

THE FUTURE OF TEILHARDIAN THEOLOGY

by *Karl Schmitz-Moormann*

Abstract. The impossibility of predicting the future allows us only to indicate which theological developments seem to be needed. These developments concern our changing perception of the world, which requires a reversal in our understanding of God's Creation, from its most imperfect beginnings to its unforeseeable future. The passing of evolution from the biological to the human level has opened moral dimensions that must be explored. Rather than return to the beginnings of the church, theology needs to try to understand Christian faith within evolution, to reinterpret the past in the light of the new. In evolution, no final doctrine is possible. The necessity for doctrine creates a constant tension with the necessity of its revision. New truth must be paid for by suffering. The need is for a coherent theological vision of Creation, Redemption, and God's action in the world. Teilhard's metaphysics of union may be the key to it. In this view love becomes the central force of creation, which in Teilhard's view opens into an eternal future in God: in its final stage, evolution becomes Christogenesis.

Keywords: anthropic principle; Book of Nature; Creation; doctrine; evolution; heresy and truth; order; rationality of the world; Redemption; science; Pierre Teilhard de Chardin; theology.

As meteorologists have known for centuries, predictions are bound to go wrong more often than one would like. Contemporary chaos theory offers theoretical insights into the problem: within complex systems, even if they are governed by a clearly defined algorithm, there can be no sure prediction of the outcome because of the smallest deviation at the start of a process can have major effects later. Perturbations caused by a butterfly in China may so affect initial conditions that four weeks later there is a hurricane in Florida instead of sunny weather. And not only initial conditions influence the outcome; any

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process is more or less continuously influenced by events it does not control that were unforeseeable when it started.

Thus, in making predictions you are probably more often than not a loser. The ancient Greeks knew this and developed an art of making predictions that did not risk grave error. The oracle of Delphi delivered predictions marked by classic ambiguity. She was never wrong. But modern language analysts might state that the information given was zero.

Knowing the impossibility of accurate prediction I hesitate to discuss the future of anything, let alone so complex an issue as an evolving theology. Nobody can predict its future. From the perspective of the 1930s, who could have imagined the Roman Catholic Church having its liturgy in the vernacular, or the Second Vatican Council with its call for *aggiornamento*?² Many points discussed and taught by the council and in today's theological schools would in the thirties have sent a theologian into the desert and on to the Index. So how are we to speak about the future of Teilhardian theology?

I certainly will not make any predictions. But my caution will not hinder us from having a closer look at the central Teilhardian theses nor from asking, What further developments are needed by Teilhardian theology as we know it? Thus I will speak of what we may hope for, not what will be in the future. Although chaos theory tells us that with highly complex systems there can be no certitude for evolutions on the macro level, we might still speak about possible outcomes. And since human freedom is involved in defining the future, at least to some degree, change in theology may depend largely on the theologians—and eventually on nontheologian thinkers.¹ Another point is becoming more and more clear: theology, that is, the presentation of the content of our faith within the framework of our present world, has become more and more deficient. As Thomas Owne observed, “Theologians continue to talk a great deal about God’s activity in the world, and there continue to be only a very few who pause to consider some of the many problems involved in such talk” (Owne 1991, 35–50).

Theological talk continues as if nothing had changed in our world. Quite often one may find statements concerning the compatibility of the evolutionary world with Christian theology, as witnessed by Teilhard. But rather rare are those statements that take the Teilhardian outlook seriously. Theology is carried on as if evolution did not concern the theologian: he is no longer disturbed by evolution because Teilhard found it compatible with Christian faith. That Teilhard postulated profound changes in theology and in the presentation of faith to the world has largely been forgotten by those

theologians. That we live in a world differently perceived and therefore different from that of the time of Jesus does not need any verification. That the self-revelation of God in this world and through the Creation will differ from that in the time of Jesus seems not to need any demonstration. In Jesus' time, God's action in the world, the notion of divine action—as it was traditionally known through the history of Israel—was no problem. Today,

[it] is not at all clear that the notion of Divine action makes any sense, or what sort of sense it makes. If it makes no sense, the Christian faith may for a while cling on to a tenuous and marginal existence as a set of legends outlining an optional policy of life. But it will eventually evaporate to take its place with the great legends of Greek and Roman mythology, its policy of life at last becoming as quaint and archaic as that of ancient Athens. It is therefore a matter of vital importance to examine the idea of Divine action, starting again from first principles, to discover what may be said of it in view of the many difficulties raised in the modern age. (Ward 1990, 4)

Teilhard was aware of this deficiency of the theology of his time, and early in this century he started to overcome this lack of groundedness in the reality of this world. The future of Teilhardian theology depends on what will be done with a heritage that is a theological countercurrent. I will highlight those aspects that might be pursued in the future.

METHODOLOGICAL REVERSALS²

In all Christian churches, theological method has been based on the belief that the world used to be better, and that in the beginning it was perfect. The Creation was perfect, the early church was the best church ever, and the present church needed reform so as to regain its original perfection.

In an evolutionary context, this sort of thinking no longer holds. Instead, one sees total chaos, with no discernible entity before the Planck-time (10^{-43} s), to growing islands of order against a background of chaotic radiation. The earlier state neither contains nor explains the later, which is true not only for atomic, molecular, and biological evolution, but also for human evolution. To understand what evolution means, it is not helpful to look for explanations in the stages just after the big bang. "Rather, we should consider the human as the key to the understanding of evolution." Teilhard, postulating the hypothesis of the "primacy [priority] of psyche and thought in the stuff of the Universe," does not see how without this hypothesis "one could give a coherent and total description of the Human Phenomenon" (PM [d], 22-23).³ By looking back we might understand evolution and its process; we will not understand it by

staring at the beginnings. Furthermore, the closer we get to the beginnings the less information we get to understand the process. Even such a general statement as $E = mc^2$, although it describes a general condition of all movement and energy transfers, does not tell us how Einstein was able to formulate it. On the other hand, the so-called anthropic principle, which points to the extraordinary precision of several physical constants, argues from the existence of humans to explain the values found in the beginning. This is a successful example of what Teilhard postulated: to understand the past and its meaning in the evolving world, you have to look backwards, starting with your knowledge about the present reality. Starting with the physical constants identified in the anthropic principle would not lead to the human reality we know. We cannot understand the present as the necessary result of the past, although we can describe the story of the emerging present.

This is still true for us today. The future is not defined for us, and, as Teilhard often pointed out, evolution did not come to a standstill when humans appeared on earth. Although biological evolution continues and in so doing promotes the diversification of species, it may no longer be the principal process. The evolution with the greatest impact on the earth is taking place on the level of the human mind, which is now the most influential factor in biological evolution: breeding and now gene technologies have created new subspecies.⁴ With new beings emerging, the interpretation of the past as the story of the emergence of the new will change. For example, we might say that having become aware of the unity of this earth's human population, we are all the more cognizant of human rights and so repudiate slavery in all human societies.⁵ The discovery of human rights is an important step in the evolution of the mind, and it has obvious consequences for moral theology. The discovery that human origins involve the long story of evolution will change our perception of God's relationship with this world.

Thus concrete changes in theology and in Christian doctrine may be caused by the basic change in perspective that Teilhard postulates, or rather, by the fact that we live in an evolving universe and not in a static one. Changes are necessary because we have changed our vision of the world, and this vision is the ground on which we encounter God.⁶ The scholastics could say, quite justly, that nothing is in our minds that was not beforehand in our senses.⁷ Today we can state that nobody can encounter God unless this encounter is mediated by his or her world perception. One can cling for a time to a traditional vision of God related to a past perception of the world, but this vision will become more and more empty

and unrelated to the human world of the present. Theology has the constant task of relating the vision of God to the concrete reality in which we live—this condition makes possible the preaching of the Gospel to the world. We are not asked to establish the beginnings of the church as the ideal to be realized in our time. Theology should not create a plan for reformation. It is rather confronted with the task of elaborating the consequences of the changing world—a world confessed as being God's creation—in order to understand our faith in the Creator, the Incarnation, and the Trinity. And if the Teilhardian position is correct, namely, that the later explains the earlier, and not vice versa, then theology and theologians must live with the notion that they have to reinterpret the theological past in the light of the new. With regard to new realities—and the domain of the human mind is an important part of this evolving reality—new vistas emerge as the reality of God opens up. There is no absolute to revelation that Christian theology can draw on as definite text. The biblical text itself is subject to reinterpretation and complementation through the ongoing revelation given in God's ongoing creation. The consequence of this continuing revelation through the ongoing creation is the impossibility of establishing a definite theological doctrine. All theology will have to be preliminary in the sense that it is likely to become obsolete in the future. Eternal dogmas as definite propositions do not make more sense than the notion of timeless infallibility.

This position may create fears of boundless relativism, where anything goes and nothing can be made obligatory. But this possibility is a menace only when the vision of the world changes arbitrarily. However, as God's creation, the world, and therefore our possible knowledge about it, will not change in an arbitrary way. Even the wildest speculations concerning the universe are limited by the need for scientific proof. Thus theology and theologians are not obliged to rethink the whole of the tradition; but they are bound in their interpretations by the world vision they have to accept as the best they can have for the time being. While faith in the Creator—who shines up through the Creation—and faith in Christ, the incarnate Word of God, assure a certain stability in theological teaching, integration of the more evolved vision of the world should enable the theologian to discover new aspects in the reality of Creation and Redemption. At the same time, it should enable theologians to free the theological tradition from fossilized interpretations of the faith based on an obsolete understanding of the world. Only in this way can the Christian message be brought to the modern world.

What conditions make theology in an evolving world possible?

What orients our lives and actions is faith—this is at least the pretension of all serious religions—but it cannot be presented in a soft way: you cannot build your life on quicksand.⁸ Therefore no Christian church can really preach without clearly outlining the content of faith. Where this is not the case the church loses its members. On the other hand, a church that sticks to the traditional formulation of its faith without updating it according to the ongoing revelation through the ongoing creation loses its credibility. Its teaching on Creation loses its object. The God professed is no longer related to this world—which traditional theologians confess as being God's creation without looking at it.

We are thus confronted with a dilemma: on the one hand there is the need for a *clearly defined* doctrine on which one can build one's life; on the other hand there is the need for the constant updating of this doctrine, which means the revision of the clearly defined doctrine. Revision will change traditional teaching in more or less important ways. Proposals for revision are by definition deviations from the defined doctrine. As Teilhard stated in 1923, the truth of tomorrow appears today as heresy.

This is not only a provocative way of stating the dilemma, but it implies a number of consequences. First of all, this statement is not reversible. Not all heresies of today will be the truth of tomorrow. Thus, at the time of their appearance, nobody will really know what will be the weed and what will be the wheat. This suggests that the church community and the magisterium should develop a greater tolerance for the heresies that show up within the church. Instead of slashing them whenever they seem to be identified, it might be wise to let them grow. The magisterium might distance itself from such new teachings without condemning them. Within the Orthodox Church one sees the habit not of condemning but of letting the Holy Spirit decide: a growing acceptance within the church supports the truth value of a newly formulated "heresy."

Since this is—and always was—a process involving the community, it is evident that a heresy as a possible truth of the faith of tomorrow will in its early years lead to the ostracism of the heretic—who may be followed by a few enthusiasts. The heretic will be lonely, suffering from the distance others take. Doubts about the lonely held truth will continually crop up, and he or she will either separate completely from the church (and then the emergent truth will be lost or its integration into the tradition will take much longer) or go through the ordeal of isolation and loneliness for many years. Teilhard's own life exemplifies this. And Teilhard knew that the

heresy of today may only become the truth of tomorrow if one is ready to suffer for it. The rationalistic, euphoric idea that truth is self-evident once spoken is just an illusion (cf. Kuhn 1962). Great truths evidently require great sufferings in order to survive and bear fruit. Thus we should not expect that doing serious theology in an innovative way will be a trouble-free, peaceful enterprise.

Theology, if it is conceived as the ongoing task of integrating the continued self-revelation of God through creation into a coherent vision, will then be a risky task for the future. It has ceased to be the reliable search for a past that cannot be changed and on which one can depend. Teilhardian theology, as the enterprise to make the Gospel preachable in our time and in the future, asks for daring thinkers ready to try unknown territory.

At the time of the Cappadocians the *quadrivium*—the study of physics, astronomy, mathematics, and music—was established as the basic precondition for theological studies. Today we must recognize that modern theology cannot exist by ignoring the knowledge established by modern science since the sixteenth century. This is even more important for theology, since the Book of Nature is not written once and forever, but continues to be written by God's ongoing creation. There is a deeply rooted theological conviction, expressed by Tertullian: *Id verius quod prius* (It is truer, what is earlier). This conviction must be reversed: in an evolving world, the later realities hold more truth than the earlier ones. Teilhardian theology's criterion for truth is no longer a quote from the Bible—not even a quote researched adequately according to the method of historical criticism—but is the coherent global vision of God the Creator, Christ the Redeemer, the Holy Spirit acting in this world, and the universe as God's creation and the object of salvation in Christ.

A theology that fails to attain this coherence can hardly be preached to the world at large, let alone to the educated people of our time. Seriously lacking such a coherent theology, Christianity is splitting into such extremes as fundamentalism and liberalism, all of which show no coherence with God's creation.

THE PRINCIPAL FIELDS OF THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH WITHIN A TEILHARDIAN PERSPECTIVE

Our classical theology has been built on an ontological understanding of reality. Since Protagoras—and also in Judaism—the God notion was linked with the idea of absolute being. God had to be unchangeable and eternally the same. In the Judaic tradition, this

basic ontological idea of Yahweh—I am who I am—was somewhat counterbalanced by the active God of Israel who could become angry. The Christian tradition built—not always coherently—on both traditions. This Christian notion of the ontologically grounded God is still alive in the scientific search for eternal laws of nature—which are grounded in the eternal will of God. Certainly, most scientists believe in the existence of such eternal laws, but such a belief does not become reasonable outside a belief in a God who establishes such eternal laws. As has often been stated, the great wonder is that in this world, there is a basic rationality. Mathematical calculations have meaning. From the Cappadocian fathers during the Middle Ages to the present, Christians have tried to build their theology on the notion of a world eternally ordered by God's unswayable will. Creation has been conceived as a well-ordered whole disturbed only secondarily by the fall of the angels and the sin of man. God had brought forth the well-ordered world through his word as the Almighty.

This vision might have been acceptable in an era when human perceptions of reality suggested that nothing changed. There is nothing new under the sun,⁹ Ecclesiastes states. As God was unchanging, the eternal fullness of being, the act of creation must have been unique. So far, theology has tried to preserve this ontologically basic vision of God founded on the perception of an unchanging world. This is attained partly by repeating old visions of God that barely cohere with the world God created, and partly by not talking about creation. The modern discovered world worthy of being preserved evidently belongs in the realm of a world whose early perfection, to which the present world should be restored, was disturbed by human interference.¹⁰ This is evidently not the evolving universe Teilhard recognized. These later views should be integrated into the theological understanding of God's creation.

The work on this task has been started on a small scale, at least in a general sense, by such European theologians as Arthur Peacocke in Oxford and Christoph Wassermann in Geneva, the group around Robert Russell in Berkeley (cooperating with the Vatican Observatory in Tucson), and the group around Philip Hefner in Chicago. They are developing theological perspectives intended to be compatible with the universe as it is seen by science—that is, with the real world we live in as God's creation.

Their approaches in that sense follow a Teilhardian line of thinking, integrating scientifically confirmed knowledge about the universe. But so far I do not see a genuinely Teilhardian approach to creation among theologians. Rather, every so often we hear that

Teilhard did not think of himself as a theologian, and so there cannot be a genuine Teilhardian theology. The point is that Teilhard was never allowed to elaborate his theology, though he discussed his ideas with his friends in the Jesuit order. But his diaries are not filled with thoughts about scientific problems—geological or paleontological questions—you find those in his field notes. All the several thousand pages of his diaries are theological reflections, which have barely been worked on. The impression from these pages is that Teilhard had at least a clear theological vision in only a partly systematized stage of development: he never wrote a comprehensive treatise on such classical theological themes as *De Deo uno*, or *De Trinitate*, or *De Deo Creatoris*. One could suggest that some of his writings do approach the last theme. But this does not mean that he did not lay a theological groundwork for developing the understanding of an evolving universe. He recognized very early—long before the physicists, the chemists, and the biologists joined forces—that evolution is not a locally limited biological event but concerns the whole universe. Earlier than most other writers¹¹—as far as I can see, and I should like to be corrected—he, together with the French philosopher Edouard Le Roy, extended evolution to the whole universe. Thus evolution had to be read as the ongoing writing of God's self-revelation in the Book of Nature.

The basis of Teilhard's vision is the fact that this world is dominated not by being but by becoming. Wherever we look we see beings becoming; it is difficult to express oneself in this world of becoming, where being appears as only a momentary aspect of the ongoing process. It appears that one of the breakthroughs in overcoming the static ontological features of our thinking, especially for Christian theologians, was Teilhard's development of the outlines for an understanding of being in becoming. The text of 1917, the *Union Créatrice* (Creative Union), complemented by the *Centrologie* of 1943 and numerous notes in his diaries, outline a new metaphysics, that is, the theory encompassing the most general features of the universe that reappear at all stages of evolution. He defines being, a task today impossible for traditional ontological metaphysics, as union: that is, the whole of evolution is understood as the ongoing process of the union of elements on ever higher levels. The higher levels of being have arisen out of the union of elements in a new reality that as such is not contained in its elements. These ideas, developed on a rather high level of abstraction, but verifiable at all levels of reality, need further exploration. For the time being, we should hold in mind that in Teilhard's vision, union brings forth novelty.

If this vision of Teilhard's is true, then the basic force of the

universe is not to be found in the energies explored by the synchrotrons of CERN in Geneva—where a proton-proton collider is still to be built—or by the other great colliders in the United States. The colliders do not study what unites elements into a new unity at all levels of being, from the human to the quark, though admittedly these instruments do study the elements that go into such a union at the atomic level. Teilhard has pointed out that on the human level the uniting force is love. Now we have to take seriously his basic hypothesis, namely, that human nature is the key to understanding the whole universe—not because he defended some kind of anthropocentrism, but because the human being is the newest reality brought forth by the universal process of evolution, with properties surpassing all other beings we know in the evolved world. With this key in hand we can define the basic force of the evolving universe as love. Naturally, this term is not to be used in an univocal way on all levels, but its analogical use is certainly justified. And this is quite in harmony with the evolutionary process: love itself is not a static force, but evolves with the universe (see I Jn. 4: 8). How this relates to God's reality, which Saint John proclaimed as being love, has been explored by Mathias Trennert-Helwig (1993) in his recently published thesis on Teilhard (reviewed in this issue of *Zygon*). This is a good start for a more complete theology of creation, to be written out more systematically in a Teilhardian vision, based on a metaphysical union.

In the well-known Teilhardian view of creation, the problem of evil, the need for salvation, and the coming of Christ are no longer linked to a primeval event when things that should have gone right went wrong. The story of Adam and Eve and the serpent that persuaded Eve to eat the forbidden apple is probably the best-known Bible story of our time, though not necessarily the best understood. This story has lost its power to explain the presence of evil in the world. Past events do not explain the present, despite their providing the necessary conditions for the present stage to arise. But the fact that chimpanzees swing from branch to branch in a manner approaching a kind of short flight does not explain the human ability to fly to the moon. However, the existence of chimpanzees—or rather of the ancestors they share with us—was a necessary precondition for the advent of humans.

If the past does not explain or determine the present—it conditions the present to a certain extent—then it is difficult to believe that some act in the past has caused the need for salvation. It appears rather that this world in evolution is always not yet perfect, following a not very straight line toward perfection. Therefore, the Bible story

does not seem to comply with the reality of God's creation we learn to see with the help of the sciences or want to interpret as an existing perfect order. Some, physicists still have a propensity to do this because they presume that the world is perfectly explainable by its beginnings. But as chaos seems to be around the next corner in any nonperfectly definable system, we learn that the future is not determined but has a limited number of outcomes. On the lower levels of evolution, these outcomes seem to happen by chance; on the human level they are to a large extent in the hands of the responsible agents. On the human level, evolution is furthered by human actions and decisions. Yet, we do not know exactly what this future should be like. Furthermore, there is a borderline visible in every future of this evolving world inasmuch as there is no way of avoiding the final failure of the universal system. Whitehead tried to solve this problem by preserving the world in the memory of God. Tipler in our day tries to confine all information of the evolving world to the vicinity of an eternal black hole. Both propositions indicate the need for an answer that carries evolution somehow beyond the limits set by the entropy of this universe. Teilhard postulates eternity as the essential result of evolution; we need to work for a *κτῆμα ἄς ἐι*. Teilhard answers the human dilemma of a time-limited world and the need for eternity, postulating an endless open future within a Christian perspective. He refers to what he sometimes calls the cosmic nature of Christ.

Other questions concerning the coming of Christ seem more traditional and are difficult to answer. One of the most concise questions to arise in the Middle Ages was, *Cur Deus homo?* (Why did God become human?).¹² Today this question will have to be answered within the context of an evolving creation, and the development of the Teilhardian approach is at least one approach that would allow for the preaching of Christ as savior of this evolving world. Understanding evolution in its final stage as Christogenesis is for most people just a new label posted on the problem: only a more concrete elaboration can move it to the center of Christian life and so provide an example to humanity.

Thus, in a Teilhardian theology our primary confrontation is not with secondary points of Christian understanding, but with the very core of the classical tradition of theology. Doctrines of God and Redemption will have to be profoundly reworked. A timid approach that tries to overcome the difficulties by weakening the classical statements and translating the theological way of speaking into transcendental language where no verification can take place must be abandoned in favor of a theology that takes seriously God's

creation. Finally, it appears that no sector of theology will remain uninfluenced. To give only one example: the Middle Ages considered our primary human task in this world to be the restoration of the original primeval order, which had been disturbed by the fall of the angels, or the creation of a new order reestablishing the original number of angels (by holy virgins) plus an unknown number of holy humans. To have as many baptized babies as possible would shorten the time required to reach this goal. Today we have to ask whether through overpopulation we endanger the future creation and consequently, how are we to handle responsibly our procreative capacities. Thus, in this instance—and in many others—moral theology will have to reconsider its traditional values and systems.

Naturally, we have no ready answers to all questions. And in an evolving world there will probably be no definitive answers. We will have to take the risk of thinking and trying new creative approaches in theology, following Teilhard's example. At the same time, we should be aware that nobody can avoid errors of some kind. Thus we will have to learn humility in proposing ideas. And the authorities in power within the churches will have to learn to tolerate errors—or what they consider errors—giving them the time to mature into the truth of tomorrow or into an error ultimately to be abandoned. In this context everyone can remember that evolution on the human level has reached a stage where errors can be recognized as such and humans can turn away from their errors, to try better ways of understanding their faith.

NOTES

1. Theologians are not by necessity those who bring forth the best theological innovations, for "God is able from these stones to raise children of Abraham" (Lk. 3: 8).
2. Cf. K. Schmitz-Moormann 1992.
3. Initials refer to abbreviations used throughout this issue of *Zygon*, as show in the key on pp. 7–8.
4. Have a look at the different breeds of dog you see in the streets of any town for examples of the results of human influence on biological evolution.
5. Cf. 1 Tim 6: 1–2: "Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be defamed. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brethren; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these duties."
6. It might be interesting in this context to reflect on the fact that human rights were only discovered in a world where all people must appear before the same divine judge regardless of privileges of birth or office; this is magnificently documented in the fifteenth century's images of the Dance of Death, e.g., in the cathedral at Lübeck.
7. *Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu.*
8. This is especially true if one disposes of only one life. On the other hand, if your religion teaches you faith in transmigration of souls, you might not need any strong basis on which to build your life: there will be another one, to do and to know better.

9. Ecclesiastes 1: 10: “*nihil sub sole novum nec valet quisquam dicere ecce hoc recens est iam enim praecessit in saeculis quae fuerunt ante nos.*”

10. At this point one might be tempted to drop the subject and talk about ecological movements that dream of nature’s perfection before human intervention. These movements contradict God’s creation, which is evolving into an unknown future and is not dominated by a trend of restoration. This does not exclude the recognition of limited possibilities and the necessity of conserving for the future, for which we are at least to a certain extent responsible.

11. Historically, he was preceded by Bergson’s *Évolution créatrice*, but it was more limited in its scope regarding biological evolution.

12. Cf. Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, where the rationality of Christ’s coming and dying is questioned especially in relation to an almighty and loving God, and Anselm found it very difficult to find convincing answers.

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