"AUREL VLAICU" UNIVERSITY OF ARAD

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FACULTY OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DOCTORAL FIELD "THEOLOGY"

PhD Thesis

Summary

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The discipline of Scripture memorisation and its contribution to the common good

Summary

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ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL THESIS

In an intensely digitised age, with an overwhelming speed of access to a wide spectrum of information, information memorisation, regardless of the domain, it seems to be rather a waste of time and not a process with existential utility. A debate on this subject, of such a scope, can be classified as a rather meaningless affair. Digitisation has also contributed significantly to the shaping of a context conducive to contemporary Christianity, with unlimited access to biblical teaching present in the online environment, which everyone can access, regardless of religious or denominational orientation. In this context where access to biblical information seems increasingly easy and the speed at which it can be accessed is just a click away, memorising Scripture can be perceived as a subject of little interest. However, we take this risk and embark on a broad qualitative and quantitative research on memorisation, but from a theological perspective because the subject and object of study is, firstly, the memorisation of Scripture as a spiritual discipline and, secondly, the implications or

benefits it has both for the private sphere, specifically for the individual, and for the public sphere, in this case with direct reference to the common good and human flourishing.

We start from the *hypothesis* that memorising Scripture facilitates the process of forming Christian virtues and we will argue that the reader of Scripture engaged in this activity of memorisation, as a social agent or as an active participant in the public sphere, becomes a catalyst for the realisation of the common good, by contributing to the shaping of the social imaginary and, consequently, to the formation of a positive community paradigm.

The main aim of the research is to explore the biblical teaching on the spiritual discipline of reading, studying and memorising Scripture and to investigate the impact of this discipline in the private and public spheres, as well as the support provided by the *Bible project*[2] for the implementation of this discipline. As a *secondary goal*, we also aim for this work to become an important theological resource for Christian communities in their efforts to find a solid biblical and historical basis for Scripture memorisation and the responsibility of Christians to make a positive impact on society. We will also build a realistic picture of contemporary Christianity in terms of spiritual discipline, especially the discipline of Scripture memorisation.

Because our perspective on Scripture memorisation is slightly different from the one proposed so far, it is necessary to *delimit the research topic* in order to eliminate the risk of confusion. Thus, by *memorisation of Scripture,* we mean the conscious process of both familiarising oneself with the biblical narrative as a whole, the assimilation of information being involuntary as a result of regular reading and re-reading of Scripture, and the transposition of scriptural precepts into daily living, with implications for personhood and the common good. Accordingly, two terms characterise the proposed type of memorisation: assimilation and action.

By the use of the term *personhood*, we refer to the quality of being a person through the prism of life lived with God, and by *public sphere* we refer to the domain in which actors have a strong sense of belonging and citizenship, with different identities and logic of action, discussing topics of general interest through the two types of encounters – direct or mediated.

The importance of the research topic is given by several major factors:

1. The present work is *a call to return to and be exposed to the Word of God*, involving *sacrificium*

intellectus in favour of understanding the biblical text from God's perspective. This appeal does not mean that we exclude secondary theological resources and their importance, because ultimately this work is also intended to be a secondary source, but we want to strengthen their position as "secondary sources" so as not to witness their transformation into "primary sources" that replace the pure text of Scripture.

2. *We draw attention to the memorisation of Scripture as a biblical principle* which tends to be increasingly neglected by contemporary Christianity in view of the unlimited and unrestricted access to the Word of God.

3. We wish it to become *a theological foundation for the discipline of Scripture memorisation* from both a biblical and historical perspective.

4. It makes valuable contributions to Scripture memorisation by redefining the meaning of the concept and opening new horizons for the discipline. Memorisation of God's Word through familiarity with the biblical narrative opens the horizon to a much wider audience than the machine learning memorisation to which children and adolescents

generally subscribe. As people grow older, interest in this type of memorisation declines dramatically as learning ability declines, with many adults rejecting this discipline on the grounds that "age doesn't help me anymore".

5. The observation of a gap in theological resources regarding the relationship between personal spirituality and the public sphere has led to the *need for a quantitative study to analyse and quantify the impact of Scripture in the private and public spheres*.

6. The work makes a *considerable contribution to the theological field in terms of constructing and demonstrating the argument both qualitatively and on the basis of quantitative analysis*. At least at the national level (but we dare to believe also at the international level), the theological field does not enjoy the beauty and contribution that quantitative research can bring, which seems to be a domain of sacrifice, to which one would appeal as a last resort and, in most cases, to build frivolous case studies.

The *motivation* behind the choice of this research topic is rooted primarily in childhood. Memorising psalms or thematic verses was a practice implemented in particular

by the mother, who in her love and zeal for God did not forget to regularly direct her children to this discipline, not much enjoyed by the eight children, but without right to protest. Although we learned mechanically, accurately everything we were given, we were amazed that, after a week, the information memorised was almost non-existent, which gave rise to a great controversy: how can we manage to memorise in any other form so that the information remains? We learned the answer from our father and grandfather, who practised and still practise rote memorisation.

In addition to the formative education received in the family, interest in the research topic was reinforced by involvement in various religious activities within the Pentecostal Christian faith, as a Sunday School teacher, county leader, coordinating instructor for Sunday School teachers nationally and internationally, initiator and coordinator of the *Bible*[2] project (whose scaling up we have been involved in – from personal to international level). In 2017, we decided to attend the Master's program at the Pentecostal Theological Institute in Bucharest, with the intention of developing a dissertation on a topic that encourages Scripture memorisation. During the period of writing the dissertation, we first noticed a shortage of

theological resources with an academic flavour, which made it difficult for us. This would have been the final point if Professor Marcel V. Măcelaru had not intervened insistently in favour of continuing the study undertaken in a doctoral programme.

In our research, we intend to pursue two major *objectives* – the theoretical objective and the practical objective – which, in turn, are built on the basis of other secondary objectives, acting as milestones to guide our approach so as not to deviate from the established subject and target.

The theoretical objective will be achieved by pursuing several secondary objectives. Firstly, we intend to survey the literature to identify the theological resources that have been written to date on the subject of Scripture memorisation and the authors' views on the subject. Secondly, we will attempt to establish the importance of this discipline by building a biblical and historical foundation. The third objective in this first category refers to the relationship between the sovereign spheres and Scripture, which leads to the last objective, the impact that Scripture memorisation has on the private sphere, specifically on personhood, and on the public sphere, especially on the common good and human flourishing.

Through the practical objective we try to answer some pertinent questions, such as: How do we ensure that after reading, studying and memorising, some changes happen on a personal level that transform us into agents of Scripture? In what ways do we read, study, memorise Scripture so that it is not just an intellectual exercise, but a transformative process, so that this transformed agent then would engage in the public sphere? In order to achieve this objective, we propose to carry out a survey, and on the basis of the data collected, to outline the profile of God's social agent, to analyse the possibility that a project such as *Bible²* could be an aid to the formation and strengthening of the discipline of Scripture, and to quantify both the impact of the project and the impact of Scripture on people and the common good.

In terms of *research methodology*, the scarcity of theological, academic resources that justify the need, benefits and impact of Scripture memorisation on both individual and public levels has been a real challenge and even a major obstacle in conducting research, thus outlining the need to build the argument on the information provided by resources from multiple fields. We have divided the paper into *two main sections*: qualitative research and theoretical research.

As already mentioned, the **topic** addressed is an **interdisciplinary** one due to the fact that we are dealing with the process of memorisation, which articulates the need that this study touches on aspects of psychology in order for us to understand the effects that memorisation has on personhood, and how the Bible influences our imaginations and actions. Note that the approach is taken from a theological perspective. At the same time, we have drawn on biblical theology and historical theology to ground the discipline of memorisation, and on hermeneutics to contextualize the information. For outlining the dialogue with the public space we have approached public theology. Also, to carry out quantitative research we used statistical processing to mathematically analyse and quantify the information in order to prove the argument.

Our doctoral research will make *significant contributions* as follows: (1) responds to the need for theological resources in the field of the spiritual discipline – Scripture memorisation; (2) grounds the discipline of Scripture memorisation both biblically and historically; (3) contributes to establishing more clearly the relationship between Scripture and sovereign spheres, (4) demonstrates that Scripture *per se* does not influence the public sphere; (5) presents the impact of Scripture as an individual

transformational journey with footprints in the public sphere; (6) presents the impact of Scripture on the common good; (7) is the second case study constructed on the basis of a public opinion questionnaire that has as its main theme the memorisation of Scripture and its discipline and the first that contributes to the construction of a theological argument at the doctoral level (at least in Romania, but, from our research, we did not find any other similar study on the international level). To the best of our knowledge, the first case study on the same topic was the one in 2019, constructed by us for the dissertation of the Master's program. (8) Quantitative research contributes to forming a picture of contemporary reality and quantifies the impact Scripture has on people and the common good. (9) Last but not least, the structure of the quantitative research undertaken provides a theoretical and practical basis for future research in the theological field, which aims to prove the argument on the basis of calculations, mathematical formulas and statistical representations.

In conclusion, what is innovative about the thesis is that Scripture *per se* does not influence the public sphere, but the influence comes through social agents, i.e. people transformed by God's Word who act daily in the public sphere. Also, the memorisation of Scripture does not only

take the form of mechanical learning of the biblical text, but should also be seen through the prism of assimilation of information as a result of familiarity with the scriptural narrative through regular reading and re-reading of the Bible. At the same time, the present work is an important source for future quantitative research, given that the theological field as a whole is scarce in research of this nature and scope.

The outline and structure of the research

The research paper is structured in two main parts due to the perspective we have in terms of grounding the argument. The first part is intended as a theoretical filter, built on qualitative research, which will serve as a theological foundation for the memorisation of Scripture and its discipline. Thus, our argument begins with a survey of the literature, grouped into three distinct categories, namely, the main authors who speak about the relationship between Scripture and the sovereign spheres, the major works that discuss the theme of reading, studying and interpreting the Word of God, because, in our opinion, in order to reach the discipline of memorisation, one must first master the other disciplines specific to the Bible, and in the

last group we insert authors who address the theme of memorisation of the Word of God[1]. Our research has been materialised in centralising and naming the types of reading and memorisation, which most authors have only described or referred to, without assigning them a generic name to be used in future research[2].

In our opinion, the acceptance that Scripture is and remains the only source and norm by which the Christian is to guide his life and not by opinions, is not a convincing enough reason for modern day Christians to form a discipline of memorising it. Consequently, after a broader definition of the concept of memorisation, we have proposed to make a foray into the biblical text to see if God, through His Word, refers to this discipline. Thus, the first pillar of the pro-memorisation argument is a biblical foundation for this discipline and was built on the basis of exegetical and hermeneutical analysis of biblical texts, with the help of which we argued who should adopt the discipline of memorising Scripture, how this discipline can be acquired, what is the information storage centre recommended by God, and the rhythmicity and frequency of

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[1] See chapter 1, *Scripture memorisation in specialty literature*
[2] See Table no. 1 – Types of reading and memorising Scripture.

memorisation[3]. The second pillar is grounded in history through the study of Jewish writings, the Church Fathers, and the reformers to observe their relationship to Scripture[4].

The concept of sovereign spheres has been of interest to us since the first meeting, which is why we decided to explore this topic, which in the end proved to have an impact on the whole work. Our foray into the world of spheres begins by looking at historical perspectives on the concept, then, after an analysis of the types of sovereign spheres, we look at their authority and relationship from the perspective of two traditions. The first tradition, the Roman Catholic tradition, which promoted the principle of subsidiarity and the second tradition, the Dutch Calvinist tradition, which approached authority through the principle of sovereign spheres. Last but not least, we observe the relationship between the sovereign spheres and Scripture through the authority that God, through His Son, has over the public sphere and through an analysis of human rights to demonstrate the presence of scriptural precepts within all sovereign spheres[5].

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[3] See chapter 2, *Biblical foundation: the discipline of Scripture memorisation*

[4] See chapter 3: *Historical background: the discipline of Scripture memorisation*.

[5] See chapter 4: *Sovereign spheres and Scripture memorisation.*

The fact that Scripture *per se* does not have a significant influence on the public sphere, but the impact of Scripture in the public sphere is manifested through social agents, namely through the people transformed by God's Word who act in the public sphere on a daily basis, led us to address two important issues. First, starting from a broader definition of personhood and an observation of its formative factors, including the 'storytelling' of the Bible, we examine the impact of Scripture on personhood and the role that the biblical text plays in shaping God's social agent. Second, we argue the impact of Scripture on the common good and the role that God's social agent has in converting public sphere. We believe it is important to note the relation between the three: the public sphere, the Scripture, and the social agent, for an explicit understanding of the role the Christian has not only in the institutional Church, but also in Christ's Church as a body, which manifests itself comprehensively[6].

The second part of the study is devoted to the practical filter that is built on the basis of quantitative research. For this purpose, we agreed to construct a public opinion questionnaire for data collection, resulting in a sample of 1088 subjects. Although some particular cases

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[6] See chapter 5: *The impact of Scripture memorisation on personhood and the common good*.

were distinguished from the beginning, nevertheless, the questionnaire proved to be a reliable solution for the construction of the case study[7], which has two branches. First, we analyse subjects who reported being enrolled in the *Bible²* project to observe the discipline of Scripture memorisation before and after their involvement in the project, whether the *Bible²* achieved its stated objectives, the type of circuit to which the project subscribes, and the impact that the *Bible²* has on sovereign spheres[8]. Second, based on the data collected, we profile the Bible-following Christian, seen as God's agent, while demonstrating and quantifying the impact of Scripture on personhood and the common good[9].

The synoptic picture of the thesis

Part One - Theology and Scripture Memorisation

Chapter 1 - Scripture Memorisation in the specialty literature

The survey of the literature has resulted in the centralisation and naming of the types of reading and memorisation of the Word of God mentioned and/or

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[7] See chapter 6: *Case study: research design and methodology*.
[8] See chapter 7: *Findings: impact of the Bible² project*.
[9] See chapter 8: *Findings: impact of Scripture memorisation on personhood*.

described by certain authors. We were astonished to find that no author addresses this discipline from our perspective. They all define Scripture memorisation as a mechanical learning of Bible verses or books, resulting in the accurate quotation of information. Instead, in our view, Scripture memorisation should not be limited strictly to this form of learning, but a similar result can also be achieved by familiarising oneself with the entire biblical narrative through reading and re-reading and implicitly through consistent listening or re-listening to God's Word. This type of memorisation we have generically called transformative memorisation.

Chapter 2 - Biblical Foundation: the Discipline of Scripture Memorisation

In order to ground the importance of Scripture memorisation and the related discipline, we thought it best to outline two pillars, a biblical one and a historical one. For the first pillar, the biblical one, we have resorted to an exegetical and hermeneutical analysis of scriptural passages to see the divine perspective on the discipline of memorisation. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament abound in verses that refer to God's claim to maximize the discipline of memorisation of Scripture from a

micro to a macro level and, even if it sounds utopian, this discipline beginning in the individual sphere must follow a path that transcends sovereign spheres. For the implementation of the discipline, God outlines precise directions. First of all, the adult must adopt a self-taught attitude, to form and at the same time continue the process of transformative memorisation. Only after this first step has been taken can the next step be taken, that of passing on the Word of God from generation to generation by implementing the discipline of Scripture memorisation within the family sphere and also in the public sphere.

Levav, the heart is presented as God's recommendation for storing or "impressing" the Word, this action fulfilling the functions that are incumbent upon the head and brain, upon the mind, today. A heart filled with pure principles and biblical truths actually contributes to the formation and transformation of personality, and actions expose the character of the information assimilated and the degree of familiarity with the biblical message. The Bible even presents the importance of a disciplinary cycle in memorisation as a result of the rhythmicity and frequency with which Scripture is called upon, the constancy of which is recommended to extend throughout life – day and night.

Chapter 3 - Historical background: the discipline of Scripture memorisation

The second pillar is the historical foundation for the discipline of Scripture memorisation. Judaism understood the process of memorising the Word not merely as an exercise in remembering, but as one of knowing with the heart. Thus, they developed a number of techniques for strengthening memory, among which we mention prosthetic memory, which presents the prosthetic elements as having the role of facilitating the process of remembering. The Hebrew Bible presents several memorial prostheses, which in addition to the contained didactic factor, also present an active factor that determines engagement with the past for the purpose of grounding present decisions, more precisely acting in accordance with scriptural precepts. The principle of memorising holy writings with the heart did not ceasea along with Judaism, but was taken up and carried forward both by the Church Fathers, who publicly declared the importance of 'immersion' in the Word, and by the Reformers, who, under the slogan *Sola Scriptura*, promoted unrestricted access to the Bible.

Chapter 4 - Sovereign Spheres and Scripture Memorisation

Sovereign spheres are the realms or boundaries within which a group of people act with their own autonomy, the authority of each being supreme only within the earthly framework because it originates in the supreme authority of God, and God is present and reigns in these spheres through His social agents and through His Word. Concerning the presence of God's Word within the sovereign spheres, I have argued that both biblically based human rights and Bible-following Christians are indirect evidence of the presence of Scripture as a bridge between the spheres.

Chapter 5 - The impact of Scripture memorisation on personhood and the common good

Communication and information are two essential factors in the formation of personhood. To these, storytelling can be added, which is a mix of communication and information. In the paper, I have argued that the 'story' of the Bible sums up these formative factors, thus the Word of God has formative and transformative impact on personhood. I have also argued that God's social agent is the Bible-following Christian whose personhood has come into contact with this character of the Bible, who recognises

dependence on God's infinite resources, has acquired the divine wisdom and mindfulness of Christ, and at the same time exhibits an attitude of service, self-denial, and humility, all of which are necessary qualities in fulfilling God's mission. The social agent understands that God's mission has also become his mission, and therefore takes part in "converting" the culture and values promoted in the public sphere, as well as in "reshaping" the public sphere, with the aim of channelling attention towards God and His Word, which is the only way to long-term common good and social well-being.

Part Two - Scripture memorisation in present practice

Chapter 6 - Case study: research design and methodology

In the second part of the paper, we analysed the data collected using the 25-item omnibus opinion questionnaire. The questionnaire was completed between 18.11.2021-02.01.2022 by 1088 subjects, of which 588 subjects are involved in the *Bible* project[2], from 20 countries and different denominations. 81% women, of which 98% declared themselves FCAB and 19% men, of which 96% declared themselves BCAB. The main objective was to determine the impact of the *Bible*[2] project both in the lives

of the participants and in the public sphere, as well as the impact of Scripture memorisation on people and the common good.

Chapter 7 - Findings: the impact of the Bible² project

Following the analysis of the data provided by the group of subjects involved in *Bible²,* we found substantial progress concerning the discipline related to Scripture after the involvement in the project. *Bible²* created bridges between the individual sphere and Scripture by helping participants to familiarise with the Bible story, which in turn had an impact on the individual, but also on the other sovereign spheres with which they interact. At the same time, 99% of the subjects involved in the project declared themselves to be Bible-following Christians, largely agreeing that the Bible is a public truth that should be found in the public sphere, and that Christian faith should be manifested not only in the private sphere or within the religious community, but also in the public sphere. As such, given that this status has been influenced by *Bible²,* we have argued that the impact of the project transcends the individual sphere, implicitly manifesting itself in the public sphere. Consequently, *Bible²* is a project with an impact on

personhood and the common good, proving its usefulness on an international scale. We believe that projects in this category are a necessity for contemporary reality, given that more than half of the *Bible²* subjects stated that prior to their involvement in the project they did not have a daily discipline in reading, studying and memorising Scripture.

Chapter 8 - Findings: the impact of Scripture memorisation on personhood and common good

The data provided by the entire number of subjects helped to form a profile of the Bible-following Christian, which in the theoretical research was referred to by us as God's social agent, as well as to quantify the extent to which Scripture memorisation impacts personhood and the common good.

- A high percentage, 99.62%, own a Bible in physical format.
- 67% have developed a discipline of Scripture with daily regularity and frequency, where the difference in percentage opts for weekly or occasional interaction.
- Gradual familiarising with the biblical narrative along with age.

- 93.22% have a rigorous church attendance discipline, opting for weekly or several times a week attendance.

- There is an interdependent and reciprocal relationship between the discipline of reading the Bible and the discipline of church attendance: a rigorous discipline of Scripture positively influences the frequency of interaction with church and vice versa.

- Approximately 90% reported that familiarity with Scripture had an impact on: personal life, family life, character, actions, language/vocabulary, ethics, view on life, and quality of Christian life. All the elements listed are components of personhood, milestones that speak about the values adopted, and the finding of an influence on them is a confirmation of the impact that God's Word has on personhood.

- The Bible is considered a public truth (98%) that should be found in the public sphere (83%), consequently faith should also be manifested in the public sphere (96%). The majority consider these statements to be largely true.

- 94% of the subjects consider Christian virtues to be the result of a mind full of God's Word, and 80% of them agree with this truth to a large extent.

Conclusions

Following the qualitative and quantitative research, we agreed on the following:

- Scripture memorisation, as defined in this paper, finds its foundation in two main pillars: first, in the Word of God, and second, in history.
- The Bible-following Christian is the person who:
  (1) has come into contact with God's Word, the evidence being that he or she owns a Bible;
  (2) exhibits a discipline of Scripture memorisation, having its dwelling in the heart and with daily rhythm and frequency;
- Scripture memorisation impacts individual personhood because of the formative and transformative character that the Bible story presents, qualifying such a person for the status of God's social agent.

- Scripture also has an impact on the family sphere as a consequence of the impact that memorisation of the Word has on personhood, the social agent facilitating access to biblical writings in this sphere, a fact confirmed by the results of the case study.

- Because his perspective on life is transformed by the Word of God and because it is a principle that the Bible is a public truth, which must be found in the public sphere, as such he acts in this direction, understanding the importance of manifesting faith in the public sphere. In fact, we cannot talk about Christians that are present in the public sphere and about an absent faith at the same time. Christian identity implies living the faith in all circumstances. As such, thanks to the acquisition of a biblical background, the agent can build linguistic bridges between Scripture and the sovereign spheres and, at the same time, remove the risk of creating a discontinuity of the Gospel, which acculturation and excessive contextualisation of Scripture raise. Consequently, God's social agent contributes to "converting" culture and

"reshaping" the public sphere, with the aim of promoting the only path – God and His Word – to long-term common good and social well-being.

- Thus, we are witnessing a process of maximizing the implementation of the discipline of MS and the impact of Scripture from the micro to the macro level.

- *Bible²* is an open circuit project that contributes to accomplishing this process.

New research directions

New research directions have emerged from this research, which will certainly add to hermeneutics in particular and theology in general.

- The lack of a research work focused strictly on the biblical foundation of the discipline of Scripture memorisation and a work that traces its historical course in detail is a major deficiency. Accordingly, we consider it more than beneficial to exploit this deficiency.

- A case study examining the relation of divorced and cohabiting CABs to Scripture.

- Concerning the rhythmicity and number of full Bible readings, we identified several differences within the BCAB group, which are worth investigating given that these situations are not found among the FCAB.
- In the case of church attendance, differences between FCABs and BCABs were distinguished. A case study could provide valuable insights.
- Among subjects who declared themselves Christians, we identified a state of uncertainty regarding the impact of Scripture in their lives. What determines these Christians to claim that they do not know whether the Bible has had an impact on their lives?
- Fewer BCAB report a great impact of Scripture compared to the FCAB. A case study on this issue would shed light on the causes of this noticeable difference and could provide directions to correct the current situation.
- Even if only a low percentage of CABs stated that it was not important to express one's faith in the public sphere, we still consider it a situation that deserves attention since Christian identity

actually involves living one's faith without interruption, including in the public sphere.

- With regard to Christian virtues, we believe that a study that investigates and analyses the process of their formation from a biblical perspective would make significant contributions to theology.

- Because, in our opinion, ethics are more likely to be considered a result of family upbringing and because there is no certainty, we believe that a study that analyses the factors influencing the ethics of Christian people is justified.

- In comparing the 2019 and 2022 results, we found a regression in the impact that the *Bible²* project has on the discipline of Scripture memorisation at both the individual and family level. In order to elucidate the causality, we believe that a case study in this direction is necessary in order to improve the policies and methods adopted by the project to contribute to the formation and strengthening of this discipline.

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