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Rose Aslan

California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, California

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ROSE ASLAN

Room at the Table: Reflections on Identity and Inclusion from a Lutheran-Friendly Muslim

Every time I leave my office in Soiland Humanities Building at my university, I pass by a brass statue of Richard Pederson, the son of a Norwegian immigrant who ran a working farm with crops and chickens. He leans heavily on a shovel that represents the hard work he put into his farm, and a look of satisfaction seems to be on his face as he looks over the expanse of the university. According

to California Lutheran University (CLU) lore, Pederson, a Lutheran himself, donated his 130-acre farm in 1957 to the California Lutheran Educational Foundation (CLEF) to establish the first Lutheran college in California. Pederson told Orville Dahl, the executive secretary of CLEF, that he had been waiting for him and that it was his destiny to donate the land. Pederson's wish had been to "provide youth with the benefits of Christian education in a day when spiritual values can well decide the course of world history" (Swanson 100).

Founded by Lutherans, initially taught by Lutherans, and with almost an entirely Lutheran student body, CLU was created as a regional college for Lutheran students. Despite its origins, the university quickly diversified due to



Rose Aslan (center) with students from California Lutheran University.

its location in southern California, and is currently involved in an ongoing discussion to define its relationship to Lutheranism.

In this essay, I discuss the opportunities and experiences of teaching Islam in the Religion Department at CLU, an ELCA-affiliated university located in Thousand Oaks, California.

Before working at my current institution, I taught courses on

Islam at Guilford College in Greensboro, North Carolina, which is affiliated with the Quakers. There I gained some sense of what it means to teach religion in a university that has religious roots and therefore differs from my public education experience.¹ Trained in religious studies at a public Research 1 university, I had not been fully prepared to teach in a small liberal arts university that had a church affiliation. However, I quickly embraced my new role and made an effort to study the lingo of my Lutheran context.

To understand the place of Islam at CLU, I will first look at discussions among Lutherans about their understanding of Lutheran higher education and the transformation (at some ELCA institutions) from a Christian-centric approach to a more inclusive one that continues to make use of

Rose Aslan is Assistant Professor of Religion at California Lutheran University, Thousand Oaks, California. A longer version of this essay will appear in the Fall 2017 issue of the *Muslim World Journal*.

Lutheran concepts to galvanize its identity. I will then reflect on my personal experience of teaching Islam inside and outside the classroom. CLU's Department of Religion has been taking serious measures to integrate interfaith studies into its curriculum. By educating students about religions other than Christianity, my department hopes to increase students' religious literacy and ability to live in a religiously diverse society.

Lutheran Identity and Vocation

To understand what it means to teach Islam at a Lutheran institution, I first delve into the question of what it means to a university in the United States to be Lutheran and how it affects the teaching in their religion and theology departments. Lutherans stress that the denomination is unique because of its stress on critical thinking, debate, and the questioning of authority. The movement developed out of critical discussions that took place at the University of Wittenberg, where Martin Luther and his colleagues strove to reform the Catholic Church as part of a broader educational mission (Christenson 15). Many colleges and universities in the United States have undergone what some Lutheran scholars call secularization whereby they have drifted from their Lutheran identities. Because of these changing factors, Lutheran institutions have had to reevaluate the role that their religious tradition plays in institutional identity (Childers 6).

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Over the twentieth century, these universities and colleges developed into full-fledged institutions with a growing non-Lutheran population among students, faculty, and administration. These institutions were no longer "for Lutherans or by Lutherans," and some church leaders and alumni mourned the loss of these Lutheran-centered campuses where activities such as attending chapel stopped playing a central role in campus

life. Additionally, Lutheran institutions were no longer responsible for the "preservation and promulgation" of Lutheranism (Christenson 23). Instead, these institutions became well-reputed liberal arts universities and colleges with a Lutheran heritage that did not directly impact most students, faculty, or staff. Lutheran colleges and universities are currently facing identity crises where they need to market themselves to primarily non-Lutheran prospective students while figuring out what to do with their Lutheran heritage and mission.

Vocation is one of the most important concepts within the Lutheran tradition, and it is also part of the discussions on the identity of Lutheran institutions. Lutherans define vocation in various ways. One popular way to understand the term is as "the calling to serve, in love, the deep needs of those we have at hand to serve" (Christenson 27). Another more general definition of vocation looks "to help...students seek truth and meaningful service in the context of a religiously diverse community" (Reed 94). Some Lutheran scholars believe that Christianity needs to be part and parcel of a Lutheran educational institutional, while others hold that the concept of vocation should be understood more broadly to include—and even celebrate—students, faculty, and administrators from diverse, non-Lutheran backgrounds. Many Lutheran institutions, including CLU, have begun to adopt the "vocation model," as inspired by Luther's understanding of vocation. Luther developed the concept of vocation to apply to every person to ensure they were fulfilling their calling in life to fulfill the needs of their neighbors, be it as a scholar, a cobbler, or a physician, as a servant of God, but not necessarily in the realm of religion (Simmons 25).

Of course, whether "vocation" is expansive and inclusive enough to connect non-Christians to mission depends on what one means by it. Ernest L. Simmons sees vocation as primarily a *Christian* mission. According to Simmons, the education offered by a Lutheran college or university should be Christian in essence, although it should not force religion on its students and employees. Simmons sees the tension of ensuring that faith is part of the conversation without pushing it onto others as a part of the "creative expression" in Lutheranism. Reconciling the confessional movement with secularism is at the heart of the tradition. Simmons holds that non-Lutheran Christians

and people from other religions can contribute to the Lutheran project of identity formation (Simmons 7, 21).

For Simmons, the paradox of wanting to infuse the campus with a Lutheran spirit and encouraging non-Lutherans to take part in this mission is both refreshing and frustrating for faculty and staff. It would seem that non-Lutherans first need to learn more about Lutheranism and then need to ensure that they work towards this mission while remaining faithful to their religious affiliation or non-affiliation. Simmons proposes that, while a Lutheran university should create a pluralistic society by ensuring that all faith traditions are welcomed, the Christian perspective and Christian thought should be “brought into relationship with every discipline on campus in whatever manner is appropriate to that discipline” (Simmons 69). Simmons’s proposal would mean that Lutheran institutions would expect their non-Lutheran employees to embrace values that may differ from their own and to further them as part of the university’s goals; they would sometimes need to conform to fit into a uniquely Christian/Lutheran context. The clear mission of the university would not provide the more pluralistic model of CLU, and I do not know many members of the campus community who would be comfortable with this form of privileging of Christian power, space, or learning.

Simmons proposes that dialogue with the Christian faith be part and parcel of every discussion and class on campus (Simmons 67). Some of what Simmons describes as the mission of a Lutheran institution is part of the mission of CLU’s Religion Department as well as the Office of University Ministries and the Office of Mission and Identity, but not necessarily other departments on campus. For some, maintaining a Lutheran spirit on campus means infusing life on campus with Christian ideals, but for others, including CLU, it means reimagining the mission and vision of a Lutheran institution from the ground up.

From Guest to Cohost at CLU

Traditional understandings of Lutheran higher education appear to be on the wane in the twenty-first century as Lutheran institutions grapple with the changing nature of their campuses. A more standard approach to Lutheran identity, at least at CLU, recognizes the importance of

the Lutheran aspect of the university but represents a more inclusive approach that allows non-Lutherans to chime in on the future and identity of the university. One of my colleagues in CLU’s Religion Department (who is a non-Lutheran Christian) grapples with this issue a lot and posits that:

We need to recognize that there is a grieving process among Lutherans because we are losing what we thought our identity was all about. But the good news is that it’s an opportunity to realize that those were just trappings, but the core of Lutheran identity, the ruthless search for truth, doesn’t let institutions stand in the way. The great challenge is to maintain a degree of malleability....We can talk to other traditions now, but we can discover where our place in that is. We have to let go of what we thought ... Lutheran and Lutheran higher education were all about.

My colleague’s words reflect that of other colleagues who have given me hope that non-Lutherans, and even non-Christians, can begin to take more ownership at the university instead of remaining as guests. This colleague proposes that members of the campus community consider themselves part-Lutheran as a form of institutional identity. I would rather consider myself a Lutheran-friendly Muslim (as in, a Muslim who is well-versed in Lutheran terminology and identity politics) rather than part-Lutheran. As a non-Christian, I strive to be a valued member of my university because of who I am and what I teach rather than because of my relationship to Lutheran ideals. I do draw inspiration from Lutheran ideals for higher education, but also draw from other sources.

An example of a Lutheran college grappling with its identity comes from Jacqueline Bussie, who teaches religion at Concordia College in Morehead, Minnesota. Bussie highlights “reconciled diversity,” which is inspired by an ELCA social statement on ecumenism, to explain the importance of interfaith engagement on campuses. For Bussie, the ELCA must “embrace, not erase, diversity; [it must] seek reconciliation in diversity’s midst” (Bussie 36-37). Because of their interfaith work, Bussie’s college eventually came up with an official college statement on interfaith engagement that places emphasis on this work

“because of its Lutheran dedication to prepare thoughtful and informed global citizens who foster wholeness and hope, build peace through understanding, and serve the world together” (Bussie 37). Faculty and members of the administration at CLU are currently exploring approaches similar to that of Concordia College. I often hear colleagues and members of the administration expressing their mission to create a pluralistic campus *because* of the university’s Lutheran identity.

California Lutheran University is the newest of Lutheran universities and colleges that were founded around the country beginning in the 1800s. CLU—then California Lutheran College (CLC)—was established in 1959 and opened to students in 1961. Three different branches of the Lutheran church helped create CLU through a land donation by a chicken farmer who owned a ranch in the burgeoning bedroom community of Thousand Oaks, which is about an hour’s drive from central Los Angeles (Solberg 312). CLU remains the only ELCA university in California and is only one of two ELCA universities in the western United States, with Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington, being the other one.² Unlike most other ELCA universities, CLU was founded by Lutherans from multiple ethnic groups and was meant to be inclusive of Christians rather than just Lutherans. And yet, in its early years, CLC required all new hires to be Christian, students to take four courses in religion, and for the entire campus community to attend chapel services. In CLC’s early context, “Christ [was] at the center” as the host. The entire campus was expected to live their life according to Christian values (Swanson 102).

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A report on Lutheran education from 1975 categorized California Lutheran College as a Christian college. The mission statement of CLC at the time was “to provide the intellectual, spiritual, moral, and cultural environment where Christian scholars may nurture the talents and develop the character of their students and guide them to

lives of more effective service to their fellowmen, motivated and empowered by a love of Christ, truth, and freedom. The basic aim...is to prepare students for meaningful adult lives through the achievement of their best Christian potential” (Gamelin 8). Compare this mission statement to CLU’s current statement: “to educate leaders for a global society who are strong in character and judgment, confident in their identity and vocation, and committed to service and justice” (*Strategic Planning*). It was not until a 1983 WASC evaluation that recommended CLC become “multiculturally inclusive” that the college revised its mission statement to welcome “students of all ages as well as all cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds” (Swanson 111).

Teaching Religions in a Lutheran Institution

In previous years at CLU, the Religion Department primarily offered courses on the Hebrew Bible, New Testament, theology, ethics, Christian history, as well as on topics such as Judaism, world religions, and women and religion. With this model, the university prioritized the scriptural traditions of Christianity for the student body, and other courses were primarily taken only by majors and minors. This approach ensured that Lutheran identity remained at the forefront while also allowing others to be “self-conscious” about their personal religious beliefs and identities, and to engage in what Simmons calls “confessional dialogue” between traditions (Swanson 23). This understanding differs from how my Lutheran and other Christian colleagues at CLU presently discuss Lutheran identity. My colleagues do not expect me to teach about Islam from a Christian perspective—although I do utilize a textbook, *Oil and Water: Two Faiths One God*, by Amir Hussein, that contextualizes Islam for primarily Christian readers. By using this book, written by a Muslim scholar of Islam who lives in Southern California and teaches at a Jesuit University, I believe that I can help students learn about Islam from their perspectives while also giving them a distinctively Muslim perspective. I would probably not use this textbook if I were teaching at a public or private secular university, but it seems to work well in my current context.

There is a small population of Muslim students on the campus, including some international students primarily

from Gulf countries, as well as Muslim American students. The university's Samuelson Chapel also contains the Wennes Interfaith Chapel, which contains ritual items and scriptures from many of the world's religions, including a collection of prayer carpets. The chapel is open 24 hours a day and students can use it for their five daily prayers. At the time of writing, work is underway to establish a Muslim Students Association and to eventually hire a Muslim chaplain to coordinate activities for Muslim students.

CLU's Religion Department is a hybrid between scholars trained in religious studies and those trained in theology. Most of my colleagues see these two approaches as going hand in hand in their research, activism, and teaching. As someone trained in religious studies at a public university, I see myself becoming more of a hybrid scholar because I not only teach about Islam and Muslims but also am invested in and work with local Muslim communities.

The department has two sets of majors and minors. The first is in Religion, which is equivalent to religious studies, and which familiarizes students with methods and theories of religious studies as well as different religions. The other major/minor is in Theology and Christian Leadership, and it offers students four different tracks through which they can gain prepare for Christian seminary or ministerial church vocations.

In recent years, the Religion Department has been completely overhauled as senior faculty retired and a new generation of faculty from a wider array of disciplinary and confessional backgrounds came in. With this change, the department gains a more comprehensive approach to teaching about religion, with emphasis on religious pluralism and interfaith understanding and more thematic courses that include, but do not exclusively study, Christianity.

The department's former mission was to focus "on the Christian tradition in its manifold expressions." Undergraduate students presently must take two religion courses to graduate: the freshman seminar called "Introduction to Christianity" and then any upper division religion course. In order to reflect the interests and backgrounds of an increasingly diverse student body, the department is currently transitioning from teaching "Introduction to Christianity" to teaching a new iteration of the course called "Religion, Identity, and Vocation." Any faculty member can teach this course according to their

strengths and interests. The new name and configuration of the course also ensure that faculty place emphasis on vocation as a Lutheran concept, albeit one that students can investigate through multiple lenses.

Teaching Islam, Christianity, and Pluralism

When I began teaching at CLU in the Fall of 2014, I had the immediate challenge of having to teach "Introduction to Christianity" and "Global Religions" in my first semester. I had primarily been trained to teach introductory and specialized courses on Islam, but here I was, fresh out of graduate school, and I felt as if I were expected to become an expert on Christianity and many of the world's religions. The other non-Christian faculty member in the department (a practicing Sikh) has also taught "Introduction to Christianity" for the past six years and now considers himself, perhaps jokingly, a part-Lutheran Sikh. Despite the course name, my colleagues reassured me that my religious identity was no barrier to teaching the course and that they wanted me to teach the course because of the Lutheran ideals of inclusivism.

To handle teaching a course on Christianity, I decided to approach the course from my strengths, and after consulting with some of my new colleagues, I formulated the course to focus on the "Abrahamic religions." At the beginning of every semester, I find myself explaining that the course will not follow the course title directly and instead will divide the course up evenly between the three religions. Teaching about Christianity at a Christian university to a majority of students who identify as Christian or who come from a Christian home is intimidating. But by introducing Judaism and Islam alongside their study of Christianity, students learn to appreciate the diversity of religion and the vital role it plays in society. I have continued to develop and tweak my iteration of the course, and the entire department has been working to redevelop the course to reflect the university and department's evolving understanding of the role of the Religion Department, and what we think we should be offering to our students.

Many of the students at CLU come from Christian backgrounds and have a mixed response when I tell them what we will be covering in class. Based on student feedback in person and my evaluations, the majority of students are excited to study different religions than the one they

have learned about for much of their lives, yet a small minority is a bit disappointed that we do not spend enough time on Christianity. Some students also admit to being surprised at the beginning of the semester that I will be their instructor for the course, considering that I am a younger female professor who wears a headscarf that identifies me as a Muslim. Because of my headscarf, I cannot deny or hide my religious identity like other, less visible, Muslim professors. I must find creative ways to combine unbiased approaches to teaching religion while also acknowledge my own positionality in the classroom.³

In the Spring semester of my first year, I was able to teach two sections of the “Introduction to Islam” course. Although I have taught iterations of “Introduction to Islam” at two previous institutions, I found that I needed to revamp my syllabus once again to meet the needs of the students. I start the semester by having my students read Diana Eck’s short piece “From Diversity to Pluralism,” which is used by many of my departmental colleagues as well (Eck). This short reading prompts a discussion on why students need to learn about religion and how it can contribute to creating a more cohesive and healthy society in the United States. It also iterates why students from all majors benefit from studying religion.

I always begin the course with two weeks that involve unpacking the baggage that “Westerners” have in regards to the study of and interaction with Islam, relying on opening chapters in Carl Ernst’s *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. Once we have established that the “West” has a long historical tie with Muslim societies, not all positive, we take the time to discern and analyze biases in the media. We spend several days on critical analysis of media, learning about how it functions in the United States. Nearly every day during the semester, one student gives a presentation on a current news event connected to Muslims, offering analysis of coverage from different news outlets. My students often have a sense of skepticism regarding the media, but I try to raise their awareness of the actual workings of news corporations, sensationalism, and the power and pitfalls of social media. After having established a strong critical approach to the study of Islam, I lead my students through a brief overview of Islamic history before we cover one thematic topic per week.

Islam and the Lutheran Ideals of Inclusion

One uniquely Lutheran structure at CLU is the presence of the convocators, which is a group of 85 people who are chosen from five synods of the ELCA, as well as faculty, students, the university president, and members-at-large. Most of the convocators are Lutheran, although it is not a requirement for membership. This group represents the university and its interests, especially concerning issues of religious identity. They also elect some members of the Regents (*Mission and Identity*).

Colleagues have explained to me that there was some worry among Lutheran beneficiaries and supporters of the university that CLU was losing its Lutheran identity. Members of the Religion Department, myself included, have spent time explaining the mission of our department to the convocators and how it fits into Lutheran ideals. In my conversation with the convocators, I explained that while I appreciate and frequently draw upon my critical training in religious studies, I have also come to cherish being a Muslim professor who teaches about Islam at a church-affiliated institution. I explained that because of the openness that existed on the campus around religion, I felt at home even though I did not share their same religious convictions. My department’s efforts were well received and much of the anxiety that the convocators had—anxiety that came from the lack of understanding about what scholars of religion do inside and outside the classroom—was resolved.

Now that I am in my third year at CLU and have come to learn more about Lutheran higher education and identity, I have come to understand that my words to the convocators implicitly spoke to these Lutheran values of inclusion and pluralism. The convocators are one university institution that helps the university adhere to its Lutheran values, and also to adjust them according to ongoing changes on the campus and in the community.

From Classroom to Chapel

In addition to my teaching duties, I also began to receive invitations to speak on campus and outside, as I am the default resident scholar of Islam on campus. Being surrounded by female Christian and Jewish religious leaders who are either ordained or have leadership roles in their religious traditions has inspired me to test the

boundaries of my community and to encourage other young women to do the same.

Over the 2015-16 school year, the theme for the CLU chapel services was "Room at the Table." Those who gave sermons grappled with defining what the table is and who is included at the table, and who has the power to make the invitations.

One of the most moving experiences I have had was being invited to give the sermon for Thursday chapel services. I was asked to give the sermon (other non-Christian university members have also given them), and the date of it turned out to be the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, which came a day after the Jewish mourning holiday of Yom Kippur. Because I had been teaching that morning, I was unable to attend Eid prayers, and ironically gave what I like to think of as an Eid *khutba*, or sermon, in a Lutheran church to a crowd of mainly Christians, as well as people of other and no affiliations. As I am unlikely to be invited to give a sermon at the mosques,⁴ giving one at CLU turned out to be especially meaningful.

Delivering a sermon in a Lutheran chapel on one of the most sacred and joyous holidays in the Islamic calendar was a surreal experience. I felt as though I was host and guest at the same time. My talk came during the peak months when Syrians migrants were entering Europe in the hundreds of thousands. I appealed to those present to consider the Syrians and others who have had to leave their homes by force as people who belong at the figurative table. In this context, I appealed to our common humanity and shared a story from both the Hebrew Bible and the Qur'an—the story of Hagar and Ishmael. At the same time, during my sermon, I was conscious of the fact that there was a large cross with the crucified body of Jesus Christ right behind me and that the altar of the sacraments was next to me. The Lutheran liturgical hymns and rituals preceded my sermon and continued afterwards. I know that I am privileged to have been given the opportunity to speak in this Christian context. One might say that, while I had a few minutes to speak as a host in this Lutheran context, I was a guest before and after.

As professor of Islamic Studies who identifies as Muslim, I struggle to figure out where I fit and if I am a guest at the table of my Lutheran hosts or if I am also a host. In conversing with colleagues from my university, I have received different answers to this issue. Some

Lutherans talk about God being the host and everyone on the campus being guests of God, while many non-Lutherans view the Lutherans as the host. I have attended numerous chapel services over the past three years and even bring my first-year student seminar to services with me once a semester, but I still feel like a stranger in the congregation. I quietly follow the lyrics of hymns and recite the general prayers with the congregations. I am always warmly welcomed into the chapel, but remain cognizant of the fact that the dominant religion is Christianity and that I am not a host, but rather a guest who is given generous hospitality by my Christian colleagues.

By attending chapel services, I can expand my worldview, appreciate my Christian friends' faith and liturgy, and enjoy the musical and choral interludes. But I would have to leave the chapel alone and go into the small interfaith chapel where I can pull out a prayer rug in order to find my spiritual home. Even though members of campus ministries are careful to speak about "God" instead of "Jesus" and use language that is technically cross-religious, the service and discussion of religion on campus has a decidedly Christian slant that will always remain. I do not have a problem with this because the university is indeed affiliated with a Christian denomination. But I do have hope that in the future the campus community, including university ministries, will work to include the voices of non-Christians in their efforts to create an inclusive community.

Concluding Reflections

So the question remains: How does one maintain an authentic Lutheran spirit that does not forget its Christian roots while also staying faithful to the goal of inclusivism and pluralism?

I have found that being in a church-affiliated university gives me another outlet, and perhaps more freedom, for exploring my place in the academy and my personal religious tradition. Teaching about Islam in the religion department of a Lutheran institution means that I somehow have found myself in the midst of an ongoing internal Lutheran discussion that I can, at times, contribute to. At other times I feel like an outsider. It also means that I can challenge myself to learn new material and perspectives by teaching outside my field of Islamic studies. As the

only faculty who specializes in Islam in the entire campus, I have made it my duty to bring relevant speakers and performers to educate the community on issues related to Muslims. I try to maintain a balance between my campus and community service, research, teaching, and personal life, but sometimes find myself giving too much of my time away to the detriment of my other work.

When I was in the middle of my secular graduate program in Islamic Studies, I never imagined that I would end up at a church-affiliated university like CLU. I have been pleasantly surprised at how welcoming the campus has been and how a university with a religious affiliation can support and nurture faculty from other religious traditions. What I find most striking about working at CLU is that many of my Christian colleagues are willing to listen to others in their attempt to readjust their understandings of religious identity and the role of this identity in an educational institution. The religious identity of the university is changing and dynamic, based on concerted efforts to reach a consensus about the connection between the university and its heritage. There are as many perspectives about the direction CLU should be going as there are members of the campus community. Only time will tell us what methods and approaches the CLU community will adopt in its effort to create the sort of inclusive and pluralistic community it espouses.

End Notes

1. The majority of my education has been at public schools and universities, although I did receive my MA from the American University in Cairo, a private university, which is secular despite its original missionary roots.

2. For a map of ELCA colleges and universities, see <http://www.whygolutheran.org/>.

3. For more on the insider/outside dilemma of teaching religion see, Elliott A Bazzano, Audrey Truschke, and Jayme M Yeo, "Forum: Insiders, Outsiders, and Disclosure in the Undergraduate Classroom," *TETH Teaching Theology & Religion* 19, no. 3 (2016): 276–95. For more on the challenge of the interactions of the academic study of religion with a professor's religious identity, see John D. Barbour, "Professing Religion," in *Claiming Our Callings: Toward a New Understanding of Vocation in the Liberal Arts*, eds. Kaethe. Schwehn and L. DeAne Lagerquist (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

4. That said, I have had the opportunity to give a sermon at the Women's Mosque of America in Los Angeles and have spoken at several mosques, but the majority of Muslims in the United States are not comfortable with a woman giving a sermon or leading prayers in a mixed congregation.

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