

Spaces are produced and shaped by discourses and, in turn, produce and shape discourses themselves. 'Space' is becoming a significant and complex concept for the encounter between people, cultures, religions, ideologies, politics, between histories and memories, the advantaged and the disadvantaged, the powerful and the weak. As a result, it provides a rich hermeneutical and methodological inventory for mapping interculturality and interreligiosity. This volume looks at space as a critical theory and epistemological tool within cultural studies that fosters the analysis of power structures and the deconstruction of representations of identities within our societies that are shaped by power.

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Contested Spaces, Common Ground

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Contested Spaces, Common Ground

*Space and Power Structures in
Contemporary Multireligious Societies*



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CHAPTER 12

Transreligious Critical Hermeneutics and Gender Justice: Contested Gendered Spaces

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Introduction

The theme of the ESITIS conference 2013, "Contested Spaces/Common Ground," is among the signs of a spatial turn surfacing in European intercultural and interreligious studies. This development entails looking further into how representations of religious plurality and religious and cultural encounters may be explored and analysed through theories that take space and place into account. From my own situated place within interreligious studies, being particularly concerned with gender and feminist perspectives on interreligious encounters, it is interesting to see how gendered perspectives—both of the critical and the less critical type—can relate to this turn in various ways.

First, however, I would like to make a statement about my motivation for intersecting or integrating spatial and gender perspectives, in addition to the more obvious interest from people concerned with gender issues in the first place. This intersection of perspectives has more to offer than simply being an obligatory exercise of political correctness or being observed as part of the general production of images of religious or cultural traditions being more or less women-friendly or 'progressive' in spatial terms. If we as scholars take gender perspective seriously, we have an obligation to get beyond an 'Add a woman and stir' attitude, as if the mere spatial presence of a woman or women is sufficient to cover the gender perspective. Addressing issues of theology, religion, and spatiality as well as interreligious and intercultural spaces and interactions without reflecting on what gender means and how our experiences and interpretations are shaped by it—critically or not—is to neglect crucial empirical knowledge as well as important perspectives in our analyses. Just as our religious, cultural, and social backgrounds shape our views and our epistemological positions, so they also determine much of a person's life, whether that person born as a woman or as a man. The question is: In what sense, and to what degree, does it make a difference and what does this difference mean? Related to spatiality and religious pluralism/interreligious encounters, this generates two-step questions like: Are there specific places or positions that are open or closed to a person in the traditions because of gender? And how does this affect

the relation between gender and positioning in interreligious encounters? From a broader social angle, how does a religiously contested or complex space influence one's view of and situation of gender? How these questions are answered depends on cultural, social, political, and religious conditions and webs of interpretation. The example I will give later to illustrate how I suggest one can analyse the intersection of space, position, and gender is the interpretative space of canonical texts. This example will address how the participants relate to gender and the construction of authority to interpret contested space.

Intersecting Space, Religion and Gender: The Understanding of Gender as a Category

I first need to address one more fundamental premise in this discussion of space, religion and gender, however. Poststructural gender research has generally focused on exploring and questioning what gender really *is* and if or how it can be used as a category (Butler 1990). Contesting gendered boundaries and differences between men and women and claiming recognition for different ways of being an individual man, woman, or transgendered person is one significant way of addressing gender, that generate salient questions aimed at deconstructing gender stereotypes. One of the highly intentional consequences of this deconstruction is that boundaries between the genders are contested and become blurred. This entails that the question of gender can be seen as limited to the individual person only. There is the risk of missing out on the existing gender segregation and stratification that continues to exert influence. If the signified place is limited to the individual body, one may avoid—intentionally or not—addressing gendered power structures and hierarchies that are socially based. My argumentation is by no means intended to state that individual identity is not important in exploring knowledge about gender or that critical exploration of the category of gender is not valuable. What I want to focus on is the fact that identity work for the individual does not happen in a vacuum but is formed through social interaction. In addition, one has to be aware of the effect of deconstructing the category of gender and take a stand on the question whether one wants to include a power-critical perspective in the exploration of gender and from which perspective he or she wants to do that.

Religious interpretative traditions, on the other hand, are primarily concerned about what gender implies *socially* when these traditions relate to and address gender. Perhaps this is why feminist action, which has established a firm boundary between men and women in their analysis of gendered power structures and a normative programme to change women's inferior status to

men, seems to be thriving in many Islamic settings where gender models and gender roles are visible and openly articulated. I sometimes get the impression we should look to various Islamic discourses to find the most sophisticated and revolutionary new analysis of gender. Islamic communities are places where gender is acknowledged as a significant category (Roald 2011). In many Christian churches and communities in Europe, gender issues and feminism are discussed and analysed *outside* of the religious community space, if at all. In Europe at the moment, however, there are economic and social challenges in most societies that will have an impact on how gender and women's place and space of action is interpreted and negotiated. So this might be subject to change.

The Category of Gender and the Category of Religion: Some Reflections

If gender and religion are both seen as categories, this creates a different dynamics than if one or both are not. Above I discussed some possible consequences if the category of gender is deconstructed. What about the category of religion or the combination of 'religion' and 'gender'?

The Christian feminist theologian Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza claims in a recent article called "Critical Feminist Studies in Religion" that present nationalist and fundamentalist movements of various origins more often than not use *both* 'women' and 'religion' as identity and boundary markers. Others have also stressed the point that keeping control over women becomes pivotal for religious and political leaders in certain contexts as part of a struggle to uphold a certain culture (Merry 2006). Schüssler Fiorenza also argues that this is combined with what she calls a situation she describes as follows:

Although like wom/en, religion has no public presence in the Enlightenment university, both religion and wo/men are crucial in maintaining public interest in the antithetical 'other' and in shaping cultural and communal self-identity.

SCHÜSSLER FIORENZA 2013: 47

She interprets this position as originating from a desire for an assumed objectivity—that would be without religion and without women. Schüssler Fiorenza's point is to combine the destiny of women and religiosity to be alienated from the colonial male naming of the world with the desire to "view the object of one's inquiry through the lens of things-as-they-are" (Schüssler

Fiorenza 2013: 47). For her, this implies the removal of hope and meaning for the non-privileged from academic scholarship because it implies a separation between what one sees as a 'fact' and what one assumes to be a 'value.' What is disturbing is the dynamics created when 'women' and 'religion' are claimed to be identity markers in a way that fuel fundamentalist, non-democratic, non-feminist movements, and 'women' and 'religion' are expelled at the same time from scholarly analysis and reflection and the public sphere.

I find Schüssler Fiorenza's analysis a bit too pessimistic, in particular her statement about the space in the public sphere being completely denied to women and religion. I do, however, find the way she links the categories of religion and gender (or, to be more precise, women) fruitful. The idea that the two categories may be intertwined in a form of shared destiny to represent values used in constructing essential identities and the way they (together) can risk being squeezed out and targeted as 'other' because they are not admitted into a constructed sphere of 'objectivity' is interesting. In analyses of social discourses where an intersectional power analysis is used in which the variables of religions belonging and gender may interact, it may be differences between men and women with the same religious belonging. This may indicate that either 'religion' or 'gender' is seen as more significant than the other. In any event, this way of labelling or marking groups has consequences for the space they are granted (or able to establish for themselves) in religious and non-religious settings.

The way religion and gender/women are intertwined in discourses is an important element when concerned with analysing majority-minority dynamics in multireligious Europe. The general observation is that if both women/gender and religion stay unmarked with respect to the majority religious community practice in public discourse, the minorities may be 'othered' through being marked as representing '*the* gendered' and '*the* religious' elements in a society. We can simply recall here how Muslim women—and Muslim men—are approached in public discussions on gender equality and Islam in Europe, where both their gender and their religious belonging or background combine and establish distinctive subject positions that they are often framed into. The practice of marking and non-marking minorities and the majority may result in hiding gendered power structures in the majority, including gendered power structures related to space and positions within religious majority communities. It may also put external pressure on discussions of space and positions related to gender in religious minority groups, and force these to select their defence of the most significant identity marker among themselves, which would often be the religious identity. This means gender struggles might have to be put aside.

Religion, Gender, and Social Interpretative Space

It is probably obvious by now that it is the question of what gender *does* and how it works *socially* in religious traditions and in interreligious encounters and dialogues that is my main concern in this paper, rather than questions of what gender and religion really *are*. Sociality is connected to space and place, it has a material and spatial aspect. And because sociality is connected to space and place and has material and spatial aspects, I will explore the term 'contested gendered spaces' a bit more before addressing my main example connected to interpretative space in religious traditions. How and where can we identify the contested gendered spaces, and why are they contested?

Contested Gendered Spaces: What Exactly are We Talking about?

As Kim Knott has pointed out, physical, social, and discursive spaces are claimed and negotiated in a religiously plural society, and the first step of this is to actually recognise and mark a 'space' or a specific 'place' (Knott 2005). It has to be acknowledged and identified. But when is space or a place gendered? The geographer Doreen Massey stated in her book *Space, Place and Gender*: "Particular ways of thinking about space and place are tied up with, both directly and indirectly, particular social constructions of gender relations" (Massey 1994: 2). This is based on a view that conceptualisations of space and place are dynamic and always in a process, woven into our interpretation of our surroundings, ourselves as well as others' selves, and this fits well with Knott's position. How people think about spaces is connected to their ongoing, social, and individual perceptions and construction of the world around them. Gender relations and gender and their apprehension are always a part of this, acknowledged or not. It is an interesting question, however, *when* a space or a place is considered *gendered*. It often seems to still be the case that it is the presence of women that makes a place gendered, and women claiming access to particular positions and locations that decides if a space is considered a contested one. This view means that women are marked as 'gender,' whereas men stay unmarked and remain outside categorisation.

If we keep the perspective that gender relations and gender always influences how we conceptualise a place, this implies than we mark both women and men as 'gender.' It is important to note that this does not automatically imply that space becomes more contested. Contesting a space or a particular place and/or position requires some kind of power analysis and intention of change regarding how the specific space is apprehended and a dispute over the control of the space.

In a feminist critical view, contested gendered space would be space where male dominance is contested and women claim space or additional space.

This would include being physically admitted to a particular space or place, being included in a discourse, being listened to—and being an equal part in a community, including having access to all positions along with men.

Identifying and acknowledging contested gendered spaces within religious communities will vary with time and place. This will also vary according to the criteria by which they are apprehended as contested. For some, some churches' restrictions of women being able to inhabit the place right in front of the altar, as a priest or a minister, would represent a salient example of a contested place. For others, the dispute would be to share space with men in the prayer room of the mosque. The distribution of space within the houses of worship and prayer for religions where gender and gendered boundaries are marked as significant will be able to produce discussions and disputes on space distribution and regulations of these based on the interpretation of gender.

Within religious communities, but not connected to the houses of worship and prayer, there may also be contested gendered spaces in the private sphere, in the family and the home. Connected to this is a challenge for many women across religious (and cultural) affiliations to create a safe space for themselves because they experience domestic violence and abuse. The body as the primary starting point for the experiencing of space can represent a contested place if the acknowledgement of a woman's autonomy over her body is denied.

My main example in this paper, however, is connected to contested discursive space. An important part of the religious discursive space in Christianity and Islam is interpretative space where canonical scriptures and the tradition itself are discussed, interpreted, and negotiated. Following Talal Asad (Asad 1986) and others, one may see this discursive space as the most relevant explanation of what the religious traditions are. Since they are crucial to the self-understanding, the interpretation of the world, human history, and the understanding of God and God's will, the interpretative discourses are significant. This entails that they often frame discussions and disputes on texts, interpretations and doctrines as well as on authority and access (and denial of access) to a position in the discourse. In this way, the interpretative discourses represent contested space, and this connects to gender and women both thematically and regarding gendered dynamics on inclusion and exclusion.

To locate places where the interpretation of religious traditions happens is sometimes very obvious; at other times it may be difficult to grasp and identify. If we focus on trying to find the spaces and positions for interpretative authority, this is clearly located where scriptures and tradition are interpreted by religious leaders, as well as by religiously acknowledged scholars. We should, however, also seek for the location of interpretative authority in more informal spaces: the web, informal groups and gatherings, within families. Both the formal and the informal locations of interpretative authority can be local,

national, or transnational. The web is perhaps the most significant example of a fluid, transnational space where interpretation of the traditions happens in ways that may carry a significant authority but where the impact and the actual context is difficult to measure. Anne Sofie Roald suggested earlier that the influence of the increasing number of web resources on 'ordinary' Muslims is that they are provided with many alternatives regarding interpretations and representation of interpretative authority, a development that privatises and individualises the formerly more traditional, collective interpretation (Roald 2011). This would imply that the interpretative authority becomes more fragmented, and may to a larger extent be located by the individual believer. In many Christian communities, particularly in Europe, the challenge is perhaps that the Bible as well as the tradition does not hold the same importance for the church member, and the question of interpretative authority becomes irrelevant for many because they have already established autonomy, claiming a personal authority to interpret both the Bible and the tradition (Grung 2015).

Interpretative authority can consist of and be based on different elements and can appear more or less social or hierarchical. It might indicate nothing more than the authority to hold one's own interpretation of a religious tradition as authoritative for oneself, but it usually means the authority to interpret in a way that others hold as authoritative or has great influence on others.

Questions that could be asked to help identify where the authority of interpretation is located or claimed are the following: Who names the world and names God? Who aims to give an interpretation of the human history for others? Who decides what it means to be men or women in a particular religious tradition? Who decides, on behalf of whom, the important question of who has the power or right to determine what is to be representative for the religion? The question of interpretative authority is the question of who has the power to connect their own narrative to the narrative of the religious community, and is allowed to interpret the scriptures, customs, and religious practice on the basis of their own experiences and knowledge.

When we know by whom and from what positions the intertwining of the religious traditions and activation of own references, experiences, and questions happens we can further identify the location of interpretative authority. With reference to gender perspective, or a feminist perspective, the gendered conceptualisation of these places of interpretation should be analysed through looking at the distribution of interpretative authority among women and men, as well as the structure and content of the actual interpretations regarding gender questions. Are women's narratives and experiences allowed access to the generally acknowledged pool of resources from where the authoritative interpretations are nourished and shaped?

Gender, Space, and Interpretation in Places of Interreligious Dialogue

If we move into interreligious space, including organised dialogue or more casual encounters, it is obvious that when we conceptualise a social setting as interreligious, there is more than one religious tradition represented. The question of interpretative authority slightly changes character in an interreligious context because there are different religious traditions present, and, depending on the character of the dialogue—the official, representative encounters are different than the more informal and exploratory ones—the encounter itself may be a place where there are no requests for establishing a shared 'truth' of religious interpretations, and thus there is no need to establish a shared view on authority to speak this truth.

The example I will give of an actual negotiation of interpretative authority connected to gendered space is from a Muslim-Christian encounter where Christian and Islamic canonical scriptures were read and discussed in a group of Christian and Muslim women in Norway. The texts discussed were Sura 4:34 from the Qur'an and 1 Timothy 2:8–15 from the Bible. I have discussed and analysed the substantial content of the discussion elsewhere (Grung 2015), but for now I will look at how the Christian and Muslim women participants situated themselves in the interpretative space of the group and how they viewed interpretative authority connected to the discussion over these texts. The examples are all taken from my study on gender justice (Grung 2015).

First, they all situated themselves as authoritative interpreters but in different ways. Regardless of the fact that they did not have any formal positions as religious leaders in their respective faith communities, they claimed the authority to interpret. The Christian women argued for this using what they called Christian freedom, claiming that the core values they found in Jesus' teaching were their interpretative guide. The Muslim women argued for their authority to interpret on the basis of their own knowledge, derived from Islamic scholars they trusted to be knowledgeable and fair and on the basis of the responsibility to interpret the Qur'an in a correct way that, for them, was in accordance with the Qur'anic message of justice, common sense, and human equality (including gender equality in a fundamental sense). It seems as if their awareness of themselves as women did not constitute any hindrance whatsoever to claiming the authority to interpret. The Muslim women were aware, however, that the authority to interpret in Islam is a contested space and that a *de facto* inclusion of women in this space is a challenge. The Christian women claimed that they belonged to a Christian church (The Lutheran Church of Norway) where the authority to interpret was no longer a contested

space related to gender. Instead, they had disputes with the biblical text itself, criticising the apostle Paul—one of them declared that 1 Timothy 2:8–15 could not be regarded as a Christian text at all because it opposed Jesus' teachings. They also criticised male clerics' interpretation of the text whenever it was used to promote the subjugation of women in God's name. These findings indicate that the interpretation was indeed different from a formal position and that the formal position of some clerics was itself actually reconstructed and criticised.

What motivated the women interpreters in their work were their own ethical stances based on their tradition as well as—and this was the case for the Muslim women in particular—an obligation to take part in the interpretational work within their own community to correct a paternalistic understanding that did not cohere with the core message of the religion as they saw it. It was obvious from the co-reading and interpretation that both the Christian and the Muslim women learned that, in order to understand the canonical scripture of the other, they had to relate not only to the text but also to the *readers* of the text to get contextual knowledge about how the text worked. They surprised one another in different ways: the Muslim participants were shocked at the content of 1 Timothy 2:8–15. They stated that this text was much more problematic for women than anything in the Qur'an. They also found that the type of criticism the Christian women applied to this biblical text would not be possible for them to apply to the Qur'an. The Christian women were surprised at how their Muslim colleagues interpreted the Qur'anic text with great skill and how they criticised male interpreters' work when they, in their eyes, used the text to benefit men. The Muslim readers did not, however, criticise the Qur'an but instead allied themselves with it.

The space of interpretation in this case was obviously gendered and can even be called feminist. The readers positioned themselves as authoritative and took positions where their own knowledge and experiences were woven into the interpretations—because they were women and the texts are about women. It was a space of confidence, and the place of contestation was located outside the group. It was clear, however, that some of the participants wanted to bring the interpretations from the group and the experiences that were shared to others: first, everyone thought the general public discourse should be aware of the positions taken because they could contribute to a more balanced view of the views of religious women and make the view of Islam as an oppressive religion towards women more nuanced. Second, however, the participants stated that they would have liked to involve men from their community in a shared interpretative practice on these and other texts. One may say that they wanted to make the interpretative space *more* contested to attract the interest

of religious male leaders because they were confident that they had something important to share with them. The women also stated that they were "tired of having to do all this interpretative work related to women and gender by themselves." They wanted to share the space so they could share the responsibility, even if it would mean that it became more contested.

The relation between the two religious traditions present was not so much addressed in the group; it was there as a premise. Occasionally, there were some questions or comments, and clearly there was the view that one's own religion provided the best framework or opportunity to live a good life as a woman. But what is striking is that a fundamental criticism of male dominance (the Christians addressed it mostly in the past tense) in interpretation. The view of gender was social, and the boundaries between the genders also assumed that different experiences of women and men were taken for granted. Part of the premises of the space they created was thus to retain the categories of Islam and Christianity and to keep the categories of gender.

What if this had been a more traditional interreligious encounter, for instance, with male religious leaders? Most representative dialogues are framed within a male-dominated space (King 1998; Grung 2015; Hill Fletcher 2013). Jeannine Hill Fletcher states that most religious practice, including her own church (the Roman Catholic Church), Judaism, and Islam, take "male space as the normative religious space" (Hill Fletcher 2013). Some scholars have addressed what they see as a lack of gender awareness and perspectives in interreligious dialogue (King 1998; Egnell 2006). Hill Fletcher, when analysing the ways women's presence in interreligious dialogues has been interpreted historically as well as suggesting ways to make dialogue more gender equal, states that at The World's Parliament of Religions' first convention in 1893 "the masculine gaze of mainstream religion ... could hold its attention on only one 'other'" (Hill Fletcher 2013: 169). The focus of the leaders was on the religious other, the exotic presence of people with a different religion, primarily from the colonies. Western women were integrated into the Western, male-dominated category and the 'brotherhood' directed across religious boundaries did not acknowledge a corresponding 'sisterhood.' She further states that "This androcentric bias creates historical sources that omit the presence and experience of women" (Hill Fletcher 2013: 169).

The question may be how to create an awareness of other significant identity markers/categories such as gender (social class and culture should also be mentioned here even if this paper will not focus on these). Could analysing the relation between the categories of gender/woman and religion be fruitful? This time the focus is neither on the public sphere nor the academic world (cf. Schüssler Fiorenza) but the faith communities and interreligious dialogues

/encounters. Certainly acknowledging religion and religious belonging is the default position here, and in interreligious encounters the presence of *different* religious traditions is an important premise.

An Attempt to Open a Gender Perspective: Transreligious Critical Hermeneutics

Andreas Nehring (2011) earlier problematised the term *intercultural* because it suggests an encounter between two stable, equal entities. Following Nehring's reasoning and implicit post-colonial criticism on this, I suggest the term 'transreligious dialogue' to replace 'interreligious dialogue' when speaking of a power-critical encounter (Grung 2015). What we can gain from this move regarding gender awareness and feminist perspectives is that it would make it possible to open up a perspective both for asymmetrical relations between non-stable entities in the encounters as well as explicitly including intrareligious dynamics and differences. There is an in-built possibility that interreligious encounters will focus only on *religious* differences and relate to religious boundaries as stable and non-porous. This can turn dialogue into spaces where other human differences are overlooked and neglected and thus create a space where the religious structures and boundaries may turn into fences defending the status quo, such as, for instance, when it comes down to interpretative authority and the question of who should have the right to represent a religious tradition. This affects the questions on women's access and women's possibilities to influence both the dialogue/encounter as such as well as the internal discussion in their respective faith communities.

Calling a dialogue transreligious instead of interreligious does not entail that religious boundaries and religious identity are not/should not be signified. This is not a suggestion to dissolve the categories of distinct religious traditions. But it may give an opening for the view that religions are dynamic rather than static and that there are many intrareligious differences, internal discourses, and actual and potential power struggles over inhabiting the space to represent a tradition.

Nevertheless, when we strive to move beyond the essentialism of religious and cultural groups it is a challenge to regard *women* as a group at the same time. Why do we need to regard women as persons having something in common? This is a relevant question, and the postmodernist feminists have told us that this is a blind alley. I have explained above why I do not think religious feminists (and people concerned with a gender perspective more generally) can leave the category of gender behind.

I find the concept of 'strategic essentialism' useful, launched by the feminist postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak in 1993 (Spivak 1993). 'Strategic essentialism' means all essentialisation must be temporal, and, if it is done, it should reflect a strategy and not an ontology. The challenge is, of course, the major diversity among women with respect to religion, culture, and social status, and we also speak about feminism in plural—to acknowledge that there are many and sometimes conflicting interests among women—just as is the case among men. A critical transreligious hermeneutics in a dialogue would include a gendered power analysis and a strategy to move—across religious (and other boundaries) towards gender fairness, with a basis in interpretative or discursive space.

Gender Justice as a Spatial Work Concept

I mentioned gender fairness. Talking about a critical perspective on gender relations in a transreligious or transcultural space implies a discussion on what should be the normative ideal relation between men and women. The concept of gender equality, besides being closely linked to Western discourse on gender, may also appear static and mostly connected to the legal space. The concept of gender justice, on the other hand, used by Muslim feminists like Ziba Mir-Hosseini (Mir-Hosseini 2007), secular feminists, and the UN,¹ provides us with a more dynamic approach.

Justice can both be a subjective and an objective concept; it could be articulated human experiences and law at the same time. Many of our theological traditions, as within the Christian and the Islamic traditions, have teachings and reflections on justice—rather than on equality—that a gender perspective can link to directly if both women and men are included in the interpretations of justice. The challenge of achieving gender justice—or gender fairness—can be adjusted to what different religious traditions teach about gender. It may be introduced in spaces and positions of interpretative authority in order to discuss what is a fair treatment of men—and women. So, instead of simply dismissing gender equality as a particular idea, connected to certain cultures or traditions, gender justice can function as an ideal for all traditions by their own evaluation. The challenge is, of course, the fluidity of the concept. It is a travelling concept, with translatability as its strength and vagueness as its weakness.

¹ See, for instance, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2010/1/gender-justice-key-to-achieving-the-millennium-development-goals> (accessed 14 August 2013).

In one way or another, common ground has to be *shared* ground—not only between people of different religions or cultures but also between men and women. Contested space may be something we actually need to produce more of—within respectful and just frames—if we want religious traditions and inter/transreligious encounters to be fairer regarding gender. To acknowledge and name the gendered spaces in inter- and transreligious dialogue between the religious traditions and to include discursive and interpretative spaces in this quest would be a good start.

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