter 7 goes back to a certain mystical experience (the Christian *hesychasm*), and the way in which it was practiced in the Eastern tradition. Although generally a secret practice based on initiation, mysticism sometimes attracts large numbers of people and constitutes the foundation of important social movements. This is the case with the Romanian “Army of God” (a movement within the church) and its social counterpart, the “Burning Bush” intellectual movement – both with a strong impact on mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Romanian society.

The remaining two chapters of Part 3 explore ways in which faith and praxis overlap in contemporary drama and art. Both look at the meaning of narratives — be that in a play or a painting — in the same way that a Heidegger or a Gadamer would: by listening to what that particular art-form has to tell us about something. Chapter 8 offers a fascinating account of a dramatic reinterpretation of the Passion narrative which was staged at Port Talbot in 2011, while chapter 9 takes us through a series of major religious themes in contemporary art.

The two chapters in Part 4 look at the relationship between church and the social economy, on one hand, and neoliberal market-based practices, on the other. Chapter 10 analyses some practical confluences between religion and social economics, such as microfinance and social entrepreneurship. Chapter 11 discusses the way in which Pentecostal Christianity has adapted to the challenges posed by the rise of neoliberalism and its associated marketised practices, by offering a prosperity-oriented theology, and criticises this association between the dominant ideology and “growth” churches.

Part 5 looks at the challenges of cultural specificity in modern society. Chapters in this section are rich in suggestions about how faith is embedded in the everyday praxis of individuals as well as groups. They authors explain, for instance, how faith shapes the daily routine of Odia women in diaspora; the sense of a national and cultural identity — the Iranian one, in this case; and the challenges faced by Pakistani converts in everyday life.

The section starts with a chapter on women and religion in the Indian diaspora in the US; the author, herself a practitioner of Indian rituals dedicated to the Odisha goddess, Lakshmi, explains how contemporary American women of Indian descent integrate their tradition into their busy schedules and social life.

Chapter 13 discusses the depth of the juxtaposition between classical Persian poetry and the Islamic tradition in Iranian culture and national identity, arguing against the common perception that Persian poetry is pre-Islamic.

Chapter 14 explores the struggle for inclusion of religious converts from Pakistan, highlighting what the author considers to be a “symbolic violence” exerted on them.

Part 6 consists of three sociological approaches to the topic of religion and society, each addressing a particular form of exclusion, based on legal status (and punishment), race, and sexuality. Chapter 15 analyses a particular case of restorative justice, namely the practice of chaplaincy interventions in prison



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and probation settings, through a series of French centres called Circles of Support and Accountancy (CoSA). The authors refer to this practice as “secondary secularisation”, to illustrate how secular and religious moralities can not only co-exist, but also work together to achieve a common good.

Chapter 16 addresses the issue of forgiveness, in the context of hate crimes; it asks whether forgiveness can ever be too quick or too selective, and shows that a rethinking of this complex Christian notion (and associated practice) may be needed, in order to dismantle certain structures of exclusion associated with a racial worldview, which is still manifest in contemporary American society. This is exactly the kind of exercise that we were referring to earlier, when suggesting that faith and religion need to adapt to the challenges of modern society, if we are to overcome secularism and reinvigorate the spiritual path as more than just one possibility among others.

The section (and the book) ends with a chapter about the challenge of reconciling homosexuality and spirituality in modern society. The author examines the case of House of Rainbow, an LGBT church in Nigeria, which has been at the forefront of advocacy initiatives on this issues, and concludes that this should be seen more like a survival strategy for Nigerian LGBT people, than a heresy.

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