

“Secretophobia”: The Modern Prejudice Against Religious and Spiritual Secrets

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ABSTRACT: Secret is often perceived today as something intrinsically maleficent, sinister, and non-democratic. Psychologists, however, recognize that secret is an essential component of human relations. Simmel’s famous indictment of the secret in fact distinguished between different forms of “secret societies.” For some, secret is a necessity caused by external hostility. For others, secret derives from an esoteric or gnostic content of the teachings. What has mostly passed from Simmel to subsequent critics of secrecy is that the secret may function as an “adornment,” a status symbol without intrinsic value. Hugh Urban has applied this criticism to both Freemasonry and Scientology. However, the criticism seems to posit that esoteric and gnostic teachings are worthless by definition, which is itself a value judgement that should not be part of value-free social science.

KEYWORDS: Secrecy, Secret Societies, Georg Simmel, Hugh Urban, Freemasonry, Scientology.

The Secret and the Self

Why is the secret today perceived as carrying an aura of maleficence? Hunting secrets to eliminate them has become almost a principle, a right that guarantees our safety and even our democracy (Lévy-Soussan 2008, 119).

These words by French psychoanalyst and academic Pierre Lévy-Soussan capture a trend of our present Western world I would call “secretophobia,” the idea that secrets are something dangerous that needs to be denounced and eliminated.

Conversely, writes Lévy-Soussan, “transparency and the absence of secrets became the standard to measure the quality of a discourse or an information” (Lévy-Soussan 2008, 119–28). This “secretophobia” is, Lévy-Soussan argues,

wrong, and carries potentially destructive consequences for both individuals and societies (Lévy-Soussan 2010).

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how a society can function without secrets, although “secret,” “restricted,” “private,” and “confidential” are not synonymous. Political documents, for example, may belong to each of these categories. Sometimes they are not disclosed because the public may not know their context and, as a consequence, may misunderstand them. It is true that we live in a world of Wikileaks and other Anonymous, where a significant number of secret governmental documents are leaked and appear on the web, sooner rather than later. Recent events have proved that a world where diplomatic documents are leaked and published is not a safer world nor one where diplomacy’s efforts, including those aimed at preventing wars, are made easier.

Spiritual groups have their own secrets. In this context, “secret” is connected with “sacred,” something that cannot be grasped by the mind and requires a deeper understanding. That secrecy is a part of many, if not most, forms of spirituality was taken for granted for millennia. But now “secretophobia” misunderstands the secrecy of spiritual and religious movements as well, and depicts it as something sinister, possibly hiding abuses and crimes.

Secret, however, does not exist in social movements only. It starts with the smallest society, the family or the couple. Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) wrote in 1913 “Two Lies Told by Children” (Freud 1953 [1913], 303–9), where he claimed that the idea that small children should never lie is both unnatural and wrong. Children understand early enough that parents lie to them to make them behave. In turn, the children’s first lies, according to Freud, are their first secrets—although (my comment, not Freud’s) arguing that all secrets are lies would certainly be wrong.

Secrets, Freud wrote, are very important, because they mark the children’s separation from the parents. Now that the child has a secret, an individual perception emerges, separated from the flow of the parents’ thoughts. Thus, the secret is essential for the process of individualization. The etymology of the Latin word “secretum” is controversial, but Freud (as many still do) believed it came from the perfect passive participle of the verb “secerno,” which means “to separate.” A secret is separated from what is open to everybody. By keeping their first secrets, children separate their selves from the parents’ selves.

We continue to need secrets to preserve the individuality and coherence of our inner selves until the end of our lives. According to Lévy-Soussan trauma, failure, and even suicide in our modern societies may come from the myth of total transparency. Because of the pervasiveness of this myth, we feel guilty if we keep our secrets, and we reveal secrets, or trespass the boundaries of our privacy, without being ready to confront the consequences.

How many believing they should “always tell the truth,” “live a transparent life,” and “never lie,” failed to respect their psychological time and made “public announcements” they were not ready to defend: that they had a “secret” child, an illness, a “secret” sexual orientation. The subject matters of the announcements are as numerous as individual stories are. These announcements have effects that are devastating, traumatic, violent, beyond everything they might have imagined beforehand (Lévy-Soussan 2008, 120–21).

Those who preach for transparency and against secrets often rely on a famous article published in 1906 by German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858–1918), “The Sociology of Secrecy and of Secret Societies” (Simmel 1906, 441–98). Simmel wrote the article in German, but it appeared in English translation in 1906 before a different version was published in 1908 as part of his major work, *Soziologie* (Simmel 1908). The chapter on the secret of *Soziologie* was in turn translated into English in 1950 (Simmel 1950, 307–76). I am not a sociologist, and I read the article by Simmel from the simple point of view of common human experience.

In a way, Simmel is the father of “secretophobia.” However, his article of 1906 is often read selectively. When it comes to interpersonal relations, Simmel agrees that some secrecy is necessary. He idealizes a classic idea of friendship, where friends were totally open to each other (or so the Greek and Latin eulogies of friendship said), but believes modern processes of differentiation made this friendship impossible.

The complete intimacy of confidence, he writes, probably becomes, with the changing differentiation of men [sic], more and more difficult. Perhaps the modern man has too much to conceal to make a friendship in the ancient sense possible; perhaps personalities also, except in very early years, are too peculiarly individualized for the complete reciprocity of understanding, to which always so much divination and productive phantasy are essential. It appears that, for this reason, the modern type of feeling inclines more to differentiated friendships; that is, to those which have their territory only upon one side of the personality at a time, and in which the rest of the personality plays no part (Simmel 1906, 458).

In this “rest of the personality,” secrets remain, concealed even to the best of these “modern” friends.

Simmel regarded the question of whether it is appropriate for a spouse to keep secrets not revealed to the other spouse as “among the universal problems of the highest importance for the sociology of intimate associations” (Simmel 1906, 459). He notes that modern bourgeois marriage is different from the ancient one, as it emphasizes the romantic element, thus making

very natural... the temptation to open oneself to the other at the outset without limit; to abandon the last reserve of the soul equally with those of the body, and thus to lose oneself completely in another. This, however, usually threatens the future of the relationship (Simmel 1906, 459).

Simmel concludes that perhaps there are some exceptional couples that can live without secrets. Most couples cannot. Simmel, here, does not distinguish between secrecy and privacy, a distinction perhaps in the 21st century we would introduce.

Quite apart from its analysis of secret societies, to which I will return, Simmel regards the situation where secrets in relationships between human beings are common as an evolutive step towards a fully developed society. He even writes that secrecy

is one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity. In contrast with the juvenile condition [of humanity] in which every mental picture is at once revealed, every undertaking is open to everyone’s view, secrecy procures enormous extension of life, because with publicity many sorts of purposes could never arrive at realization (Simmel 1906, 462).

“Secret Societies”

Why, thus, is Simmel always mentioned by those who criticize secrecy, particularly when it is practiced by religious or spiritual movements? The answer has to do with his analysis of “secret societies.” Simmel warns against framing the question in moral terms. “Secrecy, he writes, is a universal sociological form, which as such has nothing to do with the moral valuations of its contents” (Simmel 1906, 463). Some societies are secret because their activities are criminal, but this is not a rule: “secrecy is not in immediate interdependence with

evil, but evil with secrecy” (Simmel 1906, 463). All criminal societies are secret, but not all secret societies are criminal.

Simmel then distinguishes secret societies into “absolutely secret” and “*relatively* secret” (Simmel 1906, 471, emphasis in original). “Absolutely secret” societies, he believed, i.e., those whose very existence is unknown to the non-members until they are discovered or exposed, are very rare. One disgruntled ex-member who reveal their existence is enough to destroy them. Most secret societies are “relatively secret” and follow the model of Freemasonry, a subject of great interest to Simmel. That Freemasonry exists, and what it is, is generally known. What is kept secret, with more or less success since ex-members have always published exposes, is a part of the teachings and the rituals.

Except from criminal or terrorist organizations, secret societies are born, Simmel argues, either from external circumstances or from the nature of their teachings. Some societies become secret simply because they are persecuted. The Waldenses (also called Waldensians) were Christian dissidents, precursors of the Reformation, who, Simmel writes, “were in nature not a secret society” but became one “in consequence of the external pressure, which made it necessary to keep themselves from view” (Simmel 1906, 493).

I had a personal experience of how this happens when I interviewed refugees from a Christian new religious movement, The Church of Almighty God, who escaped from China where they are severely persecuted. One of the accusations the Chinese authorities, including Chinese embassies in the countries where they seek asylum, raise against them is that they operate in the secret. However, they are a clandestine group in China because, if detected, they would be arrested. In countries such as South Korea, the United States, Italy, or Spain they still adopt some precautions because the long arm of the Chinese government follows them even abroad, but they have visible places of worship open to visitors, publications everybody can buy, and websites (Šorytė 2018; Introvigne, Richardson, and Šorytė 2021).

Bloody persecution certainly justifies secrecy, and is an extreme case. However, Simmel notes that more generally

the secret society is the appropriate social form for contents which are at an immature stage of development and thus in a condition peculiarly liable to injury from opposing interests. Youthful knowledge, religion, morality, party, is often weak and in need of defense (Simmel 1906, 471).

Interestingly, the German sociologist adds that this is “perhaps most obvious in the case of religious movements” (Simmel 1906, 472).

The second case is the society that is secret because it imparts a secret knowledge. These are, Simmel tells us, the “peculiar types of secret society whose substance is an esoteric doctrine, a theoretical, mystical, religious gnosis” (Simmel 1906, 477). Here, however, Simmel saw problems, and formulated the criticism that is used by most subsequent critics of secrecy as the only part of his article they quote.

Simmel believed that in many content-oriented secret societies, the secret goes around in circles. It is not valuable because of its content. It is only valuable because it is secret. Simmel denounces “the logically fallacious, but typical, error, that everything secret is something essential and significant” (Simmel 1906, 465). In many cases, he argues, it is not. It is true that he distinguishes between genuine Freemasonry and “degenerate Freemasonry” (Simmel 1906, 479), and mostly criticizes the second. However, Simmel writes that in many esoteric societies the secret’s aim is only to create a status. Just as “among children a pride and self-glory often bases itself on the fact that the one can say to the others: ‘I know something that you don’t know,’” among the grown-up members of (most) esoteric movements the knowledge of secrets is merely an “adorning possession” (Simmel 1950, 337: “schmückender Besitz,” Simmel 1908, 365).

In the German edition of 1908, Simmel added an excursus on the notion of adornment (“Exkurs über den Schmuck”: Simmel 1908, 365–72), which is not present in the 1906 article published in English. Simmel’s “adornment” is what Max Weber (1864–1920) called “status symbol” (see Weber 1968, 698–99), a notion we are all familiar with. Simmel argued that jewels and other “adornments” do have a value that corresponds to the fact that the metals and stones they are made of are scarce, yet the real reason we want them is that they are exclusive and not available to those of a social status lower than ours. Other “adornments,” or “status symbols,” such as certain medals or items of clothing do not even have a special quality or aesthetic value, but are appreciated just because not everybody can have them.

Often, Simmel argues, the secret works in the same way. It is not very significant nor valuable, but it is “aristocratic” (Simmel 1906, 487) because only a few people are admitted to know it. Since who is admitted to the knowledge of the secret is decided by a few masters or chiefs, those initiated to the secret

reciprocate by promising “unlimited and blind obedience to the leaders” (Simmel 1906, 492). Submission to the leaders may become a core part of the initiate’s life, Simmel writes, the more so because there are “few individuals belonging to more than one secret society” (Simmel 1906, 491). The latter comment shows that Simmel was not very familiar with the real-life secret societies of his time, including in Germany, where many were at the same time Freemasons, Rosicrucians, neo-Templars, and so on, meaning they did indeed belong to more than one secret society, each with its own chiefs.

Although there were historical cases of secret societies promoting democracy, their aristocratic ethos, Simmel argues, make these groups intrinsically non-democratic. Since “democracies are bound to regard publicity as the condition desirable in itself” (Simmel 1906, 469), Simmel predicted in 1906 that as more countries will adopt a democratic regime, secret societies would eventually decline or disappear. He was wrong, as content-oriented esoteric societies continued to flourish in democratic countries. There are surely today more esoteric groups in the United States or the countries of European Union than in non-democratic states such as China, where they may be repressed and persecuted.

“Secretophobia” and New Religious and Esoteric Movements

Before commenting on whether Simmel’s criticism of (most) secret societies was right, I would like to discuss how his ideas have been applied to religious and esoteric movements, sometimes generating a “secretophobic” approach.

Of course, many who criticize “cults” or esoteric masters and movements do not even know who Simmel was. However, they unconsciously participate in the tradition he inaugurated, by believing that secrecy in a spiritual movement is intrinsically non-democratic, and necessarily leads to “blind obedience to the leaders” (Simmel 1906, 492).

There are, however, also those who quote Simmel explicitly. On the issues of secret I have read with interest some texts by American scholar Hugh Urban. I became interested in his approach because I have written some papers about Scientology (e.g. Šorytė 2020, 2021), and he deals with the secret in Scientology.

The first article by Urban was published in 2001 and applied Simmel’s criticism of secret societies to Freemasonry (Urban 2001). Urban focused on the American Masonic leader Albert Pike (1809–1891). There is no doubt that Pike was an important Masonic ritualist. However, referring to him allows for an easy criticism of Freemasonry as a secret society whose aim was to perpetuate the power of an elite of American Anglo-Saxon whites. Pike was a Confederate general, and he was even accused of atrocities during the Civil War, for which he was arrested and punished by the Confederate States themselves. He was also, as Urban notes, a racist (Duncan 1961; Brown 1997). His statue in Washington DC was defaced, torn down, and set afire as part of the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 (Cioffi 2020).

Pike became the stereotypical “bad” Freemason, and in the 19th century many Catholic publications reprinted documents where he allegedly confessed to be in league with Satan himself to destroy Christianity, which were later proved to be hoaxes (see Introvigne 2016, 191–200). While discredited in the West, these false Pike documents are still used today in Russia to prove that there is a Masonic–American conspiracy aimed at dominating the world and destroying the Russian Orthodox Church (see e.g. Braev-Raznevsky 2019).

In other words, if somebody wants to attack Freemasonry as a right-wing and racist organization, Pike makes for an easy target. By selecting famous Freemasons of different political persuasions, such as Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807–1882), who was Grand Master of Italian Freemasonry, American President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882–1945), or British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (1874–1965), different conclusion might have been reached.

To his credit, Urban does not claim that all Freemasons are racist or right-wing radicals. He also admits that secrecy can be used by both progressive and reactionary organizations. However, he uses the example of Pike to claim that Freemasonry was an “elitist” organization, primarily including “white males” (Urban 2001, 3). As such, Freemasonry is an example of the “aristocratic” type of secret society discussed by Simmel. This allows Urban to find in Freemasonry a confirmation of Simmel’s theory that “secrecy is best understood as a social form, a strategy aimed at the effect of ‘adornment’” (Urban 2001, 3).

To Urban,

it would seem that the secret symbols of Masonry are, in themselves, really not particularly shocking or remarkable; in fact, most of them would seem rather mundane... So why is it that they need to be surrounded with such an enormous amount of secrecy, occultism, and mystery? As I would argue, it is precisely all this secrecy and ritual ornament—this “adornment of silence”—which functions to *transform the otherwise fairly mundane and unremarkable body of Masonic teachings into a rare, scarce and highly valued commodity* (Urban 2001, 16, emphasis in original).

In itself, the Masonic secrets would be “unremarkable” and worthless. They become valuable to Freemasons only because they are secret, and Freemasons come to believe that they are part of an aristocracy that shares something non-Freemasons do not know.

It would seem that, except when the secret is used to disguise racism and white supremacism, as in the case of Pike, the secrecy of esoteric movements is not particularly dangerous. Members of these movements only invest resources to acquire “fairly mundane and unremarkable” knowledge, and are gullible enough to believe that they have joined a non-existing elite.

However, the situation changes when Urban analyses the secret within a group different from Freemasonry, the Church of Scientology. Urban is not exactly an admirer of Scientology, and often relies on anti-cult sources (see e.g. Urban 2011). In 2017, he published a chapter of the *Handbook of Scientology*, edited by James R. Lewis, on the question of secrecy in Scientology (Urban 2017). Here, the context was the possibility that “secretive religious groups (...) might be engaged in subversive, dangerous and/or illegal activities” (Urban 2017, 295), something more sinister than the simple alleged naivete of the Freemasons.

Scientology according to Urban is “secretive” both about details of the biography of his founder, L. Ron Hubbard (1911–1986), and about certain of its teachings and practices. Its more advanced stages of teachings, called OT (Operating Thetan) levels, are kept secret to those who are not admitted to take the corresponding courses. Urban states that, in a phase of its history, Scientology struggled to protect its secrets against the American and other governments. Today, he argues, we are in a second phase, where the threat to make public teachings that Scientology tries to keep secret more often comes from ex-members who post them on the web and from hackers such as Anonymous.

As I mentioned, unlike other academic scholars of new religious movements, Urban takes anti-cultists seriously. He quotes approvingly even Gerry Armstrong, one of the most rabid anti-Scientologists, to the effect that Scientology will eventually disappear because all its secrets will appear on the Internet. Urban writes that “the Internet may well prove to be ‘Scientology’s Waterloo’—that is, a battle of information that it cannot realistically win” (Urban 2017, 294).

With all due respect, it seems to me that this is a typical example of technological fallacy, i.e., the naïve persuasion that new technologies have the power to destroy deeply held human beliefs. Technological fallacies are not about Scientology only. Some have claimed that Christianity will be destroyed by the free discussion of its dogmas on the Internet. But the same was claimed for radio, television, and even before for the printing press, in which some atheists had put their hopes. Christianity, of course, is still there. In the case of groups with secrets, there are two aspects Urban seems to overlook. The first is that these groups are dynamic. While some of their confidential materials are being hacked and posted on the Internet, they would have already released to their members new materials that, at least for a certain period of time, will resist hacking, and so on ad infinitum.

The second problem is that those who read materials of groups such as Scientology illegally posted on the Internet by critics and hackers run the risk of encountering apocryphal texts. Sensational secrets allegedly from the OT levels of Scientology and from unpublished texts of Hubbard have been posted on the web, but there is no way of telling whether they are genuine or false. Indeed, Urban himself has been criticized for relying for his criticism of Scientology on texts posted by anti-cultists whose authenticity he cannot prove (Introvigne 2021).

I wonder how conclusions can be drawn from texts that may not be genuine. In his chapter on the secret in Scientology, Urban for example mentions that Scientology insists that materials allegedly part of the OT levels that appeared on the web “are a forgery.” Urban’s own opinion is that, “At present the authenticity of the OT documents [published by anti-cultists] remains unclear.” However, he starts the next sentence with the words “Regardless of their authenticity,” then proceeds to present hypotheses about Hubbard based on these documents (Urban 2017, 291). But, if the documents are false, any conclusion one may draw from them is irrelevant.

In general, Urban remains true to his interpretation of Simmel, which focuses on the secret as adornment. He writes that

the increasingly esoteric levels of Hubbard's OT or "advanced tech" clearly served as a kind of "adorning possession," in Simmel's sense—that is, a source of status, prestige and power that enhances one's character precisely by virtue of what it conceals (Urban 2017, 295).

From this point of view, the secret is a resource for Scientology, because Scientologists are ready to invest to get their "adorning possessions," even if in the critics' and Urban's opinion they are of no great value. But at the same time, Urban argues, the secret is a liability, because in a modern democratic society secrets are looked at with suspicion and unleash against Scientology powerful and even "dominant" social forces including the media, the Internet hackers, and some governments (Urban 2017, 295).

But Are Secrets as Bad as They Seem?

When Urban deals with Scientology (and with Freemasonry as well), he focuses on one of the functions of the secret Simmel mentioned, that of an "adornment" or status symbol. He does not consider the possibility that both in Freemasonry and in Scientology secrecy might also function as a protection against external hostile forces. As mentioned earlier, Simmel believed this function was at work both in movements that experience varying degrees of persecution, and in "young" movements, particularly religious, which are exposed to hostility more than old, consolidated religions. That this may be the case for Scientology is a possibility Urban does not consider.

However, the dichotomy "protection against hostility versus adornment" only exhausts the possible functions of the secret if one believes Simmel was right. What if Simmel was wrong? Simmel found content-oriented secrecy in movements offering "an esoteric doctrine, a theoretical, mystical, religious gnosis" (Simmel 1906, 477). This can apply to Scientology as well, which many have described as a modern form of gnosis (Melton 2000; Terrin 2017). Although Simmel did not totally rule out that some esoteric secrets might have a respectable content, he focused on the secret as an adornment whose role as a status symbol did not correspond to any real intrinsic value.

But why, exactly, should esoteric or gnostic secrets be worthless? After all, millions continue to seek forms of esoteric knowledge in an immense variety of spiritual schools. Some may be disappointed, but many remain there because they find their experiences positive and fulfilling. As both Wouter Hanegraaff and Jeffrey Kripal have demonstrated, there is no evidence that these practitioners of secret ways are simply deluded, unless one assumes as a starting point that gnostic and esoteric knowledge is worthless by definition—which is in itself a value judgement that should not belong to “objective” academic science (Hanegraaff 2012; Kripal 2017).

I would add that I do not base this criticism of “secretophobia” on theory only. I also rely on personal, practical experience. I have been interested in spirituality for many years. I have practiced different spiritual ways myself, and I have observed many who follow spiritual paths that involve certain secret teachings. Very few among those I have met have concluded that teachings they had obtained with great efforts were worthless, although some may have found that the path they had started to walk was not for them.

Why are certain teachings secret? I find the arguments of the “adornment” or status symbol strange, although I cannot exclude that it may apply to some spiritual organizations, which members may mostly attend to persuade themselves that they are very special. However, most spiritual groups I have observed are not like this. Arrogant individuals exist everywhere, including among those who disparage spirituality. However, most followers of spiritual schools and masters do not go around showing their “adornments” and telling everybody how special they are. If they have acquired some knowledge, they regard it as a gift to be humbly received and shared with others. Indeed, most spiritual teachings warn against the ego and the hybris of the mind.

Some teachings are not kept secret to allow those who learn them to become full of themselves and to believe they have finally joined some exclusive or “aristocratic” club. They are kept secret *because of their very nature*. A teacher of mathematics would not disclose to those who have just started studying it the most complicated equations. These equations are “secret”—they are published in books everybody can buy, but those without an appropriate preparation would read the books without understanding a word of them. Teachers do not keep the equations “secret” to protect their power or to nurture the arrogance of the students who would master them. Simply, they know that in order to grasp these

equations students need to be prepared. Putting the equations in front of the students before they are mature enough to understand them would only create confusion.

To use an even more simple example, parents normally do not teach 3-year-old children how to light a fire. Parents are not protecting their power. They just know that, if they would try to light a fire, small children will probably burn themselves—and perhaps the family home as well.

Confronted with deep teachings about the universe—and it does not matter whether we are ready to believe them or not—we are all children. Teachings are fire too, and we may easily be burned. A wise teacher would not disclose the fire to us and explain how to light it until we are ready.

In this sense, maintaining a secret is a way not so much of hiding a teaching but of not revealing it until a person is ready to understand. For those who adopt an esoteric point of view, there are different levels of understanding and the higher levels are not reached immediately. We read in three different Gospels (Mark 6:45–52; Matthew 14:22–33; John 6:16–21) that Jesus walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee. Everybody can understand the literal meaning of “walking on the water;” however, understanding the symbolic dimension of the story requires a training and a preparation. Jesus himself quoted the prophet Isaiah in Matthew 13 to explain that many “though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand.” But to those who “understand with their hearts,” Jesus says: “Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.” Here, again, Jesus is not referring to the physical eyes and the physical ears, but to a spiritual way of “seeing” and “hearing” “with the heart,” which goes beyond the mind and comes when the disciple is ready.

Just as there are abusive parents, who misuse their position to humiliate their children, there are also abusive spiritual teachers, who may misuse their knowledge to exert an abusive power or to foster the arrogance of a small clique of preferred pupils. But as the ancient Romans said, *abusus non tollit usum*, “abuse does not cancel use,” i.e., the misuse of something is no argument against its proper use. That some parents abuse their children does not prove that all parents are abusive.

The abuse of secret does not cancel its proper use. Secrecy is a necessary part of some, if not most, spiritual paths. And in this sense we may all agree with

Simmel that “secret is one of the greatest accomplishments of humanity” (Simmel 1906, 462).

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