

Theological Moderation as an Epistemological Mechanism: Countering Extremism and Interpretive Distortions in Islamic Thought

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Abstract

The diversity of theological thought within Islam represents a rich intellectual tradition, yet it has also historically produced interpretive distortions arising from epistemological imbalances between reason and revelation, as well as methodological deficiencies in scriptural argumentation (*istidlāl*). These tensions have given rise to forms of religious extremism ranging from rigid literalism to unrestrained speculative rationalism. This study aims to examine theological moderation (*wasāṭiyyah*) as an epistemological mechanism for preventing extremism and distortion in religious understanding. Employing a qualitative library-based methodology with a philosophical-theological orientation, the study integrates epistemological analysis, historical-comparative inquiry, and critical literature review of classical Islamic theological works (*kutub al-turāth*), contemporary scholarship on religious moderation, and studies on modern theological extremism. Findings reveal that theological moderation functions as an epistemic regulatory framework that harmonizes *al-naql* (revelation) and *al-'aql* (reason), promotes epistemic humility, and enforces disciplined application of inferential principles. Theological extremism and interpretive deviation are shown to originate from epistemological dysfunction, cognitive bias, and doctrinal internalization devoid of rigorous scholarly verification. The study proposes an operational conceptual model of theological moderation consisting of five evaluative dimensions: precision in evidentiary use, balance in reasoning, contextual sensitivity, methodological validation, and awareness of cognitive bias. This model carries significant implications for Islamic religious education—including *pesantren* and Islamic higher education—as well as for digital literacy efforts aimed at critically filtering the rapid circulation of theological discourse on social media platforms.

Keywords: theological moderation, Islamic epistemology, theological extremism; *kalam*, religious interpretation, *wasāṭiyyah*

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Introduction

The pluralism of theological ideas in Islam constitutes a historical reality present since the initial formulation of the faith community. This intellectual variation grew out of multi-layered intersections between historical contingencies, changing social structures, and divergent methodological frameworks applied to clarify core religious tenets (Ramadhan et al., 2024). As Islamic civilization expanded geographically, it drew in an array of cultural expressions and established intellectual systems, which directly catalyzed diverse interpretive traditions. While this legacy illustrates the sheer vitality and expansiveness of Islamic thought, it simultaneously introduced deep-seated differences. These disagreements have often threatened to destabilize communal cohesion, fundamentally because they expose incompatible epistemic frameworks for assessing scriptural texts.

In the long trajectory of Islamic theology, a recurring friction between human rational capacity and scriptural boundaries has served as a primary driver for both radical reductionism and excessive accommodation. The *Khawārij*, for instance, operated on an unbending, literal treatment of scripture (*naṣṣ*), a methodology that naturally produced highly exclusionary and militant religious postures (Putrawan & Eunike, 2021). On the opposite end, the *Murji'ah* adopted a highly flexible model that minimized the operational link between inward faith and outward ethical action (Burhanuddin et al., 2024). Meanwhile, the *Mu'tazilah* chose to position pure human reason as the primary architectural platform for their theology (Ayub, 2021), a stance that occasionally subordinated received text to logical parameters. At a different extreme, the *Musyabbihah* compromised divine transcendence by falling into raw anthropomorphic readings of God's attributes (Mathiesen, 1970). This historical spectrum suggests that theological schisms are not caused by the mere presence of different texts; rather, they point to deeper problems regarding methodological balance and epistemic discipline.

Faced with these historic polarizations, reconstructing an authentic model of theological moderation becomes an essential academic task. Even though the vocabulary of "religious moderation" reflects modern institutional phrasing, its underlying mechanics are deeply woven into the historical fabric of Islamic thought. Values like *al-wasāṭiyyah*, structural equilibrium, and intellectual proportionality serve as the foundational scaffolding for both Islamic ethics and its epistemic practices. True moderation in theology requires an intentional, balanced integration of intellect and revelation. It operates as a vital stabilizer, ensuring that religious inquiry does not collapse into either strict scriptural atomism or an unbound rational speculation that lacks any methodological anchor (Yanti & Witro, 2020).

Methodological slip-ups do not act alone; they are frequently worsened by cognitive and psychological vulnerabilities. Subtle reasoning biases, simple logical fallacies, and the passive adoption of complex religious claims without formal academic verification routinely construct unreflective religious perspectives. In numerous settings, theological viewpoints are passed down through dogmatic pedagogical channels, an absolute reliance on religious personalities who resist intellectual critique, or specific psychological-spiritual states that cloud objective analysis (Lee, 2021). As a result, the resulting theological formulations forfeit the systemic epistemic balance that once defined mainstream Islamic scholarly traditions.

This historic vulnerability has taken on an urgent dimension in modern religious life. The digital revolution has undeniably democratized access to sacred texts and discourses, but it has also triggered an exponential rise in theological extremism, ideological balkanization, and a loose liberalization of interpretation that sidesteps scientific validation. Social media networks now function as primary conduits for truncated, emotionally manipulative, and analytically shallow religious claims that travel with unprecedented speed. This modern reality shows that

theological deviation is not a frozen historical artifact; it remains a dynamic, self-replicating modern crisis.

While contemporary scholarship on religious moderation and theological diversity has grown extensively, research that specifically treats theological moderation as a formal epistemological system capable of preempting interpretive errors remains remarkably scarce. Most current literature gravitates toward purely normative declarations or sociological descriptions, leaving the precise epistemic dynamics of *kalām* largely unexamined. Consequently, a distinct academic gap exists for an analytical study that positions theological moderation as an explicit cognitive framework designed to evaluate and articulate religious dogmas proportionately.

Confronting this research gap, this study attempts to formulate a structured framework for theological moderation that acts as an epistemological defense against extremism and interpretive distortions. The investigation seeks to complement the current Islamic intellectual corpus while providing a practical conceptual model to navigate modern theological crises.

To guide this exploration, this article addresses three core questions. First, how can the concept of theological moderation be understood and structured epistemologically within Islamic thought? Second, what specific epistemic variables drive the emergence of theological extremism and deviation in historical and modern settings? Third, how can this model of moderation be operationalized to protect the contemporary Muslim public from doctrinal distortion?

Accordingly, this study analyzes theological moderation through an Islamic epistemic lens, isolates the root causes of sectarian deviance, and develops an operational model to serve as a reliable cognitive shield against religious misinterpretation. Theoretically, this work aims to refine modern *kalām* epistemology by clarifying the relationship between intellect and scripture. Practically, the insights gathered offer a concrete template for updating religious education curricula, structuring public *da'wah* methodologies, and enhancing digital religious literacy to support an accountable public discourse.

Theoretical Framework

The Theory of Religious Moderation

The concept of religious moderation within the Islamic tradition finds its normative validity in the ideal of *al-wasatiyyah*, which scriptural sources frame as the core identity of the balanced faith community. Far from suggesting a weak compromise that dilutes essential principles, *al-wasatiyyah* denotes a comprehensive equilibrium that integrates justice, harmony, and precision in thought and action (Munandar & Amin, 2023). It serves as a rigorous methodology that ensures every aspect of Islamic doctrine occupies its intended place and functions optimally. In theological terms, moderation demands a steady commitment to normative truths balanced with deep intellectual openness, pairing an unshakeable adherence to creed (*'aqīdah*) with strict epistemic caution during textual analysis.

In contemporary state and social policy discourses, religious moderation has undergone significant institutional refinement, clearly illustrated by the strategic initiatives developed by the Ministry of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia (Farhan & Subagio, 2024). This administrative framework emphasizes several crucial indicators: civic loyalty, cross-cultural tolerance, the outright rejection of violence, and a constructive openness toward localized cultural expressions. Though these parameters originate within sociological and normative spheres, their relevance to formal theology lies in their reminder that moderation is not merely an external social behavior. It directly influences the internal cognitive processes through

which believers process and apply their faith ethically. Thus, religious moderation serves as a critical bridge linking transcendent theological truths with an evolving social reality.

This balancing act is not a novel modern invention; it has always been central to the work of classical Islamic jurists and theologians. Al-Ghazālī consistently emphasized the need to preserve an exact equilibrium between the intellect and scriptural transmission, writing extensively on the psychological dangers of both unbound rationalism and unyielding literalism (Senin et al., 2023). In a similar vein, Abu Mansur al-Māturīdī built a theological framework that granted clear epistemic validity to human reason without ever encroaching upon the sovereignty of revelation (Abdrassilov, 2023). Furthermore, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī utilized a sophisticated analytical approach to synthesize philosophical logic with transmitted textual data (*dalīl naqlī*) (Mustofa, 2023). The enduring legacy of these classical masters confirms that moderation operates as a foundational epistemological engine long prioritized within orthodox Islamic theology.

The Epistemology of Islamic Theology

The structural design of Islamic theological epistemology relies on a dialectical relationship between reason (*‘aql*) and revelation (*naql*), a relationship that has served as the core debate of *kalām* since its inception. Differing views on the status and limits of the human mind versus sacred scripture have profoundly altered the developmental trajectories of various schools of thought. While some strict traditionalist currents treat scripture as an unmediated authority that leaves no room for rational inquiry, other speculative movements have given reason an almost unchecked dominance in decoding sacred language. In contrast, a moderate epistemological model refuses to view reason and revelation through an adversarial binary, treating them instead as complementary epistemic sources operating within a unified, disciplined methodology (Elouazzani et al., 2024).

In the field of theological hermeneutics, normative epistemology provides the evaluative criteria needed to assess the validity and legitimacy of scriptural interpretations. This process requires the strict application of scholarly canons during textual inference (*istidlāl*), including rigorous source criticism, precise historical-linguistic contextualization, and internal logical consistency (Ainusyamsi et al., 2025). Operating without a transparent epistemic blueprint inevitably opens the door to highly subjective, volatile, and unchecked interpretations, which ultimately manifest as theological distortions.

A foundational pillar of this methodology is evidentiary proportionality. This principle demands a clear, operational distinction between definitive (*qat’ī*) and probabilistic (*ẓannī*) proofs, as well as between core creedal axioms (*uṣūl*) and secondary theological branches (*furū’*). Proportionality insists that the intellect should function as an interpretive tool to clarify and reinforce textual meanings, rather than an independent authority meant to replace revelation (Thaib, 2020). By maintaining this balance, theological moderation shifts from an abstract ethical concept into a systematic, disciplined, and accountable epistemic practice.

Additionally, the development of religious understanding cannot be separated from the cognitive and psychological undercurrents that shape human reasoning. Cognitive biases—including confirmation bias, authoritarian religious habits, and intense sectarian emotions—frequently distort how individuals interpret texts and creeds (Tarar & Hasan, 2019). Without a critical awareness of these psychological tendencies, theological reasoning is prone to producing highly skewed conclusions. Therefore, an explicit recognition of human epistemic limitations remains a mandatory element within any valid framework of theological moderation.

Theological Extremism and Deviation

Theological extremism can be understood as an interpretive style that reads and expresses religious doctrines in an excessive, rigid, and exclusionary fashion, intentionally ignoring textual complexity, historical contexts, and the legitimate diversity of views recognized within the Islamic scholarly tradition (Wibisono et al., 2019). Within the theological domain, extremism does not always manifest as overt physical violence; it frequently appears as absolutist truth claims that shut down constructive dialogue, critical feedback, and intellectual reflection. Theological deviation, similarly, refers to interpretive models that break away from established epistemological and methodological boundaries in Islamic thought.

Conceptually, theological deviation can be classified into three major categories. The first is literalist extremism, characterized by a crude word-for-word reading of scripture that completely ignores historical contexts, linguistic figures of speech, and traditional interpretive keys. The second is rationalist extremism, where the human intellect is over-elevated to the point of displacing scriptural authority altogether (Rohayana & Sofi, 2021). The third is spiritualist extremism, which positions highly subjective mystical experiences as the ultimate source of absolute truth, entirely bypassing normative scriptural boundaries (Wibisono et al., 2019). These three categories show that extremism does not grow from a single flawed method, but from a systemic failure to maintain epistemic equilibrium.

Historically, these expressions of extremism and deviation emerged during the earliest formative decades of the Muslim community. The Khawārij represent an uncompromising literalist extremism, while the Murji'ah displayed the opposite extreme of over-laxity regarding the interplay of inner faith and outward ethical behavior. The Mu'tazilah mirrored a dominant rationalism that sometimes overrode texts, whereas the Musyabbihah fell into anthropomorphic errors due to unmediated literalism. Reviewing these historical movements reveals that theological error almost always stems from an asymmetrical relationship between reason and revelation (Huda M, 2018).

In modern times, these theological deviations have transformed in both structure and medium. The digital revolution has midwived social media-based theological extremism, an online environment where sacred discourse is frequently reduced to simplistic slogans, heavily politicized, and broadcast without any methodological oversight. Conversely, an ungrounded liberalization of religious discourse that ignores classical scientific disciplines produces equally problematic theological conclusions. This dual challenge underscores the urgency of establishing theological moderation as a robust epistemological bulwark capable of addressing modern dilemmas.

Method

Research Design

This study utilizes a qualitative, library-based research design developed through a philosophical-theological framework. The choice of a qualitative approach is dictated by the conceptual, normative, and epistemological nature of the inquiry, which cannot be accurately measured through quantitative or statistical tools. The primary analytical focus is directed toward evaluating the core concepts, intellectual structures, and epistemological assumptions that shape the practice of moderation within both the classical and modern Islamic theological traditions.

A library-based design was chosen because this project relies completely on the systematic exploration, analytical reading, and critical evaluation of primary religious texts and secondary academic literature spanning classical and modern eras. By blending philosophical and theological inquiry, the study goes beyond simply describing historical viewpoints; it interrogates their underlying epistemic foundations, methodological coherence, and broader

implications for religious behavior. This methodology allows for an investigation of theological moderation as a cohesive, functioning epistemological mechanism.

Analytical Approaches

To address the core research questions, an integrative suite of analytical approaches is utilized. First, an epistemological analysis is applied to investigate the interaction between reason and revelation within the architecture of Islamic theology, while examining the criteria for knowledge validation during text interpretation. This technique is designed to trace the epistemic frameworks that give rise to both moderate and radical stances, including the identification of cognitive biases and methodological errors that corrupt religious reasoning.

Second, a historical-comparative approach is deployed to map the historical trajectory of theological schisms within Islam and contrast the defining characteristics of competing schools. Through this approach, the genesis of theological extremism and deviation can be viewed contextually, whether manifesting as literalist or hyper-rationalist tendencies. Furthermore, comparing classical and contemporary texts reveals structural continuities and shifts in the nature of these epistemological problems across Islamic history.

Third, the study carries out a critical literature review to systematically evaluate academic works focused on religious moderation, theological extremism, and Islamic epistemology. This review extends beyond simple thematic categorization; it interrogates theoretical assumptions, methodological frameworks, and the logical strengths or limitations of previous research. This critical reading aims to identify clear research gaps and articulate the unique conceptual contribution of the current study.

Data Sources

The data for this study are drawn from contemporary literature analyzing religious moderation across theological, sociological, and policy-oriented dimensions. The corpus includes academic monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and foundational policy documents addressing moderation in modern Islam. This body of literature serves to link classical concepts with the realities of the digital era. Supplementary data comprise scholarly case studies and credible analytical reports focused on theological extremism and deviance. These case studies offer empirical illustrations of how an epistemological imbalance can translate into highly problematic religious behaviors. Integrating these varied data streams ensures an exhaustive, contextual, and thoroughly argumentative analysis.

Results and Discussion

Theological Moderation in Islamic Epistemology

The findings of this study demonstrate that when viewed through the prism of Islamic epistemology, theological moderation operates as an epistemic regulatory apparatus that guides the interpretation of sacred texts (Prasetia et al., 2021). Moderation is far more than an ethical posture or social attitude; it functions as a strict methodological filter governing how an individual engages with the sources of Islamic revelation. Within this framework, theological moderation minimizes semantic distortions that routinely emerge from fragmented readings, historical uprooting, or ideological manipulation of scripture. In classical scholarship, notably that of Imam al-Ghazālī, knowledge is conceptualized as an instrument for moral action and spiritual purification (*tazkiyat al-nafs*); hence, understanding religious texts requires not merely cognitive mastery but also moral maturity and intellectual accountability (Al-Ghazālī, n.d.).

A key finding is the re-emphasis on the vital equilibrium between *al-naql* (revelation) and *al-aql* (reason) within the structure of Islamic theology (Ainusyamsi et al., 2025). Theological moderation firmly rejects any binary logic that opposes these two sources. Revelation retains its position as the ultimate normative authority, while reason serves to

dissect, elaborate, and clarify the core messages embedded within scripture. Any asymmetry in this relationship—whether via rigid textualism or a detached, speculative rationalism—inevitably yields distorted theological conclusions.

Furthermore, Islamic epistemology requires that theological moderation be accompanied by epistemic humility—a deep acknowledgment of human limitations when trying to fully comprehend the divine will (Hasanah & Abbas, 2023). This principle discourages hasty, absolutist truth claims, creating a legitimate space for a plurality of interpretations, provided they rest on valid methodological frameworks. Consequently, theological moderation fosters an intellectual climate that is reflective, humble, and thoroughly responsible.

The study also reveals that theological moderation must be conceptualized as an intellectual discipline rather than a mere psychological inclination or personal moral stance. It demands rigorous consistency in applying epistemological rules, adherence to scientific methodologies, and mastery of classical and modern interpretive tools (Prasetya et al., 2021). Devoid of this academic discipline, moderation risks degrading into an empty political or normative slogan stripped of analytical depth.

The Epistemological Roots of Theological Extremism and Deviation

The paper's structural analysis demonstrates that theological extremism and deviance are fundamentally rooted in acute epistemological dysfunctions, particularly within the practice of *istidlāl* (Rahman et al., 2019). Methodological failures in drawing theological conclusions typically appear as textual misreadings, selective proof-texting (selective textualism), and a total disregard for historical contexts or established hermeneutical principles. Such flawed inference patterns generate unbalanced, highly exclusionary religious viewpoints.

An unbridled reliance on human intellect unguided by methodological rigor further aggravates these deviations (Djaga & Labaka, 2025). When human rationality breaks free from the epistemological boundaries of revelation, it positions itself as an autonomous arbiter of absolute theological truth. This displacement often yields speculative religious models that lack any authentic normative anchor within mainstream Islamic scholarship.

Simultaneously, cognitive biases play a significant role in fostering extreme interpretations. Confirmation bias, rigid ideological alignments, and intense religious emotions heavily compromise how individuals approach scriptural texts and prophetic traditions. Consequently, the sacred text is stripped of its role as an objective source of truth and is reduced to a tool for rubber-stamping pre-existing prejudices.

Theological deviation is further reinforced by belief systems constructed through dogmatic indoctrination devoid of scientific verification. When religious ideas are accepted uncritically, without any space for critical evaluation or methodological testing, they produce a closed, defensive religious psychology. Historically, this structural pattern is observable in early heterodox groups: the Khawārij fell prey to severe literalism, while the Mu'tazilah, during specific historical phases, enforced a heavy-handed rationalism (Sutiyo, n.d.).

In the contemporary landscape, this identical pattern manifests as digital extremism. Social media accelerates the rapid distribution of shallow, emotionally charged, and highly fragmented theological formulations. Real scholarly authority is pushed aside by algorithmically driven popularity, while rigorous epistemic validation is sidelined. This phenomenon exposes a clear continuity of epistemological problems from the classical era to the modern age, even though the mediums and modes of expression have shifted.

Theological Moderation as a Preventative Mechanism

The analysis indicates that theological moderation can function as a balanced, contextual hermeneutical approach to sacred texts. By adopting this approach, scriptural interpretation moves past basic literalism to incorporate linguistic principles, historical backgrounds, and the

overarching objectives of Islamic law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*), effectively neutralizing semantic reductionism.

Beyond its hermeneutical utility, theological moderation provides an epistemic ethic that regulates an investigator's posture during the pursuit of truth. This ethic is materialized through the continuous application of equilibrium (*tawāzun*), academic caution (*iḥtiyāt*), and proportionality (*tawassuṭ*) in reasoning. These foundational principles act as checks against the urge to drift into either rationalist or literalist extremes.

In practical *istidlāl*, moderation enforces the proportional deployment of evidence. This requires keeping clear boundaries between definitive (*qat'ī*) and probabilistic (*ẓannī*) statements, and maintaining a healthy balance between rational arguments (*'aqliyyāt*) and textual proofs (*naqliyyāt*). Such a balanced approach prevents sweeping generalizations based on speculative evidence, while protecting rational inquiry from descending into uncontrolled conjecture.

Based on these findings, an evaluative framework for tracking theological discourses can be formulated. This framework consists of five dimensions: evidentiary precision, logical balance in reasoning, context sensitivity, methodological validation, and a critical awareness of cognitive biases. This model can serve as an analytical tool to measure the validity and proportionality of any given theological perspective.

A Conceptual Model of Theological Moderation

Drawing from the cumulative findings, this study outlines a conceptual model of theological moderation featuring five interconnected components: (1) the source of theological knowledge, (2) the process of epistemological verification, (3) the mitigation of cognitive biases, (4) contextual interpretation, and (5) the generation of moderate theological understanding. Together, these components constitute a self-correcting epistemological mechanism designed to intercept extremism and interpretive deviance.

The first component covers the foundational sources of theological knowledge, namely *al-naql* (revelation) and *al-'aql* (reason). This model avoids treating them as opposites, viewing them instead as interdependent sources. Revelation serves as the ultimate normative guide, while reason acts as the instrument used to dissect, explain, and rationally elaborate scriptural truths.

The second component is epistemological verification, an ongoing process that tests the validity of religious interpretations against the canons of *istidlāl*, core creedal principles (*uṣūl al-dīn*), linguistic philology, and socio-historical realities. This component functions as a vital quality control loop, ensuring that textual inferences and rational claims remain aligned with established methodologies.

The third component involves the mitigation of cognitive biases, which demands a vigilant awareness of confirmation bias, group insularity, and ideological subjectivity. This works as an internal psychological filter, preventing personal biases or sectarian interests from warping textual readings into exclusive or radical views.

The fourth component is contextual interpretation, which interprets sacred texts by cross-referencing them with the broader objectives of the law (*maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*), contemporary social realities, and historical change. This phase ensures that Islamic doctrine remains dynamic and socially relevant without compromising its timeless normative foundations.

The interaction of these four elements generates the fifth component: moderate theological understanding. This outcome is distinguished by a balance between textual fidelity and rationality, an openness to legitimate interpretive pluralism, and a firm commitment to classical Islamic methodologies. The resulting understanding is continuously fed back into the verification loop, establishing a reflective cycle. Through these relationships, theological

moderation evolves from a passive moral stance into an operational epistemological engine that produces valid, proportional religious knowledge capable of resisting extremist currents.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that theological moderation functions as a robust epistemological mechanism that places reason (*al-'aql*) and revelation (*al-naql*) in a proportional relationship during the interpretation of Islamic doctrines. Within Islamic epistemology, moderation is not merely a normative stance; it represents a systematic methodological framework that steers the use of evidence through *istidlāl*, demands epistemic humility, and maintains an acute awareness of human intellectual limits. Furthermore, the findings indicate that theological extremism and interpretive distortions stem directly from an imbalanced relationship between text and reason, methodological breakdowns in proof-texting, and unchecked cognitive biases working in tandem with weak academic verification. In response, this study puts forward a conceptual model of theological moderation built upon the integration of revelation and intellect, rigorous epistemic verification, cognitive bias mitigation, contextual hermeneutics, and a continuous feedback loop.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the advancement of *kalām* epistemology by establishing moderation as a formal methodological principle that bridges reason and revelation during the construction of religious knowledge. Practically, the proposed model offers a structured template for designing religious education curriculums, improving digital literacy, and professionalizing *da'wah* activities to foster a critical, balanced, and accountable religious public.

This study acknowledges certain limitations, being primarily conceptual and library-bound, meaning it has not empirically tested the implementation of the proposed model. Consequently, future research should pursue empirical investigations to examine the perceptions, understanding, and real-world practices of theological moderation among lay communities, religious educators, and missionary actors. Additionally, subsequent scholarship could focus on designing operational instructional modules for moderate theology grounded in these epistemic principles to cultivate inclusive and critical religious habits. Finally, comparative studies across different Islamic theological schools regarding moderation and extremism will help map out the diversity of available epistemic approaches and identify common grounds to strengthen moderate discourses in the modern era.

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Conflict of interests

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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