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Title: "Religion and Secular Education: The Case of the German Democratic Republic"  
  
Published in: Religion and Educational Research: National Traditions and Transnational Perspectives.  
Münster / New York: Waxmann  
Year: 2019  
Pages: 121 – 134  
ISBN: 978-3-8309-3980-1

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# Religion in Secular Education: The Case of the German Democratic Republic

## 1. Introduction: secular education in the study of religions<sup>1</sup>

In the past decade, investigating textbooks and classrooms has become part of the research agenda in the study of religions (as examples: Alberts 2007; Berglund 2010; Frank 2010; Fischer 2011; Andreassen & Lewis 2014; Rota 2015; Štimac 2017). Most studies concentrate on religions and religious education while research on secular education is at an early stage. In recent years, there has also been a growing interest in this topic in other academic disciplines though (Halafoff, Arweck & Boisvert 2016; Lester 2011; Aslan & Rausch 2013). A key problem of this research is the conceptual and terminological unclearness of *secular education*, which has been defined and understood in different ways (see Arthur 2017; Alberts 2008c, p. 1). While different approaches of teaching religion have already been systematised (e.g. Alberts 2008a; Byrne 2014, esp. pp. 16–19), a classification of possible approaches to secular education is still lacking. Further systematisation would help outline the research potential of this promising new research area for the study of religions. Three domains of secular education could be identified so far: religions education; alternative school subjects to religion; and education toward secularism.

(1) Religions education (*Religionskunde*)<sup>2</sup> is based on a secular or integrative approach to the subject. Religions education is secular first and foremost in its mode of instruction, which, as both non-confessional and non-religious,

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1 I use the term *study of religions* as a disciplinary name analogous to the German *Religionswissenschaft*, which differs fundamentally from religious studies. The latter sometimes denotes an area of research that involves several academic disciplines. To prevent confusion, some scholars in the study of religions tend to avoid the potentially ambiguous *religious studies*, using the term *science of religion* instead, a nineteenth-century disciplinary label first created by the German philologist Friedrich Max Müller.

2 There are different terms to label the non-confessional and non-religious approach to this school subject, e.g. education about religion; religions and religious diversity (Alberts 2008b, p. 121); and religions education, abbreviated as RE (Byrne 2014, p. 17). Religions education or religions courses may be closest to the German *Religionskunde*.

is principally open to all pupils; the development of curricula is independent of religious institutions. In this sense, secular instruction in religions can be considered *neutral*.<sup>3</sup> Such classes have also been linked to the teaching-about approach (e.g. Furer 2012), which is to be distinguished from a teaching-in approach (on the conceptual problems of the teaching-about approach: Frank & Bleisch 2015, p. 189). Even though Ninian Smart's book *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (1968) can be considered an early examination of the teaching-about approach, only over the last decade has research on it increased. Some countries have played a pioneering role, as is the case with Switzerland, where the bilingual online academic journal *Zeitschrift für Religionskunde/Revue de didactique des sciences des religions* (ZFRK-RDSR) was founded in 2015. The breadth of this journal, which encompasses historical, pedagogical, and teaching-related questions, illustrates that non-denominational religions courses (*Religionskunde*) are both a subject area and an area of application for the study of religions (Alberts 2012, p. 299).

- (2) A second approach to secular education may focus on school subjects that are conceptualised as alternatives to the subject of religion, sometimes also unfortunately denoted as 'surrogates'. These subjects were originally developed to provide secular moral and values education for non-religious pupils, which is why some of them lack the word *religion* in their titles, while others include it in one form or another. The content of the lessons reflects this spectrum to some extent. Besides historical knowledge about religions, subjects may include, for instance, philosophical and societal reflections.<sup>4</sup> The term *alternative* may also encompass subjects that are not

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3 To avoid misunderstandings concerning the term *neutrality*, it may be worth saying that, as a conceptual stance, neutrality is not epistemologically naïve: it does not question the problem of individual or collective biases, nor does it claim that a 'value-free' education and pedagogy are possible. The neutrality concept simply conceptualises religion as a school subject that does not aim at teaching pupils to 'actively participate in religion' (Bleisch & Frank 2013, p. 201) but to learn about different religions instead (Alberts 2008a, p. 303). Of course, learning about different religions and worldviews has long been part of confessional religious education too. One crucial difference may be, however, that confessional teachers have 'only little or no academic knowledge about other religions than their own' (Alberts 2008a, p. 305). Furthermore, religious stances, attitudes, and positions are 'the object[s]' of the lessons, but they 'cannot provide the framework for the representation of any religion' (Alberts 2008a, p. 314).

4 Philosophy has its own tradition of being taught in schools in several European countries (Pfister 2014, pp. 132–135). Other subjects may cover ethics and questions of everyday life, such as the German courses *Werte und Normen* (values

or not only descriptive, in particular ones that contain aspects of advice and counselling. Some are even more involved in worldview discourse, as is the case with *Humanistische Lebenskunde* (humanist life studies), which is an optional subject developed by the Humanist Association of Germany and is offered at schools in Berlin and Brandenburg. Intended as an explicitly secular alternative to religious education, *Humanistische Lebenskunde* turns away from the teaching-about approach in favour of political and ideological concerns (see for instance White 2015) and thus firmly positions itself as a worldview alternative to religion and religious education. Altogether, research on this domain is even less common than research on religious education.<sup>5</sup>

- (3) I consider school subjects that are closely related to the formation of the secular modern nation, such as civic education, to be a third domain. Unlike *Humanistische Lebenskunde*, which was a private attempt by a particular group, civics is a mandatory part of many states' official curriculum and is therefore taught nationwide. Religious education shaped the historical discourses that gave rise to civics courses, but acquiring knowledge about religions is not necessarily a key part of the lessons. There are various models of civics corresponding to different understandings of politics and secularity. Examples include the late nineteenth-century *L'instruction morale et civique* (moral and civic instruction), installed to replace religious education in France, and the twentieth-century *Staatsbürgerkunde* (civics) in the German Democratic Republic. Besides addressing aspects of political education, the latter was explicitly conceptualized as instruction in the socialist worldview. As different as the historical backgrounds and main principles (laïcité and socialism) of both subjects are,<sup>6</sup> they share a

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and norms; taught in Lower Saxony), *Lebensgestaltung – Ethik – Religionskunde* (lifestyle – ethics – religions education; taught in Brandenburg), and *Ethik* (ethics; taught as a compulsory subject in Berlin), or the Swiss *Natur, Mensch, Gesellschaft* (nature, humans, society; abbreviated as NMG), which includes a large unit entitled *Ethik, Religionen, Gemeinschaft* (ethics, religions, community).

- 5 In the study of religions, Christina Wöstemeyer (University of Hannover, Germany) is one of the few scholars who have worked on this subject. Her PhD thesis is on three alternative school subjects in Germany: 'values and norms', 'lifestyle – ethics – religions education' (LER), and non-denominational 'biblical history', which has a long tradition at public schools in the German city of Bremen.
- 6 *L'instruction morale et civique* was the result of the concept of a 'l'école laïque' established by Jules Ferry in late nineteenth-century France (see also Stock-Morton, 1988; Baubérot, 1997; Ognier 2008). *Staatsbürgerkunde* (civics) was part of the real socialist curriculum in the twentieth-century German Democratic Republic and was considered the core subject of socialist education in schools. According

strong emphasis on secularism, meaning a critical attitude toward religion that ranged from anti-clerical to anti-religious stances. Aiming at the formation of an ideal secular citizen, the instruction in or toward secularism is actively involved in worldview discourse. These school subjects have been addressed in several academic disciplines so far. But research on public education toward secularism is relatively new as a topic in the study of religions (ZFRK-RDSR 2016; Kirsch 2016).

Sketching these three domains is a first attempt at differentiating and systematizing possible approaches to secular education as a research topic in the study of religions. It must be noted, though, that religion and religions are of different importance in each of these approaches. Further problems concern the lack of conceptual and terminological clarity with the terms *secular* and *alternative*. *Secular* could either refer to the mode of teaching or to the contents of the lessons; *alternative* may suggest comparisons between religious and secular education, which, then, need to be qualified in more detail. As an umbrella term, *alternative* also does not further differentiate between philosophy and ideologically engaged school subjects, such as *Humanistische Lebenskunde*. Due to this terminological vagueness, I suggest using *alternative* as a heuristic term, which would have to be clarified in a more elaborated model that differentiates between textbook research, pedagogy, and classroom research.

In the following, I will deal with the third domain by providing a historical case of religion in secular education in the German Democratic Republic, the former socialist part of Germany. The aim of this article is to illustrate how secular education was conceptualized and implemented in a socialist state. By asking how the political elite thought this education would be successful, I focus on the pedagogic strategies of this education as well as on the implementation of the worldview in civics textbooks. Officially regarded as the key subject of ideological education, civics played a decisive role in East German political discourse.

I will start with the institutional und ideological conditions of the GDR's worldview education. After briefly explaining the historical framework, the theoretical and philosophical foundation of the socialist worldview, and the key premises of its didactics, I will turn to practice. The analysis will focus on how the worldview was implemented in civics textbooks with a specific emphasis on the role of religion.

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to the different discursive frameworks, both models of political education have a specific approach to secularity and religion.

## 2. The GDR's worldview education: Institutional and theoretical conditions

In contrast to West Germany, where both churches became an important player in education after the end of the Second World War, the educational system of the German Democratic Republic lacked any influence of a church. Like all other domains of society, education was centralized and, as such, under the full control of the state, meaning the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (abbreviated as SED). The leader of the respective Ministry of National Education was Margot Honecker, the wife of Erich Honecker, who was the head of state from 1971 to 1989. Centralization also affected the production and distribution of school materials, the content of lessons, and school exams. Every lesson was based on the mandatory school textbooks used nationwide, produced by the Berlin publishing houses Dietz and Volk und Wissen. The latter was also responsible for printing the valid curriculum and the didactic instructions for teachers. The polytechnic secondary school (abbreviated as POS) was the ten-class standard school and the central institution for imparting socialism and its worldview. The subject of civics, taught from grades seven to twelve (ages thirteen to eighteen), was crucial to educating socialist citizens, and civics textbooks were officially declared the most important instruments of the socialist worldview and ethics (Kirsch 2016, pp. 75–78).

This worldview, officially called the scientific worldview of Marxism-Leninism, consisted of three elements: (1) the historical, philosophical, and epistemological foundation of dialectical and historical materialism; (2) political economy, which included the teaching that labour and production were dependent on socio-economic conditions; and (3) scientific communism, which encompassed the doctrine of class struggle and the working class revolution as well as the development of socialism or communism. Implemented as the mandatory doctrine in 1938 by Josef Stalin, Marxism-Leninism later became the theoretical and ideological foundation of most socialist countries. Its claim to being scientific was, in a nutshell, based on a specific interpretation of the history of philosophy according to which *scientific* became synonymous with *materialist*: unlike capitalism, which was epistemologically grounded in philosophical and 'unscientific' idealism, socialism and communism were based on the materialist worldview of Marxism-Leninism. This worldview left no epistemological room whatsoever for religion and religions, which were only considered as false worldviews.

The GDR's worldview education aimed at forming socialist identities, who, according to the 1965 education act, would not only think and act but even feel 'in a socialist manner' (Deutsche Demokratische Republik 1965). Civics was considered *the* key school subject of socialist education. The main concern of

the experts was, thus, the question of how civics lessons could most effectively attract pupils to socialism. Debate on this question resulted in the ‘formation of the socialist conviction’ (Baumann, Kompaß, Kühn & Vier 1971), a pedagogical concept that became mandatory and referred to controlling children’s and young people’s attitudes. As the question of the greatest possible efficacy of civics lessons was transformed into a systematic method, the objective of the lessons changed from conveying knowledge toward controlling pupils’ actions and thoughts. Proceeding from the idea that successfully forming the socialist conviction would be predictable in every detail, worldview didactics aimed at pupils’ emotional commitment to socialism.

In its entirety, civics lessons were designed as a ‘step-by-step development of the same [socialist] conviction’ (Baumann et al. 1971, p. 16). While the contents of the seventh and eighth grades roughly covered historical and institutional aspects of the socialist state, the ninth and tenth grades were dedicated to introducing Marxist theory. The socialist worldview and ethics were an inherent part of the tenth-grade textbook. A detailed and quite challenging analysis of the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the Marxist-Leninist worldview was the topic of the last two years in eleventh and twelfth grades. Religion was an important aspect of this analysis.

### **3. Religion in civics textbooks 1963–1989**

The development of civics as a regular school subject has a long tradition in Germany. This history is interwoven with the nineteenth-century discourse on the separation of church and state and, as a consequence, with attempts to establish secular ethics and moral education in the German Empire. After the end of the Second World War, debates on political and moral (re-)education drew on this tradition, but as a compulsory school subject, civics was not implemented in the GDR’s school system until 1957. Systematic textbooks were first produced in 1963 (Kirsch 2016, p. 56–72).

Religion played a well-defined role in the three-cycle design of civics. Clearly situated in Marxist theory and the history of philosophy, it was, first and foremost, referred to in textbooks for the eleventh and twelfth grades. The textbooks for the years seven to ten, by contrast, contain little information on religion. Most of the references address the relationship between church and state, emphasizing, for example, the sympathy of Christian citizens for the socialist state: ‘The vast majority of devout Christians are faithful to the Workers’ and Peasants’ State’ (Hellborn, Karras, Mittenzwei, Nussbaum & Thomas 1965, p. 210). Christian scenes are sometimes the subject of illustrations in the textbooks; for instance there is a picture showing nuns standing next to a

voting box or a painting interpreting Jesus as a proletarian (see Berndt, Mollnau, Schoop, Udke & Wippold 1969, p. 14; Döbler et al. 1983, p. 5), but these pictures were often soon removed. Altogether, the references to religion seem rather rare, but this makes them all the more important. They were officially approved and therefore shaped what was learnt and adopted about religion. It is, however, striking that the word *religion* was not part of this reception. The semantic field of religion was defined with *superstition* instead. The most notable example is the tenth-grade textbook.

The final chapter, entitled 'Marxism-Leninism: The Worldview According to Which We Live and Act', of the textbook's 1984 edition suddenly addresses the topic of superstition. Superstition serves as a generic concept for characterizing capitalism's unscientific nature in contrast to socialism's scientific nature. The passage reads as follows:

Up to now, a great variety of idealistic ideas have prevailed. Still today, capitalist countries impart a distorted, false, and unscientific image of the world to their peoples. According to recent surveys, a large number of people in the Federal Republic of Germany believe that the stars have a more or less determining influence on their destiny; about 45 percent of adults have horoscopes cast for them. Around one million citizens of the FRG still believe that witches are causing trouble, and thousands of witch exorcists make money off this belief. In the USA and Western Europe, there are three times more astrologers than physicists or chemists. In the FRG, twenty million people would rather entrust themselves to a faith healer than to modern medicine when in pain. It has been estimated that in 1980, in France alone, there were approximately 500,000 clairvoyants foretelling peoples' futures for money out of coffee grounds, crystal balls, or candle flames. (Grundmann et al. 1984, p. 170)

The examples come from modern esotericism, while religion and religions as well as Christianity and the churches are not mentioned. References to methods of empirical research such as surveys and statistics aim at making the GDR's claim to scientificity plausible, but the textbook does not give any further information on where the numbers referring to West Germany, the US, and France are from. The hint at the clairvoyants' payments is meant to expose their practices as a mere fraud. A question in the margin supports this verdict, asking: 'How would you explain the rise in superstition in a time when space stations circle the earth, and science, technology, and medicine have reached a high level?' (Grundmann et al. 1984, p. 170). With this leading question, all the practices mentioned are subsumed under the term *superstition*.

From the perspective of Marxism-Leninism, the identification of any kind of religion as a superstition was coherent because Marxist-Leninist philosophy did not differentiate between 'high' and 'vulgar' forms of religion. Religion is

superstition and superstition is religion was the dictum, entrenched in the official work of reference for Marxist-Leninist theory, philosophy, and epistemology, the *Philosophisches Wörterbuch* (philosophical dictionary): ‘In *Marxist-Leninist philosophy*, superstition is mainly used synonymously with religion (as belief in the supernatural in opposition to scientific knowledge)’ (see Schuffenhauer 1971, p. 36). The dictionary’s firm definitions were considered mandatory and binding. The textbooks consequently presented ‘superstitious’ practices like reading coffee grounds, esoteric practices, and religious institutions like the church or religion in itself as various manifestations of one and the same thing: as expressions of an idealist image of the world, fundamentally opposed to the materialist world view. While *superstition* was important in defining capitalism and socialism as entirely different political systems in the lower grades, in the years eleven and twelve, *religion* became an element for theoretically, philosophically, and epistemologically establishing this demarcation.

The contrast between the philosophical streams of materialism and idealism and their resulting worldviews – Marxism-Leninism and religion, respectively – dominates eleventh- and twelfth-grade textbooks. This philosophical and, more importantly, epistemological polarity is crucial to the socialist understanding of religion as it was presented in teaching materials.

The starting point of the competing worldviews is the question of the origin of the planet earth. Referred to as the ‘fundamental question of any philosophy whatsoever’ (Grundfrage der Philosophie), Marxism-Leninism is naturalistic because it assumes that the world is completely material and, with reference to Friedrich Engels, that matter is exclusively self-moving: ‘Motion is the mode of existence of matter’ (see Engels, [1887/88] 1975, p. 55). With the doctrine of autonomous matter, the idea of an external impulse for the origin of the planet becomes obsolete (see also Engels, [1887/88] 1975, pp. 57, 66–67). Only the unscientific and outdated philosophy of idealism would believe in this idea, which consequently results in the ‘religious myth of the “creation of the world”’ (Schachnasarow et al. 1963, p. 30).

The Marxist understanding of matter and the premise of the materiality of the world became the basic principles of the Marxist-Leninist worldview. It claimed to be scientific by taking recourse to the laws of physics, which functioned as evidence for the exactness of philosophical materialism and as proof for the veracity and truthfulness of its worldview.

According to Marxist-Leninist epistemology, idealist worldviews such as religion were, in turn, unscientific, epistemologically outdated, and socially obsolete. Empirical religion was therefore only referred to as a historical phenomenon.

In the textbooks' approaches to the history of religions, *religion* indicates, first and foremost, a pre-scientific understanding of the world that was typical for humans living in ancient times:

'In antiquity, people knew nothing about the nature of electricity. A thunderstorm would frighten them and appear to them as an act of the angry gods. It is no coincidence that in Greek mythology, Zeus was depicted as the god of thunder, hurling thunderbolts at his enemies. In the nineteenth century, science discovered the fundamental laws of electricity and explained these phenomena theoretically.' (Schachnasarow et al. 1963, p. 37)

In this classic intellectualistic and evolutionistic theory of religion, humans created deities to make sense of natural phenomena. Religions represent a (misguided) cognitive function but have no social function at all. To the contrary, they are explained using the Marxist model of base and superstructure. According to this model, religions express, first, a false and un- or pre-scientific consciousness that was, second, based on the economic structure of society or humans' social *existence*. Religion is an instrument in the class struggle, used by the ruling elite to oppress the working class. Consequently, the history of religions is a history of oppression.

How, then, is it possible that religious phenomena still exist in real socialism, which, according to the theory, lacks the breeding grounds for any kind of idealist worldviews? The textbooks always give the same explanation: they are 'ancient remains' and 'remnants of the past'. With reference to Karl Marx ([1875] 1973, p. 19), an early edition of a textbook characterizes religions as "'birthmarks" of old [capitalist society]', which, having become a mere habit and tradition, 'still cling in a way to the new [socialist] world'. They infect one person after another to 'take hold in the new society' (Schachnasarow et al. 1963, p. 325). The description of socialist society as an organism invokes language common to nineteenth-century political literature (Meyer 2007, p. 104). With the medical diction, the triumph over religion could be interpreted as the recovery of the socialist collective.

The passage features another peculiarity that was characteristic of East German education and the GDR's culture of remembrance in general: the socialist topos of authority. This topos was based on quotes from the Marxist 'classics' by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir I. Lenin, which were used to prove conclusively that any content was correct; at the same time, these quotes served as evidence for the validity of the classics' analyses. Quotes from the Marxist classics hence needed no further comment or historical contextualization. The opposite was true. The reference structure claimed to be conclusive *just because* the quote was not contextualized further. The message was pretty clear: the classics represent the truth, and this truth is timeless. Religion was

no exception in this overall structure of reference, so Marx, Engels, and Lenin were constantly called in as experts on the topic.

The description of religion was largely based on its interpretation as a pre-scientific understanding of the world, a merely historical phenomenon that was used as an instrument of oppression in class struggle and would ultimately be overcome by the new society, which, as the 'classics' had proven, would inevitably arrive. This pattern of argument was constantly repeated throughout all editions of the textbooks for the eleventh and twelfth grades. In sum, the textbooks were shaped by repetition, which formed an important part of their pedagogical concept. This included the repetitive critique of religion, but the style in which this critique was conveyed is remarkable. It was based on an intertextual structure (Gérard Genette) that used literature, fictional stories, anecdotes, and newspaper articles to disprove religion. The 1980s editions of the textbooks even included irony and satire as stylistic devices (e.g. Hahn, Kosing & Rupprecht 1983, p. 39). The combination of non-fictional and fictional sections was unique among the entire corpus of GDR textbooks. It reveals the narrative quality of instruction in the socialist worldview, which, according to the guideline of the 1965 education act, included disciplining pupils' feelings. The use of fictional texts became a main instrument in the GDR's education toward secularism. This education did not, however, primarily aim at disproving religion as a deceptive, oppressive, and false worldview but at imparting the true Marxist-Leninist worldview, which pupils were not just supposed to learn about, but, above all, to internalize.

#### **4. Conclusion: Secular education from a transnational perspective**

Teaching the socialist worldview can be considered a specific historical case of secular education. Developed as an encompassing approach to history, philosophy, epistemology, society, ethics, and peoples' personal lives, the comprehensive Marxist-Leninist worldview aimed at forming ideal socialist citizens. With an explicit ideological stance toward idealist worldviews such as religion, this education was far from being neutral. The commitment to socialism and harsh criticism of capitalism and 'imperialist' countries, first and foremost the United States and West Germany, was a defined goal of the GDR's ideological education (Kirsch 2016, pp. 145–146). With its theoretical and conceptual foundation, Marxism-Leninism was indeed conceptualized as a *worldview alternative* to religion. This does not mean, however, that religion was a dominant topic in worldview education. The opposite is true: merely negating capitalism, idealism, or religion was not sufficient to make Marxism-Leninism plausible and

adaptable to citizens' daily concerns. Instead of arguing and fighting against religion, the overall political objective was far more fundamental; it aimed at establishing socialism and its worldview as positive values. The socialist citizen was self-evidently conceptualized as secular to such an extent that the thesis of secularism did not even make it into the *Philosophisches Wörterbuch*, the dictionary of Marxist-Leninist theory and epistemology. This indicates that a debate on 'secularization' did not take place in the GDR's real socialism. 'Secularisation' was not a key concept of the academic debate because the change of the religious landscape was not a topic of broad interest as was the case in West Germany and other western countries. This does not mean that social change was outside the scope of academic discussion, but that religion was just not the focal point through which this change was observed, analysed, and discussed.

These findings provide an interesting basis for further comparative analysis of the discourse of secularisation and of models of secular education in other socialist countries, such as the Soviet Union, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. In the GDR, the school-subject civics and the style of its textbooks were borrowed from the Soviet Union. The first systematic textbook (Schachnasarow et al. 1963) was a translation of the Russian textbook *Обществоведение*. Even though the book was soon replaced by an East German version, the Soviet textbook established the narrative framework of the socialist worldview education in the GDR. It provided the essential stylistic devices that were adopted in all the following editions of textbooks in all grades. It would be interesting to see if this history of reception was unique, due to the strong relation between the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic, which resulted from post-war occupation, or if we can identify a transnational socialist narrative culture. If this is the case, these processes of reception and transfer would reveal a distinct culture of secular education in central Europe and the Soviet Union, which, as part of the history of European culture and religions, would definitely be worth further comparative analysis.

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the Georg Eckert Institute for International Textbook Research for funding the copy editing of this article.

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