

Our Very Own "Contras": A Response to the "St. Louis Project" Report

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Source: *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (Summer, 1986), pp. 323-335

Published by: Oxford University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1464759>

Accessed: 14-10-2023 19:58 +00:00

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ESSAY

OUR VERY OWN “CONTRAS”:
A RESPONSE TO THE “ST. LOUIS PROJECT”
REPORT

IVAN STRENSKI

Revolution and Counter-revolution in Religious Studies

Few would doubt that something at least appearing to be a revolution has occurred in the study of religion in North America over the past twenty-five years. Plans were made and published. In both secular and church-related universities and colleges, departments of “religious studies” were created *de novo* or out of existing departments of divinity, religion or theology. Their creation seemed to mark a clear determination to set aside being religious or “doing” religion from studying it. In intellectual terms, being religious in this sense usually was taken in its crude sense as equivalent to “instruction in” religion; opposed to this was academic “study about” religion. (See the Schempp Case, 1963, U.S. Supreme Court. Cited in Welch, 1971a:17). Moreover, insofar as part of “being” religious also meant actively to express the meaning of a religious tradition or creatively to construct it, “doing” theology was thus excluded from the religious studies curriculum (at least in theory). To borrow a phrase from William F. May (750), “‘doing’ theology” has been opposed in principle to the “study” of theology. Signalling and legitimating this change were documents like Claude Welch’s report, *Graduate Education in Religion* (1971a), his presidential address to the AAR, “Identity Crisis in the Study of Religion? A First Report from the ACLS Study,” (1971b) or the Jesuit Education Association’s “The Statement on Theology and the Jesuit College: A New Rationale” (O’Connell:734). Referring to religious studies over against theology, the Jesuits speak of “two distinct kinds of courses” (Quoted in O’Connell:735). Welch’s “Identity Crisis in the Study of Religion?”

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opens by declaring the independence of religious studies from its theological past a virtual *fait accompli*.

The value of the scholarly study of religion in college and university has now been so widely acknowledged that it need no longer be a subject for anxiety. In this sense, *the period of emergence of a discipline of 'religious studies' as distinct from theology, is coming to an end.* (1971a:13. My emphasis)

Yet, visions of “ending” the fusion of religious studies and theology now seem over optimistic, even naive. This is at any rate the sense one gets in reading the notice for the AAR “Awards for Excellence in the Study of Religion” and what may be called “The Report of the St. Louis Project” (*JAAAR* 52/4 (1984):727–757). To risk a bit of melodrama, it seems fair to me to say that these are counterrevolutionary documents, whose assumptions would undo the program for the emergence of religious studies from theology. Let me show how this is evident first in the report of the St. Louis Project and then briefly in the assumptions of the language of the AAR “Awards for Excellence.”

“No Fuss” and “Fate”: Two Strategies for Counter-Revolution

The participants of the St. Louis project in effect turn Welch’s proud announcement of the successful “end” of the struggle for the emancipation of religious studies from theology neatly on its head: theology is already or ought to be incorporated into religious studies. William F. May (750) asks pointedly why faculty of philosophy departments can actively “*philosophize*,” while theologically inclined religious studies faculty may not “theologize.” May anticipates and defuses charges of sectarian dogmatism by saying his active theology would be “problematic”—focussing on “common human problems,” and “less concerned in the university setting to systematize and defend such statements of faith” (751). Although several participants of the St. Louis Project do speak of a mutual “*rapprochement*” between theology and religious studies, their major burden of argument remains legitimizing the inclusion of active theologizing within religious studies curricula (May:748–752). Thus, the St. Louis Project urges counter-revolution against the separation of religious studies from theology. It is a policy for “contras.” But how is such a counter-revolution justified?

The means employed to reverse religious studies’ emancipation from theology fall into two classes: strategy and tactics. Let me illustrate two preliminary strategies employed in “re-theologizing” religious studies: the strategies of (1) “no fuss” and (2) “fate.”

One might argue, for instance, that theology’s inclusion within

religious studies is simply not controversial. The perceived scandal of theology in religious studies reflects failure to appreciate the open boundaries of intellectual inquiry or the vital place of theology within the phenomenon of religion. To "re-theologize" therefore does not constitute counter-revolution, just responsive curricular decisions reflecting new interests—"larger socio-cultural developments and educational trends (Capps:729). No "fuss" should be made since all the curricular moves would be made within the bounds of the prevailing paradigms of academic life. This position is in part reflected in Walter H. Capps's comments introducing the report of the St. Louis Project. Capps observes that the aims of the St. Louis Project are inspired by the general feeling that "theology is *now* seen as a crucial component of religion—*has become* of significant interest to scholars in religious studies." The St. Louis Project is just another attempt to update a curriculum whose general guiding principles are taken for granted (Capps:729, my emphasis). Thus there is nothing much to "fuss" about.

I cannot imagine why anyone would call it news that students of religion today take theology seriously as part of religion. Capps makes a very odd claim indeed. I say so for two reasons: First, what's the big deal in making the sweeping observation that religious studies faculty find theology interesting—especially when the issue agitating the participants on the St. Louis Project is the particular case of "*doing*" theology within religious studies. Why then speak as if the whole matter might be no more than a question of *studying* theology within religious studies? Second, it is distinctly odd to say that theology in this wide open sense has not been a subject of critical study within religious studies until *recently*. It seems plainly false that interest in theology as subject or datum of religious studies represents a "*shift* of intellectual interest" (Capps:729, my emphasis). It cannot just suddenly be "now" that theology "has become" interesting to religious studies. We are thus left quite puzzled by what Capps is getting at.

Although puzzling, if we assume that the "no fuss" approach constitutes a strategy to help ("doing") theology gain access to academe, some of the oddity evaporates. For if we follow the underlying argument that including theology generally within religious studies is not controversial, we leave ourselves wide open for each and every kind inclusion of theology within religious studies—not just the academic study *of* theology, but the active "*doing*" of theology as well.

If the strategy of "no fuss" fails to give the "*doing*" of theology entry, one might have recourse to a second strategy—surrender to "fate." Laurence J. O'Connell, for example, appeals in part to a mysterious ineluctability of the "*rapprochement*" between theology

and religious studies—it just “happens”—without anyone being particularly responsible:

Fifteen years into the mission [of separation laid out by “The Statement on Theology and the Jesuit College: A New Rationale”] we *have begun to realize* that theology and religious studies cannot be neatly separated within the contexts of the humanities curriculum. It *has dawned on us* that the curricular and methodological exigencies implicit in our desire to exploit the richness of both theology and religious studies have not been addressed. (735)

I shall perhaps be forgiven if I do not believe in things innocently “dawning” on people. *Prima facie*, it is at least equally true that people “realize” (become persuaded of) the truth of things because these “truths” serve their own interests.¹ In this case, it is perfectly reasonable that one would “realize” that theology ought to be done within religious studies (and vice versa), if its inclusion should suit one’s own interests. If, for instance, one has been doing theology all the while within religious studies, then one would have an interest in playing this down, since it is at least controversial to “do” theology in the secular university, and arguably even in institutions claiming to teach religious studies as one of the “humanities.” (In a somewhat poetic vein, another participant in the St. Louis Project, Professor P. Joseph Cahill (747), goes so far as to say that theology is actually present “in hiding or latent in other disciplines. . . .”) Alternately, one might try to legitimize doing theology, if one thought one could succeed in establishing its legitimacy in the university. Apparently, the St. Louis Project participants believe the time is ripe for an attempt to legitimize “doing” theology—whether or not they have been doing so all along.

It will be small comfort to those wishing to keep the “doing” of theology out of religious studies that Van Harvey (1970) years ago predicted active theologizing in departments of religious studies. Whether this involves the development of new theologies independent of the churches, as Harvey thought, or reassertion of older church-based theologies hardly matters. It all comes to the same thing in the end: the “re-theologizing” of religious studies. Even one of the St. Louis Project participants, Professor Laurence J. O’Connell, admits that the changes of departmental labels to “religious studies” among others have been “often more nominal than substantive” (735).

¹ I hereby accept that my own “realization” that theology ought not be *done* within religious studies (without qualifications to be made below) is itself a product of my own (but not only mine) interest. In this respect, I would prefer to have the issue of the doing of theology debated on the basis of competing interests, rather than by appeals to “dawning” revelations.

If so, we are very far, and moving farther away still, from fulfilling the promise of Welch's report.

Why "Re-theologize"? A Brief Historical Construction

But how can the "re-theologizing" be explained? Why is it happening? Elements of one of the better accounts come from William F. May.

Beginning in the middle 1950's, conservatism in the churches clashed with the intellectual consciences of a new generation. Church communities and their divinity schools became inhospitable to many of their own young, and those young were unable to fulfill normal career goals in their home church communities and institutions. Partly because of the perceived deadening dominance of what T. S. Eliot called the "hippopotamous church," the fleshy ponderous institution to which ordinary men and women belong" (752), many would-be or actual liberal theologians found themselves deprived of institutional opportunities to practice creative theologizing. Providentially, as this gap widened, the universities expanded, and many of these liberal theologians became members of the new departments of religious studies. May has it right when he says (752): "As theologians drift away from religious community, they do not thereby reject religion (and doubtless, "theology"). At a rather practical level, they often become religious gnostics, that is, those who prove their membership in an elite, among the *illuminati*, by abandoning what T. S. Eliot called the 'hippopotamous church. . . .'" Only social research can confirm this judgment with *precision*, even if introspection and knowledge of the life-stories of members of the academy attest to the *accuracy* of what May says. What matters is that would-be creative theologians inside the secular department of religious studies are in contradiction with their institutional locations if they seek to theologize. The St. Louis Project report tells us that they seek to do just that without somehow contradicting the social contract of the university.

This is of course aside from the question of *whether or not* there really has been a lasting "revolution" in religious studies, whether or not departments of religious studies staffed with many products of the social processes set rolling by the hippopotamous church have ever really departed from the divinity school model. From the express and open wishes for theologizing within religious studies contained in the report of the St. Louis Project, one could reasonably doubt both the depth and thoroughness of the religious studies revolution. Thus, for creative theologians, the contradiction with the secular department of religious studies may be more apparent than real. The so-called revolution in religious studies may thus be largely illusory, and the

counter-revolution that threatens it be a simple re-emergence of latent forces.

This makes bitter irony of the complaints by theologians in the St. Louis Project report about the so-called dominance of non-theological studies in the study of religion, the so-called "Enlightenment model."! One wonders if they have read the numbers of courses and faculty teaching theological subjects? And if they have, what even greater degree of preponderance for (typically Christian) theological interests they desire? Religious studies is still the new kid on the block, but in something approaching an analogy with nineteenth century nativism, some American theologians in religious studies find even "his" presence too much of a threat to their dominant interests.

First Tactic: Fighting the "Fads" of the Sixties

Thus, at the heart of religious studies we now find a fundamentally counter-revolutionary group, like some of the theologians of the St. Louis Project. Perhaps never really convinced of the value of secular religious studies in the first place, they now feel confident to advocate even *more* theology *within* religious studies. Rather than advancing the revolution, brought about in most cases by theologians who broke with received intellectual habits, they seek instead to re-theologize religious studies.

This then brings me to the first tactic employed in this attempt to reverse religious studies: a general discrediting of the achievements of the 1960's as, for instance, embodied in the Welch reports. Witness the readiness to roll back the religious studies revolution of the 1960's, especially in O'Connell's contribution. For him, hardly a principle seemed at stake in that great struggle. It was all "faddish" secularist prejudice. Those who liberated religious studies from theology simply "followed the fashion of the later 1960's. . . due to our uncritical acceptance of a simplistic distinction between theology and religious studies" (735). The position of those who would keep the lines drawn between active theology and religious studies is "rooted in a dated, dogmatic" insistence and nothing more (735). O'Connell's position would reverse the direction of religious studies and alienate us from our colleagues in the secular university.

Why does this follow? Well, for one thing it is obscure at best how the hope for a "*rapprochement*" between religious studies and theology avoids the perennial church/state dilemma. Resistance to the confusion of theology and academy goes much deeper than mere "fashion." It is rooted in our way of life; it is not some legalistic inconvenience. The university is a marketplace of ideas, but within the *akademia*, not the *agora*. As such, some things are simply not for

sale there—political ideas, for one, religious ideas for another. And this involves "theology." For creative theology, if it is anything at all, is *religion* itself, and not the *study* of religion. On the face of it, its place is in the *agora*, not the *akademia*. O'Connell offers no arguments to proceed from different first principles.

Thus, one must wonder about O'Connell's citation of Neusner's just lament about the reluctance of religious studies scholars to deal with contemporary issues. I fail to see how making "bed-fellows" of creative theology and religious studies would help. Indeed, re-theologizing religious studies would divert even more energy away from studying today's religious life. If students of religion were doing less theology and more real study of religion, perhaps we would already have the contemporary studies O'Connell desires. Doing more theology is not the solution to Neusner's problem.

Second Tactic: If Scholem, Why Not Buber. . . and All the Little Bubers?

Related confusions likewise plague the tactics in the arguments in William May's article, "Why Theology and Religious Studies Need Each Other." Basically, the tactic involves admitting the need for "creative" folk on religious studies faculties—meaning the substantial introduction of "constructive" theologians.

Many things trouble May about the separation of religious studies and "creative" theology. But he believes he exposes a critical absurdity produced by it in noting that under conditions of separation he could "hire Gershom Scholem but not Martin Buber"—an "historian" of religions, but not one of "those intellectual giants in their own person" (750). But would May in fact be prevented from hiring Buber? I think not. English departments can hire "creative writers;" religious studies departments could just as easily hire a "creative" or "constructive" theologian, or indeed a holyman or guru, as some have. There is no problem—even if one would not want a whole department of poets or prophets. In fact, separation allows such creativity to be featured, if one wants. It also prevents it from muddling the academic commission our university membership demands. The same would hold for equally controversial areas of university life like government or politics. If the University of Minnesota can hire a "creative" politician like Hubert Humphrey to display for students how the mind of a real politician works, what's to stop the University from tendering a similar offer to Buber? But government departments don't normally muddy matters by making such figures the core of their programs, or necessarily even prominent. Our colleagues in government and English know more clearly than we what they ought to be about in a university.

Magnifying this muddle, May moves from the “restricted plea for those who border on genius,” to a much broader inclusion of theology across the board. On the analogy of the poet, May says: “One needs minor as well as major theologians.” Indeed, how many Bubers are there to go around? But May means more, and in the process gives away the game. He says that “an intellectual tradition needs not only its intellectual giants and historians, but also minor constructive thinkers *to keep itself alive*” (751, my emphasis). Why is it the job of the university to keep theology “alive?” What has happened all of a sudden to living religious communities themselves, and their responsibility for this? Are religious studies departments to serve as surrogate religious communities to foster the theologies real religious communities will not? Does poetry expect to “keep itself alive” by subsidized status within the university? And, what kind of poetry would it be that needed to live off academe? Answer: academic poetry. Do we really want to turn departments of religious studies into centers of “academic theology,” havens in the heartless world for “*illuminati*” trampled under foot by the “hippopotamous churches?” The University of Minnesota ought not be in the business of keeping Hubert Humphrey’s political candle aflame. We should not make it our business to “establish” the religion of the “*illuminati*” in religious studies departments.

Although May talks of theologies arising out of “particular communities of faith” (751), he confirms my gloomiest expectations for the establishment of such an “academic” theology—what he calls a “problematic theology,” or with inexplicable change of substantive, “theological anthropology.” It will be “a little less apologetic” (only a “little?”); it “may be less able to take faith for granted” or “may also orient less to worship than in the past. . .” (only “may”, and then only “less?”). May’s equivocal language here suggests confusion about how, or perhaps doubts that, “constitutional and academic proprieties” can be maintained in the face of the re-theologizing of religious studies he seeks.

Let us now turn briefly to the AAR Awards for Excellence in the Study of Religion. They embody some of the same assumptions presupposed in the strategies and tactics of re-theologizing religious studies guiding the thinking of the participants in the St. Louis Project.

“Doing” Religion or Studying It? The AAR Awards for Excellence

As presently constituted, the statement of these awards officially sanctions a counter-revolution of theology within religious studies. To wit: why is there an award for theology? Why is there such a

category (listed proudly in first position, saying something about the priorities of the AAR!) as "The Constructive-Reflective Study of Religion"? Aside from policy questions, the rubric presents at minimum a logical or linguistic absurdity, perhaps even an obfuscation. I know what it means to *study* religion *historically* (category 2 of the AAR list) or *analytically and descriptively* (category 3), but what is that strange animal, the "constructive-reflective" study of religion? Isn't any respectable intellectual effort "constructive" or "reflective"? Do we really need to tell scholars to be "constructive"—to be "creative," to "advance a good purpose"—any more than we need to tell them to be "reflective"—to be "thoughtful" or "considerate"? "Constructive" and "reflective" in these naive senses seem either meaningless or insulting as modifiers of "the *study* of religion."

It is important to hammer this point home, since it holds the key to the meaning of religious *studies*, and why it is different (not better or worse) than theology in the active sense. I know what it means to "study" religion—even to study it "religiously" (i.e. seriously and/or dogmatically). The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines "study" as "the pursuit of knowledge, as by reading, observation or research. Attentive scrutiny." To "study" is essentially to contemplate, empathize, understand or explain. "Studies" are referential; they are *about* something, e.g. birth rates, mystical states, pearly gates. Religious studies is just such a *study*. But, to the degree we accent "constructive" here, the idea of "studying" anything gets utterly displaced in favor of "creating," producing or advancing something. At best "constructive study" is paradoxical; at worst, absurd. Such "constructive study" of religion is not *about* religion; it is religion itself. It is not empathetic contemplation and understanding of religion; it is religion-in-the-making.

I cannot see how this "constructive-reflective study of religion" belongs in the AAR's list of award categories. The AAR might just as well create a "Saint's List" for practical excellence in *being* religious. An award for *thinking* religiously is not all that different. There may well be a "new religious consciousness" welling up across the land, at least among intellectuals estranged from the "hippopotamous churches." But America has known well how to give such feelings voice and nurture—in the *agora*, in the churches. And, if existing churches are hostile, America again gives us a time-tried solution—found a new church. But, leave the *akademia* to be itself. Religious studies does not need to undermine its own academic aspirations. It needs to get on with the job. Without lapsing into a discredited positivism, we in religious studies must resist its re-theologizing—even if these days the new theology speaks often in the seductive pseudo-universal language of continental Hermeneutics, the archaic

religion of Eliade, or the post-critical faith of Ricoeur. Our job is still to *study* religion, not to *make* or “construct” it.

Without “Theology” in Religious Studies: A Proposal

If “creative” theology is to cherish any hopes of overt membership in the university, it would need to pass a battery of tests. First, at every place May is tentative, we must be clear and unequivocal: the kind of “theology” one might imagine being “done” in the university would have to be free of apologetics, liturgical expression, belief, commitment or anything else likely to compromise its liberal intentions. Then, it should be able to meet the two more specific requirements: is it a general human enterprise in (1) method and (2) application? If something called “creative theology” could successfully claim both, then it, like philosophy, history, sociology, and so on, might take its place in the human studies.

But where is the extremely high cost of which I spoke? To start, the term “theology” will have to go. It has intrinsic theistic reference, thus giving offense to those religious communities and individuals, both ancient and contemporary, for whom the notion of god is either irrelevant or odious. Buddhism, Confucianism, forms of modern atheistic quasi- or pseudo-religious movements would be examples. The “new theology” of which I speak cannot be universal, and thus fit for the university, unless it can include these manifestations of the religious spirit as equals with more familiar forms of religion in the “Abrahamic” West.

I would thus prefer instead of “theology” the term “hermeneutics.” In its more earthbound sense as “interpretation,” every religious community seeks to express and explicate its vision of things. In the sense I employ here, “hermeneutics” names that activity. Do not Buddhists, Christians, Marxists, Fascists, Liberals and so on face the *same* intellectual or methodological task when they seek to square expectations with world realities? How do these different communities or individuals “read” their “texts?” Are there distinctive differences? Don’t all such “religions” (in the broad sense) need to “interpret” the givens of their communal traditions and identities with day-to-day changes in real life? If so, they are doing “hermeneutics” in my sense.

Now such “hermeneutics” (R.I.P. “theology”) deserves serious study. And we have hardly begun. Where are our studies of general rules and regularities of the creative interpretation of traditions? Where are our studies establishing interpretation as a universal, human, creative operation, which alone would put any putative “creative theology” (i.e. “hermeneutics”) on firm intellectual founda-

tions? In a pluralistic society such as ours, our problem is how to demonstrate and understand this universal human intellectual operation without prejudice to the different communities bound up in our social contract. The possible methodological generality of the process of creative interpretation promises this. But we need to make good on the promise. Even the St. Louis Project theologians I have criticized should welcome this—indeed, perhaps be among the first to lead the charge. This hermeneutics promises to embody the kind of display of crucial first-order, creative, human "activity" that the fictive hiring of Buber seemed intended to do. It should also satisfy many of the St. Louis Project members because it preserves the essence of a method that they in their best moments seek to preserve. But what of content? What of my second test for general "application?"

By referring to the wide world of religions, I have already indicated that such a "hermeneutics" must be worked out in a cross-cultural comparative context. But cross-cultural comparison must be conceived as central and indispensable to such a religious hermeneutics, as it must be for doing straightforward systematic theology (Strenski: 126–128). The comparative study of religions is not an "option," a handsome addition to the *study* of religion or the creative "doing" of a hermeneutic. It must be an integral, necessary part of it. If it is not, the suspicion will always linger that a partial or strictly sectarian viewpoint is being propagated. Although I cannot lay out the details of this position here, I mean something analogous for "hermeneutics" to what is standard operating procedure in linguistics. No one does up-to-date work in French linguistics, for example, without ready comparative reference to all the other Romance languages. Linguists recognize that some features of a language may be unique to it, but thanks to comparative historical studies, also that other features are common to the entire language group. How could a general "hermeneutics" do respectable work without equivalent sophistication, without knowing when its interpretations were essentially, or uniquely Christian, and when they were only features of, say, the Semitic religious group. How could one do an essentially Christian theology without knowing what features of Christianity were not particularly Christian, but primarily features of the Semitic group of religions taken as a class?

Getting Our Priorities Right

Yet even if "theology" should reconstitute itself in the university as this general hermeneutic, certain priorities would have to be weighed.

The first would place history of religions at the core of the

religious studies curriculum and staffing policy. This is so, since even the hermeneutic of which I spoke would need to wait on the results of the history of religions for primary data. Indeed, such a hermeneutic would create demands for richer and more ramified results from historians of religion.

Second, we would have to weigh the value of doing such a hermeneutic over against other activities (and assignment of FTE). We know that Americans are massively ignorant about the world—both outside and inside the USA. Our primary responsibility in the universities is certainly to remedy this appalling circumstance and to move the mountain of ignorance blocking humane relationships with the world. We might concentrate on this perhaps before we get on with hermeneutics—however well conceived. Instead of doing hermeneutics, students of religion might arguably thrust themselves into the forefront in the *akademia* and *agora*, explaining what's happening in Iran, Lebanon, Ireland, Central America, and yes, Lynchburg, Virginia too. As a profession, we are disgraced by the fact that Americans look first to almost any other discipline than ours when it comes to matters where religion itself is central. But we have only our drooling over nationally self-indulgent problems of adolescent religious questing to blame for this. How many courses of mock mysticism and pseudo-soul-saving have passed as regular options in religious studies? That part of the legacy of the 1960's we could safely shelve. How much of the current drive to re-theologize religious studies represents the same concerns to save the souls of young people in our care? More than we might care to admit.

I do not reject the counselor's commission, but religious studies needs to strike the right balance between existential and educational commissions. Unless we are to become the walk-in therapy center for the university, we have to re-establish the balance in favor of knowledge and education, hard thinking and good writing—which themselves put the existential concerns of adolescents—whether narcissistic or not—into perspective so that they can successfully overcome them. There really *is* a world out there beyond the existential anxieties of youth. The "others" really exist, with their histories, customs, interests and so on. We are a nation more and more unavoidably part of that world scene; yet more ignorant of it than ever. Moreover it is a world scene of equals in which we will no longer be able to enjoy the privileges of special treatment. We will have to know as much about "them" as they have, for some time, known about "us." Religious studies had better be there in the arena of public knowledge where it is needed, if we want to be part of the future. Thus, instead of making counter-revolution in religious studies or even doing "hermeneutics," scholars with "creative" theological inclinations

should lend their aid and comfort to the unfulfilled potential of the religious studies revolution of past decades.

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