

**Sustaining Positive Religious Affect among Young Churchgoers:
Research, Theory and Practice**

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Abstract

This paper prioritises the nurture of positive religious affect at the heart of religious learning and argues for the central role of the household in faith transmission as *ecclesia domestica*. A cumulative case is built by considering: the move from cognitive to affective

development; the prioritising of affective development; the three key agencies in faith transmission (home, congregation, and school); the research evidence for the growing importance of *ecclesia domestica*; models for nurturing positive religious affect; and ways for nurturing *ecclesia domestica*.

Keywords: faith transmission, attitude measurement, empirical theology, discipleship learning, Christian nurture, parental influence

From cognitive to affective development

When I began my bivocational commitment in the early 1970s as academic researcher and Anglican priest, the focus both of research concerning the religious development of children and young people and of practical ministry among children and young people tended to be cognitively based. At that point the key academic voice was that of Ronald Goldman with his twin books, *Religious thinking from childhood to adolescence* (1964) and *Readiness for religion* (1965). Goldman's research perspective was rooted in Piagetian developmental psychology (see Piaget 1929, 1972). The theory distinguishes between three developmental stages in thinking that are characterised as pre-operational thinking, concrete operational thinking, and formal operational thinking.

In his primary research, Goldman employed the clinical interviewing technique. In this research Goldman interviewed 200 children and young people in depth one at a time, following a structured sequence of questions: ten boys and ten girls within each year group between the ages of six and 17, treating those aged 15, 16,

and 17 as one age group. The interviews were driven by two main devices. First, the children and young people were asked to listen to three tape-recorded bible stories: Moses and the burning bush, the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, and the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. After each story they were asked probing questions about their understanding of the narratives. Second, the children and young people were asked to look at three pictures, one at a time, and to answer questions about the pictures. The pictures were used as a ‘projective device’. Each picture presented a child of the same sex and age as the child being interviewed. The three pictures showed a family going to church, a child or young person at prayer, and a child or young person looking at a mutilated bible. After looking at each picture they were asked probing questions about their understanding of what was being portrayed.

Using the statistical technique of scalogram analysis, Goldman interpreted the findings of these interviews as evidence for the view that religious thinking develops through an invariant sequence of stages during childhood and adolescence in line with the Piagetian model. This analysis was based on the interviewees’ answers to five

of the many questions asked in the interviews. On the basis of this analysis, Goldman concluded that before the onset of formal operational thinking, occurring from the age of 13 or 14 upwards, religious thinking was seriously restricted. In his second book, Goldman (1965) cautioned against exposing younger children to bible stories before they were equipped to employ formal operational thinking.

Goldman's qualitative research method stimulated a number of other researchers to build on his pioneering work, applying the same theoretical framework to specific aspects of the development of religious thinking, including Bull (1969), Brisco (1969), Kingan (1969), Miles (1971), Greer (1972b), Whitehouse (1972), Richmond (1972), Fagerlind (1974), and Morley (1975). For example, Bull (1969) followed the path from religion to morality in his study of *Moral Judgement from Childhood to Adolescence*. Whitehouse (1972) selected the biblical narrative of Zacchaeus, to avoid the emphasis on miraculous events which was present in the three stories used by Goldman, and interviewed 20 first-year and 20 fourth-year junior pupils from two closely matched non-denominational and Roman

Catholic schools. Related studies used the clinical interview technique to explore the child's thinking about eucharistic presence (Jaspard, 1971), the priest's occupations (Dumoulin, 1971), themes of resurrection and hell (Darcy and Beniskos, 1971), and the concept of God (Nye & Carlson, 1984).

While Goldman's own research had been rooted in a qualitative tradition, Peatling (1973, 1974, 1977) set out to test the same theoretical perspective on cognitive development within a quantitative approach. Peatling developed a criterion referenced multiple-choice pencil and paper test, known as *Thinking about the Bible* (TAB). In this test Peatling employed the same versions of the same three bible stories as Goldman. In this test four answers to each question were selected as being representative of four levels of religious thinking, styled as very concrete, concrete, abstract, and very abstract. From these data Peatling concluded that abstract religious thinking was not attained until somewhat later than Goldman's estimate of 13 or 14 years.

It was against this background that I established my own doctoral project under the title 'An enquiry into the concept of

“Readiness for religion” (Francis, 1976). Having myself interviewed 200 children, I grew disillusioned with the Piagetian emphasis on the priority of cognitive development (see also Francis, 1979) and proposed a fundamental shift toward prioritising affective development.

Prioritising affective development

Building on my critique of Goldman’s focus on cognitive development, I proposed moving the focus of attention to affective development. For me, both theologically and pedagogically, the key priority in nurturing the religious development of children and young people resided more in attending to how they felt about religion than how they thought about religion. For me, research into affective development was located within a quantitative rather than qualitative tradition. For me, affective development was best accessed and operationalised by means of a well-calibrated attitude scale.

As a deep-seated underlying construct concerned with affective response (favourably towards or negatively against) religion,

a well-developed attitude scale is able to calibrate individual differences in religiosity across age groups and across denominational divides. It is for this reason that in the 1970s I developed an instrument which has become known as the Francis Scale of Attitude towards Christianity and invited colleagues to join with me in building up a secure basis of empirical information regarding the correlates, consequences, and antecedents of a positive attitude towards Christianity (Francis, 1978). By agreeing on the use of the same measure, colleagues could be clear that their independent studies fitted together to build an integrated tapestry of research concerning the contributions being made to individual lives by the form of spirituality being accessed by the Francis Scale of Attitude towards Christianity.

The Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity is a 24-item Likert Scale that contains both positive and negative items concerned with an affective response to five components of the Christian faith accessible to and recognised by both children and adults, namely, God, Jesus, Bible, prayer, and church. Each item is assessed on a five-point scale ranging from agree strongly, through not certain, to

disagree strongly, producing a range of scores from 24 to 120. The reliability and validity of the scale have been supported by studies among children and adolescents (Francis, 1987, 1989; Lewis, Cruise, McGuckin, & Francis, 2006; Lewis, Cruise, & Lattimer, 2007; Francis, Lankshear, & Eccles, 2017) and among adults (Francis & Stubbs, 1987; Francis, Lewis, Philipchalk, Brown, & Lester, 1995; Lewis, Cruise, & McGuckin, 2005).

In order to facilitate further cross-cultural studies within the psychology of religion, the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity has also been translated into a number of different languages, including: Arabic (Munayer, 2000), Chinese (Francis, Lewis, & Ng, 2002; Tiliopoulos, Francis, & Jiang, 2013), Czech (Francis, Quesnell, & Lewis, 2010), Dutch (Francis & Hermans, 2000), French (Lewis & Francis, 2003, 2004), German (Francis & Kwiran, 1999; Francis, Ziebertz, & Lewis, 2002), Greek (Youtika, Joseph, & Diduca, 1999; Nazar, 2019), Italian (Crea, Baiocco, Ioverno, Buzzi, & Francis, 2014), Norwegian (Francis & Enger, 2002), Portugese (Ferreira & Neto, 2002), Romanian (Francis, Ispas, Robbins, Ilie, & Iliescu, 2009), Serbian (Flere, Francis, & Robbins,

2011), Slovakian (Lewis, Adamovová, & Francis, 2008), Slovenian (Flere, Klanjek, Francis, & Robbins, 2008), Spanish (Campo-Arias, Oviedo, Dtaz, & Cogollo, 2006), Swedish (Eek, 2001), and Welsh (Evans & Francis, 1996; Francis & Thomas, 2003).

Initial studies employing the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity began to establish the correlates, antecedents and consequences of individual differences in religious affect during childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood (see Francis, 2009). Gradually one set of studies began to demonstrate consistent patterns in the association between personality and religion, building on the dimensional model of personality proposed by Eysenck and Eysenck (1975, 1976). These studies generally found no connection between religious affect and neuroticism (Francis, Pearson, Carter, & Kay, 1981a; Francis, Pearson, & Kay, 1983a; Francis & Pearson, 1991), and no connection between religious affect and extraversion (Francis, Pearson, Carter, & Kay, 1981b; Francis, Pearson, & Kay, 1983b; Francis & Pearson, 1985b). On the other hand, these studies found a consistent negative correlation between religious affect and psychoticism (Kay, 1981; Francis & Pearson, 1985a; Francis, 1992).

This finding lends support to the theory that a positive attitude toward Christianity is associated with higher levels of positive mental health and lower levels of incipient psychopathology.

Another set of studies explored the association between religion and sex differences. These studies confirmed the general finding that females tend to be more religious than males (Francis, 1997; Francis & Penny, 2014), but also suggested that this sex difference was connected more with the differences in the personality profiles of females and males (Francis, 2005; Francis & Wilcox, 1996, 1998) than with the different locations of women and men in society. In other words, individual differences in personality profiles play a part in nurturing positive religious affect.

A third set of studies, employing the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989) has consistently reported a positive connection between religious affect and psychological wellbeing (see, for example, Robbins & Francis, 1996; Francis & Lester, 1997; French & Joseph, 1999; Francis & Robbins, 2000; Francis, Jones, & Wilcox, 2000). In other words, nurturing

positive religious affect among children and young people seems to be consistent with promoting human flourishing.

A fourth set of studies has made clear the consistent association between individual differences in religious affect and religious practice. In particular that data confirm a strong correlation between a positive attitude to Christianity and church attendance (see, for example, Francis & Gibson, 1993). While it is important to note that correlations do not demonstrate the direction of causality, it is sufficient to observe that positive religious affect and religious practice are complementary. It is for this reason that attention is next given to the factors that sustain church attendance during childhood and adolescence.

Agencies of faith transmission: home, congregation, and school

The Catholic Church has in recent years consistently spoken of the partnership among three primary agencies in the Christian education and the Christian formation of children and young people. In this partnership, home, church and school stand side-by-side. The case is

clearly made in primary documents from the Second Vatican Council (Tanner, 2012), including *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic constitution on the Church) and *Gravissimum Educationis* (Declaration on Christian Education). The priority among these three primary agencies may emerge differently in different social and educational contexts. Evaluating the situation within modern plural and secular societies, John Paul the Second (1981), in *Familiaris Consortia* (The role of the Christian family in the modern world), was clear in prioritising the family and drew on the terminology of *Lumen Gentium* that spoke of the family as ‘the domestic church’ (*ecclesia domestica*). Building on the foundation in *Familiaris Consortia*, John Paul the Second (1981) commented as follows:

In our own time, in a world often alien and even hostile to faith, believing families are of primary importance as centres of living, radiant faith. For this reason, the Second Vatican Council, using an ancient expression, calls the family the *Ecclesia domestica*. It is in the bosom of the family that parents are ‘by word and example ... the first heralds of the

faith with regard to their children’. (*Familiaris Consortio* 1656)

Elsewhere in *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul the Second (1981) writes that:

parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it. The right and duty of parents to give education is essential. (*Familiaris Consortio* 36) This case is also clearly argued in the *General Directory for Catechesis* (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997) in the following way. Indeed, in the same way as the Church, the family ‘is a place in which the Gospel is transmitted and from which it extends’. The family as a locus of catechesis has a unique privilege: transmitting the Gospel by rooting it in the context of profound human values.

Between 2016 and 2019 the Church of England (the Church in which I am licensed as priest) also drew attention to the three

agencies of home, church, and school in faith transmission, with separate reports focusing on each in turn. In the first report, *Rooted in the Church*, the emphasis was on identifying the characteristics of local churches that sustain the engagement of children and young people (Church of England Office, 2016a). In the second report, *Church of England vision for education: Deeply Christian, serving the common good*, the emphasis was on identifying the characteristics of Anglican church schools, operating in England within the state-maintained sector of education, that are both deeply Christian and committed to serving the common good of the whole local neighbourhood (Church of England Education Office, 2016b). In the third report, *Growing Faith: Churches, schools and households*, the emphasis was on the primacy of the third of the three agencies, the home. This report stated that ‘research shows that parents have the largest influence on their children in matters of faith’ (General Synod, 2019, paragraph 11). Nigel Genders, the architect of the report, refrained from identifying the sources for this research. It is against this background that the present study assessed the research evidence that leads to the conclusion that parents and the household (the

ecclesia domestica) emerge as the key agency in sustaining churchgoing and positive religious affect among young people (see also, Francis, in press).

Examining the research evidence on *ecclesia domestica*

One strand of research that has in recent years systematically drawn attention to the centrality of the home in sustaining the faith of young churchgoers was initiated by the Australian National Church Life Survey, in which young churchgoers have been invited to complete a survey alongside the surveys completed by adult attenders. For example, in their report from the 2001 Australian National Church Life Survey, on data provided by 10,101 10- to 14-year-old attenders, Bellamy, Mou, and Castle (2005) found that parents have a central role in the development of faith. They concluded that the practice of family prayer times, the encouragement of a personal devotional life for children, and parents simply being prepared to talk with their children about faith are all aspects that are positively related to higher

levels of belief and a more positive attitude toward and involvement in church life.

In their report from the 2011 Australian National Church Life Survey, on data provided by 6,252 8- to 14-year-old attenders, Francis, Penny, and Powell (2018) found that these data confirmed the power of parental example on frequency of church attendance. Frequent attendance among young churchgoers occurred when *both* parents attended as well. The most positive attitude toward their church was found among young churchgoers who had the opportunity to talk about God with their parents and who did not feel that their parents made them go to church. Young churchgoers responded to parental encouragement better than to parental pressure. Although peer influence within the church did not make much contribution to frequency of attendance, it made a contribution to shaping positive attitude toward church.

In their report from the 2016 Australian National Life Survey, Francis, McKenna, and Powell (2020) concentrated on data from 2,131 8- to 14-year-old attenders who completed surveys while attending Catholic churches. This study employed multiple regression

modelling to examine the effects of parental church attendance (treating mother and fathers separately) and home environment (in terms of family encouragement and religious engagement within the home) on frequency of child church attendance. The data demonstrated that parental church attendance is the strongest predictor. Young Catholics in Australia are more likely to attend church frequently if both mother *and* father attend church a lot. Moreover, after taking parental church attendance into account the home environment adds additional predictive power. Young Catholics are most likely to attend church frequently if both parents attend church *and* support faith within the home environment through both family encouragement and religious engagement within the home. When parental churchgoing and home environment have been taken into account, the external factors of engaging with online religious resources and of attending a Catholic school add no further positive predictive power in sustaining churchgoing among young Catholics.

The Australian National Church Life Survey gave rise to the 2001 Church Life Survey designed primarily for use in England (Churches Information for Mission, 2001). In their report on the

survey conducted among 10,153 8- to 14-year-old attenders, Francis and Craig (2006) found that parents play a crucial role through what they do and what they model outside their pattern of church attendance. The maintenance of a positive attitude toward church during the tweenage years is associated with having parents who support the faith in conversation and example at home.

Building on this research tradition established by the Australian Church Life Survey, Francis and colleagues have reported on three studies exploring the place of the home specifically in sustaining young Anglicans in England and Wales. In the first of these studies, Francis (2020) drew on data collected within schools in England and Wales (half of the schools were church schools within the state-maintained sector and half were schools without a religious character within the state-maintained sector) to identify 13- to 15-year-old students who identified as Anglicans. This method allowed research to be undertaken among non-churchgoing Anglicans as well as churchgoing Anglicans. From a total sample of 7,059 students, 645 identified themselves as Anglican (Church of England or Church in Wales). This study employed multiple regression to take into account

the effects of personal factors (sex and age) and psychological factors (extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism) before testing for the effects of peer-related factors and parental factors. These data demonstrated that young Anglicans who practise their Anglican identity by attending church did so primarily because their parents were Anglican churchgoers. Moreover, young Anglican churchgoers were most likely to keep going if their churchgoing parents also talked with them about their faith. Among this age group of Anglicans peer support seemed insignificant in comparison with parental support.

In the second of these studies, Francis, Lankshear, Eccles, and McKenna (2020) drew on data provided by 2,019 9- to 11-year-old students attending 88 Church in Wales primary schools who self-identified as Anglican. These data demonstrated that the single most important factor in sustaining churchgoing among these young Anglicans was the church attendance patterns of mothers. The effect of maternal example is, however, augmented when mothers take the opportunity to talk with their children about God, Jesus, prayer, and

church, and when fathers are also seen to support mothers' pattern of church attendance.

In the third of these studies, Francis, Lankshear, Eccles, and McKenna (2020) drew on data provided by 2,323 11- to 16-year-old students attending eight Church of England secondary schools, one joint Anglican-Catholic secondary school, and one secondary school operated by a Christian foundation. These data confirmed that parental church attendance provides the strongest prediction of church attendance among young Anglicans. More frequent attendance is associated with mother attending church and with father attending church. These two factors operate cumulatively with the stronger influence being when both parents attend church.

Also building on this research tradition established by the Australian Church Life Survey, Francis and colleagues have reported on two studies exploring the place of the home in sustaining young Catholics in England, Scotland and Wales, and in the Republic of Ireland. The first of the two studies, reported by Francis and Casson (2019), employed data from 2,146 students who self-identified as Catholic from among 9,810 participants to a survey conducted in

England, Scotland, and Wales. The second of these two studies, reported by Byrne, Francis, Sweetman, and McKenna (2019), employed data from 1,942 students who self-identified as Catholic from among 3,000 participants to a survey conducted in the Republic of Ireland. Using multiple regression analyses, the data from both studies suggested that young Catholics who practise their Catholic identity by attending church do so largely because their parents are Catholic churchgoers. Moreover, young Catholics are most likely to keep going if both mother *and* father are Catholic churchgoers, and if they discuss faith with their mother. Peer-related factors and psychological factors added little additional predictive power to the model.

Working within the same research tradition in Canada, Fawcett, Francis, and McKenna (2021) explored the impact of parental religious practice on sustaining positive religious affect among churchgoing young Baptists. A total of 299 participants between the ages of 12 and 18 years attending a summer youth programme sponsored by the Canadian Baptists of Atlantic Canada, completed the Francis Scale of Attitude toward Christianity (Francis,

2009) as a measure of positive religious affect, together with measures of frequency of church attendance for themselves, their mother and their father. These data identified fathers' religious attendance as a statistically significant factor augmenting the effect of mothers' religious attendance for sustaining young Canadian Baptists in the faith.

Cumulatively, the evidence is clearly focussing attention onto the household. The pressing question, nonetheless, remains: how can households be equipped to rise to the challenge of promoting positive religious affect among young churchgoers?

Nurturing positive religious affect

Having in my doctoral dissertation (Francis, 1976) argued for shifting the priority in religious education from cognitive learning to affective learning, in my bivocational capacity as academic researcher and Anglican priest, I began in my parish ministry to experiment with ways of shaping a curriculum and a learning environment fit for that purpose. In so doing I built on three foundational principles.

The first principle was informed by the insights of John Hull who located the religious learning of the child within the vibrant life of the worshipping community, or local congregation. John Hull had been the principal architect of two reports published by the British Council of Churches: *The child in the church* (British Council of Churches, 1976) and *Understanding Christian nurture* (British Council of Churches, 1981). The second principle was informed by an understanding of Anglicanism that acknowledged the twin influences of the Catholic tradition (Penhale, 1986) and of the Reformed and Evangelical tradition (Saward, 1987) and that valued the nurturing context of the liturgy. On this account, the heart of Anglicanism take seriously the Ministry of the Word *and* the Ministry and the Sacrament. The third principle was informed by a pedagogical approach that rooted learning in solitary and in group activities designed to foster enquiry and project-based learning (see, for example, Leat, 2017)

Drawing these three principles together, and placing the Parish Eucharist at the heart of the worshipping community, I developed an illustrated communion book for all age use, *The Lord is Here* (Francis

& Jenkins, 1977). The theory behind this illustrated communion book was that the liturgical text could be spread over 31 pages and that each section of the text could be associated with a relevant picture. Each picture could then be associated with a project learning experience. These 31 projects were developed in the companion volume, *His Spirit is with us: A project approach to Christian nurture* (Francis, 1981). Pedagogically the positive affect generated through the project was invested in the picture, and through the picture in the liturgical event.

An example of what is meant by this approach can be provided through consideration of the Nicene Creed that is included in the eucharistic liturgy. This creed expresses belief in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The creed is then appropriately distributed over three pages and associated with three pictures. The picture associated with the Holy Spirit illustrated balloons on a windy day, exploiting the linguistic links between *ruach* (Hebrew), *pneuma* (Greek), wind, and Spirit. The project work associated with this picture explores many aspects of the windy day and invites the art, craft and drama generated by the project learning

sessions to be introduced into the service at the relevant point in the liturgy.

In a subsequent book, *Making contact* (Francis, 1986), published five years after publishing *His Spirit is with us*, I documented how my project approach to Christian nurture had taken hold elsewhere, and I invited John Hull to offer a preface. John found that my practice was implementing his theory. This is what he wrote.

A very lively and readable book, bubbling with ideas, presented with enthusiasm and common sense, in a way which is both spiritually enriching and practically helpful... Perhaps the finest feature is its integration of life. The church, the school and the home, sacred and secular time, old and young (and middle-aged!), the various subjects of the curriculum, the senses, thinking and feeling, church and world, the seriousness and the frivolity of sacred play are all brought together in these pages to form one whole environment of Christian living. I am grateful for this opportunity to recommend this book and I believe that it will do much good in all the churches.

Much has now changed since the 1980s. Within the Church of England, where my ministry at present is still exercised, there are now fewer clergy and smaller congregations. My vision for the late 1970s of animating the local congregation as the vehicle for project learning has now worn too thin. It is for that reason that I turned attention to the *ecclesia domestica*, as the location for all-age engagement in project learning as preparatory for participating in the Parish Eucharist (whether held on Sunday or at some other point within the week).

Nurturing *ecclesia domestica*

Covid-19 brought significant changes to the liturgical life of the local church (see for example, Francis & Village, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b). In March 2020 the Church of England locked up the churches (even to the clergy), and liturgy, where feasible, was now live-streamed from the priest's domestic space into the homes of parishioners (see McGowan, 2020). Working at that stage as Canon Theologian in Liverpool Cathedral, I designed the *Exploring the*

Sunday Gospel programme with the dual aim of engaging adult parishioners to deepen their affection for the Gospel narrative and of enabling young members of the household to engage (alongside adult participants) in project learning relevant to the Gospel theme. This programme has now been running for over three years. It has been well-tested and refined in the light of experience. Freely available on the Liverpool Cathedral website it can be commended for use more widely (<https://www.liverpoolcathedral.org.uk/exploring-faith/exploring-the-sunday-gospel-resources/>)

Exploring the Sunday Gospel is offered as a resource that argues that households can function best as effective transmitters of faith among young people when the whole household itself fully engages in discipleship learning across the full age range. The household is then better equipped to empower and to motivate both schools and congregations. The core assumptions underpinning the programme are that:

- the eucharist is at the centre of the cathedral, at the centre of parish churches, and at the centre of the diocese;

- in the Anglican tradition weight is given to both word and sacrament;
- the ministry of the word is resourced by the Revised Common Lectionary;
- households, congregations, and schools engaging in preparation for the Parish Eucharist (whether held on Sunday or at some other point in the week) will participate more intentionally offline and online.

The pedagogical principles underpinning the programme include:

- focusing throughout the week on the Gospel reading appointed for the following Sunday;
- focusing on a concrete image identified at the heart of the Gospel reading;
- using a short Gospel prayer shaped on the Gospel reading;
- engaging in activities that can explore the Gospel reading and the concrete image;

- preparing material that can be a focus for online worship at home or can be brought to share or to display at the offline service.

Now that the *Exploring the Sunday Gospel* programme has been available online for three years, we are beginning to evaluate how this is impacting the discipleship trajectory of those engaging with the programme (see McKenna & Francis, in press).

Conclusion

The present paper has been tightly focused on addressing an apparently simple question concerning ‘sustaining positive religious affect among young churchgoers’. In so doing it has attempted to illustrate the benefits of interdisciplinary enquiry (specifically integrating theological, psychological, and pedagogical perspectives) and the benefits of combining academic research (rooted in the university sector and tested within the peer-reviewed literature) and pastoral practice (rooted in parish churches and cathedrals). For me, such integrated activity is totally consistent with the dominical

invitation to ‘observe the sower’ and with the emphasis on ‘empirical theology’ (see Francis & Village, 2015).

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