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## ***FUTURE OF RELIGION IN THE POSTMODERN SECULAR CONTEXT***

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*Abstract: Secularization and the future of religion are current topics of interest not only for the philosophy of religion and for Christian theology, but also for other areas of culture and contemporary society. Postmodern thinking has changed the nature of society and how religion is viewed and practiced. What has changed in the perception of religion in today's society, and how will the religious phenomenon look in this century? Gianni Vattimo, René Girard, Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor are thinkers who debate on the return of religion in public discourse and in the academic space.*

*In this context, Gianni Vattimo speaks about secularization as a destiny of Christianity. He sees secularization as a form of expression of Christianity, and not any form, but the best expression. Secularization does not have to be seen as a negative phenomenon, but a positive one to help Christianity to fulfill its purpose.*

***Keywords: secularization, postmodernism, future of religion, Gianni Vattimo, René Girard, Richard Rorty, Charles Taylor***

The question about the role of religion and religious practice in contemporary society is not a new question. From Nietzsche's Madman who declared the death of God<sup>1</sup> to practical phenomenon of declining participation in religious services within Judaism and Christianity, we ask today what the place of religion is in the modern and postmodern world.

Secularization was presented at the beginning of the twentieth century as an inevitable process, religion was considered disqualified in relations with modernity and rationalization process. Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim<sup>2</sup>, Max Weber and others have described secularization as the loss of influence and importance of religion in modern society. For Karl Marx, who believed "religion is the opium of the people", religion it supposed to disappear with the coming of society without classes, religion was a tool of oppression belonging to the rich people. For Emile Durkheim, religion had to be replaced by a civil religion that will provide moral support for society and facilitate strengthening social cohesion.<sup>3</sup> Durkheim sees religion as a life experience separated by eternity with exclusive implications in human temporality. Max Weber<sup>4</sup>, on the other hand, although sees the link between the progress of the institutions of modernity (capitalism, free market, democracy) and religion believes that the rationality of modernity (which includes the idea of progress) will lead, among others thing, to the marginalization of religion.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Știința Veselă* in *Opere complete*, vol. 4, Critic edition in 15 volume by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Translated by Simion Dănilă, Timișoara: Editura Hestia, 2001, 340, [English: Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science (The Joyful Wisdom)*, 1st ed. ([Stilwell, Kan.]: Digireads.com, 2009).].

<sup>2</sup> Durkheim, Émile. *Formele elementare ale vieții religioase*. (Iasi: Polirom, 1995), [English: Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms Of The Religious Life*, 1st ed. (New York: Free Press, 1965)].

<sup>3</sup> Tănase Laurențiu, 'Familia și societatea într-o lume secularizată', in *Congresul internațional Familia și viața la început de nou mileniu* (București: Palatul Patriarhiei, 2001), 81.

<sup>4</sup> Weber, Max. *Etica protestantă și spiritul capitalismului*. Traducere de Ihor Lemnij. Postfață de Ioan Mihăilescu. București: Humanitas, 2003 [Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic And The Spirit Of Capitalism*, 1st ed. (New York: Scribner, 1958).].

Speaking today about the secularization of religious sentiment or about secular society requires recognition that religion has, at least apparently, in modern society, decline the influence comparing to the past.<sup>5</sup>

### Religion became modern

I don't want to insist on the concept of secularization, we use the expression inspired by Max Weber presenting secularization as an action of *disenchantment* of the world and the process designate an inevitable consequence of modernity. Modernity implies modernization, development and social progress, which had a huge influence on how religion was seen in society.

At the beginning of modernity (in the 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and 17<sup>th</sup> century), religion and modernity were at the same table and still negotiating their role in society, but it became evident that Religion was losing its influence and Reason won the fight for modernism. In the Enlightenment (18th century), religion has faces with a choice: adapt to modern requirements or disappear. The first option was the way that religion has followed. Theologians and philosophers have debated on the many faces of religion and the place that find for itself in modern Europe. Nineteenth century theologians<sup>6</sup> have tried to provide a rational Christianity. They started the process of disenchantment through *demythologization*<sup>7</sup>, by removing the possibility of miracles and the faith in the resurrection, by building better hierarchical religious institutions; all of this through the approach of new hermeneutics that has no biblical source, but human rationality (Schleiermacher). Religion took the form of modernity.

Disenchantment of the world theorized by Max Weber present secularization as a pressure on religion to be free of myth and magic. But Christianity and Judaism by definition are against myth and magic. According to Charles Taylor,<sup>8</sup> before modernity religion was related to magic content and concept. Through rationalization was detached. In this sense, the disenchantment of the world, rationalization and secularization are synonymous. Charles Taylor tells us that we should not speak about secularization in quantitative terms, for example, how many people go to church and how not, but the attitude of human interiority. The way we talk about demons and other religious phenomena is different than was five hundred years ago. In this aspects there has a disenchantment of the world. On the other hand, the attitude of the disenchantment of the world is rooted in the Bible. Judaism, and Christianity and later Islam had this component of demagnification of the world.

Jonathan Sacks<sup>9</sup> in a dialogue with Charles Taylor on the future of religion<sup>10</sup>, says disenchantment of the world had both positive and negative effect on Christianity. The negative effect is found in the idea that the role of religion in modern society can be taken

<sup>5</sup>Popescu Dumitru. „Ortodoxia la sfârșit de mileniu”. în *Almanahul Bisericesc*, Arhiepiscopia Bucureștilor, 2000: 86-96.

<sup>6</sup>Rudolf Bultmann, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Emil Brunner, Wolfhart Pannenberg.

<sup>7</sup>Rudolf Bultmann and Schubert Miles Ogden. *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*. 1984.

<sup>8</sup>Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>9</sup>Jonathan Sacks was the Chief Rabbi of the largest synagogues in the United Kingdom, United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth. He is a Jewish religious authority worldwide, teacher, philosopher and author of over 25 books on topics of moral philosophy and Judaism. (<http://www.rabbisacks.org/about-us/>)

<sup>10</sup>Charles Taylor and Jonathan Sacks, 'Charles Taylor And Jonathan Sacks On The Future Of Religion', TVO, 2012, <http://tvo.org/video/171085/charles-taylor-and-jonathan-sacks-future-religion>.

over by other social institutions. We do not need priests to cultivate morality because now we have teachers, we don't need to pray because now we have technology, when we are sick we don't need a priest, or a pastor or a rabbi, but doctors; if we are depressed we don't need the Book of Psalms, but we can take a pill. The positive is reassessment and readjustment of Christianity to new social conditions. As in the first centuries, the Christianity had to respond to heresies in the ecumenical councils, in the same way the warning signs of modern rationality has forced the Church to abandon what is changeable and respond so that they keep the place in modern society. Secularization itself means transition and change.

After the blows that religion received in the nineteenth century from evolutionism and Marxist materialism, and in the twentieth century from fascism and communism, it is believed that in the late twentieth century we speak about religion in the past tense, but we are seeing, especially in recent years a revival of religion in contemporary society. How to explain this? Jonathan Sacks answers this question by appealing to the human need for meaning and modernity with all its progress that could not meet these needs. "Four institutions of modernity (science, technology, liberal democratic politics and market economy) cannot answer to three fundamental questions of human being: Who am I? Why am I on this earth? How should I live? Searching for meaning is inherent to any man, and religion is the legacy carrier in terms of significance. No doubt, faith still has a role to play in society and in what it means to be human."<sup>11</sup>

### **Modern secularization and postmodern secularization**

The society had two major changes of perspective. The transition from (1) pre-modern to (2) modern in the sixteenth century and the shift from modern to (3) postmodern in the twentieth century. The first major exponent of modernity is Descartes. The first major exponent of postmodernism is Nietzsche. The world has move from (1) a concern for religious and supernatural guided by the Christian revelation (2) to a concern for natural and scientifically guided by reason,(3) to a waiver of standards, certainty and meaning in postmodernism. The society went from (1) the medieval aristocratic hierarchy to (2) universal democracy (3) to doubting individualism characterized by social passivity. Or in terms of Lyotard, the society moves from (1) a meta-narrative of God's story (2) to a meta-narrative of universal reason that claims the truth about reality (3) to a reduction in postmodernism of all meta-narrative to will of power.<sup>12</sup>

An illustrative example of the three types of society is how religion is viewed. In pre-modernism, religion had a central place. Man is evil and irrational and religion needs to control his life. In modernity, religion is overcome by skepticism. Consequently, religion was institutionalized and rationalized. Postmodernism suggests that no matter how organized religious act is. People are together, worship together, but are like islands in the archipelago, it does not matter what they think, feel and how they live.

There can be identified similarities between pre-modernism and modernism and their distinction from postmodernism. Pre-modernism and modernism have in common that the

<sup>11</sup>Ibidem

<sup>12</sup> James W Sire, *Universul de lângă noi*. (Oradea: Editura Cartea Creștină, 2005), 224-225 [English: James W Sire, *The Universe Next Door*, 1st ed. (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1997)].

world can be known, reality is objective and independent, and knowledge is secure.<sup>13</sup> Postmodernism, on the other hand, is nihilist, denies the reality, says that the world is a construct of the self and the truth isn't certain.

Scholasticism, the Renaissance and the Reformation contributed each in its own way to the modern destiny of Europe. The Scholastic phenomenon put the first brick of modernity. God is presented as analytical concept, and what can be analyzed can be controlled. Renaissance presents a new type of man: *humanism* raptured from transcendent, lover of nature and beauty. Thus begins the era of scientific discovery and the development of the arts. Reform, on the other hand, strongly broadened strap of Catholic Church and gave liberty not only for a new kind of Christianity, but also political freedom, especially freedom of independent thinking in science and philosophy.

Reformers strove to preserve the balance between autonomy and authority. For them, the first authority was the Bible (the Reformation slogan was *Sola Scriptura*.) That principle had the strength to challenge other authorities (mainly ecclesiastical authority of the Catholic Church), and autonomy means freedom to read, study and interpret the Scriptures in independence by Church Catholic teaching canon. But, due to the emphasis on freedom, on value of the individual, on personal responsibility, on work ethics<sup>14</sup>, the duty to build social prosperity, all of this produced a man who "dares to think"<sup>15</sup> after Kant expression opposed biblical leitmotif "dare to believe"<sup>16</sup> and gave birth a man without transcendent, who no longer accept any absolute that can limit his freedom. Religion does not have to be characterized by outwardness, ritual, mediated by the institution of the Church, but an inner expression of the heart. This formulation apparently orthodox and biblical, it was a justification for departing from the influence of the Church. Christianity at that time, but today also, for most people means what the church does (the major church for every particular country - in this case the Catholic Church). The idea of heart religion was a subterfuge to mind religion which turned into obedience religion (which became individualistic) before reason.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> David S. Dockery, *The Challenge Of Postmodernism*, 1st ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1995), 14.

<sup>14</sup> We can refer to the study of Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which shows the influence of the Protestant Reformation and changes in mentality which it had in Europe, compared with traditional churches (Catholic and Orthodox). According to Weber, Protestantism in the way it understand the world facilitated rational action and social democracy expressed freely and responsibly which led to the development of contemporary capitalist society. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by IhorLemnij. Afterword by John Mihailescu. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2003 [Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic And The Spirit Of Capitalism*, 1st ed. (New York: Scribner, 1958)]. Perhaps a similar study can be made to indicate the Orthodox Church influence in Romania compared to the role of Protestantism and neoprotestant Churches.

<sup>15</sup> In the book coordinated by MirceaFlonta and Hans-Klaus Keul, *Filosofia practică a lui Kant* (Iași: Polirom, 2000) is presented a Kantian essay "What is Enlightenment" (1784) where the phrase *sapere aude* is presented to support Enlightenment and means "dare to know", but is translated in the spirit of the Enlightenment with "dare to think". The term is used as a slogan for many educational institutions and organizations worldwide.

<sup>16</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *Tradiția creștină. O istorie a dezvoltării doctrinei. V. Doctrina creștină și cultura modernă (de la 1700)*. (Iași: Polirom, 2008), 164 [English: Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 1st ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971)].

<sup>17</sup> Valences of this discussion is more extensive, but not belong here. The subjects involved are secularization, the private sphere and the public sphere of religion, the religion of the heart and religion of the mind and the role of reason in religion. I recommend reading Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 1st ed. (Chicago:

Postmodernism is based on the unfulfilled promises of modernity. Modernity began to decline. Optimism faded. Postmodernism is an ideology that has arisen in response to both modernism and the Christianity, a worldview, an intellectual provision and cultural expression that calls into question the ideals, principles, and values that form the heart of modern thought and Christianity. On the same ground that postmodernism rejects modernity, it rejects Christianity. Modernism and Christianity believe in truth. Postmodernism denies the possibility of truth.<sup>18</sup> Although apparently postmodernism is hospitable to Christianity, postmodernism essentially reduces the presence of Christianity to a mere voice. It is the "rolling" from center to edge, which Nietzsche wrote, of all social realities, not just human. Postmodernism is another form of secularism, and Christianity is obliged to respond in a different way than it did when the attacks came from modernity.

Postmodernism as a new type of secularization has the question of the death of God, the question of truth, the problem of being and becoming, ethical problems involved in the postmodern context, all of these are issues to be addressed in detail, and Gianni Vattimo helps us to put old problems in a new perspective under the area of suggestive concept of "weak thought".

### **Secularization as a destiny of Christianity**

Postmodernism is not challenging the foundations of modernity because then, as suggested by Vattimo (and Heidegger), we are dealing with a new foundation, a new inception. Vattimo says that foundations we used until now do not exist, the foundation is illusory, metaphysics must be left behind (not exceeded – because that implies an idea of progress, something better – a core notion of modernity). Metaphysics and ontology are forms of "strength". Postmodernism is an invitation to honesty. We do not have to overtake anything, we don't need a new foundation, but to recognize the phenomenon as it is. Something exists. How does the phenomenon exist? Why does it exist? What purpose does it exist for? What is the nature of reality? All these questions are not interesting for postmodernists.

Connecting the concept of *weak thought* to the idea of *weak faith* or otherwise connection between postmodern thinking and religious phenomenon gives us a new perspective on religion. Gianni Vattimo, René Girard, Richard Rorty debate on the return of religion in public discourse and in the academic area. In this context, Vattimo speaks about secularization as a destiny of Christianity. He sees secularization as a form of expression of Christianity, and not any form, but the best form. Secularization does not have to be seen as a negative phenomenon, as was theorized so far (from Hegel to the present day), but a positive phenomenon that helps Christianity to fulfill its destiny.

Gianni Vattimo acknowledges the influence of René Girard in his conception about Christianity. René Girard has developed a theory who explain the relation between violence and sacred (*Violence and the Sacred*, 1972, [1997]). Gianni Vattimo says: "René Girard helped me to understand that Christianity is the supreme religion, not the best exposure of the

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University of Chicago Press, 1971) and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*. 1st ed. (Cambridge, Mass Belknap Press of Harvard University.: Press), 2007.

<sup>18</sup> Gene Edward Veith Jr., *Postmodern Times*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 19-20.

sacred, but even a desecration of what was considered sacred for centuries."<sup>19</sup> Moral imperative of Christianity in Vattimo's vision is reduced to: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus came to show us God, in others terms that we knew the meaning of the Old Testament. Whence, the destiny of Christianity is to desecrate, to secularize. "The more we desecrate in terms of secularization, the more we get to the essence of the Gospel."<sup>20</sup> says Vattimo.

Some years ago it seemed that religion has no place in the public arena and will remain in this condition forever. But today, religion is in the form of a rapid recovery. Postmodernism *offered a chance* for religion. Postmodernism denounced the failure of modernity, reason and humanism crisis, challenged the power of science objectivism and in this delivered place, religion has find a new voice. Vattimo and Rorty talk about the future of religion, and more than that, Vattimo says that Christianity has everything to gain from secularization. Christianity as a hermeneutical principle is able to gain the liberty for itself and tonot become a new domination. Again, an interpretation in the scope of weak thought.

From Gianni Vattimo's perspective, postmodernism *helps* Christianity. Christianity is not the voice, but a voice. Christianity returns to status before Edict of Milan (313 AD) when it was a religion among other religions and provide a genuine story to produce disciples. Postmodernism is "forcing" Christianity to be genuine in its message to attract people with the power of love, which is the core of its message.

Vattimo distinguishes between two types of Christianity: Christianity-Institution governed by church and Christianity-Principle. Vattimo says that the second type of Christianity is more adapted for postmodernism. Probably the first type of Christianity is the type of religion to which Nietzsche reacted when he declared that "God is dead." Heidegger continues the same idea and says to his contemporary theologians: What did you make with God? An abstract notion. People cannot worship a concept.

Gianni Vattimo used very well the principle of Nietzsche: "There are no facts, only interpretations." So, on the path opened by Vattimo we can reach some kind of morality (ethics is love plus traffic rules.) and to a particular interpretation of Christianity that defines new approach to Christian influence in the contemporary world.

Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo suggests that they have the same perspective on the future of religion and puts this future in the context of overcoming the conflict between religion and science and the conflict between institutions. The battle between science and religion had the sense on "will to power," as Nietzsche expression, but is without sense in the new social context in which the goal is "social cooperation". The institutions that Rorty speaks about being in conflict are the Church and religious organizations on the one hand and the State and other secular institution like Academy. Each institution assert cultural supremacy (both the Church and the State).

I can summarize the line of thought that Vattimo and I are pursuing as follows: The battle between religion and science conducted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was a contest between institutions, both of which claimed cultural supremacy. (...) If social

<sup>19</sup> René Girard și Gianni Vattimo, *Adevărsaucredințăslabă. Convorbiridesprecreștinismșirelativism.*(București, CurteaVeche, 2009), 31, 32. [English : Gianni Vattimo et al., *Christianity, Truth, And Weakening Faith*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).]

<sup>20</sup> Idem.

cooperation is what you want, the conjunction of the science and the common sense of your day is all you need. But if you want something else, then a religion that has been taken out of the epistemic arena, a religion that finds the question of theism versus atheism uninteresting, may be just what suits your solitude.<sup>21</sup>

Rorty and Vattimo talk about a possible future of religion, but the conditions involved in the future of religion are different in their perspective. The quoted text can only talk about the conditions that Rorty offer to the future of religion:

- Religion has a future if we recognize the distinctive role of science and religion.
- Religion has a future if it gives up to the claim for cultural supremacy.
- Religion has a future in the context of searching for meaning, beyond technology and materialism.
- Religion has a future if it gives up to the controversy between theism and atheism.
- Religion has a future in the private of human life to satisfy his loneliness.

The future of religion is directly related to the recognition and practice the distinctive role of religion and science. The role of science, as Rorty says, is given in projects of social cooperation and the role of religion is related to the emotional nature of the individual in his approach for meaning.

Gianni Vattimo, on the other hand talks about the future of religion in terms that remove the conditioning. Religion will be in the future whether we like to admit or not. The proof is our history. We can't call ourselves Christians. Vattimo's vision is more optimistic due of the concept of *weak thought* which involves the elimination of violence. After reading the works of René Girard, Gianni Vattimo says that claim to scientific objectivity characteristic of modern rationality hide aggression in itself who is lost in the new postmetaphysical context and must also give up to the absolute values of religion, values that imply exclusion and facilitate aggression. Hermeneutics of weak thought implies the renunciation to violence, and this can be done on both sides, on the religion side and the science side in the political and academic institution. Gianni Vattimo says that foundation for dialectic atheism was destroyed by postmodernism. We are all historically Christians and atheists from a practical point of view.

Gianni Vattimo perspective on future of religion may be summarized as follows:

- Religion may return in places where it lost its influence.
- The future of religion is secured on ground left empty by science.
- The future of religion is guaranteed in the private area of the individual.
- The future of religion is given by waiving social controversy and resolving emotional needs of the individual.
- Religion wins by losing.

Rene Girard summarizes Gianni Vattimo's thinking about the future of religion saying: "Religion beats and overcomes philosophy. In fact, the philosophies are almost dead; ideologies are gone; political theories are almost over; belief that science can replace religion

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Rorty, Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *The Future Of Religion*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 39.

is now obsolete; and in the world is felt one new need for religion. And Vattimo is aware of that."<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusions

From a personal perspective, postmodernism is presented as a fact, as a phenomenon that releases us from illusions, which points to the limits of modernity, but in the same time recognizing its limits. Whether we want it or not we are in postmodernism. I do not know if it is cultural phenomenon or historical epoch or ideology, it is clear that something in the collective mentality has changed and can be easily better characterized by postmodernism than by modernism.

Modernism was the future, certain and hope, even if it was immanent in its nature. Postmodernism remove the illusions (or even this claim is an illusion), but has no future, no truth, no reality. We live in a postmodern world where the horizon has disappeared, meaning has faded, foundations are shaken, the feeling of smallness was accentuated, in a world of crisis where the pessimism is globalized, in an unpredictable world where anything can happen (more negative than positive), a world where we have the terrible sentiment that things got out of control and no one can offer a viable alternative to overcome the impasse. But what is the impasse? Is this the reality? Then, if there is an impasse, who can give us a way out? It is easier to deny the problem than to solve it (or from postmodern perspective, we just have the illusion of solving). Historical crises come and go and these things will change too. In what direction? We do not know. Postmodernism does not want to know. Perhaps it is worth quoting Charles Dickens in *A Tale of Two Cities* to describe postmodernism: "It is the best of times, it is the worst of times."<sup>23</sup> It remains to be seen.

Postmodernism offers a new opportunity for religion. It attacked the foundation of scientism and the force of reason and modernity fall in disgraced. However the chance offered by postmodernism is not free, or unconditional. Postmodernism offers a chance of a certain type of religion namely that fits its requirements, first, a religion that gives up the claim of truth in favor of relationship, a religion that emphasizes authenticity better than formalism, a religion that fits for individual needs and leaves the institution at the second level. A noninstitutional and flexible religion appropriate for postmodern man needs, a church adapted to the postmodern culture.

The answer of Christianity in the modern world where it has to do with atheists was dialectic apologetics that provided arguments. The answer of Christianity in a postmodern world cannot be apologetic. However it cannot be apologetic in the classic sense of term. Postmodern world does not need arguments. In fact, the postmodern world does not value logical arguments, but other type of arguments like relationship, friendship and experiments that validate the promises that are made.

Christianity throughout centuries dressed the faces of culture and social influences, but struggled to do it with discerning and balanced approaches. It has not always succeeded.

<sup>22</sup> René Girard și Gianni Vattimo, *Adevăr sau credință slabă. Convorbiri despre creștinism și relativism*. (București, Curtea Veche, 2009), 42. [English : Gianni Vattimo et al., *Christianity, Truth, And Weakening Faith*, 1st ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).]

<sup>23</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Tale Of Two Cities*, 1st ed. (Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Library, 1994).

Christianity must learn from history. Christianity influences culture, and culture influences Christianity. It is a fact that we need to recognize to have the maturity to talk about the future of religion and to make statements with predictive character. History teaches us the future.

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