

New Occasions Teach New Duties -- Even to Popes

Pope Benedict XVI has offered a number of apologies recently - for clergy sex abuse, for promoting a Holocaust denier, for statements about Islam. What does it mean that a Pope has started doing that? Should those apologies be accepted? Should more religious leaders do that?

1....."I screwed up" is the way President Obama admitted a mistake ahead of the media curve, and America smiled. Maybe this President, master of the media, helped this Pope *repent faster*. That's a welcome change in papal behavior, and a good model for all religious leaders - indeed, for all leaders.

2.....Change is painful, and human inertia avoids it at least until truth makes not changing more painful. But power, by insulating them from truth, permits the powerful to put off the pain of apologizing. "TRUTH is the first victim of war." And of the captivity of state by church or of church by state. And of imperial expansion. And of unregulated capitalism.

3.....Reason is weaker than *change-resistance*. I wanted to build our retirement home by rational (metrical-decimal [10-base]) measurement, but could find no builders supply that would accommodate me: all were still 12-base (the irrational ancient Babylonian duodecimal system nowhere in the world now in use except in parts of the English-speaking world, including America). We lost a satellite-launching because of a 12/10 measurement-confusion, but that pain was insufficient to convince Congress to reverse its record on the issue. Reason is too weak, and until now the pain has been too little to overcome the change-resistance.

4.....CHANGE is the fundamental idea in the Bible's words for change-resistance. The Hebrew word means "change of direction," the Greek word means "change of mind." Both words are usually translated "repentance." To the extent one changes one's mind, one's direction changes. But before either of those changes, one's *attention* must change. What gets our attention gets us for as long as it holds our attention, and we get the attention of our fellow-attenders. As an academician, the future Benedict XVI had the attention of scholars; as the Vatican's theologian, he had the attention of theologians; as Pope, he has potentially the world's attention and should choose his words responsibly as he faces all the concentric circles of his audience.

5....Good communication is so difficult it's improbable, especially for Presidents and Popes. Those in positions of power should be especially eager to "repent," *apologize*, and try again whenever the faulty communication is their fault. Some, with more self-transcendence, find it easier than others. Obama, easier than Benedict. Obama has all four rhetorical skills: silence, soft focus, sharp focus, and "I screwed up."

6.....Now to the three particular *Benedict apologies* "On Faith" mentioned to its panelists:

6.1....."Clergy sex abuse." The Pope's trip to the U.S. will be remembered for his refreshing alacrity and frankness in facing this major sin, shame, and sadness in the behavior of some of Rome's all-celibate clergy. I hope the pain of it will move that church toward change, opening its clergy to marriage.

6.2....."Promoting a Holocaust denier." The Pope confessed to insufficient vetting and has disciplined the offender (whose denial was specifically of Hitler's gas chambers). The Pope is his church's bishop of bishops, and "bishop" roughly transliterates a Greek word meaning "oversight." It's an old joke: "oversight" means both assigned supervision and unintentional overlooking.

6.3....."Statements about Islam." His Regensburg address was primarily to an academic audience, and the Pope incautiously slipped back into his professorial role and unguardedly quoted an anti-Islamic statement of a Christian leader who was trying to rally his people against attack by Muslim armies. In the current PBS documentary, "Jerusalem: The Center of the World," viewers are correctly informed that Arab armies took Jerusalem (and much of the Middle East) in the same century as Muhammad's death. Under Muslim governments, non-Muslims were (and are to this day) treated as second-class citizens, on whom special taxes and other restrictions were/are imposed. If repentance is genuine, reform follows. And the Pope's reform has taken the form of special attention to improved relations between Catholic and Muslim leaders.

7.....But I must add what I see as a *flaw* in Rome's structure. Politically, Popes are lineal descendant of Roman Emperors, who had monarchic power: They had, as it were, a mouth but no ears. In 1968, a papal commission recommended to the Pope that he pronounce in favor of certain forms of artificial contraception. His response, "Humanae Vitae," was to prohibit *all* forms of artificial contraction. On his recent visit to Africa, the present Pope reaffirmed the 1968 ban, specifically condemning the use of condoms (despite the HIV-AIDS plague there) and claiming that condoms are ineffective (despite the objective evidence). Some day, some Pope may apologize for Rome's long-continued use of the Roman emperor as model for the papacy.

BY WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | APRIL 6, 2009; 5:13 PM ETSAVE & SHARE:        

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Comments

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Thank you for your thoughts. And thank you for your careful analysis of some of the Pope's recent actions.

I think philosophical presuppositions often go unrecognized in our analysis of things. It seems to me that most people hold the Pope to an American liberal philosophical understanding of freedom of indifference, and call him to adjust his views, beliefs, and actions accordingly.

Perhaps a more interesting dialogue, one that would get more to the heart of the issue, is to look more closely at why he says what he says and does what he does. The Pope isn't a politician. He doesn't speak in soundbites. He's best understood as a servant of servants. I personally find it more convincing that the truth he seeks to uphold is not at the mercy of popular secular sentiments. If the Church changed teachings simply because the majority of people wanted it that way, then why would we even need/want the Church? We may as well do whatever we want, if that is our highest priority. It seems to me that the only reason to listen to the Church is if one believes she stands for something true, something beyond ourselves.

POSTED BY: WHITJER29 | APRIL 15, 2009 1:58 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

TO COLINNICHOLS:

While I don't believe in maternal determinism, It's likely that the hospital mixup you hypothesize would produce the effect you suggest: children's culture (language & religion) is generally that of the adult to whom they were closest in their earliest years. It's why the Germans call one's "native" speech Muttersprache (mother-speech).

But, I repeat, not determinism. Obama's mother was a freethinker, but he is (as I am) an evangelical-liberal Christian.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | APRIL 13, 2009 7:41 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

TO COLINNICHOLS:

Sorry about a mixup on my computer!
I thought my 1st post had been lost, so I rewrote-reposted to you,
& got to read your response only after my 2nd post!

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | APRIL 13, 2009 7:33 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

TO COLINNICHOLAS:

1

Thanks for the fill-in on your bio. I asked in what generation your family rejected Christianity; and while you didn't say, you said that the family has been religionless for three generations (your parents, you, and your children). From your survival without religion, you seem to conclude that your condition is "natural" and (a further leap) that religion is "nonsense" and exists only because some parents brainwash their children to belief in God.

2

While you supported your argument for godlessness as natural by saying that your children arrived at this position on their own, you now admit to negative-answering when a child asked you the God-question. When in religion parents are not hypocrites (saying one thing, doing another) - i.e., when they have word-and-dead integrity - they have a powerful influence on their children. My children were powerfully influenced by their parents' living & talking the God-assumption; yours, by your living & talking the godless assumption. Our positivity made the God-assumption "natural" to our children, as your negativity made the godless assumption "natural" to your children. It's a wash: you and I consider each other's assumption not only unnatural but nonsense.

3

But now that you've made the argument from "nature," I'll engage you on it. In his 1897 classic "The Will of Believe," William James argued not only for the naturalness of religion but also for the pragmatically-sustainable truth of what it believed - sustainable by creative-constructive-benevolent effects on persons and society (as in Jesus' saying "By their fruits you shall know them"). Scientific epistemology (teaching that "knowledge" is limited to the repeatable / commensurable / verifiable-falsifiable) was undermined by James and has been taking a beating from many directions: post-modernism, brain/mind research, "the faith gene," social scientists, global-cultural observers.

4

Right now, in the West, two publishing-streams seem almost unaware of each other. The scientific stream assumes that religion is an unnatural cultural accretion, in the realm of fantasy and wishful thinking rather than in the realm of knowledge and reality. The realistic stream assumes that religion is natural, intrinsic to human nature, and in the realm of "core knowledge" rather than "common knowledge" (to use the terms Adam Gopnik wrote his most recent book to expound).

5

The lead article in today's Newsweek is realistic: "Faith is an intrinsic human impulse" says the editor, Jon Meacham. He so considers religion natural that he feels no need to argue for its naturalness. You, however, see religion as so unnatural that you feel a need to argue against it.

6

For at least three generations, your family has deliberately suppressed something natural, depriving itself of something "intrinsic" to human nature. I hope your children, if not also you, soon come to address the deficiency.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | APRIL 13, 2009 2:53 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dr Elliott;

I apologise for getting your name and title wrong the first time couple of times i commented. It was rude of me.

Thank for responding to my latest comments. I do appreciate it. By the way, I never claimed to be an exception.

I made the point that where I grew up churches were near empty, and believers rare. I have no idea when my ancestors left the Christian religion, it never came up..

My dad was in WW1. That might have had something to do with it.

You know what they say, " There are no believers in foxholes - when Hell is everywhere - religion fails to persuade."

OK I just made that up, but I'm inclined to believe it. I have read that badly wounded soldiers trapped and dying in the mud screamed for mama like little schoolboys, it was no place for gods. Maybe that's when my dad ditched him. I have no idea.

I was raised in a godless world that had nothing supernatural about it. No ghosts or demons or gods...just reality.

If I am Hell bound because of my inability to believe what religion teaches, then so be it. I yam what I yam.

I would, however, appreciate your response to the following, if you have the time.

Assume, for argument's sake - that we were the same age, and both of us born in the same hospital at the same time. Do you think that - had the maternity nurses mistakenly given our mothers the wrong baby - you to my mother, and me to your mother - would we each have the other's point of view today? Would you be the atheist and me the devout Christian?

I say yes.

POSTED BY: COLINNICHOLAS | APRIL 13, 2009 11:47 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

TO COLINNICHOLAS:

Thanks for the fill-in on your bio. I see that it's "natural" for your children not to believe in God, since you told them you didn't, & "natural" for you, as your parents were disinterested in church. You didn't tell me in what generation your family became godless, but you have now said that it's been "natural" for three generations.

For three generations, as I see it, your family has been living unnaturally. "Faith is an intrinsic human impulse" that in your family line has been long suppressed or diverted to idolatrous substitutes. (The quotation is from Newweek editor John Meacham, whose 4.13.09 "The End of Christian America" is titled, on the cover, "The Decline and Fall of Christian America." As a faithful Episcopalian, he's happy about the failure of religion to lobby legislation, and hopeful about the return of churches to their proper sphere (though, on other occasions, he's expressed happiness over the success of religion lobbying [led by a Baptist preacher] for the '64 civil rights act and the '65 voting rights act).

Meacham & I say religion is natural ("intrinsic"), and you say it's unnatural (extrinsic) and has to be taught: religionlessness (atheism, agnosticism) is humanity's default position. But as parent, you are not the exception you claim to be: you & I both gave our children verbal guidance by answering their religion questions (the verbal guidance being in line with our example, our manner of life).

"Natural" is multidimensional. My 62-year-old son is teaching in a university in China & is often on the phone with us, laughing at the cultural differences as to what's "natural." That's the descriptive use of "natural." In responding to me, your use was rhetorical: you made a reality-claim which reduced my position to nonsense, and my reply asserts that your position is delusional.

There is, as you seem not to know, no objective or even philosophical resolution of our difference. But I argue that the preponderance of evidence is on the side of religion as "natural," from William James' "The Will to Believe" to the latest brain-mind research.

In church yesterday (Easter Sunday), we Christians greeted one another with "Christ is risen!" / "He is risen, indeed!" I am sorry that you have deprived yourself and your children of this communion, this joy, this hope, this motivation to be good news to one's neighbor and the good earth.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | APRIL 13, 2009 9:07 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dr Willis;

Part 2

My boasting that I had raised five atheists occurred to me when I read a column in The Guardian UK titled "Atheism Has to Be Taught" by Andrew Brown. I commented on that blog that I am an atheist - not through being taught atheism - but by NOT being taught religion.

It then came to me that my childrens' non-belief is more persuasive testimony than my own - that atheism is the natural state, because that's how I brought them up, naturally, without any pressure either way. And now, as adults, they don't believe in god. The word atheist might be a bit strong for them. They are not 'active' atheists like myself. They are like most Brits and Europeans - they just don't believe in anything supernatural.

I did not tell my kids about atheism, or agnosticism, or in anyway push my views on them, or tell them that I thought religion is preposterous nonsense. It only came up at moments like this - one of my boys, then age about seven, asked me one day "Dad, is there a God?"

I replied something like "Well, some people think there is and other people say there isn't" He then asked "So do you think there is one?" I told him "No, I don't think there is one."

It was a piece of cake.

POSTED BY: COLINNICHOLAS | APRIL 11, 2009 3:07 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Hi Mr Willis.

Part one.

Thanks for your unexpected response.

I was a boy in Wales during WW2. I was raised by parents who never mentioned god. On Sundays sometimes they would tell me to go to Sunday school, or church, so that I would be out of their way. But like most other kids I often kept the collection money, and would go fool around on the river banks, or the park.

A few times I did go to church, and sang in the choir once or twice, and pumped the organ at least one time I vaguely recall. I also recall counting the the choirboys (6) and the worshipers (5) and one organist, one priest (wearing bicycle clips) and 2 boys pumping the organ, one of which was me.

My parents never attended church.

But the thing is - neither did anybody else in my neighborhood, except for the catholic kids - who were Irish anyway, and couldn't even play truant without a priest (on a bicycle) chasing them off to school.

POSTED BY: COLINNICHOLAS | APRIL 11, 2009 2:14 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

^ in the christian year, today is good friday, when we christians remember the crucifixion of our lord and savior jesus christ & anticipated easter^

the above is a good picture of the delusionism of greco-romanism ,zeus and appolos family.

the almighty creator god is free from that insult and delusion .

if some human being can manage to crucify the LORD AND SAVIOR , what is the use of this lord or god?

the mass delusional environment of juchristianity bred another delusion called atheism.

the almighty creator god is free from the above nonsens.

as much books DR E carry on his back he should know better than this.

POSTED BY: MONO1 | APRIL 11, 2009 7:51 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

TO COLINNICHOLAS:

Thank you for your witness. A few comments:

1

Since your family name is Christian, I wonder in which generation Christianity was abandoned & why.

2

Since your children are all of the same (atheist/agnostic) religion-opinion as you, I must conclude that you've strongly influenced them by instruction (indoctrination, brainwashing, whatever) rather than only by example. No surprise here, given the strong bias in your comments on my column.

3

The essence of your bias, as I see it, is your limitation of "knowledge" to what Adam Gopnik, in his recent book, calls "common [commensurable, verifiable/falsifiable] knowledge" in contrast to "core [personal, heart] knowledge." Obviously, faith in God is in the category of "core knowledge" (as is love, imagination, the arts, the virtues, etc.).

4

I do not doubt the authenticity of your witness. My witness is that on the occasion of my Christian conversion at age 17, I was overwhelmed with a sense of the divine Presence, liberation, peace, and joy that has been the tonic (in the musical sense) of my life. Why should you doubt the authenticity of my witness? Wait, wait! Judging from the wording of your comment, I know your answer. It is, is it not, that you "know" & I (along with most of humankind) am a victim of "nonsense."

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | APRIL 11, 2009 12:14 AM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

TO FARNAZ2:

Thank you for your thoughtful posts.

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I doubt that I'm worthy of your intuition about me, but at least it shows your goodwill.

I affirm the truth I share in your saying, "only you and I can bring Jesus, Tikkun Olam, peace, justice,...love to our fellow humans, all of them." That is the responsibility side of biblical religion, Jewish & Christian. The balancing truth is that "only God can...." John Wesley put the paradox memorably: "On your knees! everything depends on God. On your feet! everything depends on you."

In the Christian year, today is Good Friday, when we Christians remember the crucifixion of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ & anticipate Easter, the celebration (day after tomorrow) of his resurrection, which looks forward to what Jews call Tikkun Olam & we Christians call the Return of Jesus. We believe that in Jesus, the Messiah (in Greek, "Christos") has come & offers all who receive him participation in his suffering, death, & resurrection. / I taught Hebrew & Greek; &, at NYTheological Seminary, a continuing-education course for Orthodox, Conservative, & Reform rabbis - which I mention only to indicate how distant I am from antisemitism.

POSTED BY: WILLIS E. ELLIOTT | APRIL 10, 2009 11:29 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Dear Rev. Elliott,

I read your post on R. Waskow's thread: 'Twas very violet sweet! I don't know the proper words to say to Christians in this period. My Christian friends say "Happy Easter" to one another, Happy Passover to me (a long story-- about me, that is--not Passover), so I wish you the happiest of Easters.

On the words you wrote to R. Waskow about Jesus and Tikkun Olam: I thought, and, only in the last few years realized I'd been in error--that racism, that all human-destroying isms would end in my lifetime. I was naive. I see the path of the Jews was, in fact, written in an ancient book whose trajectory we have, in mysterious ways followed.

Exilic. Yet Diasporism(!) is a creative place. It enables peripheral vision. One can see that the fringe is really the center, etc. The Talmudists earnestly believed that the world needs the Greeks for their sense of beauty, but must have the Hebrews for their understanding of Justice, which they (including yours truly) don't radically distinguish from mercy.

Reverend, only you and I can bring Jesus, Tikkun Olam, peace, justice, tranquility, obligation with love to our fellow humans--all of them.

And so I wish for you, for me, for our children and our children's children's children, that this period brings us closer to that promised humanity.

Farnaz

POSTED BY: FARNAZ2 | APRIL 10, 2009 8:20 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Hi Mr Elliott.

I raised five atheists.

I knew that would get your attention.

I find it depressing that ancient beliefs in supernatural gods continues to have credibility with so many.

I mean as far as we actually know there are no gods and never were. The only way we end up believing this nonsense is if we were indoctrinated as children into believing it. I raised five children; and as I didn't brainwash any of them - they all grew up to be atheists, or at least agnostics. I didn't indoctrinate them into atheism. I just refused to allow them to be indoctrinated into a religion. So 'naturally' they do not believe in god; and they don't miss him anymore than I do.

I would urge all parents to do this. Reality beats fantasy every time. and it's honest.

POSTED BY: COLINNICHOLAS | APRIL 10, 2009 12:04 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

""But I don't much tend to doubt he'd be a forthright soul to have at my back, should we find ourselves together in a messed up circumstance in some other life."

Ditto!

Farnaz :)"

Ditto, indeed. :)

I would, though, prefer to ask his Reverendship to concentrate more on retaining and passing what he knows of farming than what he thinks of New York subways and the metric system. :)

Frankly, Rev Elliott isn't here cause, if you listen carefully, he knows a whole lot more about keeping a certain number of people alive by *knowing how to grow things* than he does about applying 'Ultimate Truth' to the strange place and times we live in.

Kind of struck me, revently, at a recent Pagan social, noobs come ask us about Big Cosmic Power,' ...they step aside, we're talking about how to grow plants.

I think Rev Elliot is basically full of it with his theroies about whattina Hel the Digital Age means.

I know he knows how to grow stuff in a quasi-industrialized economy.

So I say to th Reverend, Much has been forgotten, in really stupid ways.

It's not a metaphor, sir. Things are geting screwed-up again. I'm sorry. I've done as best I could while getting kicked in the head very hard.

Stuff you quote as qualifications to demand stupid sh** in daily lives, is more important than coercing some shape of 'God.'

You say, I farmed, this makes me 'absolutely virtuous. I can tell you about complex social dynamics I play into...

I say, the biger threat is no one knows how to grow *food* under limitedly-industrial situations cause everyone you coulda been teaching thinks the *world's* ending.

Things you know, people *ache* to know, cause we don't trust your damn authorities anymore. Nor your assertion the 'world ill end tidily.'

Teach people what you know about growing food, sir. My Goddess wil sanction me helping ou out in any way you can accomplish this. And if *your* God* wants someone to punish, welll, by your reckoning, I'm already in dutch for any notion how crops might come up. Reports can be filed.

Whattya say, Reverend?

If my Pagan arse is in any way mine to give, you teach that stuff? If I'm full of it, more words outta you can hardly help anyway.

So I ask. Please.

Food, and stuff.

We can work the rest out later.

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 9, 2009 6:33 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Basically, it you proceed from the presumption, 'God' designed us to coun on ten fingers, and we make *binary* computers in 'our own image,' we may cal it 'authoritative, but it still don't mean a circle in base ten ain't irrational numbers.

And ain't *that* the picture of allegory. :)

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 9, 2009 6:10 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Rev.,

PaganPlace writes to you:

"But I don't much tend to doubt he'd be a forthright soul to have at my back, should we find ourselves together in a messed up circumstance in some other life."

Ditto!

Farnaz :)

POSTED BY: FARNAZZ | APRIL 9, 2009 6:07 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Speaking of calling people on things:

"....Reason is weaker than change-resistance. I wanted to build our retirement home by rational (metrical-decimal [10-base]) measurement, but could find no builders supply that would accommodate me: all were still 12-base (the irrational ancient Babylonian duodecimal system nowhere in the world now in use except in parts of the English-speaking world, including America)."

Err.... It's **irrational** to apply base-twelve measurements to **astronomy,** Reverend.

It's equally-irrational to try and make carpentry **digital.**

I'd think that as a follower of a carpenter's son who died by carpentry, you might figure on that.

Base-twelve math, even rendered in decimal arithmetic, makes a **lot** more sense in practice.

If you're handling and measuring real objects.

Ten suits a decimal display. Twelve.... is evenly-divisible by 1, 2, 3, 4, and 6.

It's **still** how we measure time.

More than that, my **hands** know what an eighth of an inch is, whereas, what. .125cm is 'absolutely' more precise in terms of hydrogen atoms?

Not everyone thinks of the universe as some imposed digital order, Reverend. Some things work better in ratios, if we don't let machines do it all for us.

The circle is reckoned in twelves for a reason.

You wanna forget **why,** we may as **well** go metric.

It's just a number-talk, not a 'One Universal Truth.'

Gods forbid we should be bilingual, eh?

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 9, 2009 5:58 PM
[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

(I choose this column to ask.... Does anyone else think our photo illustration should read:

Pope: "Whassamatta you!"

Dsvd or Adam "Forget about it!"

Just needed to say that. I'm Italian enough to notice. :)

As for the Reverend, Farnazz, I do actually think he's a good man. I just don't think he always sees the world or governs his claims accordingly.

To wit, I think the words he often says, actually mean something else.

Actually, I think he's full of it on many occasions. And I do call him 'Evil Santa' from time to time, But I don't much tend to doubt he'd be a torthright soul to have at my back, should we find ourselves together in a messed up circumstance in some other life.

Of course, I've been known to expect such people to get past polemic, here and there. :)

POSTED BY: PAGANPLACE | APRIL 9, 2009 5:48 PM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Reverend:

Leave it to you to come up with some very astute reasoning and even better accusations!

POSTED BY: GABY1 | APRIL 8, 2009 7:58 PM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

OYE VAY!

POSTED BY: INGOODFAITH | APRIL 8, 2009 7:02 PM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

Rev.,

An interesting, even daring essay. I'll probably post here again before Easter, but I wanted to wish you a meaningful one, in case I can't.

I don't often agree with you, Rev., but I'm strongly intuitive and "intuit" that you are a good man. I hope I'm right because good, I think, is the best we can be.

Farnaz :)

POSTED BY: FARNAZ2 | APRIL 8, 2009 6:24 PM

[REPORT OFFENSIVE COMMENT](#)

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