IMAGE, PERSON, AND THE PRECONCEIVED NOTION OF MONOTHEISM; A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

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Abstract
        The study revisits, in a critical and creative manner pertaining mainly to philosophy of religion and comparative religion, the notions of *image*, *idolatry*, and *person*, laying emphasis on their tight connection to (re)defining and (re)tracing the essential features of *monotheism*. The preconceived, popular and/ or theological, misunderstanding of key-terms evoked in 'monotheistic' discourses or applied with regard to 'other' religious traditions (than the Abrahamic 'monotheisms') highlights the necessity to thoroughly and adequately re-approach the religious phenomenon and its various expressions in diverse traditions, by re-contextualizing, in scientific, non-apologetic and non-confessional ways, the relation with the 'divine' when envisaged as a unifying experience. In this framework, the *connection* with 'the One', the emergence of *personal* God, and the notion of 'chosen people' are attentively reconsidered.

Keywords: Image, idolatry, person, monotheism, divine

Introductory remarks
    There is no one religion or religious tradition 'higher', in other words 'superior', than another. Likewise, there are no 'primitive' religions. Although this statement might seem banal, given that it is widely theorized in almost every study on the philosophy or history of religions today, at the level of everyday understanding, mentality and behavior, *ex cathedra* theories have yet to take root, and the desideratum has in many respects remained academic.
    The superiority that the monotheistic religions claim over the polytheistic religions, which is falsely constructed by setting out from political and ideological prerogatives, represents merely a sub-case, albeit one that is representative and, alas, enduring.
    The establishment of a theology does not at all demonstrate the superiority of a religion. On the contrary, it is highly likely, the same as in

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the case of the 'major civilizations', sooner to represent a sign of incipient or advanced decay.

The imposition of superiority by virtue of elements that define the uniqueness of a religion is an abuse. To overvalue certain features or dimensions and to elevate them to the level of a unit of measurement on a scale of partial and subjectively constructed values is tantamount to the obstinate imposition of one's own vision at the expense of others'. If one has blond hair, one cannot impose this attribute as a criterion for the assertion of superiority. It would follow that all those who do not have blond hair would be regarded as inferior. From here to the theory of higher races is but a short step, with consequences that are all too well known.

The desire to impose one's own religion at the expense of others', with the aim of political supremacy, is by its very nature morbid. Religions cannot be imposed upon others, nor can they be demonstrated, rather they are followed and practiced by those who embrace them by their own free will.

The authentic practitioner will not wish to impose himself before the practitioners of other religions. The gesture is pointless.

An authentic religion offers a spiritual path. It may or may not be appropriate, but it will never be superior to other paths.

The same holds in regard to the desideratum of perfection. The phases of spiritual perfection cannot be higher in one religion than in another. They differ from one religion to another and from one person to another. Representations, as many as exist at the institutional level (as the religion of a community), come second and are secondary. Based on these, it is not possible to make comparisons or give verdicts regarding other religious practices.

Within the framework of each religious tradition there are practitioners who have moved through certain stages and practitioners who are at the beginning of their journey. Religions can be compared with each other, and it is desirable that they be compared, in order to enable them to communicate and in order to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of man in relation to his spiritual dimension.

There is no standard of perfection imposed by a particular tradition: every spiritually evolved person will find perfection in his own way and evaluation remains subjective. Perfection has no particular image, and this is why it is perfection.

An adequate revaluation of *uniqueness* is the key to peace between religions. Just as no relation can be 'borrowed' or reproduced by others, so too the practitioner will discover his own image in relation to the divine and the world, a unique image arising from unique connections.

Those who have gained perfection cannot be recognized by either their color or their smell… All are perfect in their own way and have their own gift.

Within each tradition there are people who have found perfection and people who are on their way to finding perfection; there are high techniques and common practices. The expression of spirituality as a religious discourse or dimension differs from person to person and from place to place.

In each tradition will be found all the phases that lead to restoration of the link with 'the divine' (dimension). The forms of manifestation and the phases will differ in their expression from one religion to another, depending on region, language, collective experience, etc.

The terms that denote the principle, the divine or the One, will also differ depending on the way in which religious experience has imagined the divine presence or dimension, setting out from representations specific to each particular context. It is absurd, for example, to insist on applying the name "God" or any other name to traditions that have a different language and which express different types of religious experience in their own specific ways.

Tao of the Taoists is neither inferior, nor primitive compared to the God of the three Abrahamic religions. It is neither a (pagan) deity, nor an idol. It bears different names and attributes, and it is alluded to through different images and representations, according to the landscape, the language and the « imaginaire » of a different religious culture. Any reading or approach depriving a tradition of its particular, distinctive features in order to make it fit for another framework, artificially established as a model, is erroneous.

The flimsy pretension of the 'monotheisms' to judge, facilely and ignorantly, religious manifestations from within other traditions demands critical re-evaluation.

Reconsidering *idolatry*

No religion possesses all the symbols of the others, since – legitimately and necessarily – it has its own symbols. These are not superior in one religion and inferior in another. Each mode of religious manifestation puts forward its own techniques and practices. Efficiency is not conferred by analyzing them comparatively, but at the level of those that practice them. Consequently, it is meaningless to compare theologies, techniques or practices (except perhaps academically, although the aims would be problematic and doubtful), inasmuch as the 'results' will be individual.

Christianity fights idolatry. Nevertheless, idolatrous (mis)understandings are at home in Christianity, in many of the 'folk' contexts of the practice and understanding of the religion adopted only through tradition.

Idolatry as a practice is misunderstood, however, as the term is applied pejoratively (and thus mistakenly) from the outset. Clarifying and pertinent

are, in this respect, the explanatory approaches of José Faur and Yehezkel Kaufmann:

"The Biblical injunction against idolatry rests on two different premises: it violates the Covenant and it is useless. […] This conception of idolatry is based on the Biblical ideal of monolatry: God ought to be worshiped according to the rituals established by Him. […] It is worth noting at this juncture that 'abōdāh zarah', the Hebrew equivalent for 'idolatry', means 'strange' – i.e. unprescribed – 'cult'." (Faur, 1978, 1-2)

"[…] the prophets ignore what we know to be authentic paganism. Their whole condemnation revolves around the taunt of fetishism." (Kaufmann, 1960, 14)

The term 'idolatry' sooner reveals the misunderstanding of those who have evaluated the practices in question, inventing a term which, in fact, gave shape to their own transgressions, but mirrored in (or rather hurled at) other religions, which thereby remain misunderstood, but negatively labeled. Idol worship as an offence and infringement of religious tradition can be found only within the 'monotheisms', demarcating their own shortcomings and blockages or failures.

A high practitioner of a tradition erroneously classed as 'idolatrous' will worship not a stone idol, but the divine presence that manifests itself through it in an effective or iconic manner. But in this case, is not the Christian who kisses an icon for its 'graven' image, as often happens, an idolater? And does not the one who worships the divine presence via a stone image transform it into an icon?

The present study neither negates nor minimizes the importance of any of the 'monotheistic' religions, but reaffirms their uniqueness, without imposing their superiority.

Superiority is not conferred through religion, but rather the quality and loftiness of the practitioner (and not even then does it manifest itself in this way), regardless of the religious tradition chosen as the path.

On the impossibility of being apologetic without borrowing an image of the divine

The only non-ideologizing and disinterested praise and glorification is that which uttered face to face and exclusively to its addressee. Perhaps the best illustration would be the praise of the angels in Isaiah 6:3, words which are repeated as part of the prayers to bless the meal (in Judaism) and in the Eucharistic offerings (in Christianity): "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of Hosts…"

To transfer praise, attempting to instill it in the other through the gesture of revealing one's own *connection* is apologetic and ideologizing. The *connection* proper cannot be 'presented' or exhibited like a precious object, with or without arrogance, just as it cannot be 'transferred' except through a

false and artificial assumption of the interlocutor. A genuine theologian or spiritual master (if we have in view types of religiosity other than those expressed through the Abrahamic religions) does not transfer his own *connection* to the pupil or disciple, but rather helps him to make his own connection by following his own path. Only in this way will praise and glorification be born from the sincerity of one's own gesture, through the personalized, unique connection of the novice, without his being told and without it being imposed upon him what to feel or utter.

Learning does not presuppose destroying what you are, through the rejection of uniqueness, of your own configuration and context, in order to absorb externally and forcibly an alien message. This is why a genuine relationship can only be unique and personalized.

The stubbornness of the image

Without a vision of the One, it is impossible for the part to comprehend the whole. It will always see the differences, as the world is a totality of parts interpreted as 'objects'. In other words, the 'leap' from the fragmentary and subjective-objectivizing vision of the part to the integrating and unifying vision of the One cannot be made from within the fragmented world, through the singular or exclusive initiative of the part, but only through the 'fragmentary' opening itself to the possibility of a "wholly different" (Otto, 1977, 25) vision, which does not belong to it and which it cannot 'produce' as an effect of any action of its own.

Every concatenation between cause and effect is a sign of not having moved beyond a fragmentary vision, within the limits of spatiotemporal sequentiality. The idea is fully illustrated by the Hindu and Buddhist vision of *karma* (for the distinction between Samsāric and Nibbānic discernment, as well as for the issue of selflessness, see the applied, rigorous and nuanced work of Peter Harvey *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvana in Early Buddhism,* 1995).

For this reason there are no techniques or recipes to attain a vision of the One. This vision *occurs*, spontaneously and unpredictably; it cannot be anticipated. Man is called upon to prepare himself, inasmuch as the relationship is reciprocal and cannot be completely established without the free participation of the practitioner.

For this reason, it will always be tempting, in opening up to the One, to lend it an image, to give it a form and content similar to the part, in order to have the feeling that relationship endures, is embodied and preserved, and this will thus be reduced to an 'object' like any other. The failure to preserve the relationship in the evanescent form of the instantaneous, spontaneous connection, living and unique in its every instant, gives birth to the forms of *memory* 'saved' in and under different images. The desire to preserve contact and the renewing gaze ends up lending embodiments to the One and the

connection with it. The embodiments, as "externalizations" (Savran, 2005, 148-189) of the relationship, aim to conserve and lend continuing meaning to the connection for the person who has experienced the One and desires to preserve it, in the hope of repeating it or passing it down to others, as a founding gesture.

The risk is twofold and arises from the erroneous, distorted interpretation of the embodiments at the level of at least two registers:

a. The erroneous interpretation of the intermediary (and fragmentary) stages that occur during the experience as being the ultimate reality and therefore as representing the ultimate threshold for achievement of the connection with the One, mistakenly imagined through manifestations that depend upon the realm of the multiple. Such a deceptive identification of the higher stages with the terminal point of the relationship constitutes an obstacle in the path of progress and therefore realization of any authentic connection with the One.

I would illustrate this type of erroneous interpretation by recurring to a Jewish famous *aggadah* present in both Talmuds (*BT*, *Hagigah* 14b, and *JT*, *Hagigah* 2.1): "Four entered Pardes. They were Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva said to them: 'When you come to the place of pure marble stones, do not say: 'Water! Water!'; for it is said: 'He who speaks untruths shall not stand before My eyes' (*Psalms* 101:7)."

It is a question of the same exacerbation of the 'part', of the fragment that replaces the whole, even if the embodiments accompany authentic, intense experiences. As long as the divine is *objectivized* through the gaze that erroneously separates object from 'object', it is not possible to dwell in connection with the One.

The One can have no image and consequently any objective representation can at most stand as a sign pointing to the divine presence.

I would take as an example the celebrated 'vision' of Elijah, which masterfully crosses all the thresholds, without lending any image to the divine (2 Kings 19:9-18).

A similarly eloquent illustration is provided, in the Zen Buddhist tradition, by a *koan* that refers to the manifest presence of the Buddha: "If you meet the Buddha on the path, kill him."

The One has no particular image, but manifests itself and is present in all images and in all forms. It results that in the higher unifying visions the multiple as a whole will stand as a sign for the presence of the One. Each part and each fragment will be a 'mirror' of the One, through a redefinition that occurs together with the new gaze, which neither separates nor lays down boundaries.

b. The second level of erroneous interpretation is that of others' understanding of the already existing objectifications or "externalizations"

(Savran, *ibid.*) of the experience of connection, provided either through being directly handed down by a person who has experience union or through tradition. Consequently, the various embodiments in the "externalized" form of the representations, images, texts, objects, beings etc. that occur during or as a result of the experience of connection will constitute either bridges to re-establish the connection for self or others, or, contrariwise, if they are interpreted erroneously, these symbolic forms will be reduced to contents that depend upon the register of the part, the fragmentary. As a result, instead of functioning as signs that open up to and point to the One, these representations will provide images inadequate to the One, attributing to it forms and attributes from the register of the multiple.

In other words, the 'monotheistic' purpose of the signs is replaced with an 'idolatrous' understanding, and the One is erroneously discovered and identified at the level of forms and representations.

I would illustrate this particular type of idolatrous attitude within a monotheistic framework, by drawing the attention, from a different and uncommon perspective, toward the controversial scene of the golden calf in *Exodus* (32:1-5, *JPS*): "And when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mount, the people gathered themselves together unto Aaron, and said unto him: 'Up, make us a god who shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man that brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we know not what is become of him.'/ And Aaron said unto them: 'Break off the golden rings, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them unto me.'/ And all the people broke off the golden rings which were in their ears, and brought them unto Aaron./ And he received it at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, and made it a molten calf; and they said: 'This is thy god, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.'/ And when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation, and said: 'Tomorrow shall be a feast to the Lord.'" Aaron made all the preparations in order to worship "the Lord", but according to a different, foreign (and thus idolatrous) cult.

Both the above risks are depicted as obstacles within the framework of every religious tradition that lays out or theorizes movement up the levels.

On the *person*

Also similar is the tendency to anthropomorphize, lending the One the image, modes and attributes of the person.

As humans, our desire to have an interlocutor that resembles us is so deep that it ends up lending human or humanized attributes to the One.

But the *person* embodied for us as a mediator towards the One cannot be reduced to the common meanings and understandings of the person. Thus, for example, an *avatar* such as Krishna will address Arjuna (*Bhagavad-Gītā*

X, XI) *as if* he had the qualities of a person, but without being a person in the common meaning of the term, something Arjuna knows all too well.

Likewise, in Tibetan Buddhism, the entities that reveal themselves to the soul in the intermediate state in the form of benevolent or terrifying deities are not persons in the way we understand the human person, but rather the embodied manifestations of various spiritual forces, energies and powers objectified in order to provide a context suitable for spiritual advancement (see, for example, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, 2006, 234-272, 387-402).

In Judaism, the biblical scene depicting the three guests of Abraham at the oak of Mamvre (*Genesis* 18) is famous. Abraham receives and regales the three "men". Viewed from the exterior, this seems nothing unusual, but Abraham recognizes the three strangers from the outset, and his friendliness and inner willingness to receive and recognize the three guests stands witness to his spiritual loftiness. Sarah sees the three "men", but does not recognize them as having been sent by the Lord. The fear she manifests in the moment when she realizes the different nature of the three guests is the sign of the difference, at the level of vision, between her and Abraham.

The same scene is given a different meaning in Eastern Christianity, for example. The image of the unexpected 'visit' frequently illustrated in Byzantine icons, where the three "men" represent the Holy Trinity.

In the dogmatic theology of the Eastern Church, the Holy Trinity is described as a "threefold person". If the attribution of *personal* qualities seems obvious and unproblematic in the case of Christ, the same cannot be said of the other two *Persons* of the triad: the Father and the Holy Ghost. In order to understand the meanings of the Christic *Person* without anthropomorphizing, the appropriate modality would be by analogy with the understanding of the other two *Persons*. How, for example, is the Holy Ghost a *Person*?

If we say that Christ is a *Person* in the common mode of our understanding with regard to the meanings of the person, we do nothing more than to make an inappropriate link between the Christic *Person* and a particular image, a particular time in human history and a particular delimited geographical space. But in canonical terms, Christ is and always will be with the Father. Consequently, the Christic *Person* cannot be reduced to the embodied manifestation of the divine presence, except by anthropomorphizing, by interposing and imposing the embodied manifestation as the image of the Christic *Person*. But the embodied manifestation is given as a sign for that which has no image.

The imposition of a *personal* image on the One is therefore a barely perceptible form of idolatry, perhaps the most refined form.

Henry Corbin even proposes the formula "metaphysical idolatry": « Le péril immanent déjà au premier moment du paradoxe du monothéisme, c'est

de faire de Dieu non pas l'Acte pur d'être, l'Un-être, mais un *Ens*, un *étant* (*mawjûd*), fût-il infiniment au-dessus des autres *étants*. […] Et c'est cela l'idolâtrie métaphysique, laquelle contredit au statut de l'*étant*, car il est impossible à un étant, un *Ens*, d'être *supremum*. […] Ce qui est la Source et Principe ne peut donc être *Ens*, un étant » (Corbin,1980, 73-74). In the same context, Corbin justifies the necessity of negative theology: « La théologie négative este présuppossée justement par l'investissement de l'*être* dans tous les *étants*, de l'Un dans tous les multiples » [*ibid.*].

The spiritual beings and entities that make themselves present in the worldly space possess, according to every tradition that has been handed down faithfully, a quality that we might name *fluidity*, understood as the potential to be otherwise at any moment and therefore to take on different images and forms. For this reason, they are described as revealing themselves in different forms (or in different places at the same time), in order to show the impossibility of capturing and fixing an image (the 'part's' desire to have another 'part' like unto it in front of it).

Christ's appearances to the Apostles in the body or in the form of the body are so different that they themselves have difficulty recognizing Him (see, for example, *Luke* 24 : 13-31, *John* 20: 14-16, or *John* 21: 4-7).

The higher modes of manifestation and understanding presuppose different relationships to matter and embodiment. In this context, matter becomes the *form* of a revelation, as a vehicle for the mediation of a sign, without being fixed or attached to a 'personality', without being separated as a limited and spatiotemporally petrified individuality. Rather, space and time in this case become bridge extended towards humans, while matter follows the fluidity and diaphanous transparency of light.

On monotheism as a relationship; concluding remarks

The connection with the One is not a given and cannot be sealed as an attribute of a religion or doctrine, as its nature is not one of unshakable 'stability'. On the contrary, the connection is (re)established and preserved through a certain orientation (and concentration) of the, as a rule, inconstant soul, with differing intermittences and intensities, even in the case of spiritual masters and teachers recognized as such (see, for example, the approach of Moses Maimonides regarding the degrees of prophecy – Maimonides,1963, 395-403).

This alternation in the dynamic of the relationship with the One stands as witness to the impossibility (and error) of describing the connection with the One as being 'existent', stable and continuous, as having the nature and enduringness of an 'object'. This outdated vision of the 'objectifying' and 'objectivizing' understanding, from the perspective of the Cartesian scission, needs to be re-evaluated in the context of current research into monotheism.

Every connection is unique in its entirety, but also thanks to the uniqueness of every moment of the relationship. The establishment (and naming) of an 'object' with the attributes of uniqueness and stability (be it a thing, a being, a phenomenon, etc.) recognizes only uniqueness in relation to other 'objects', but without penetrating as far as the perception of the uniqueness of every 'instant' of the object as uniqueness in and for itself (see, in this respect, the important study of Alexander von Rospatt, referring exclusively to the Buddhist tradition, *The Buddhist doctrine of momentariness: A Survey of the Origins and Early Phase of this Doctrine up to Vasubandhu,* 1995).

For this reason, it is inappropriate to employ the term 'monotheism' without taking into account the *living*, dynamic and personal nature of the relationship with the One, as well as the fragility and discontinuity of this connection at the personal level.

Henry Corbin brings into discussion the emergence of the *personal* God as a continuous, intradivine process synchronal with the nascence of man as a *person*:

« C'est dire ainsi que la personne divine, la forme personnelle du Dieu personnel, n'est pas elle-même l'absolu originaire ; elle est le résultat éternel d'un processus éternel dans la divinité [...] Il y a corrélation entre la naissance divine et la naissance de l'âme pour laquelle se produit cette naissance divine. Cette corrélation noue donc entre les deux termes une interdépendance, une solidarité réciproque, telle que l'un ne peut continuer d'exister sans l'autre. » (Corbin, 1981, 175-216)

The One and the multiple are correlative terms, as uniqueness cannot be affirmed through the absence of the connection with the One, which it establishes as a reflection or manifestation of itself at the level of the individual. In other words, not possessing a vision of the One in itself, religions put forward and refer to the connection with the One as is evident in the relationship with the multiple. No expression of it in discourse would otherwise be possible.

I would mention here the exemplary (and still actual) study of Aubrey R. Johnson *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God* (1961), relevant for the debate regarding Jewish monotheism and the problematic relation between the One and the Many. Johnson highlights the correspondence between the biblical vision of man as totality, and the vision, in the mirror, of God - the One manifest and present in multiple forms identified as "extensions" of the divine Personality. Restoring the plurality in the form of the multiple envisaged as "extension" of the One represents, in Johnson's vision, the only adequate reading of the relation to God which, inevitably, reinstitutes and reinforces the Jewish monotheism. The plurality of manifestations and instantiations does not cancel the condition of the One,

but reconfirms it in relation to man and its world. "In the light of the Israelite conception of man, however, it would seem that this *ruah*, as a memeber of Yahweh's heavenly Court (or 'Household'!), should be thought of as an individualization within the corporate *ruah* or 'Spirit' of Yahweh's extended Personality, in other words, that we must be prepared to recognize for the Godhead just such fluidity of reference from the One to the Many or from the Many to the One as we have already noticed in the case of man." [*ibid.*, p. 16]

Consequently, the personal capacity to understand and relate is fundamental. The inconstancy and discontinuity of the relationship with the One at the personal level makes it legitimate to employ the term 'monotheism' sooner as a postulate or desideratum established by the traditional religions, setting out from the canonical interpretation of personal experiences (re)defined as exemplary, founding gestures.

Another characteristic of dwelling in connection with the One is the *bivocality* of the relationship, as a sign of a *real* (not symbolic or imaginary) relationship.

To be more exact, regardless of whether, within the framework of a tradition, the One is given the symbols of a person, a being, or entity, the connection does not depend exclusively and univocally on the human partner. As a rule, for man its takes the concrete form of an exit from his own boundaries, as fulfillment through becoming 'unbounded', as union and communion.

The 'intervention' of the One manifests itself as a presence that re-establishes, as 'contact' is more often than not described as death and rebirth or as 'embarking upon the journey'.

Dwelling in connection with the One is correlated at the personal level with abandonment of self and negation of the gaze that isolates and confers identity through separation of beings and things.

Thus, the communion presupposes the extinction of the 'partial vision' through the receiving of the 'divine' gaze *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is not (exclusively) achieved through the will and power of the 'part', but is received concomitantly with renunciation of the 'objectifying' identification of one's own person and the world. The object, insofar as it exists, is established through difference from the subject. This separation means a gaze that emerges from communion and detaches itself from the unifying connection.

Therefore, in the case of the exemplary relationships that come to founding traditions, we speak of the 'anointed', the 'called', the 'chosen', using grammatical forms and expressions from the register of passive paradigms.

At this point I would like to make an observation regarding the phrase "chosen people" as it occurs in Judaism. 'To be chosen' does not mean 'to be different thanks to inherent superiority', but to be party to the connection with the One, through the covenant, as an institutionalized form of the relationship with the One.

Eloquent is, in this respect, the analysis of Nathan MacDonald: "[…] the primary significance of the *Shema* is the relationship between YHWH and Israel. YHWH is to be Israel's one and only; and Israel, in response, is to love YHWH. […] It will be necessary then, in exploring what Deuteronomy has to say about "monotheism", that we give careful attention to what is said about YHWH's chosen people" [4, p. 151].

Consequently, the people is not 'chosen' in comparison with other peoples (in the 'adjectival' manner), but is 'chosen by the Lord' (in the 'verbal' manner), referring to the special relationship with the one who chooses (see also Baruch Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise*, 1951, 43-56). In other words, the term "chosen" is not a description in regard to a people, but an indirect reference to dwelling in relationship with the One. In this way, 'passivity' as absolute availability on the part of the people and the 'action' of the One are concomitantly emphasized.

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