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(83) CHRISTIANITY IN RWANDA

Tharcisse Gatwa

Religion	Pop 2010	Pct 2010	Pop 2025	Pct 2025	Gr Pct 1970 2025
Christians	9,373,000	91.1%	13,211,000	91.9%	2.3%
Independents	1,008,000	9.8%	1,510,000	10.5%	2.7%
African initiated	918,000	8.9%			
Orthodox	1,500	0.0%	1,500	0.0%	0.0%
Protestants	3,310,000	32.2%	4,450,000	31.0%	2.0%
Anglicans	1,240,000	12.0%			
Adventist	732,000	7.1%			
Baptist	484,000	4.7%			
Pentecostal	463,000	4.5%			
Reformed, Presbyterian	271,000	2.6%			
Roman Catholics	4,734,000	46.0%	7,006,000	48.7%	2.6%
<i>Evangelicals</i>	2,060,000	20.0%	3,141,000	21.8%	2.9%
<i>Pentecostals/Charismatics</i>	1,949,000	18.9%	2,850,000	19.8%	2.6%
Muslims	518,000	5.0%	800,000	5.6%	2.9%
adherents of traditional African religions	360,000	3.5%	300,000	2.1%	-1.2%
Baha'is	20,000	0.2%	30,000	0.2%	2.7%
Hindus	540	0.0%	800	0.0%	2.6%
people professing no religion	21,900	0.2%	36,100	0.3%	3.4%
Total population	10,294,000	100.0%	14,377,000	100.0%	2.3%

Source: Centre for the Study of World Christianity (CSGC), Boston, Gordon-Conwell TS

The evangelisation of the Kingdom of Rwanda was initiated by the White Fathers¹ who arrived from Uganda in 1900. The first Protestant missions were from Bethel (by Bielefeld, Germany), who arrived from Tanganyika in East Africa, then the Seventh Day Adventist missionaries, the Anglicans, the Danish Baptists, the Methodists and the Pentecostals.² In the latter half of twentieth century came the Lutherans from Tanzania and many new religious groups, claiming an indigenous origin and leadership. In a single century, Christianity grew to be one of the most influential institutions of the land with more than 90% of a population estimated at twelve million, one of the most highly Christianised country in Africa.³

¹ The congregation was founded in 1868 in Algiers by a French prelate, Cardinal Lavigerie. The true name of the organisation is the *Missionary Society of Africa*. They adopted the name of White Fathers by imitation to Muslims aiming at reaching out to evangelise in those contexts.

² Butselaar & Twagirayesu, ed [1982], *Ce don que nous avons Reçu*. Bruxelles: Eglise Presbyterienne au Rwanda.

³ The 2012 National census projected the population of Rwanda for 2014 at around 12 million. Similarly, Statistics published by the US government estimate the population of Rwanda in July 2013 at 12 million. Of these 56.5 % are roman Catholics; 26 % Protestants; 11.1% Seven-day Adventists; 4.6% Muslims and 1.7 no religious and others. If we

The Implantation of Missions in Rwanda

The Roman Catholic Church. On 2nd February 1900, Mgr Jean Joseph Hirth, a French national heading a team of three other European priests and many Baganda from Uganda, arrived in Nyanza, the headquarters of the monarchy. King Musinga allowed them to start the first mission stations in Save, in the south of the country, on 8th February 1900, followed by a chain of mission stations across the country – in Zaza (in the east, 1900), Nyundo (in the west, 1901), Rwaza (in the north, 1903), Mibilizi (in the south-west, 1903), Kabgayi (in the centre, 1905), Murunda (in the west, 1909); Rulindo (in the centre, 1909), Kansi (in the south, towards Burundi, 1910). The first baptism was administered on 12th April 1903, Easter Sunday, to 26 catechumen (22 boys and four girls).⁴ Two other baptisms took place on 15th August and 24th December 1903.⁵ In 1917, King Musinga was forced to sign a bill granting religious freedom; in October that same year, Mgr Hirth ordained the two first Rwandan priests, Donat Rebero and Balthazar Gafuku.

The Protestants. German Protestant missionaries who first evangelised Rwanda were ministering among the German colonial officials in German East Africa to which Rwanda and Burundi then belonged. From Usambara, a delegation consisting of pastors Dr Ernst Johanssen and Ruccius, plus a number of Tanganyikans, arrived in August 1907; they met King Musinga who authorised the opening of stations in Zinga (in the east) and Kirinda (in the centre) that year. Rubengera opened in 1909, Kiteme on Ijwi Island (1910), Remera-Rukoma (1912), then Kigali, Cyangugu and Rukira. At the outbreak of World War I, the German missions had eleven stations.⁶

In 1921, the Germany missions were taken up by the small Société Belge des Missions Protestantes au Congo (SBMPC). They were joined by two young Adventists (1919) in Rubengera and Kirinda before they later moved to create their own stations in Gitwe and Rwankeri;⁷ the Anglicans arrived from Uganda in 1922 and established a mission station in Gahini, in the east of Rwanda. They later extended to Shyira (in the north), Shyogwe (in the centre) and Kigeme (in the south). The Danish Baptist missionaries from Burundi started to evangelise from the south in 1928; the Swedish Pentecostals from eastern DRC started to evangelise from Gihundwe (in the south-west in 1940), while the American Methodists initiated a mission in Kibogora (in the west in 1941). Today, the Pentecostals and the Seventh Day Adventist Church are the fast-growing communities which have overtaken the Presbyterians and the Anglicans.

add up the Seven-day Adventists together, all Protestants together represent 37.1%. www.state.gov/documents/organisation/222297.pdf, “Rwanda 2013 International Religious Freedom Report. Executive Summary accessed 24-01-2015.

⁴In accordance to the instruction of Cardinal Lavigerie, the catechumenate would last four years. It was exceptionally reduced to 3 years for the first baptism in Rwanda. Jean Van der Meersch [1993], *Le Catéchuménat au Rwanda de 1900 à nos jours*, Kigali: Pallotti Presses, p 43.

⁵ 17 and 51 catechumen were baptised. Of the hundreds baptized in 1903, three would become priests: Donat Rebero, ordained 1917 [died 1926], Joseph Bugondo, ordained in 1919 [died 1942] and Jovita Matabaro, ordained 1920 [died 1973] [Rutinduka 2014:40].

⁶ Blamed for the war in Europe, the Germans were defeated in Africa in 1916; they lost their colonies and the missionaries had to leave. Under the 1919 Versailles Treaty, Tanganyika was given to Britain whilst Rwanda and Burundi were given to Belgium.

⁷ The first Seven Day Adventists in Rwanda were two young converts, David Delhove and Henry Monnier. These two started as officers in the Belgian colonial troops; they were allowed to settle and run the missionary stations abandoned by the German to locals in Rubengera and Kirinda. When the Belgian protestant missionary society was given the control over the German missions, Delhove and Monnier left to initiate Gitwe and Rwankeri. They later extended mission work in Mugonero [West].

Evangelism

In the 1930s, the Catholic Church experienced mass conversions known as *Irivuze Umwami* ('what the King says'). King Musinga, seen as a threat to evangelisation, had been dismissed in 1930. Exiled, he died in Moba, a site in the south-east of DRC; he was replaced by one of his sons, Rudahigwa, a Roman Catholic convert. Enthroned in 1931 by both Mr Voisin and Mgr Classe, respectively the Belgian governor of the colony and the head of the Roman Catholic Church,⁸ Rudahigwa led the ruling elite to Christianity. His conversion made a psychological impact on the masses who followed his example. There was a common perception that the King had ordered his subjects to convert to Catholicism. Thus the population applied the phrase of the common knowledge: *Irivuze umwami ukoma yombi* ('what the King says, you applaud'). According to many views, the King never gave such an instruction, but the confusion persisted and the missionaries enjoyed it.

In reality, the missionaries had reached an agreement with the colonial administration on political reforms, aimed at removing from power the so-called 'old guides' (traditional chiefs). Baptism was one of the criteria for keeping the position of chief. The conditions for the chiefs to be baptized consisted of presenting a record number of postulants for catechism. Hence, for the chiefs, urging the population to convert became both a duty and a motive for political survival.

The Fathers were however excited by the ruling elite's conversion and the influence the church gained. In missionary literature, these conversions were known as 'the tornado', from an article published in *La Revue des Grands Lacs* in 1936; it was 'welcomed' as the greatest Catholic missionary achievement on the continent, a 'miracle, the hand of God on earth discovered by the Europeans', 'the Spirit that blows in tornadoes from above'.⁹

In the climax of the tornado, two major events deserve our attention: the baptism, in 1943, of the King, the queen and the queen mother; and a memorable ceremony during which, in October 1946, King Mutara III consecrated Rwanda to Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary, a 'significant move of the Catholic Church', according to Father Muvala. The discourse of the consecration was an extraordinary piece of contextual theology. The King publicly recognised the Lordship of Jesus and the Virgin Mary over any national traditional religion or philosophy. The Catholic hierarchy continued to be influential in society and have direct influence in colonial and post-colonial politics.¹⁰ And yet, the Catholic hierarchy was speaking of God from a top-down perspective.¹¹

Church, Culture and Literacy

From the beginning, the missionaries took an interest in learning the language of the country, Kinyarwanda, along with the customs, social institutions, laws and rules. By 1911, four books were published in a mixture of the Kinyarwanda and Luganda languages, the *Ekitabu Kyo Kufutula Bigambo Bye Dini, Okuvaku Belemye Bwi Si Okugera mu Misi Wacu* ('the book that explains faith words from the creation up today'). The missionaries continued to use many imported concepts, like *Mungu* ('God' – instead of *Imana*); *Roho Mutagatifu* (instead of 'Holy Spirit', *Mwuka w'Imana*).¹² The missionaries codified the Kinyarwanda language; however imperfect it was, it still worked until the 1960s when Father Alexis Kagame made substantial improvement of the phonetics and orthography.

⁸ The move was done in disrespect of the custom where Abiru, the guardians of the monarchical customs were sole competent to enthrone the King. Governor Voisin said: "Rudahigwa, as you were nominated by the kin of the Belgians, I proclaim you of Rwanda". Then Mgr Classe said: "Your name of the throne is Mutara III" [Gatwa 2004: 89].

⁹ Rutayisire 1985:100

¹⁰ Kalibwami; 1991; Linden 1977 & 1999; Gatwa 2005; Gatwa et Karamaga 1990; Rutinduka 2014; Rutayisire 2014

¹¹ Gatwa 2005:90

¹² Jean Van der Meersch [1993], *Le catéchuménat au Rwanda de 1900 à nos jours*. Kigali: Pallotti, 50.

At the time of Vatican II, the Catholic Church had four local bishops.¹³ The hierarchy would deal with the republican institutions mostly run by political leaders who had graduated from the seminaries, including Gregoire Kayibanda (President 1962-1973), and the graduates of Indatwa College in Astrida.¹⁴ The church's active role and influence in Rwandan politics with an ethos of closeness was extensively documented by many researchers.¹⁵

In 1963, the Dominicans from Canada created the first university in Rwanda which remained the only one until the 1990s. The church and its religious congregations run many organisations, social and charity activities under Caritas, schools under the Secretariat for Education, youth and lay organisations, newspapers including Kinyamateka (1933), the only Rwandan weekly for years, and Hobe, the journal for children created by Mgr Bigirumwami (1954). In 1988, the church started a radio station, *Radio Maria*, which broadcast from Kabgayi. From cultural and intellectual perspectives, much of the scholarly information and knowledge on past and present Rwanda were produced within the Roman Catholic Church by foreign and local clergy, including the most prominent Father Alexis Kagame.¹⁶

Protestant initiatives in evangelism include the 1925 Kirinda missionary conference that initiated the translation of the Bible in Kinyarwanda,¹⁷ the establishment in 1930 of geographic limits for missions to avoid competition and rivalry, the formation in 1935 of the Alliance of the Protestant churches in Rwanda and Burundi and, finally, the formation in 1963 of the Council of Protestant Churches in Rwanda (CPR)¹⁸ which co-ordinated various activities, including education, through its office of National Protestant Education, BNEP.

Speaking out for God from Personal Piety

In 1933, a spiritual revival emerged in Gahini, an Anglican missionary station. Influenced by the Keswick revival movement in England, the Rwandan movement was later known as the East African Revival; its

¹³ Aloys Bigirumwami in Nyundo, Jean Baptiste Gahamanyi in Butare, Joseph Sibomana in Ruhengeri then Kibungo and the Swiss born André Perraudin in Kabgayi. Mgr Perraudin, as Primate of the Catholic Church from 1956 to 1976 sponsored the first Rwandan politicians including Grégoire Kayibanda. In 1976 Vincent Nsengiyumva took over both ecclesial and political leadership. Today, the Roman Catholic Church has 9 dioceses, more than 140 parishes for over 6 million believers. Much smaller, the Anglican Church has 11 dioceses for less than 1 million of believers.

¹⁴ Created by the Colonial government for the education of the sons of the chiefs, the college was given to the Fathers of Charity for management.

¹⁵ Linden 1977; 1999; Justin Kalibwami 1991; Rutayisire 1989 & 2014; Blackmann 1994; Gatwa 2005

¹⁶ Father Alexis Kagame of the indigenous clergy started his intellectual activities in late 1930s; he was appointed by King Mutara III a member of the prestigious Abiru royal institution hence acceded to volume of royal corpus of cultural and traditional material. He defended a doctoral thesis of philosophy in 1951 in Rome on the Rwandan philosophy of being published in 1954]. Philosopher, ethno-historian, linguist he was a reference of knowledge in Africa, one of the editors of the General history of Africa by UNESCO. Other influential figures of the local clergy was Mgr Aloys Bigirumwami who collected and commented volumes of corpus of the Rwandan popular wisdoms under the title *Imihango n'Imigenzereze ya Kinyarwanda*, work that has become a reference to subsequent studies; Father Muzungu [See his three volumes, *Le Dieu des nos peres*]. Among foreigners, Canon De Lacger, Father Pages, Arnaud; Nothomb.

¹⁷ The translation was sponsored by the United Bible Society and the British and Foreign Bible Society. Led by Rev Harold Guillebaud from the UK, the team published the NT in Kinyarwanda in 1931 and the whole Bible in 1957. The Catholics waited until 1967 when Father Alexis Kagame published the first translation of the New Testament. In 1981 both Protestant and Catholics initiated an ecumenical translation of the Bible completed in 2002; but in parallel, the Catholic conducted their own translation which was published in 1989.

¹⁸ In 1962 Ruanda-Urundi obtained independence into two entities. The tense political context wouldn't allow to work cross the two borders; hence the Alliance of Protestant Churches split into the Alliance of Churches for Burundi and the Protestant Council for Rwanda.

focus was not the ruling elite as with the Catholics, but individuals. The missionaries attempted to emulate the Keswick teachings on the holiness of God, the new birth, repentance, faith, prayer, the Holy Spirit, sanctification, the public confession of sins, visions and prophecies, participating regularly in fellowship meetings, and walking in the light of the Holy Spirit. After a promising beginning, the movement declined in the 1950s, a development blamed on opposition coming from Catholicism, communism and nationalism.¹⁹ It reappeared in the 1970s in an Anglican girls' school in Kigeme. From a Puritan perspective, the revival achieved a great deal: the *Abarokore* or 'born-again' involved in evangelisation insisted on the *ethnic togetherness*, while teams of evangelists sponsored by the Ruanda Mission toured East Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas, forming a worldwide fellowship. Their attitude towards politics, on the other hand, was one of clear distance.

Catholics, Protestants, State Relations and Social Actions

The relations between missionaries and King Musinga regime were never very good. The King suspected the missionaries of thwarting his power and plotting to take away his authority, while the missionaries saw him as anti-missionary and western civilisation.

Between Catholics and Protestants, relations were never very good either. While the Catholics were influential in Rwandan politics, the Protestants were left on the sidelines but the constant internal quarrelling for power and leadership, particularly within the Anglican Church from the 1970s up to the 1990s, never helped to promote the credibility of the Protestants. However both Catholics and Protestants, separately, initiated many socio-economic activities to alleviate poverty and the suffering of the people. As from the beginning, about a hundred Catholic orders joined in supporting the mission work, providing both human and material resources. Religious orders helped to create or run schools on behalf of the Belgian colonial power.²⁰

Protestants were both discriminated against but also had little ambition to promote general education. It was only in 1947 that the alliance of the Protestant churches in Ruanda-Urundi opened the first secondary school for primary school teachers in Shyogwe. The first Protestant high school opening up to university education started in 1965 in Kigali, by the Presbyterian Church of Rwanda, assisted by the Swiss churches. A centre of excellence, the College Officiel de Kigali (COK) was unfortunately nationalised in 1976 by the Habyarimana regime to host the Franco-African College of Statistics and Applied Economics (IAMSEA).

The Training of the Clergy

Lavigerie, a former professor of ecclesiastical history in the Paris Sorbonne University (1853-1860), applied the early church structure on the catechumenate. He was inspired by the Canon XVIII's conclusions of the Council of Trent and the Leon XIII (1878-1903) encyclical in which the Pope invited the universal church, in particular in Africa, to create seminaries. Mgr Hirth, a former assistant rector and professor of seminaries in Algiers and Jerusalem, had experience of seminaries. He created the first seminary in 1903 in Rubya, Tanzania; fifteen Rwandans (ten from Save and five from Zaza) were recruited; in 1904, they joined 43 other recruits from the rest of the Vicariate. Of these Rwandans, two, Donat Rebero and Balthazar Gafuku, persisted up to priestly ordination in 1917; they were the first Rwandan priests.

¹⁹ Ntuhinyuzwa: 354

²⁰ To mention but a few, the school of sons of chiefs, Indatwa in Astrida created in 1926 run by the Fathers of Charity; the technical school in Kicukiro, Kigali run by the Salesians; the Athenee Royale, Bujumbura, Burundi run by the fathers of Holy Spirit, etc.

In 1913, following the creation by Pope Pius X of the Kivu Vicariate, detached from Nyanza's and consisting of Rwanda, Burundi and Buha (west of Tanzania), a new seminary opened in Kabgayi. It was transferred to Nyakibanda in 1936 till the present. When Mgr Hirth retired in 1922, the Pope created two Vicariates, one for Rwanda, given to Mgr Leon Classe, and another for Burundi, given to Mgr Gorju. Rwanda and Burundi continued to train priests in Nyakibanda till 1952.²¹ Between 1917 and 2012, the Kabgayi, then the Nyakibanda, seminaries had formed 1,054 priests.

Within the Protestant missions, clergy training was viewed with suspicion and even accused of a lack of faith. Exceptionally, the Presbyterian Church pioneered theological formation in sending candidates to train abroad, starting with Naasson Hitimana and Ildephonse Muzigamfizi, who trained in Cameroon from 1958. These two were ordained to ministry in 1963, 46 years after the first Roman Catholic ordination. Hitimana became the first African leader of the church. He pioneered the creation of the first ecumenical theological seminary in Butare in 1970, which has since trained about 700 pastors and church leaders. As from 2010, this institution was transformed into a fully-fledged university, the Protestant Institute of Arts and Social Sciences (PIASS). Within the Protestant family, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, after years of stagnation, revised with quality education under the Union's leadership of the Rev. Peck, E. Sembeba, Amon Rugerinyange and Hesron Byiringiro.²²

Religiosity and Mariology

From 28th November 1981, another spiritual revival was sparked off in the Roman Catholic Church of Kibeho, south of Rwanda. Many school pupils claimed to have received messages from the 'Mother of the Word', i.e. the Virgin Mary. The visionaries invited the church hierarchy, public authorities and the populace to repent, devote, love and revere the 'Mother of God'. The Roman Catholic hierarchy was divided between the pros and the antis. Some questioned the poor academic background of the school children, their Biblical illiteracy and their moral standards, while others suspected political manipulations.²³ And yet, on 29th June 2000, Kibeho was officially recognised as a 'holy place of apparitions of the Virgin Mary'. It has become a pilgrimage destination for believers from the region and beyond.

The Church and the Genocide

The church hierarchies have been blamed to missing the opportunity to address ethnic discrimination and manipulation before and during the genocide.²⁴ Many observers trace the genocide ideology back to the 1959 episode, during which hundreds of the ruling Batutsi elite were killed and others sent into exile. While the discrimination of the Bahutu was overwhelming during the time of colonial rule, dominated by the colonial-missionary alliance with the Batutsi ruling elite, the situation was reversed during the republican era. In 1990, when the descendants of the 1959 refugees attacked Rwanda from Uganda, the regime exacerbated ethnic feelings against the Batutsi community within the country. Many killings were conducted in various places of Batutsi concentration. The paroxysm was the 1994 genocide that followed the death of Presidents Habyarimana of Rwanda and Ntaryamira of Burundi.²⁵

²¹ That same year Burundi opened its Superior Seminary in Burasira.

²² Today the Seven Day Adventist Church has three universities, one for the whole central Africa, in Kigali, a second in Gitwe and a lay University in Kigali.

²³ Misago, later bishop of Gikongoro that covers Kibeho, remarked that some of the visionaries were regularly invited by the propagandists of the regime even seen in the private residences of the president of Rwanda [Misago 1991:366].

²⁴ Rutayisire 2014

²⁵ Gatwa 2005

The post-genocide era was characterised by a malaise created by both the loss of the Catholic Church's dominant position and criticism lodged against her misguided role and the absence of stance against the genocide.²⁶ The church hierarchy had kept silent or had spoken too little while hundreds of thousands of victims, including believers and members of the clergy, were being slaughtered across the country.²⁷

In 1991, there was an AACC-inspired initiative, out of which the hierarchies on both sides formed a Contact Committee to mediate in the political crises between 1991 and early 1994. Though mixed results were achieved, the hierarchy missed the opportunity of capitalising on that to try to defuse the malaise. Some of the Protestant churches repented for the failure; but it was only in 1998 that the Catholic Church organised an extraordinary synod in dioceses in preparation for its centenary celebrations.²⁸ Interestingly, the approach run from below within ecclesial communities speaking up on the topic of ethnicism. One of the major findings was the need for a Gacaca (Rwanda's community courts which is loosely translated as "justice amongst the grass") but this was exploited by the government.²⁹

A Spring of Revivalism

The religious life of the aftermath of the 1994 genocide was imbued with the arrival of new charismatic movements. The end of the genocide inspired many refugees to return from their long exile; streams of former refugees managed to join some local churches. But many others decided to start their own church. A new era of religious pluralism started. In less than ten years, more than 300 new religious movements were registered.³⁰

The absence of ecclesiology, doctrine and theological training for these initiators, expressed in liturgical improvisation, added to the extraordinary variety of leaders' titles and became a matter of controversy. First, they practised a theology of deliverance, calling the people – both the authorities and the populace – to pray continuously for deliverance; to publicly confess and repent of the evil that had led to the genocide. Secondly, the new churches formed their own 'fora' (the Alliance of Evangelical Churches, AEC; the Federation of Born Again Churches and Organisations, FOBACOR). However, since 2000, these two convinced the older National Council, the Protestant Council of Rwanda (CPR) to form a body called 'Peace Plan'. Apostle Paul Gitwaza, leader of Zion Temple, one of the new churches, was elected in 2013 as its chair. He took over from retired Anglican, Archbishop Emmanuel Kolini. From 2011, 'Peace Plan' has organised annual crusades called *Rwanda Shima Imana* (Go Rwanda. Thank God!), to thank God for the country's renaissance.

In 2014, both Catholics and Protestants were able to co-operate in the elaboration of a declaration, confessing and repenting of missed opportunities of the past, as seen in the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi.³¹ This move gave new hope for inter-church and church self-state dialogue.

²⁶ Blackmann 1994; Gatwa 2005; Rutayisire 2014

²⁷ Some exceptions include Pastor Athanase Rwamuhizi [a Presbyterian minister in Kugituntu parish]; Sr Félicité Niyitegeka of Nyundo, Father Munyaneza of Mukarange parish; Claver Nzabamwita and his wife Angélique Mushinzimana of Kiziguro, Mathias Kanamugire of Rukara; Cyprien Rugamba of the Emmanuel Community killed with his wife and children. Timothy Longman (2010), *Christianity and Genocide in Rwanda. African Studies 112*. NY: Cambridge University Press.

²⁸ Rutayisire 2014:3012, 3

²⁹ This traditional mechanism of conflict resolution within families and communities was rehabilitated by the government and used in the trial of the perpetrators of the genocide. As from 2001 up to 2012 the Gacaca community tribunals treated more or less 2 million cases.

³⁰ Gatwa & Rutinduka 2014, 246-249

³¹ The process initiated by PEACE PLAN culminated in the June 2014 Musanze Church leaders' retreat which adopted the Declaration. The working group is chaired by the Anglican bishop of Kigeme, Augustin Mvunabandi.

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