Perspectives in the Study of Religion
Perspectives en sciences des religions
Perspektiven in der Religionswissenschaft
Prospettive in scienze della religione

On Bron Taylor's *Dark Green Religion*: Contribution and Critiques from Social Theory

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Published on 19.12.2022

Abstract

In 2010, Bron Taylor published his seminal book *Dark Green Religion: Nature, Spirituality and the Planetary Future*, which rapidly became a "must-read" in the ongoing ecology-religion debates. A decade later, this work gained broader visibility and diffusion with a German translation. This paper aims at introducing the first two chapters of Angelica Federici's and Eleonora D'Alessandro's translation in Italian to a European continental audience. It first provides a brief genealogy of the ecology-religion debates and how it structured into an interdisciplinary field of research. Then, it details how the concept of *dark green religion* is useful for expanding ongoing scholarly discussions. On a more critical note, and from the perspective of social theory, the author suggests two critiques that challenge religious scholars and social scientists to extend current thought and reflection on *dark green religion*.

1. Introduction

In April 2017, the *International Society for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* (ISSRNC) held one of its international conferences. Hundreds of scholars and activists gathered at the New School in New York, including myself. In the meanwhile, all over the country "science marches" were organized to protest against the climate change scepticism of the cabinet of the newly elected president Trump. We were all somehow concerned with the study of the ecology-religion nexus. During the official banquet of the conference, Bron Taylor received a Lifetime Award Achievement. This award honoured him as a founding member of the ISSRNC back in the year 2007. It also acknowledged his innovative contribution to this recent interdisciplinary field of study. Taylor is the author of *Dark Green Religion: Nature, Spirituality and the Planetary Future* (2010), a seminal book that now deserves to be called a "must-read" for anyone in the field.

When I first met Bron Taylor in 2017, his work was still circumscribed to an international English-speaking audience. No translation of his book had yet been published. Since then, a German translation by Kocku von Stuckrad (Taylor 2020b) is available. In this issue, *ARGOS* is publishing the first two chapters of a forthcoming Italian translation by Angelica Federici and Eleonora D'Alessandro. On this occasion, being a social scientist engaged in debates on religion and ecology, I was asked to introduce his work to a European continental audience. To do so, I will first briefly sum up and situate Taylor's concept of *dark green religion* in relation to general religion and ecology debates. I will then describe how this concept is useful for expanding ongoing scholarly discussions. Then, on a more critical note and from the perspective of social theory, I will advance two main critiques that may engage religious scholars and social scientists to extend current thought and reflection on *dark green religion*.

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To quote this article: Grandjean, Alexandre. 2022. "On Bron Taylor's Dark Green Religion: Assets and Critics from Social Theory." *ARGOS* | Special issue *Religion and Ecology*, 65-75. DOI: 10.26034/fr.argos.2022.3561.

2. The historical roots of the religion and ecology debates

Studying the contemporary crossovers between religion and ecology is not entirely straightforward. Within Western European models of secularism, environmentalism and ecology are mainly associated with secular environmental experts or with Marxist criticism of the global alienation brought about by the joint venture of technology, neoliberalism, and resource extraction. To mention but two examples, in French-speaking contexts, shaped by a political imaginary of a strict division between the secular and the religious (*laïcité*), green theologies and movements invoking an ecospirituality remained largely unnoticed in the public domain until the first decades of the new millennium (Becci/Grandjean 2021). As for German-speaking contexts, several initial ecospiritual traditions emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries. However, it is the political dimension of ecology that has had the most impact on contemporary public debates. The founding of Germany's *Die Grünen* in 1980, which was one of the first green parties in Europe, is especially notable in this regard (Uekötter 2014).

Among both activists and scholars, full acknowledgement of a religious or spiritual dimension of environmentalism and ecology is new within Western European contexts. This acknowledgement is manifest in a recent change of the semantics regarding these two social categories. Religious and spiritual actors, rituals, and registers are now receiving positive valuation and legitimacy in the public domain, but also among scholars, via ecological themes. In these instances, religious actors are not necessarily envisioned as environmental experts, but they nonetheless are increasingly perceived as facilitators and mediators of an ecological ethos within popular cultures and social organizations (Koehrsen 2018; Monnot/Grandjean 2021).

From an ecological critique of religion toward a "greening" of religions

The genealogical bond between ecological thought and religion was emphasized much earlier in anglophone scholarship. Most authors trace the origin of this bond to the figure of Ernst Haeckel, the German naturalist who first coined in the term of "ecology" in 1866. As described by Whitney Bauman and his colleagues, Haeckel not only called "for a new science based on the Darwinian idea of natural selection, a science to study organisms in relationship with their living and non-living environment", but also had a moral agenda in which the study of nature should "also reveal the 'order of nature' and the 'virtues' by which human beings could live harmoniously with it" (Bauman/Bohannon/O'Brien 2011: 49). Such ideas were translated and diffused in the United States by important authors of the transcendentalist movement, such as Henry David Thoreau or Ralph Waldo Emerson. With their romantic and naturalistic creativity, these authors sought to comprehend and convey the "order" and "virtues" of relations within an ecosystem with the aim of uncovering a "natural religion" that provided an alternative to Christian dualism and sacred texts.

Opposition to established religions was common among conservationist authors of the early 20th century. Growing awareness of environmental depletion, as well as more mundane and nature-based forms of religiosity led diverse authors, including John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Albert Howard, and Rudolf Steiner, to criticize Judeo-Christian anthropocentric and utilitarian views of the non-human world. For instance, in his manifesto, the *Sand County Almanac*, the forest engineer, Aldo Leopold, claimed that "[c]onservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us" (Leopold 1996: xviii–xix). This critique was extended and reached new heights in 1967 when medieval historian, Lynn White Jr., published a controversial paper entitled "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis" in the renowned journal *Science*.

The paper's main argument was that the origins of the ecological crisis was shaped by the West's Judeo-Christian legacy and worldview. According to White (1967: 52), "Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen", since it is premised on the superiority of the humans over the other non-humans of creation.

White's critique was aimed mainly at contemporary changes in lifestyles, values, and worldviews, questioning the accumulation of technological skills leading to the acceptance of human's superiority in shaping "nature".[1] His diagnosis of the source of the ecological crisis as religious led him to call for a remedy that "must also be essentially religious, whether we call it that or not" (White 1967: 54). In sharp contrast to secular environmental agendas, he stated that "more science and more technology are not going to get us out of the present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion, or rethink our old one" (White 1967: 53). Although White was not the first to accuse Christianity of being responsible for our current ecological imperilment, the controversy generated by his comments was without parallel (Sponsel 2017). In the wake of his critique, ecumenical Church organizations, theologians, religious scholars, and quantitative sociologists tried to either prove or contradict what is now known as the "White Hypothesis" (Berry 2013). Sympathy for his position among Christian actors contributed to the "greening" of some Christian institutions, such as the World Council of Churches which adopted in 1983 their program "Justice, peace and the integrity of Creation". This entailed conscientiously searching for the ecological themes and interpretations of sacred texts, theological traditions, and religious lifestyles (Monnot/Rognon 2020).

The structuration of the field of study of religion and ecology

It was only in the 1990s that the religion-ecology nexus became a structured and academic field of research inspired by Thomas Berry and led by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim at the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology. A new generation of scholars sought to broaden the role and impact of religious ethics and belonging on environmental conducts.[2] The *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (2005) edited by Bron Taylor and *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology* edited by Roger Gottlieb (2010) exemplify the efforts to gather the eclectic work of a generation of scholars who either explored the environmental ethics or the ecological specificities of distinct religious traditions. It is in this context that we must situate the emergence of the ISSRNC in 2007, and three years later the publication of *Dark Green Religion* (2010). During this period, the study of the religion-ecology nexus started to expand the perspective on what counts as religion and contemporary spirituality.

Similar to the tensions within the social scientific study of religion, the first decade of studying the religion-ecology nexus was still polarized between the study of established traditions, on the one hand, and the study of marginal holistic, alternative and private "spiritualities", on the other. In the 1990s, scholars such as Catherine Albanese crossed these boundaries by considering how the polysemic motifs of "Nature" in American culture supported religious creativity (1991). From the Puritan ethos of the first settlers through the civic religions of the 18th century, the metaphysical traditions of the 19th century and the indigenous revival and so-called New Age movements of the 20th century, Catherine Albanese considered the dominant and marginal—as well as the nature-friendly and destructive—religious expressions alike.

[1] I capitalize "Nature" when referring to the global concept and use "nature" when referring to local biotopes.
[2] For a detailed history of the study of religion and ecology, see Grim / Tucker 2011.

In the same vein, radical ecological movements such as *Earth First!* and *the Earth Liberation Front*, not to mention countercultural movements such as the Rainbow Family, "New Age" sacred sites or neo-pagan festivals, became innovative sites for examining the contemporary entanglements between environmental ethics and the popular dissemination of religious and spiritual worldviews (Taylor 1995; Ivakhiv 1997; Bloch 1998; Pike 2001). As scholars noticed that ecological thought and religious morals overlapped, new concepts were required to encompass phenomena bearing a "family resemblance […] despite the absence of any clear, essential, universal trait that everyone will agree constitutes religion's essence" (Taylor 2010: 3). At that point, the concept of *dark green religion* played a significant role in academia and in activist movements by extending the paradigm of a "greening of (world) religions" to other—and sometimes unexpected—social realms.

3. *Dark green religion* and the dissemination of the ecological thought

Taylor's concept of *dark green religion* encompasses authors, cultural productions, social organizations, and movements that reflect on "Nature" as being "sacred", having "intrinsic value" and worthy of "reverent care" (2010: 10). Envisioning the planet as a living and agential entity (e.g., Gaia or Mother-Earth), or believing that places, stones, plants or animals can be kin to humans and have a soul or a spirit of their own, exemplify the "experiences, perceptions, values, and practices" Taylor chose to describe with the term "*dark green religion*" (2010: 223). Be it in sports associations like the "soul surfer" subculture he uses as a case study in his book (2010: 103–126), in the American literary folklore, as well as with scientific figures such as Jane Goodall and James Lovelock or in blockbusters such as James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), on which he dedicated a book (2013), Taylor perceived the spread of the same kind of environmental ethic.

This ethic is *dark green* because it challenges a utilitarian and anthropocentric worldview by considering the needs and worth of biotopes and ecosystems over human interests, similar to Arne Næss (2005) concept of "Deep Ecology". It also acknowledges a perilous and frightening future ahead. *Dark green religion* may be considered a form of "religion" insofar as it is premised on implicit religious morals much like Bellah's conception of "civil religion" (1967). In order to distance himself from the numerous and controversial definitions of "religion" and "spirituality", Taylor mainly points to the concept of "nature religion" which "is most commonly used as an umbrella term to mean religious perceptions and practices that are characterized by a reverence for nature and that consider its destruction a desecrating act" (2010: 5). This ecological perspective on religion is particularly noteworthy as "in the modern West, such perception has been resilient, even episodically threatening the hegemony of the monotheistic consensus and, later on, challenging secular, science-based worldviews" (2010: 8).

I argue here that the main contribution of *dark green religion* has been to grasp the coincident "greening" of various and multi-sited social actors and milieus—identified as either religious, spiritual, or secular. *Dark green religion* is an analytic concept detailing the popular dissemination of ecological knowledge, mainly in Western societies. Yet, I will further discuss an additional premise of Taylor's work, namely the almost teleological and longitudinal dimension of *dark green religion*. Specifically, I will remark on how the concept also refers to a broader socio-cultural process, thus leading to the formation of a planetary religiosity. In a somewhat similar vein to the thesis advanced in Ronald Ingelhart's *Silent Revolution* (1977), Taylor suggests that a shift in post-material values can be observed in popular cultures and in alternative spirituality movements. These new worldviews and values promote social imaginaries and sensibilities revolving around a form of "ecological thought" that conceives of every living entity on the planet as

interconnected and interdependent, thus forming what the environmental philosopher Timothy Morton (2012) termed a "mesh".

The coincident "greening" of the religious, the spiritual, and the secular

One important dimension of *dark green religion* is its overt contrast to some established churches which are considered at best to be *light green*, according to which they do not challenge an anthropocentric and utilitarian worldview on nature while still being environmentally engaged. On this matter, Taylor still leaves open the possibility that *light green* religious institutions may also turn *dark green* or inspire other religious movements to do so in the forthcoming years. In a retrospective paper published in 2020, he mentions the case of a non-Christian ecospiritual movement, the Church of Deep Ecology, as an example of a formally organized religious organization that acquired a tax exemption status while promoting an egalitarian "right to live" for all species (Taylor 2020a: 501).[3] Liberal theological figures, such as Matthew Fox, who organizes Catholic Cosmic Masses with dance-floor, DJ sets, and praises new bodily forms of "reconnection with the Earth",[4] are also interesting cases where ecology and liturgy creatively entangle in anglophone contexts. Some established congregations in Continental Europe appear to be following these trends, especially in regard to the move toward a deep ecospirituality in Swiss and German parishes and Christian NGOs, as well as among Christian spokespersons (Koehrsen 2018; Monnot/Grandjean 2021). These studies have nonetheless addressed the strong institutional limits and resistances at play when *bottom-up* ecospiritual expressions seek to transform into *top-down* church organizations.

Through the category of *dark green religion*, Bron Taylor also demonstrated that the diversity of "contemporary spirituality" movements (Fedele/Knibbe 2020) has been historically shaped by moral projections of nature as a *locus* of self-experience and expression of values, harmony, and sacredness. Moreover, he demonstrated that, more than simply being narcissistic, individualistic, and depoliticized, these forms of subject-based religiosity could also foster and enhance radical environmental engagements and mobilizations. He likewise considered secular figures like primatologist Jane Goodall and cultural productions like *Avatar* (2009) as having implicit religious elements. Through the elaboration of a two-by-two typology, Bron Taylor observed different ways of sacralising Nature and of challenging the boundaries between the religious and the secular within contemporary ecological discourses and postures. In his typology, *animism* and *Gaian earth religion* combine with *naturalistic* or *supernaturalistic* approaches and epistemologies in grounding a biocentric and ecocentric ethic. Each type, however, is unstable given that

> "Dark green religious and moral sentiments are embedded in worldviews and narratives that are believed to cohere with science—but they are also often grounded in mystical or intuitive knowledge that is beyond the reach of scientific method. […] Such an understanding also helps to explain why, even when certain types and tendencies of dark green religion can be identified, the boundaries between them remain permeable, blurred, and perpetually shifting—much like the boundaries of religion itself. (Taylor 2010: 14)

Taylor thus pointed out how although an "ecological thought" has been popularized, it nonetheless acts as a vector of sociocultural transformation. It challenges the clear-cut and modernist boundaries between the religious, the spiritual and the secular, as well as between naturalistic and supernaturalistic

[3] See http://www.thechurchofdeepecology.org/about-us/ (01/12/2022).
[4] See https://www.thecosmicmass.com/ (01/12/2022).

epistemologies. By bringing forth new values, holistic worldviews, and social preoccupations at both the individual and institutional levels, ecology fosters what the sociologist Ulrich Beck has termed a "metamorphosis of the world" that involves a "new way of generating critical norms in the age of global risks" (2016: 39) and that also entails new norms and aesthetics that can easily be related to *dark green religion*.

Toward a new planetary religious ethic?

In reading Bron Taylor's work closely, one gains insight into how *dark green religion* is more than just a concept. It is invested with a militant aspiration for a radical sociocultural shift. However, in the context of conservationist milieu, international NGOs, American literary folklore, the psychedelic and Zen counterculture of the 1960s or indigenous communities and coalitions, Taylor observed a similar ethical move toward a biocentric or ecocentric view of Nature and non-humans. Starting with Earth-day in 1970, he contended that a massive cultural and ontological shift began to occur worldwide. Be it in the global North or South, he saw individuals and societies as gradually leaving a dominant "shallow" environmentalism centred mainly on struggles against pollution and resource depletion. Instead, he believed we were heading toward a "deep ecology" premised upon radical changes in lifestyles, symbolic representations, and values, and which was concerned with "diversity, complexity, autonomy, decentralization, symbiosis, egalitarianism and classlessness", in accordance with the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss' (2005: 7) influential ideas.

Whereas Taylor is more cautious when it comes to predictions and acknowledges the contemporary religious and scientific resistance toward these new environmental ethics, in his conclusion to *Dark Green Religion* (2010), he still suggests that a *dark green epidemic* might occur among intellectual elites and policymakers. In one recent writing, Taylor openly assumes that "we might be witnessing the nascent stages of a new global nature religion emerging in such cultural creativity" (2020a: 498). This "new global nature religion" would have the peculiarity of incorporating and merging evolutionary and scientific knowledge on ecosystems with a human sense of "awe", "sacredness", and "duty" to preserve the planet. For Taylor, this vision is still open to numerous models of social transition currently discussed in the environmental humanities. He nonetheless appears to favour a vision in which "spirituality" is positively viewed as a catalyst for more healthy, resilient, and sustainable lifestyles.

4. Dark green religion and social theory

I will now address at least two main lines of constructive criticism of *dark green religion* from the perspective of social theory, a perspective that did not so far engage much with Taylor's work. The first line deals with Bron Taylor's comparative method of "family resemblance" and narrow understanding of "religion" as singular. The second line of criticism contends that *dark green religion* has not been sufficiently connected to broader processes of secularization, religious pluralization, globalization, or politicization. Nor has it been adequately related to the emergence of new social movements and expressive selfhood, as theorized by James Beckford with respect to the study of contemporary religious landscapes (2003).

Context matters in *dark green religion*

Although Bron Taylor avoids adopting a universalizing stance on "religion" and conceives it more as an umbrella term, his strategic flexibility on the definition is also a weakness of his concept. On the one hand, it enables new understandings and descriptions of how an ecological thought has circulated within popular cultures in the form of values, imaginaries, and discourses inspired by diverse contemporary

religious traditions. On the other hand, it does not fully acknowledge the impact of social structuration, political and religious landscapes, power relations or national, contextual, confessional, professional, and linguistic specificities on how social actors consider "Nature" to be sacred or they attribute intrinsic and "spiritual" value to local biotopes.

Whereas Taylor conceives *dark green religion* as a broad analytic category, in sociological terms, it appears that we are rather witnessing a plurality of green religious and ecospiritual movements which consider "Nature" and "spirituality" to be unifying and universal notions. In practice, however, their claims about the universality of "Nature" and the "Self" diverge significantly (See Becci/Grandjean 2022) and are grounded in the specificity of local settings, social organizations and needs. For instance, I have shown in my own research that in the context of the Swiss wine-crafting scene an esoterically-driven agronomy—biodynamics—is locally becoming an "umbrella term" for numerous holistic, creative, and alternative care practices. Bron Taylor's concept has been adapted into *dark green agronomies* which fit better with professional expectations on wine "expressiveness" and quality (Grandjean 2021). Namely, Swiss wine-crafters translate an overall *dark green* environmental ethic into the language and needs of agronomic methods of production. The staging of a biocentric or ecocentric ethic is action-orientated and entwined with my informants' own logic of distinction within the Swiss and European wine market. These results suggest that "context matters" more than ever for understanding ecology as an emergent and encompassing sociocultural phenomena in highly localized and specific settings. While analyses that are attentive to contextual variants may give rise to new lines of criticism of *dark green religion*, they may also facilitate and clarify movements from etic to emic understandings of the concept—and reversely.

On the political forms given to "religion" and "spirituality"

I agree with Bron Taylor's observation of a socio-cultural turn comprising a "new global nature religion" and a climate of "cultural creativity". However, we should be meticulous in documenting on the field the variety of forms that entail these biocentric and ecocentric ethics, especially the way they are framed as "religious" or "universal" by their promoters. In a recent paper, Peter Beyer (2020) has convincingly argued that the forms given to "religion", "spirituality", or "culture" in public debates have strong performative dimensions. In the cases of the Canadian politics of recognition surrounding indigenous nations or reconsiderations of a French model of *laïcité* in Catholic Quebec, for instance, delineating identities, symbols or rituals as "religious", "spiritual", or "cultural" reflects distinct political orientations and objectives. Depending on the particular context in question, the display of a Christian cross in a national assembly or an indigenous rite of purification may generate political support, be challenged as problematic, or remain a largely banal and uncontested symbol of cultural heritage. In the case of *dark green religion*, it remains unclear what roles may play the explicitly religious or the religious-resembling rhetoric, aesthetics, and practices described by Taylor within political negotiations and global political struggles. For instance, in the climate youth movements or in more secular environmentalist NGOs, how are *dark green* religious registers being valorised, challenged, or eluded in favour of other ecological modes of communication and critiques?

Another limit to *dark green religion* may be that Bron Taylor does not interrogate religion as a wide and dynamic sociocultural phenomenon, "lived" in the everyday world by concrete and yet differentiated social actors. Of course, it would be inconvenient to blame Taylor for not following recent social scientific debates on religion, especially in regard to globalization, pluralization, multiple secularities, or the formation of new cultures of the selves. Yet, seeking out overall religious resemblances as well as enforcing ambivalent terms such as "nature religion" or "spirituality" without interrogating the

transformations and moving boundaries of contemporary religious expressions may be misleading and overlook the complexity of specific socio-cultural settings. This is a risk that comes with comparing extremely different contexts, which requires attending to how local meanings and forms are polysemic, interactional, fluid, possibly conflictual, as well as to how they are often grounded in (post)colonial encounters. In that sense, monographic fieldwork can provide in-depth insights which may endorse or question the broad epistemology revolving around the category of *dark green religion*.

Frédérique Louveau's (2021) analysis of the Sukyo Mahikari in Dakar, Senegal is illustrative in this regard. The Sukyo Mahikari are a new religious movement that originated in Japan and gained public visibility and recognition in Western Africa through their engagement with the pan-African project of the Great Green Wall. With the de-colonization process, Senegal inherited the French model of *laïcité*, though Sufi brotherhoods continue to play a central role in civic life. The Sukyo Mahikari, which are generally considered a "cult" in Senegal, managed to challenge the religious *status quo* by performing a restorative ritual at the Ministry of the Environment, which has been broadcasted on national television. On the one hand, their performance was informed by their ecological involvement with the project of the Great Green Wall. On the other hand, the participants employed Sukyo Mahikari's green theology, as well as elements that resonated with local histories and beliefs about nature spirits, trances, and possessions. For Louveau, this produced a "creative misunderstanding" that entailed diverse interpretations of the group's performance as "religious", "spiritual", "cultural", or even "ecological". This case study suggests that different politics of religious recognition, as well as models of environmentalism, secularism, and pluralism, may also shape the public expression and diffusion of *dark green religion*. In American religious landscapes, labelling an ethic as "religious" and "spiritual" is a way of fostering an interdisciplinary linkage between a wide array of scholars concerned about the environment and potentially interested in forming new environmental coalitions. Whether in the context of different European models of secularism or Senegal's postcolonial religious configuration, their concerns are integrated within different intellectual traditions, histories of social movements, and structures of civic and academic militancy.

5. Conclusion: The planetary future of *dark green religion*

More than a decade after the publication of *Dark Green Religion* (2010), it is worth discussing the work's strengths but also its limitations through the lens of social sciences of religion. In the realm of religious and environmental studies, Bron Taylor is the scholar who has most clearly articulated how clear and clean modernist divides between the religious, the spiritual, and the secular are overtly challenged in diverse ecological visions and expressions. His writings detail a turn accompanying the popular recognition of a global Nature in diverse localities. The global proliferation of the concept of *dark green religion* seems to be gaining momentum with German and Italian translations of the seminal book in which it was developed. It is probable that other academic publishers will continue this trend by contributing to the further dissemination of Taylor's work. This will invariably bring new criticisms but also new extensions of the concept, as well as its expansion to a wider variety of academic disciplines, as well as national and linguistic theoretical traditions. This will, in turn, help to keep religion and ecology debates lively, passionate and epistemologically stimulating. In this introduction, I have provided a brief overview of how social theory in general, and insights from the social sciences of religion in particular, may help refine the concept of *dark green religion*. This, I have argued, may be accomplished by bridging the debates with contemporary theorizations of secularization and spiritualization. It may also be accomplished by undertaking in-depth ethnographic work that explores processes of social structuration

that materialize when the entanglement of ecological awareness and religion yields newly shared environmental ethics.

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