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Taylor & Raschke - About About Religion - JCRT 2.2
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Mark C. Taylor is widely known for his reworking of the theological enterprise in terms of the philosophy of Jacques Derrida and the movement within the humanities that came to be known as "deconstruction". Taylor himself has denoted this approach as "a/theology." In recent years he has turned his attention to the subjects of religion and "religious studies," which he argues can only be compassed in an interdisciplinary, or non-disciplinary, manner. The following conversation between Taylor and Carl A. Raschke, senior editor of the Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory_, engages in a free-wheeling style the sorts of themes and issues which Taylor has brought to the forefront. It takes as a point of departure Taylor's recent book entitled_ About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture (University of Chicago Press, 1999). There's something "about" religion? What is that all about? The conversation probes that question.

3. **RASCHKE:** One of the most provocative statements you make in *About Religion* is the following: "While I no longer believe in God, I can no longer avoid believing in the sacred." You also talk about the sacred as the "denegation of God" and vice-versa. And in a little further on you characterize the sacred as "that which allows God to be God by enabling God to be other than everything that is not God."
4. Can you explicate these statements more fully as well as discussing the (semiotic) relationship between the "a" of "a/theology" and the "about" of *About Religion*?
5. **TAYLOR:** Whether conceived theistically or non-theistically, God in the western theology has been inextricably bound up with the metaphysics of being. For many years, I have been convinced that this tradition is no longer viable. Nor do I think that the simple rejection of this tradition is possible. Somewhere Kierkegaard says: "to do the opposite is also a form of imitation." The effort to negate the metaphysics of being - and all that goes with it - remains caught within it. This is why atheism has never been a serious alternative for me. Absence is merely one of the guises through which God's presence continues to haunt us.
6. In the passage you cite, I was attempting to use the term 'sacred' to suggest that which is neither being nor non-being. The sacred is not God and is *not* not God. This *not/not* not is/does not involve a dialectical negation that turns negativity into positivity. That is why I appropriate the Freudian term 'denegation' for theological or, more precisely, a/theological purposes. In contrast to dialectics, which negates negation, denegation neither simply negates nor affirms negation. While the logic of dialectics is *both/and*, the logic of denegation is *neither/nor*. If understood in this way, the sacred is, in a certain sense, the condition of the possibility and impossibility of both being and non-being. If the sacred were a ground, which it is not, it might be understood as the ground of the ground of being, which otherwise is "known" as God.
7. There is, as you suggest, a relationship between the 'a/' of a/theology and the 'about' of *About Religion*. When I wrote *Erring*, I was trying to articulate a domain between theology

and atheism. What I was attempting to write was not theology and *not not* theology. By so doing, I was striving to establish a position that differs from the death of God theology as it appears in Altizer's work. Though I have learned a great deal from Tom, I have always been convinced that his "Christian atheism" remains a radical version of the metaphysics of being. His atheism, therefore, is still too theological. A/theology is neither theological nor non-theological. This *neither/nor*, which falls between Hegel's *both/and* and Kierkegaard's *either/or*, can never be expressed, articulated, or represented directly. We can, therefore, only think, speak, and write *about* it. That is why I insist in *About Religion* that religion is about a certain *about*.

8. **RASCHKE:** It has always seemed to me that your articulation of a/theology amounts to a strategy of "overcoming" metaphysics, or ontotheology, or simply "theology" for that matter, in a manner that is neither Heideggerian nor Derridean - the two most prominent philosophical gambits of the twentieth century (I, of course, recognize your debt to Derrida.). At the same time, you don't employ the semi-sophistical and crypto-theological sort of mystical sacramentalism that we find in movement of radical orthodoxy, which argues that the sign of the Eucharist itself is the true *Überwindung* of the metaphysical insofar as concretizes the transcendence of language.
9. At the same time, you have been accused of serving up a subtle sort of "pomo" mysticism. You have been called a latter day hermeticist (I am thinking of the eye in the triangle of *Altarity*) as well as a "negative theologian," which is nevertheless still a theologian. I am reminded here of your remarks on "paralectics" as opposed to dialectics. How do you argue against the charge that *neither/nor* is mysticism a la "negative theology"? The Sanskrit formula *neti neti* ("not this, not that"), which "denegates" the attributes of Brahman, would seem to be remarkably close to the *neither/nor* of paralectics.
10. **TAYLOR:** It is important to recall the context in which the notion of a/theology first appeared. I had been working on Hegel and Kierkegaard for a decade. (Indeed, I've never stopped working on them.) I had recently finished *Journeys to Selfhood: Hegel and Kierkegaard*, which attempts to find a middle way between Hegel and Kierkegaard. My fascination with these two thinkers is not only a matter of historical interest. Just as Plato and Aristotle represent two alternative philosophical positions, so Hegel and Kierkegaard represent two alternative theological positions. The history of 19th and 20th century theology can be read as an oscillation - alternation - between Hegel and Kierkegaard.
11. From the outset, it was clear to me that Derrida was somewhere between Hegel and Kierkegaard. Moreover, it was obvious to me that Derrida was engaged in a form of theology. At the time, the association of deconstruction with theology and religion provoked a critical response from all sides. Obviously, that situation has changed significantly. Now it seems all Derrida and his followers can talk about is religion. Though Derrida has always insisted that what he is doing is not negative theology, many have revived negative theology under a Derridean banner.
12. My problem with most versions of negative theology is, as you suggest, that it remains ontotheological. Rather than eluding the metaphysics of being, God is being as such - or pure nothingness, which is the mirror image of being and, thus, imitation by reversal. I would, therefore, insist that the *neither/nor* is not to be understood in terms of negative theology. What is required is to think in terms of *interstitiality* rather than oppositionality. The problem is that language is structured, as the structuralists have taught us, in terms of binary oppositions.

Hence it is impossible to articulate that what we are attempting to think ABOUT directly. Our discourse must be, in Kierkegaard's terms but with a different twist, indirect.

13. This indirection entails an effort to make language slip and slide. The alternative is not speech or silence; rather, the struggle is to say the unsayable by making language fail. I have often thought that the *neither/nor* is, in fact, very close to the *not this*. Indeed, I have on occasion suggested certain similarities between a/theology and Nagarjuna's co-dependent origination. Finally, one can think of the *neither/nor* in terms of the problem of relation. Rather than terms related, *neither/nor* is relation "as such."
14. **RASCHKE:** I like the expression "interstitiality," as it captures what I think you have been up to for quite some time. If we can return to the original question, how then would your understanding of the "sacred" be an instantiation of the "interstitial," so far as the question of religion is concerned? And can you say some more about "about" in this connection?
15. **TAYLOR:** The site or, more precisely, the *para-site* of the sacred is the interstitial. I would not use the term 'instantiation' in this context because it suggests too much stability or fixity. Rather, the interstitial is the domain of alternation (one of the nuances of altarity) where the sacred oscillates in an approaching withdrawal and withdrawing approach. The interstitial is neither here nor there; it is not present and yet not absent. And, as you suggest, this is what the *about* that religion is about implies - no more than implies because, of course, it can never be specified, determined, articulated, or fixed.
16. **RASCHKE:** I am wondering if you could draw some kind of (dis-)connection here between what you are saying about the sacred and Heidegger's characterization of Being and language. Could you go along with Heidegger and say something like "the sacred sacreds"?
17. **TAYLOR:** There is a relationship between what I'm thinking 'about' through the 'sacred' and Heidegger's thinking 'about' thinking. For Heidegger, the task of thinking at the end of philosophy is to think what philosophy leaves unthought. This unthought is characterized in many ways in Heidegger's work. In *Altarity*, I develop an analysis of the holy in Heidegger, which can be directly related to the notion of the sacred in *About Religion*. I do not want to suggest that they are precisely the same but there is a notable family resemblance. As Derrida has demonstrated, Heidegger both thinks that which the ontotheological tradition leaves unthought and yet remains devoted to ontotheology in a problematic way.
18. While I can accept the former part of his work, I reject the latter. Heidegger's neologisms become counter-productive so I would not claim something like "the sacred sacreds." Rather, I would say that the sacred approaches by withdrawing and withdraws by approaching. In developing these ideas, I draw on a wide range of sources: Derrida's difference, Blanchot's neuter and/or disaster, Kierkegaard's infinite qualitative difference, Lacan's real. The different chapters of *Altarity* between the beginning (Hegel) and end (Kierkegaard) are explorations of different variations on this 'theme.'
19. **RASCHKE:** The "sacred," of course, is the operative and instrumental category for what historically has been constituted as the "study of religion." The connotation of the technical term has oscillated in various directions, beginning with Durkheim's understanding of collective representation and reaching a kind of crescendo in Eliade's hermeneutic, which increasingly has been rejected by serious scholars of religion. Can you envision yourself, or one of your admirers, doing something akin to what Eliade did, i.e., forging a rhetoric of religious studies

that banks on the language of post-structural linguistics? Or is such a feat impossible? Do you think you can meld together Derrida, Blanchot Kierkegaard, Lacan, etc. into a discourse of “sacrality” that could be deployed toward the data of religion after the fashion of the “classical theorists”?

20. **TAYLOR:** First, a few words about terminology. In your question, you use the words ‘instrumental’ and ‘technical.’ The sacred, I would argue, eludes instrumentality and the technical. It is, as Bataille has show, non-utilitarian. This is an important point and should be stressed. The notion of non-instrumentality and non-utilitarianism operative in the sacred can be traced to Kant’s analysis of inner teleology in the Third Critique. That work is absolutely critical for everything that follows. One way to think about the reading of the sacred that I’m suggesting is as an appropriation and adaptation of Kant’s notion of art. This is one of the points at which my interest in religion and art intersect.
21. Now for your question “proper.” Yes, I do think it is possible to use the notion of the sacred as I am describing it to weave together Kierkegaard, Blanchot, Derrida, Lacan, de Certeau, Kristeva, and others to form something like a theory of religion. This reading of the sacred would differ in significant ways from the suggestions of Durkheim and Eliade. It is important to note that all the figures I’ve mentioned are deeply interested in religion. While for many years, most of them did not highlight this aspect of their work, in recent years they have given it much more prominence. I should also stress that for me, *the theory of religion must become a theory of culture*. There is, I believe, a religious dimension to all of culture. The task of theory is to tease out that dimension in different places where it is hiding.
22. **RASCHKE:** I wasn’t suggesting that the terms “instrumental” and “technical” are in any way predicative of the sacred, only that they are key to what might be considered the theoretical strategies of the profession. But, of course, the sacred eludes such strategies, or that is what I believe you are proposing. If that is the case, then perhaps what we talk about when we talk “about” religion, or speak of “the study of religion,” is not subject to theoretical intervention in the way we might anticipate. I guess my question, therefore, would be as follows: can the “sacred” be considered a site for the development of a postmodern “theory” of religion? If so, what are we really speaking “about”? What would be meant by “theory,” if anything?
23. **TAYLOR:** It seems that this question turns on the precise meaning of ‘theory.’ Needless to say, this has been a hotly contested issue in a variety of fields and disciplines in recent years. While many insist that so-called post-structuralism leads to an anti-theory position, I do not think that is necessarily the case. If theory requires the delineation and thematization of an object of investigation in a way that stabilizes it, then, of course, the sacred cannot be theorized. It is, however, possible to understand the sacred as precisely that which eludes theorization when theory is understood in terms of stabilization. In this sense, the sacred calls into question every theory about it. I would insist that this is not an anti-theoretical position. To the contrary, what I am suggesting is that in order to think theory in relation to the sacred, and, hence, to develop a theory of religion, it is necessary, in Derrida’s terms, to use “theory” under erasure. This is a paleonomic gesture that simultaneously erases and preserves the notion of theory
24. **RASCHKE:** If we understand in such a manner a “theory” of the sacred” - which also in a paleonomic sense may be considered theorizing “about” religion -then we are confronted, it seems to me, with the recurring question of the relationship between thinking “about” religion and “religious thinking” itself. You say that “the sacred calls into question every theory about it.” That would suggest the sacred “calls” in much the same manner as Being

calls in the Heideggerian idiom. Does thinking respond to the call, and if it does, are we not within the venue of the “theological,” or perhaps the para-theological? Or the a/theological, rightly understood? In way manner, if at all, can a/theology be considered a “theory” at this level?

25. **TAYLOR:** While there are lines of association to be drawn to what I’ve been writing ‘about’ for many years, Heidegger is not a major influence on my thinking. I don’t think it’s profitable to push the connections too far - at least I do not want to do that, though others might take up that task. I simply am not sure what to make of invoking the “call of Being”. As for the relation between thinking “‘about’ religion” and “religious thinking itself,” I have several comments.
26. First, ‘religious thinking’ is never exactly itself but is always also other than itself. Second, religious thinking is always a thinking “‘about’”. I would not draw a sharp distinction between religious thinking and theorizing religion. Somewhere I have argued that there is a “theological” dimension to all of theory, which usually goes undetected because it is unrecognized by those engaging in it. The deployment of theory that I am proposing would, as you suggest, be more in keeping with a/theology. Just as a/theology is neither theological nor a/theological, so theory in this context is neither theory *sensu strictissimo* nor anti-theoretical. Perhaps we should supplement a/theology with a/theory.
27. **RASCHKE:** Can you say more about the “‘theological’ dimension to all theory”? How is that the case? And what would it look like to “supplement a/theology with a/theory”?
28. **TAYLOR:** Theory seeks a comprehensive understanding or interpretation of diverse phenomena. In philosophical terms, theory tries to unify multiplicity or establish identity in the midst of differences. As you know, some “theorists” argue that there is no such thing as religion. The point is not merely that there are only religions and not religion as such; rather, the claim is that the category “religion” is a social construct devised for very specific and, in some cases, political purposes. While I would not necessarily disagree with this claim, the point I would stress in this context is that the unifying gaze of theory is a vestige of theological vision.
29. But there is another point that is not precisely theological. The study of religion, as we know it today, began to emerge in the 1960s. Indeed, departments of religion, or religious studies, only began to differentiated themselves from philosophy departments and religious offices (usually Protestant) at this time. Until the time you and I were in graduate school, a Bachelor of Divinity degree was required before one could begin a Ph.D. program in religion. Many people who were trained in the Sixties spent most of their careers trying to convince themselves and others that they were *not* doing theology. One strategy for this identity-by-difference was to rush into the arms of the social sciences and to develop theories of religion. The enthusiasm with which such theorizing was embraced was - indeed still is - virtually religious. Moreover, the essentializing impulse of theoretical investigation remains thoroughly theological - or, more precisely, ontotheological.
30. **RASCHKE:** You raise, of course, about the genealogy of religious studies as an academic field and the constructionist character of religious theory. However, one can make the same claims concerning all academic “disciplines,” as Foucault has shown us. That, as you suggest, is not the real issue. The question concerns the continuity, or discontinuity, between theological studies and religious studies. I myself have argued at various time and in various writings that the study of religion, as it is practiced for the most part in this day and age, harbors its

own “theological agenda,” even if it dismisses out of hand the familiar theological formula of *fides quaerans intellectum*.

31. The very concept of a religious “tradition,” as J.Z. Smith has observed, depends on a process of textual election and canonization that is a covert form of theological intermediation. So long as we adhere to the model of “religious traditions,” even when invoking sociology and anthropology, we are laboring within a *theo-logocentric* (i.e., a “theoretical”) framework. If we really moved into the a/theoretical realm, wouldn’t we be losing the “field” itself? That’s not necessarily a bad thing, but it has to be addressed in all candor. Is there any way an a/theory of religion - a discursivity “about” religion - could be carried to its deconstructive frontiers and still keep in view “whatever” it is we are talking about when we do religious studies?
32. **TAYLOR:** This is a difficult and complex question that involves more than the so-called disciplines of the study of religion and theology. Indeed, I don’t think your question can be addressed without considering the whole question of disciplines as they are currently constituted. I think we are in the midst of a moment of profound cultural transition, which is a function of what I have labeled emerging network culture. Network culture is not just a function of the Internet and World Wide Web but is symptomatic of a transformation of the very ‘infrastructures’ - though this idea no longer holds in the same way it did for industrial society - of society and culture.
33. One of the consequences of these developments will be the reconfiguration of the structure of knowledge. The way knowledge is structured is a function of the modes of production and reproduction in society. As these technologies change, so does the structure of knowledge. The structure of knowledge - and correspondingly of disciplines - as currently constituted is largely the result of modern industrialism. As post-industrial or information society takes shape, knowledge will no longer be organized in the same way. The issue is not merely the formation of ‘interdisciplinary’ or ‘cross-disciplinary’ inquiry but a rethinking of the very notion of discipline itself. It is very difficult to anticipate what will happen to religious studies - or to any other field - when these changes occur. Rather than thinking of religious studies in terms of traditions, I prefer to think of the so-called field in terms of problems. The problems with which religion wrestles can be dealt with in other ways - through literature, art, music, architecture, etc. This does not necessarily make the notion of religion meaningless, though it does render the “boundary” between religious studies and other fields porous. We must stop thinking of disciplines as well-defined fields with clear borders and begin to think of areas of inquiry as something like nodes in an infinitely complex web of relations. Imagine knowledge structured like a hypertext rather than an assembly line.
34. **RASCHKE:** Okay, so let’s talk more about a/theory itself as a function of network culture. In a network culture knowledge is no longer domain-based. Knowledge emerges at the nodes. At the same time, I would distinguish a “discipline” from a “field.” A discipline implies an identifiable methodology that engenders its subject matter. Religious studies has none. But in the past it has been considered a “field,” inasmuch as there is within the work of religion “scholars” a transparent outline of signifying praxis that distinguishes their concerns from that of philosophers, or historians, or psychoanalysts. It all has to do with the division of academic labor.
35. But I take it you are calling into question even the notion of the “field.” That would suggest to me you see the “religious” as a sort of episodic signal in the interpretation of culture on the whole. “Religion,” therefore, would be just one important link in the broader hypertext, and it

is the hypertext that is at issue. The study of religion is a route for getting us somewhere else. But where does it get us? Not to other otiose "domains." Does it move us toward the "sacred," and if so, how does the notion of sacred function within a topology of network culture?

36. **TAYLOR:** Let me approach this question or cluster of questions by distinguishing the issue of religious studies as a field and/or discipline from the issue of the function of the sacred within a topology of network culture. While I agree with your criticism of the discipline of religious studies, I'm not sure other so-called disciplines are any better off. Does literature, for example, have "an identifiable methodology that engenders its subject matter"? Indeed, the way in which the notion of the literary works in much recent criticism - I'm thinking especially of post-structuralism - is very similar to the way in which the religious functions in other contexts. Rather than trying to identify the distinctive domains of different disciplines, I think it is more fruitful to consider areas of inquiry as mobile sites of intersecting lines of investigation. I have no idea where religion ends and philosophy begins, or where art ends and religion begins. They intersect, overlap, interrelated in ways that are unstable and constantly morphing.
37. As a point of transition to the question of the sacred, I would rewrite your comment "the 'religious' [is] a sort of episodic signal in the interpretation of culture on the whole" to read "the 'religious' is a sort of episodic noise in the interpretation of culture as a whole." It is a question of noise not of signal. That is to say, the sacred interrupts and disrupts lines of communication. It is important to realize that one of the most important systems of communication that the sacred interrupts and disrupts is religion. This disruption can have several results: the system can repress it; the system can reconfigure itself to take account of the disruption; or the system can collapse. Noise is not merely destructive because it can lead to a recasting of the system or interpretive framework that is more complex and more adequate. In this sense, this process gets us somewhere but there is no antecedent teleology at work. Since noise is aleatory, the transformation it occasions is, in important ways, a matter of chance.
38. **RASCHKE:** The signal/noise paronymy you lay out is intriguing, but I am not persuaded that you can treat of the "sacred" (on anybody's terms) simply in terms of the disruption of the flow of information. If the sacred is merely "noise," how does one account for the naming of sacred "irruptions"? Hierophany implies hieronymy. It would seem to me that some kind of semiosis is involved, and that necessarily takes us beyond "noise," if one is going to invoke information theory. I agree that the sacred disrupts the signifying process we call religion. Theologically speaking, that trenches upon what in the past has been called "revelation." Or we can of course say "hierophany," if we need to recur to Eliadisms. I am curious why you don't introduce here some version of the "paralectic." That might suffice to finish out the paronym.
39. **TAYLOR:** One could use a variation of what I once described as paralectics at this juncture but at the moment, I'm more intrigued by thinking through some of these issues in terms of information theory and analyses of complex adaptive systems. This is new territory for humanists and I think has great potential. This is the subject of a new book I just finished - *The Moment of Complexity: Emerging Network Culture*. Suffice it to say that the relationship between noise and information is quite tangled. I would direct you to Michel Serres' *The Parasite*, which I think is a very important book. I definitely would not invoke the category of revelation at this point - nor would I use Eliade's notion of hierophany. What we are talking "about" here is precisely what cannot be revealed - or what is revealed as the impossibility of revelation. That impossibility is not simply silence but is more like static that interferences and interrupts

so-called lines of communication. That interference is context specific and constantly changes.

40. **RASCHKE:** I certainly wasn't expecting you to resort, or even give lip service, to theological categories such as "revelation" or crypto-ones such as "hierophany." My point was simply that in the study of religion, historically and programmatically, locutions such as "sacred" have been utilized in the sense of "signal," or "information," rather than "noise." The science of "sacrality" is an extension of linguistic science, which deals with the way in which signification emerges from randomized, or entropic, phonics. That is the basic principle of semiotic theory.
41. Now this moment of signification may appear as an instant of "noise," but its contrarian character is simply the occasion for the production of a more complex semantic order. Such is a "grammatological" rendering of what is implied in chaos science as well as complexity theory, as I understand those terms. It seems that this transitional link between noise and information is missing in your argument that the sacred is simply "aleatory." Or do you want to make that simply equation? If so, we'll go on to another question.
42. **TAYLOR:** You are certainly correct to insist that traditionally the sacred and related notions are associated with information rather than noise. I am suggesting that this equation needs to be reconsidered. I would not, however, use the phrase "science of 'sacrality.'" The term "science" is simply too overdetermined in this context. Moreover, I would strictly avoid importing terms like "grammatology" into this discussion. There are, to be sure, connections to be made but if this move is made too quickly, the distinctive new resources of complexity theory are lost. I should also stress that there are important differences between complexity and chaos theory. I am in complete agreement with your suggestion that noise at one level can be the occasion for the emergence of more complex systems at another level. I would insist, however, that there is no necessity in this process. To the contrary, emergence always involves chance. This point is made consistently by complexity theorists like John Holland, John Casti, Stuart Kauffman, and others.
43. **RASCHKE:** Good. Now let's head toward closure here with a wide open question. Could you characterize as decidedly as possible how you would re-(en)vision what has historically been regarded as the "study of religion," including theological studies, in light of the above considerations. I am not talking about "religion" as the matter of discussion here. I am talking about what religious scholars do, and how they do it. If someone wanted to redo the academic curriculum along the lines you intimate, what sort of things might they do?
44. **TAYLOR:** As you suggest, this is a wide-open question, which can never reach closure. At the outset, it is important to stress that it is impossible to reimagine religious studies without reimagining the structure of knowledge as such. Correlatively, it is necessary to rethink the structure of disciplines as well as the curriculum. I realize, of course, that this is a huge undertaking. Nonetheless, I think it is both necessary and unavoidable. In approaching this task within the context of religious studies, it is necessary to think in terms of problems or issues rather than disciplines.
45. Consider, for example, the questions of transcendence, transformation, and transgression. These interrelated problems might be taken as points of departure for inquiries, which would draw on a broad range of what are now labeled disciplines. Needless to say, it is important to approach these issues from the perspective of multiple religious and cultural traditions. Moreover, it is very important to consider the historical development of these issues in different traditions. A central question to be asked is: Where has this issue been explored creatively

and critically? My wager is that this way of approaching investigation will eventually recast every field of inquiry. I should also stress that I think the academy as a whole remains far too graphocentric in its research and teaching.

46. The book as we have known it for centuries is, like the traditional curriculum and the classroom, a thing of the past. It is, therefore, necessary to reinvent the ways in which we read, write, and teach. New informatic and telematic technologies make this not only possible but unavoidable. One of the most important aspects of these new technologies is that they are multimedia. It is now possible to “write” not only with words but with images and sounds as well. By now we should realize that the graphic design of most scholarship and teaching is completely overdetermined both ideologically and intellectually. It is time to break the regime of print in all of its manifestations. The implications of this gesture are radical because the authority of the university as well as the scholar/teacher continues to rest upon print.
47. The developments I’m suggesting involve complex feedback and feed-forward loops in which nothing will remain the same. Yes, of course, there are threats here. But there are also unprecedented opportunities. Rather than living out the eternal return of the same, I’d rather roll the dice and see what happens. Might be snake eyes but, then again, might not.

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