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Cultural and Language Diffusion: The Spread of Judeo-Christian Religions

The innate human desire and longing for spiritual fulfillment has been evident from the earliest civilizations. In fact, many researchers and archaeologists argue that the first human societies developed to have access to a steady supply of ancient beer, which many believe was used for the purposes of religious ceremony (Muraresku 108-122). The creation of these communities eventually led to the development of language and thought, creating a new way for spirituality to be expressed. Religions formed as a way of expressing a belief system with a set of behaviors, practices, and code of ethics with the goal of achieving spiritual transcendence. The study of world religions is of extreme importance because of their impact on western civilization, whether it be an established set of moral principles or the cultivation and pursuit of knowledge (Hubbard 55-61). One overarching concept that relates to world religions is the determination of some of the primary factors that affect the growth and proliferation of certain religions. Language is one of the factors that can be viewed as having a direct relationship with religious popularity and the spread of its ideas. With over 6500 languages in existence today, understanding its unique relationship with religion gives a firsthand look into some of the root causes of cultural development (Klappenbach). The spread of Judeo-Christian religions is inherently tied to the development and cultural diffusion of religious ideas and holy works with the different languages throughout the globe.

Before the development of language, humans would communicate like other species using gestures and sounds. Evo-devo, or evolutionary developmental, theorists including Charles Darwin proposed that there might be a connection between language and toolmaking (Normile 408). They hypothesize that “the cognitive capabilities that supported toolmaking gave the toolmakers language-ready brains,” which eventually led to the emergence of language because of its benefits in communicating crafting skills (408-409). Recent studies and brain image scanning offer some support to their hypothesis regarding the origins of language. The evolution and diversification of languages from its first conception to the modern day is truly exceptional. Linguists define languages according to a common ancestor or proto language, referring to the descendants of the ancestor language as daughter languages. Some of the largest language families in terms of worldwide speakers include Indo-European with 2.9 billion estimated speakers, Sino-Tibetan with 1.2 billion, and Niger-Congo with 437 million (“Language Families of the World”). The variety of languages can be attributed to multiple factors including land separation and evolution over time. One prime example of this can be seen when speakers of the same language split or form separate communities. Over time there would be substantial and recognizable differences in the specific version of the language spoken although they resulted from the same source.

The diversity and variety of languages both in sound and structure is part of what makes language one of the most special human faculties. In a research paper by Evans and Levinson, they analyzed if there was any truth to the theory of language universals and determined that humans “are the only known species whose communication system varies fundamentally in both form and context” (431). The array of available

languages in modern existence also alludes to the development of many rich and diverse cultures. Certainly, the development of language and its growth contributed to the accelerated development and growth of human intellect and cognition. As humans developed more tools for communication, turning sounds and gestures into a complex and structured system, it made it possible not only to communicate with other humans in more advanced ways but also enhanced an individual's own mental faculties.

Language also made it possible to share spiritual thought and beliefs more easily, which with the invention of writing led to the spread of religious ideas and principles across the Earth.

There has always been a reciprocal relationship between spirituality and language. Many religions place a high value on language, whether it be the inner spirituality of the language itself or the sacredness of certain sounds. In Hinduism one approach to connecting with the different spiritual energies is through sound vibrations called "mantras" (Kempton 8). Additionally, Hinduism recognizes the Goddess Saraswati as the embodiment of "language, insight, and sound" (Kempton 177, 197). In Judaism, Hebrew is referred to as "Lashon HaKodesh" or "The Holy Language." As many religions believe that the world was created through the speech of God, language is viewed as an extremely powerful force. For example, in the beginning of the Bible every verse regarding creation begins with the phrase "And God said" (Orthodox Jewish Bible, Gen. 1.3-28). Besides for the biblical sources, many paleontologists and archaeologists found evidence supporting the hypothesis that "spirituality is rooted in our primordial origins," and looked at the development and use of symbols as "the primary language of spirituality" (Gellel 17). One of their theories is that humans created

symbols as a language mechanism through which they were able to fully access and express their innate spiritual dimension (22-23). Sluneko and Hengl described language eloquently in their research paper where they explained that language ‘owns’ individuals by “structuring how we think and feel” (48). They even go on to propose that language systems “transform anyone who starts employing them,” by turning them into the embodiment of that culture (48). Using this description of language, a new relationship between linguistics and religion is uncovered. Language can be viewed as not just a mechanism for communication, but the embodiment of a culture itself.

Before exploring the spread of the Judeo-Christian religions individually it is important to analyze how aspects of a certain culture spread in general. The field of anthropology defines the term cultural diffusion as “the spread of a cultural item from its place of origin to other places” (King et al.). The diffusion process, by which one culture transmits cultural traits to another society can happen for a multitude of reasons including “migration, trade, war, and other contact” (King et al.). Essentially, cultural diffusion happens when two different and separate societies encounter one another. Religion is one of those “cultural items” that can diffuse from one culture to another. In his research paper, Chris Park analyzes the connection that religion has with geography. He identifies a two-way relationship whereby the religion of one culture is diffused throughout a new location and its inhabitants while at the same time the religions themselves become influenced by the different traits and customs of the newly inducted culture (10-12). In this way many religions have undergone a great deal of change as they spread. Within the framework of cultural diffusion is the specific distribution of language, which is referred to as language diffusion. Language diffusion

is defined as the “spread of a dominant language and the resulting retreat of a minority one” (“Language Diffusion”). For the purposes of this paper the term “language diffusion” is expanded to identify the reciprocal effect of both the dominant and minority language on each other. The distribution and diffusion of language and religion have an evident relationship that can be investigated by exploring the spread of Judeo-Christian religions and principles.

The term Judeo-Christian is used to group together two of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity. Judaism is often referred to as the world’s oldest monotheistic religion, dating back nearly 4000 years (“Judaism”). Currently, there are about 14 million worldwide with the majority living in Israel and the United States (“Judaism”). Christianity is the most widely practiced religion in the world with over 2 billion followers (“Christianity”). Due to the success and worldwide adoption of Christianity, many historians refer to it as “the most successful spiritual mission in human history” (“Christianity”). Followers of Christianity can be seen across the globe, a sharp contrast from the high concentration of Jews in only two main countries (see fig. 1).

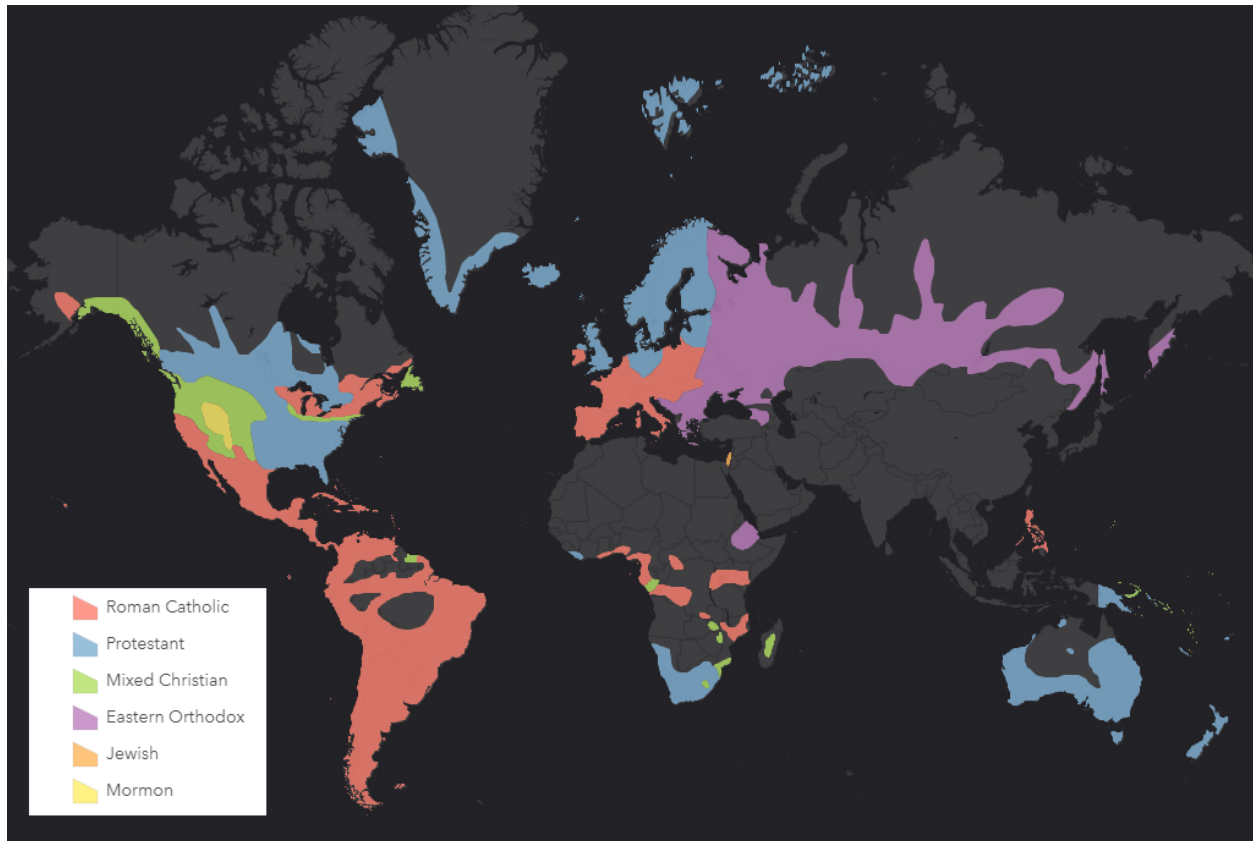


Fig 1: Jewish & Christian Main Geographical Locations. “Language and religion - Human Geography GeoInquiries.”

<https://www.arcgis.com/home/webmap/viewer.html?webmap=cbb3f933cf5f4b7f8bdbcea294fcdacc>.

Both stemming from the same foundation the two interrelated faiths have had drastically different amounts of “worldwide success,” with regards to different cultures adopting the faith. There are some obvious reasons for that. First, Jewish tradition does not actively recruit others to join their faith and has very stringent laws regarding conversions. Christianity, on the other hand, sought to spread the word to as many people as possible, beginning even in the early days of Christianity with the missionary journeys of Paul the Apostle. However, even though these are some of the overlying surface level

factors, exploration into some of the intricate influences of religious growth unveils the role that language played in the spread of Judeo-Christian religions.

Judaism and Christianity had a very different approach when it came to the establishment of a language for their religion. The primary dialect of the Jewish faith has always been one language, Hebrew, which they refer to as the holy language. However, other languages like Aramaic and Yiddish seeped into the culture as Jewish people began to spread across Europe. Nevertheless, Hebrew has always been the established cultural language and is the primary language used in religious circles for religious services. The role of language within Christianity shows a completely different story. There has never really been an established Christian language, as Christians were never just one ethnicity or grouped together in one geographical location (Johnson). In fact, Christians are “mother-tongue speakers of 82% of the world’s languages” (see fig. 2). In contrast, Muslims who make up the next largest group only have native speakers of 25% of the world languages (Johnson). While there is no official language of Christian faith, they do hold three languages to be sacred. These are the three languages that were inscribed on the cross, where it is said that “the sign was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin” (KJ21, John 19.20). They also have some liturgical languages that are not really used in practice but maintain high esteem within liturgy due to tradition. Exploring the history of both faiths will help identify the relationships that exist between languages and the spread of Judeo-Christian religions.

Mother tongues with the most Christians, 2020

	Language	Population	Christians	%
1	Spanish	440,549,000	413,007,000	93.7
2	English	346,615,000	249,900,000	72.1
3	Portuguese	226,284,000	206,388,000	91.2
4	Russian	136,418,000	125,243,000	91.8
5	Chinese	1,390,814,000	105,431,000	7.6
6	French	65,165,000	45,331,000	69.6
7	Tagalog	42,784,000	41,954,000	98.1
8	German	57,793,000	39,461,000	68.3
9	Polish	40,998,000	38,556,000	94.0
10	Ukrainian	37,038,000	32,522,000	87.8

Source: World Christian Database

Figure 2: “Mother-tongue languages spoken by Christians.” *Christianity & Language*, Dr. Todd Johnson, 2020, <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/christianity-language/>.

The dispersion of the Jewish people started long before the rise of Christianity. In 587 B.C.E the Kingdom of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians (Seltzer). The Jews were exiled to Babylon, the location of modern-day southern Iraq. At the time, the Jewish language was entirely Hebrew. The Neo-Babylonian empire consisted of two primary languages Akkadian and Aramaic, although Aramaic was the language that was primarily used by the time of King Nebuchadnezzar II (George 60). The aftershock of this effect on Jewish culture is still visible today. For a long period of time Aramaic replaced Hebrew as the primary language of the Jews. This is evident from many of the holy books written at the time. Certain portions of the Book of Prophets are written in Aramaic as are the books of the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmud’s (“Aramaic

Language”). While Hebrew remained the official language of the religion, “Aramaic was used by the common people” (“Aramaic Language”). The ripple effect of this monumental language change has a direct effect on Christianity, as both Jesus and the 12 Apostles, who were of Jewish origin, are believed to have spoken Aramaic (Pruitt; “Aramaic Language”). The Aramaic language featured a rapid decline in the seventh century CE when Muslim armies conquered the area and established Arabic as the main tongue of the Middle East. The only reason Aramaic is not completely extinct today is because it was established within other cultures. In a news article published in the UK in 2015, they identified that the dying language was still spoken by “isolated communities of different Christian, Jewish, and Mandaean ethnic groups” (Adams).

Besides for the addition of Aramaic into Jewish culture, there was a massive contribution made during the mid-third century BCE that resulted in a large portion of Jewish culture becoming accessible to much of the world at the time. During the first diaspora there was a large Jewish settlement in Alexandria, Egypt who provided the first translated copy of the Pentateuch in Greek called the Septuagint (Ages 3). Before this translation Jewish culture was not accessible to the rest of the world as the sacred text called the Torah, or Pentateuch, was only written in Hebrew. The translation is believed to have come about at the request of King Ptolemy as is indicated in both the Talmud and in a letter from Greek poet Aristeas to his brother Philocrates. (William Davidson Talmud, Megilla 9a; Davila). This translation was extremely monumental as there are theories that suggest that “Christianity fared well in Asia minor because the ancient Jewish communities there had prepared the way by making the indigenous populations aware of Hebrew Scripture” (Ages 3). In addition, the New Testament quotes text from

the Septuagint, also referred to as LXX, much more often than the original Hebrew version (Nicole 142). Therefore, this one translation can be looked at as one of the monumental factors that led to the eventual spread of Judeo-Christian religions and principles throughout many cultures.

The second diaspora of the Jews by the Roman empire led to the permanent expulsion of the Jews from Palestine in the first century and resulted in Jewish history being exposed “to all major civilizations: Greek, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic, Asiatic, and Communist” in addition to the more modern “British, French, etc.” (Ages 22). The Jewish diaspora is often looked at as being the same as the history of civilization itself (see fig. 3).

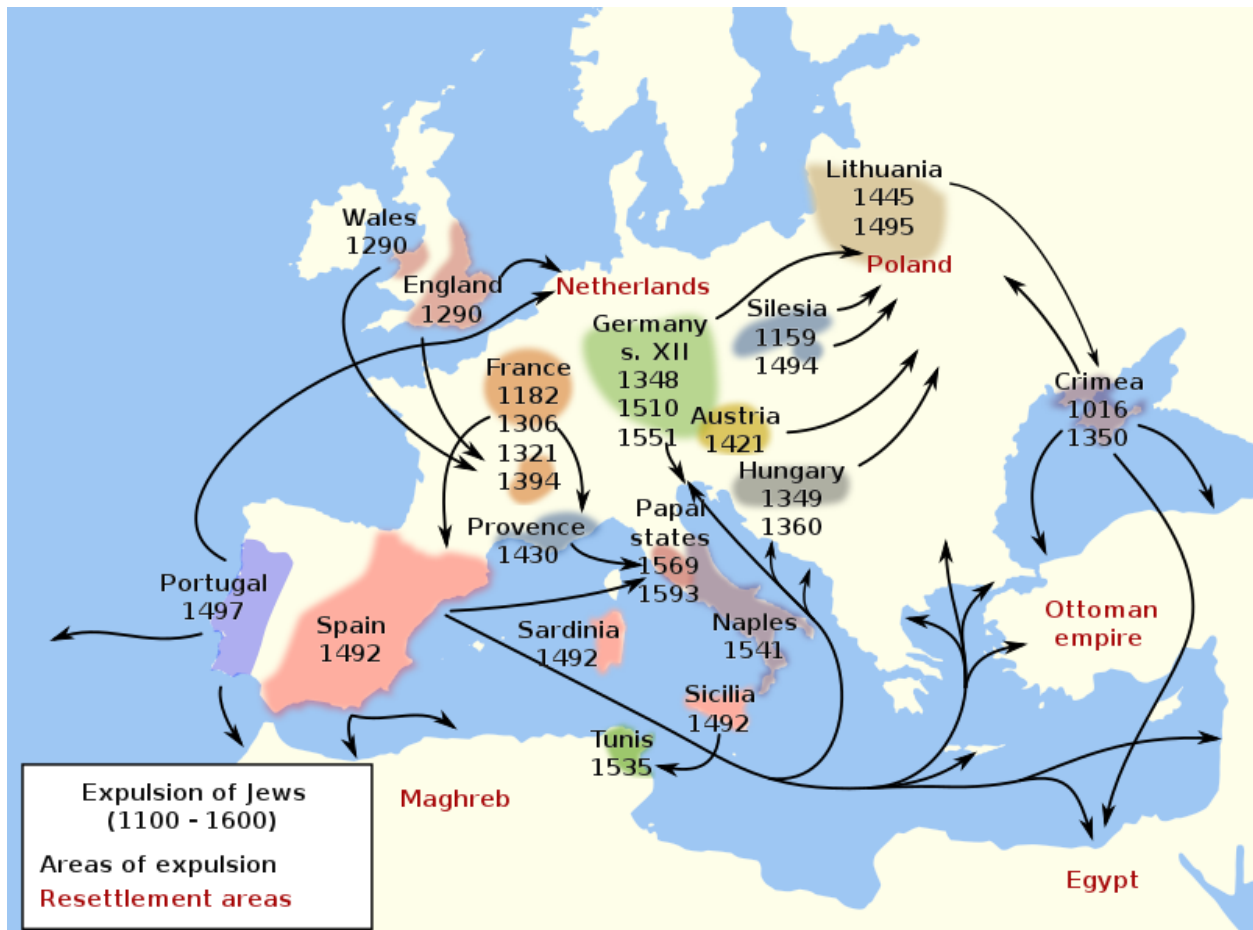


Figure 3: The Jewish Diaspora, "Expulsion of Jews in Europe 1100-1600." *Jewish Wikipedia*, <http://www.jewishwikipedia.info/diaspora.html>

While there was no official settlement from the second diaspora and onwards until the establishment of Israel in 1948, Jewish culture is sprinkled throughout history. As the Jewish people spread, they adopted the prominent language of the civilization they were living in, as is the traditional impact of language diffusion. Nonetheless, Hebrew was still maintained throughout as the official religion of the culture. There is reason to believe that the retainment of Hebrew and other Jewish-influenced languages like Yiddish is what kept Jewish culture alive for so long. In fact, in the late 1700's a secular German Jew named Moses Mendelssohn advocated the "abandonment of Yiddish and Hebrew in exchange for modern German" to effect a rapprochement between Jews and Germans (Ages 126). It worked a little too well. The abandonment of Yiddish and Hebrew led to the eventual disregard of Judaism itself in what was essentially the first mass voluntary assimilation of Jews (Ages 127). This is further evidence of the intricate relationship between language and culture.

The Christian approach to language differs greatly from the approach taken by Judaism. The reasoning for this is primarily because of the Christian view on conversion which is summed up perfectly in the following verse of Matthew: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (ESV, Matthew 28.19-20). The goal of Christianity from the beginning was not to form an individualistic culture, but to spread across a multitude of cultures and bring them to practice the Christian faith. The earliest evidence of this can be seen from the creation of the New Testament itself. One might question why the New

Testament was originally written in Greek when it would make much more sense for it to have been written in Hebrew or Aramaic (Janse 646; "Biblical Translation"). After all, that was the language of the Jewish population at the time, and most believe Aramaic was the language that Jesus and the Apostles spoke. Not only was the New Testament written in Greek, but it was written in common, everyday Greek instead of classical Greek (Janse 647-649). Analyzing the Christian mission and intention, the choice of language for the New Testament becomes obvious as Greek was the "lingua franca" or the common language at that time in the first century C.E. (Pruitt). In fact, similarities have been found between the Ancient Greek of *The Bacchae* and the *Gospel of John*, and some surmise that John used the language purposely to "appeal to any Greek speaker at the time." (Muraresku 197). Thus, Christianity was able to reach a broad audience where the message itself was ingrained within the language of the specific culture being recruited. Since language shapes how humans "think and feel," Christianity was able to win over a lot of people.

Facing early persecution, the turning point of Christian history was when "Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity," after which religious tolerance shifted in the Roman Empire ("Christianity"). Through the formation of the Roman Catholic Church and the mass conquering of land by the Roman Empire, Christianity spread farther East. Its diffusion and growth continued whereby it became the primary religion of Europe. The European empires spread and so did Christianity, and through the colonization of countries like Spain and Portugal the Christian faith was able to extend even further. This diffusion is evidenced by the "90% of Latin American's who identify as Roman Catholic today" (Lipka). At every point along the way the Christian faith became

diffused by surrounding cultures by taking on the individualism of the culture, especially its language. Therefore “translatability is at the core of Christian theology” and the reason for the “vast amounts of diversity within the religion.” (Johnson). By refusing the adoption of a central, “holy” language, Christianity itself was able to diffuse itself within multiple cultures unlike any other religion in recorded history. Anyone and everyone could practice Christianity in their mother language which allowed for the quick and easy adaptation of the religion.

The establishment of Protestant Christianity shows another side to the multi-faceted relationship between religion and language. Before Martin Luther came around in 1517 C.E, St. Jerome translated a Latin version of the Bible which became the standard of the time (“Biblical Translation”). When Latin looked like it was becoming an official language of the Church, Martin Luther “advocated for the printing of the Bible in the language of the reader, rather than in Latin” (Harvey). After all, the widespread use of Christianity was tied to its adaption to the language of multiple cultures. Interestingly, when Martin Luther wrote what became the official Protestant Bible, he went back to the original Greek and Hebrew to translate it into German (“Biblical Translation”). Therefore, the two major sects of Christianity stem from two entirely different language bases, Catholicism and Romance languages versus Protestantism and Germanic languages. While this could be seen as mere coincidence, Martin Luther could have been sending a message when he purposely circumvented the popular Latin version for his translation of the Bible into German. It is almost as if he was signifying the start of a new path for Christianity, and complete separation of language, the embodiment of a culture itself, was the perfect way to start the new tradition.

The development and cultural diffusion of religions within languages aided in the spread of Judeo-Christian religions and ideologies across civilizations. Language itself is a powerful human faculty that aids in the sharpening of other mental faculties. It also has an important role in the spiritual pursuits of an individual. Whether the focus is on one specific “holy” language, or on the uniqueness and beauty of the diversity of languages across the planet, language has always played an important role in the expressivity of religious ideas. The invention of writing added another dimension to the spread of religious principles, as its ideas and concepts were able to be spread to other societies and cultures. As the relationship between language and religion is multi-faceted its influence can be seen in a variety of ways. The spread of Judeo-Christian religions shows two different sides of that relationship. Judaism is a faith that makes use of a universal “holy” language. Even after the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek, Hebrew remained the language of worship. Although gentiles now had access to the religious texts of the Jews in their language, they remained separate cultures. In fact, the Jewish religion never spread into other cultures besides for its eventual adaptation into the other Abrahamic religions which was made possible by the Septuagint. Christianity, on the other hand, did not form any central, established language, as they wanted the faith to become accessible to anyone. The Christian faith experienced cultural diffusion in every new civilization which is why “all peoples, languages and cultures have a unique contribution to World Christianity” (Johnson). Language has the unique ability to become the embodiment of a culture. With Judaism, the survival of Hebrew has a direct relationship with the survival of the Jewish people all these years. As for Christianity, its unique ability to morph itself into the language and culture of

different civilizations is part of the reason for its mass spread and success. The relationship between religion and language expresses the unique power that language possesses, more than any other human faculty, to open the mind and hearts of humanity to spiritual enlightenment and transcendence.

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