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Wilfred Cantwell Smith and “Orientalism”

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Edward Said’s groundbreaking book, *Orientalism* (1978), moved well beyond previous studies of Occidental engagement with “the Orient”—for example, the classic work of Raymond Schwab, *La renaissance orientale* (1950). In his work, Said (1935–2003) undertook a wholesale analysis and critique of Western hegemonic domination of “the Orient” since the eighteenth century, not only politically and economically but culturally and intellectually. He did so through a Foucaultian and Gramscian analysis of the sociopolitical context of basic power imbalance in which European-American treatment, both in public media and in academic scholarship, of the non-Western world, especially the Near Eastern part of it, is seen as the handmaiden of Western imperialism, colonialism, and domination of the rest of the world—preeminently in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although it began much earlier.¹

His book is arguably the most important interpretive work of the late twentieth century regarding modern scholarly approaches to the non-Western world in general, and the Islamic and Arab Middle Eastern world specifically. As such it has become a standard point of reference in postcolonial and subaltern studies as well as in Middle Eastern, Indian, and other Asian studies fields, and it has had a major influence in all these areas. It has made “orientalism” into a

commonly used, negative shorthand designation for varied kinds of Western bias, chauvinism, and hegemonic motivation in conceiving and describing non-Western cultures and peoples, both within and beyond the academy. While Said's subsequent writing on orientalism did not convey the same polemical tone or blanket condemnation as his critiques in *Orientalism*,² the book's all-but-blanket indictment of Western treatment of "the Orient," whether political or intellectual, has remained the primary touchstone for subsequent scholarly efforts to move beyond any imbrication with imperialist and colonialist attitudes and agendas in trying to interpret and understand any sector of the non-Western world.

This being said, despite the brilliance of many of Said's insights, his book is highly polemical in tone and correspondingly uneven and selective in its data and argumentation.³ Said rather indiscriminately threw together the accounts of Western travelers to the Orient and Western scholars of the Islamic world. He was often selectively unfair to individual Islamicists (from Sylvain Levi or Louis Massignon to Gustav von Grunebaum or H. A. R. Gibb). In his selection of European-American orientalist scholars to attack, he ignored (or was ignorant of) orientalists who did not fit his purposes. His apodictic, blanket censure of Western scholarly study of non-Western, especially Islamic, cultures was based almost solely on selected citations from a small, selected group of English and French Islamicists and Arabists.

In what follows, we focus on some of the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000), one of those twentieth-century, anglophone "Western" scholars of "the Orient" whose scholarly critique of reductionist and chauvinistic orientalist scholarship in fact presaged Said's arguments, but whose work Said either ignored or was unaware of. Not unlike Marshall G. S. Hodgson, perhaps the other most obvious American Islamic-studies scholar whom Said never mentions, Smith was arguably an "orientalist" who was delineating and practicing, long before Said's

book, an approach to the Islamic and other Afro-Asian worlds of the classic “Orient” that was different from, and highly critical of, the kind of “orientalism” that Said’s blanket criticism would later stigmatize for all subsequent students of non-Western studies.

It seems odd at first that Said would not have made some effort to mention orientalists who did not fit his paradigm, perhaps chief among them Smith, a Canadian who had founded and directed McGill University’s Institute of Islamic Studies in the 1950s. Smith had spent six years during World War II teaching in a Christian missionary college in Lahore, in British-colonial northwest India (during which time he was working also on a doctorate in oriental studies at Cambridge University). His older brother Arnold, a Canadian career foreign service diplomat, capped his diplomatic career by becoming the first secretary general of the British Commonwealth in 1965. On the face of it, especially since Smith was by the 1970s a particularly prominent senior North American orientalist, what better counterexample or exception to Said’s “orientalist” establishment might he have found—a Western “orientalist” who was part of the Anglo-American Islamic-studies establishment, had family ties to the British Commonwealth establishment, and yet had also castigated the kind of hegemonic Western approaches to the Orient that Said inveighed against among Western orientalists?

Nevertheless, if Said was aware of Smith, he gave no indication of it. Certainly Smith’s approach to Islamic or more generally to non-Western or “oriental” studies was not one that could have provided grist for Said’s mill. What Smith had to say in his own criticism of attitudes among Western interpreters of “the Orient” toward “oriental” individuals and groups in his lectures and writings over more than three decades before Said’s book appeared can be said to parallel the very kind of critique that Said makes, albeit from a very different perspective and in a different (decidedly not postmodern) idiom. (The same holds, as indicated above, for the

positions Marshall Hodgson took in his efforts to look at the worldwide history of Islamic peoples and to argue the nonexceptionalism of European civilization; Said apparently knew nothing of his publications or his singular teaching career at the University of Chicago, both of which were cut short by his untimely death a decade before the appearance of *Orientalism*). I want to think that Said simply did not even attempt to canvass the field of American oriental studies; otherwise, one would have to conclude that Smith and Hodgson were excluded from consideration simply because they did not fit his paradigm of hegemonic orientalist scholarship.

Turning now to Wilfred Smith, I shall restrict myself in this brief exploration to considering Smith's *opera minora*, his lesser-known essays and articles, rather than drawing on his major, longer studies that bear on Islamic studies and Western colonialism and imperialism, since the latter have been widely read and cited.⁴ To support my estimation of how little Smith's work fits Said's paradigm, I want to point briefly to some of the positions that Smith took that run counter to, or at least greatly complicate, the otherwise resolutely critical picture Said paints of prominent Western "orientalists" who studied and interpreted the non-West, its languages, cultures, politics, religions, and histories, going back at least to the late eighteenth century—and carried out their studies in the hegemonic context of Western societies that were systematically engaged in the despoilment, exploitation, colonization, and subjugation of non-Western societies around the world.

First, in his young adulthood, until perhaps the end of World War II, Smith was strongly socialist, even Marxist, and pacifist in his own politics—tendencies that we may speculate were only heightened by what he experienced during his six years in the British imperial India of the early 1940s. As a budding historian of Islam and India, he saw the grave consequences there of the "merchant" and then "industrial capitalism" that had exploited India under the East India

Company and the British Raj. He was himself personally involved in some prepartition, Indian nationalist efforts to get rid of British rule, move beyond communalism, and find a way to a new, independent, unified India (he always regarded partition as a mistake and an unmitigated catastrophe). Smith's first scholarly monograph treated Muslim political and religious movements during what was to be the final century of British rule in the subcontinent. This book was completed in the middle of his time in India, in 1943, and submitted as his Cambridge doctoral dissertation. However (as H. A. R. Gibb had warned him⁵), it was turned down when presented during the war, apparently because of its unvarnished anti-British sentiments.⁶ Published nonetheless in Lahore in 1943 as *Modern Islam in India: A Social Analysis* (2nd rev. ed., 1946), the book subsequently went through multiple editions and printings, the latest at least as recently as 2006. Although Smith, amid the ongoing disillusionments of communist dictatorships, abandoned his socialist and Marxist leanings, his moralist critique of Western imperialism, capitalism, and colonialism remained still strong in his writings of the 1950s and '60s especially. His first book had made clear above all that he would not make common cause with other orientalists in approaching the Orient, and Islam in particular, as a member of a Western tradition of either political and economic or intellectual hegemony, without a critical self-consciousness of that fact and a dedication to transcending it.

The first note sounded by Smith in his postwar work that I want to point to is *the rejection of any approach to Islamic, Hindu, or other Asian traditions that sees them as passive recipients or "victims" of a dominant "Western modernity" that has dealt them a blow either disrupting them or leading them to slavish imitation*. In a paper, "Traditional Religions and Modern Culture" in 1968, he says: "The impact theory has been widely held, usually without argument, perhaps especially by Western administrators, by political scientists, and by economic-aid men. .

. . The impact idea often seems to suggest a somewhat massive assault under force of which the traditional system in this dichotomy is seen as reeling, bewildered, if not knocked down. . . . The impact metaphor also seems to suffer from a serious under-estimate of the dynamic, fluid quality of the so-called traditional religious systems.”⁷

The chauvinistic, hegemonic idea of the Western, or the Western Christian, world as dominant and active, the subject, and of the oriental world of whatever type as submissive and passive, the object of the West’s more “objective” knowledge and greater political power, is something that Edward Said later would associate strongly with “orientalism” in his book. More than two decades earlier than Said’s book and a decade before his just-cited paper, Smith had spelled this out in a different manner in an interesting 1955 address to the American Oriental Society, which was published a year later as “The Place of Oriental Studies in a Western University.”⁸ In this address, in terms remarkably parallel to what Said would argue some twenty-three years later, Smith makes clear the danger that he sees of American or any Western study of the “Orient” becoming complicit in supporting political, economic, or any other domination of that “Orient”:

When an unexpected problem, an unfamiliar obstacle, confronts an ongoing activity, the universities are called upon to solve that problem, to manipulate that obstacle.

It would be idle to deny that this principle underlies, and doubtless will continue to underlie, the stark and perhaps exhilarating expansion of oriental studies in our day. It is the source of money, of students, of whole new programs. But it would be equally idle to deny that it is full of danger, both to our studies and to the world. There is the danger of “being used”; of subordinating knowledge to policy, rather than vice versa. There is the subtler danger of acquiring seeming knowledge that is, in fact, false. For

it happens to be a law of this universe in which we live that you cannot understand persons if you treat them as objects. You misinterpret a culture if you approach it in order to manipulate it. A civilization does not yield its secrets except to a mind that approaches it with humility and love. Knowledge pursued *ad majorem Americae gloriam* will, in the realm of oriental, as indeed in all human studies, fail to be sound knowledge. . . .

[A] university cannot glibly subordinate its study of the Orient to the pragmatic desire of its society to cope with the Orient operationally.⁹

Here Smith points toward a second and enduring theme of his subsequent work, namely *the imperative for the scholar not to objectify what or whom she or he studies*. Later in the article he makes this more explicit:

We shall have failed in our task as orientalists if our society continues to imagine that the problem is how we in the West can deal with the Orient. The practical problem is rather how man throughout the world can deal with the fact that he is separated from his neighbor by a cultural frontier.¹⁰

Smith expands on what is wrong with this kind of objectification of other societies, traditions, or persons somewhat more clearly in an address that he gave at Colgate University in 1975:

To treat persons objectively, as if they were objects, is not merely morally wrong, but is intellectually wrong. It does not lead to accurate or penetrating understanding.

Hence the Western university does its work badly if it interprets Asia in purely objective, behaviourist, impersonalist terms, on the one hand, under the pretention of being “scientific,” or if, on the other hand, it simply presents it in its own Asian terms,

uninterpreted, receiving at face value and uncritically the self-understanding of an alien culture.¹¹

Over a decade earlier, Smith's 1964 inaugural lecture at Harvard, "Mankind's Religiously Divided History Approaches Self-consciousness," had broached the concept of "corporate critical self-consciousness" as an antidote to objectification of other religious persons and traditions. Here he calls for those who study "other" religious traditions to recognize that henceforward whatever one says or writes can no longer be about "them" or even "you" as opposed to "us," but only about "us" altogether as fellow human beings of all faiths and cultures.¹²

A decade later, in a 1974 article, "Objectivity and the Humane Sciences: A New Proposal,"¹³ Smith expands on his solution to the problem of objectivizing the "other." Here he argues again, but in greater detail, for the development of a "corporate critical self-consciousness," which he sees as essential to "humane studies," and as "the proper goal of humane knowing." He defines it as a rational, inductive, and communal understanding that is subject to a "valid verification procedure." While his explicit definition of this understanding in the article is frankly somewhat impenetrable,¹⁴ he does go on in the article to elucidate more simply what he means by the term. There he indicates that, first, "corporate critical self-consciousness" requires objective knowledge: namely, that in studying another culture or religious community, one must insure "that a first observer's understanding has done justice to what is observed" by testing it against the experience of further observers. Second, such self-consciousness involves the understanding "that no statement involving persons is valid . . . unless its validity can be verified both by the persons involved and by critical observers not involved."¹⁵ In sum, this is a strong argument against the kind of objectification of the "other"

that Said identifies as typical if not universal in the work of Western scholars studying things “oriental.”

A third theme of Smith’s work from the ’50s through the ’70s is also very much at variance with the “orientalist” hegemonic approach to the non-Western world that Said excoriates in his book. This is Smith’s *objection to the idea, rooted in the evolutionary biases of the previous century of Western thought, that modernity is something being achieved by the Western world in the late nineteenth and especially the twentieth centuries that should be, and is being, emulated by the most progressive elements in “the Orient.”* Smith debunks this notion in several places, not least in his three 1964 Annual Lectures of the Indian Council of World Affairs at Sapru House, New Delhi, published in pamphlet form as “Modernization of a Traditional Society.”¹⁶ Noting that “what ‘modern’ means is not really clear,”¹⁷ he goes on to question whether the “traditional [W]estern state” is really “modern” or perhaps itself now an outmoded model for a sovereign nation. Then he argues trenchantly that “India, or any non-[W]estern community cannot just copy the West in its transformations, and cannot even find the meaning or content of modernization by simply inquiring from the West.”¹⁸ Even though India can learn from the West, “India’s goal must be clearly an Indian goal, and the idea of imitating the West or imposing purely [W]estern solutions to India’s problem is distasteful or laughable.”¹⁹ He subsequently remarks on the multiple ways in which India’s circumstances differ from those in the West, even as he affirms that humanity is one, albeit a “multiform one.”²⁰ He warns against treating “modernism” as a commodity to be acquired,²¹ and he also points out that there is no single Western answer to the question of modernization to give to India or anyone else, for modernization has become a global process transcending the West. Hence “the fully modern West is no longer [W]estern”²² at all but something more global: “The categories ‘Western’ and

‘Oriental,’ or more accurately ‘Western,’ ‘Islamic,’ ‘Indian,’ ‘Far Eastern,’ etc., have been exceedingly important—it is my professional business to say how important. Yet they are today in the process of being superseded, however incipiently, by a new cosmopolitanism. . . . The modernization of the West cannot be defined in terms of the West’s future, for the West does not have a future of its own. It can look forward intelligently only to the [W]estern stand in the future of the world: a future that all of us must construct jointly, for good or ill.”²³

This line of argument is augmented in the same essay by statements such as “Afro-Asian resurgence involves not only a throwing off of [W]estern political control but also a refusal to think in [W]estern ways,” following which he notes that that Afro-Asian “refusals” should not only be negative but involve active efforts to modernize on their own terms and, correspondingly, that Westerners must think of modernizing not only in old Western terms, but must rather develop a common global frame of reference within which to modernize.²⁴ Again, Smith pushes toward a future in which any group anywhere should think of itself and everyone else globally in terms of “we,” not “we and they.” This is the antithesis of the hegemonic treatment of the non-Western world for which Said indicts the Western orientalist tradition.

The fourth, and in many ways the clearest, testimony that I want to highlight from among Smith’s attempts to move beyond older “orientalist” paradigms of Western academic study of the Orient comes not from his writings so much as from his pragmatic work in creating the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill on the principle that *the study of anything Islamic in a non-Muslim institution must be pursued in conversation with, and under the critique of, Muslim as well as non-Muslim scholars*. Smith led the Institute from its inception in 1952 until he left McGill for Harvard in 1964. (It is particularly fitting, I think, to end on this note, given that the conference for which this paper was prepared was held under McGill auspices on its campus; while Smith

pursued similar principles as director of the Center for the Study of World Religions from 1964 to 1973, it was at McGill that he first tried to implement his approach.) Smith's principle of demanding that there be mutual critique by both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike of any analysis of things Islamic was evident from the outset in the makeup of the Institute's membership. The ethos of the endeavor is well captured in a 1996 appreciation of Smith's work at the Institute by McGill's Salwa Ferahian:

The Institute endeavors to offer to Westerners a serious encounter with a civilization other than their own. It recognizes that such an experience, in order to be valid, may require a creative modification of one's own terms of reference. It strives to help Western students understand and appreciate an important, rich and varied civilization. To Muslims, the Institute aspires to offer an opportunity to study their own society in a serious, disciplined, scientific, and sympathetic environment, and to understand the international setting in which their society is currently involved and the problems that in modern times their faith must face.

The Institute was founded for the purpose of engaging in the serious study of the modern Muslim world. The innovative element was Smith's conviction that this could not be done effectively by non-Muslims studying in a non-Muslim institution and without the participation of Muslims. The design for the Institute, including the design for the library, was the result of his creative response to the dilemma, as he saw it, of how to study Islam in a way that would involve Muslims and non-Muslims.²⁵

Smith's commitment to such an approach in studying Islam at McGill is also demonstrated vividly in his approach to the first major book that he completed in his years at McGill, *Islam in Modern History* (1967). He submitted each of his chapter drafts for this book as the text for

critical discussion in a session of a faculty seminar that included both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars currently at the university; he then made changes as needed on the basis of the discussions there.²⁶

The approach instituted by Smith at McGill exemplifies what I am describing as his rejection of (in Said's terms) an "orientalist" orientation to the study of the history of religion in particular, which was, after all, at the heart of his work on both Islam and other religious traditions and cultures. This is clear from frequently cited references, both in his own work and in critiques and appreciations of his work, to "persons," as opposed to "religions," as the proper focus of historical and social inquiry. Near the end of his 1965 paper, "Traditional Religions and Modern Culture"²⁷ (which was the first of Smith's writings cited above), he delineates the proper scope of the study of religion by averring that "the subject matter of our study . . . is not merely tradition, but faith; not merely the overt manifestations of man's religious life, but that life itself."²⁸ He goes on to say, "my entire thesis can be summed up in the phrase, that the study of religion must be fundamentally a study of persons."²⁹ He makes clear in a short 1979 essay, "Thinking about Persons," that by "person" he does not mean "individual," "for the fact is that the individual becomes a person only in community. And a society becomes a community only through being personal."³⁰ He goes on to note that older outlooks, Western or Eastern, were characterized by a coherence or integrity in which the natural, the personal, and the transcendent orders were perceived as "part of a total pattern"; it has been the rise of "objectivism" in modern science in the West that has fractured that integration, and it is now imperative in the light of the crises of our time (he mentions the nuclear threat and oceanic pollution as examples) to deal with the lack of integrity and coherence in our approach to the world. Of possible solutions to the problem, Smith's choice is "to pursue integration through a larger rationality—available to us, I

believe, through a study of human history: an intellectual vision, of wholeness, within which the scientific is a component explicitly subordinate, and partial, and even inadequate, yet important; in which the personal, done full justice, is central; and for which the realm of value, though higher than we, is recognized as real, and is rendered intelligible, and apprehensible, even if not (in our finitude) fully comprehensible.”³¹

This personal emphasis is ubiquitous in Smith’s writings, and it has been widely misconstrued to mean unscientific subjectivity rather than scientific objectivity, something that he, dedicated rationalist that he was, would never have dreamed of suggesting. I would argue that one of the things he was trying to get at with this emphasis is specifically the problem of objectification of the *human* “other” whom he as an orientalist scholar had dedicated his life to studying. He was convinced at a very deep level that any humane study of a Muslim, or Hindu, or any religious or cultural “other” (even including any “other” in our own society and culture) requires more than some imagined objective knowledge to do justice to him or her. It is precisely the objectification and the subordination to “our” higher Western scientific knowledge of the Orient and the oriental “other” later inveighed against by Edward Said that Smith also saw as dangerous and dehumanizing—not only to the “oriental” being objectified, but to the objectivizing occidental scholar, because of the inherent distortion and intellectual dishonesty of such an approach. As he put it in the passage cited earlier, “the Western university does its work badly if it interprets Asia in purely objective, behaviourist, impersonalist terms.”

In this, Smith was in a very real sense arguing for scholarly study that could transcend the limitations of the orientalist approach that he himself must surely have seen as rightly excoriated by Said.³² Like Said, Smith had from the outset of his career, and primarily in the Indian rather than the Palestinian context, seen the linkage between Western economic and political intrusion

into the Orient and the damaging force of an objectifying, much less than fully humane, scholarship focused on the indigenous cultural and religious traditions of that same Orient. Of course his book, *Modern Islam in India*, testifies to this, as did his anticolonial activism in India and, ultimately, his much-referenced “personalist” approach to Muslims, their faith and tradition and the wider world of Islamic cultures and civilization. The objectifying, culturally imperialist “orientalism” attacked so tellingly by Edward Said could hardly be said to be something Smith ever tolerated, let alone represented or fell prey to; in fact he actively fought against it, as the preceding should have demonstrated. It is unfortunate that Smith and Said apparently never shared with one another their very similar indictments of many lamentable strands of Western orientalism.

Notes

1. As seen in comments Said makes at the outset in *Orientalism*, such as: Orientalism is “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (p. 3), and “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony.” (p. 5). Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

2. Notably his much subtler book, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

3. Not to mention the excessive repetition and generally sloppy editing of the book, which is particularly curious given the excellence and precision typical of Said’s large corpus of scholarship otherwise.

4. E.g., Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modern Islam in India* (Lahore: Ripton Printing Press, 1945) and *Islam in Modern History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962), etc.

5. Personal oral communication of W. C. Smith, ca. 1982.
6. Smith went to Princeton after the war and earned his PhD with a thesis on the content of the *Majallat al-Azhar*, the monthly journal of Al-Azhar in Cairo.
7. *Proceedings of the XIth International Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions* (held at Claremont, CA, September 1965), vol. 1: *The Impact of Modern Culture on Traditional Religions* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), pp. 55–72.
8. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “The Place of Oriental Studies in a Western University,” *Diogenes* 16 (Winter, 1956), pp. 104–11.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 108–9.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
11. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “The Role of Asian Studies in the American University,” plenary address of the New York State Conference for Asian Studies, Colgate University, October 10–12, 1975 (published in pamphlet form with support from the Fund for the Study of the Great Religions of the World, Colgate University, 1976), pp. 9–10.
12. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Mankind’s Religiously Divided History Approaches Self-Consciousness,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 29 (1966), pp. 1–17.
13. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “Objectivity and the Humane Sciences: A New Proposal,” *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 4th ser., 12 (1974), pp. 81–102.
14. “that critical, rational, inductive self-consciousness by which a community of persons, constituted at a minimum by two persons, the one being studied and the one studying, but ideally by the whole human race, is aware of any given particular human condition or action as a condition or action of itself as a community, yet of one part but not of the whole of itself; and is aware of it as it is experienced and understood simultaneously both subjectively (personally,

existentially) and objectively (externally, critically, analytically; as one used to say, scientifically).” Ibid., (84).

15. Ibid., p. 84.

16. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Modernization of a Traditional Society* (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1965).

17. Ibid., p. 7.

18. Ibid., p. 12.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid., p. 13.

21. Ibid., p. 18.

22. Ibid., p. 15.

23. Ibid., pp. 15–16.

24. Ibid., p. 43.

25. Salwa Ferahian, “W. C. Smith Remembered,” *MELA* [Middle East Librarians Association] *Notes*, no. 64 [1996], viewed October 31, 2009, at the unpaginated website: <http://www.mela.us/MELANotes/MELANotes64/toc64.html>.

26. Personal communications in conversation with Herbert L. Bodman (who had taught previously at McGill with Smith) at UNC–Chapel Hill and with W. C. Smith in Cambridge, MA, both in the late 1960s.

27. Smith, *Impact on Traditional Religions*, pp. 68–72.

28. Ibid., p. 68.

29. Ibid., pp. 71–72.

30. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Thinking about Persons," *Humanitas: Journal of the Institute of Man* 15, no. 2 (May, 1979), p. 148.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

32. Here this author has to confess to an inability to remember any specific confirmation of this from discussions with Smith after his 1978 return to Harvard (and an adjacent office in the Study of Religion) from Dalhousie. I do remember Smith's general approval of the positive review of Said's book by Albert Hourani at the time.

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