

Discourse and Debate on Religion and Politics in Nigeria: An Appraisal

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Abstract: *This paper investigates and appraises the interrelationship of politics and religion with a close attention to Nigeria. The paper establishes why both religion and politics seek for power and also examines reason why they love power. The findings of this article confirm that the only goal that is pertinent to both religion and politics is to acquire power for the fulfilment of their aims and ambitions, though with different strategies. With the secularist theory and descriptive and case study designs, the paper identifies the roles of religion and state in their interrelationship and believes that there are divergent views of leadership of religion in their pursuit of power. Before conclusion, the paper gives recommendations for the regulations of the interrelationship of religion and politics in Nigeria.*

Keywords: *Nigeria, politics, religion.*

I. Introduction

From inception, religion and politics have great impacts in the life of man. Both religion and politics have one goal; to acquire political power and use it to fulfil their aims (Calloway, 2019). However, to achieve this objective, both use different strategies. While religion mobilizes religious sensibilities of people to get their support for acquiring power, politics adopts the use of intrigue, diplomacy and makes an effort to win public opinion democratically, if the constitution supports it or usurps power with the help of a gun through military personnel, if the society is underdeveloped and backward.

Therefore, in power struggle, both politics and religion make attempts to undermine each other. If religion holds political authority, its ambition is to exploit it to fulfil a divine mission. It claims to have derived its authority from divinity and therefore, its mission is holy, motivated to reform society through spiritual guidance (Calloway, 2019). Politics, on the contrary, bereft of any value directs its policy on the needs and requirements of society whereupon, it obliges to change laws and system of governance accordingly (Calloway, 2019). This is a basic fact that this paper is set to establish.

Definitions of Concepts:

There are basically two concepts that this paper considers for our discussion. The concepts are: politics and religion.

II. Concept of Politics

Generally, there is no single definition for politics because politics itself is a contested concept. Politics, according to Cambridge dictionary means the activities of the government, members of the law-making organizations or people who try to influence the way a country is being governed. In another dimension, politics has been defined to mean the relationships within a group or organization that allows people to have a particular power over others. Politics according to Akubar (2018, 105-131) is about the management and allocation of resources for the benefit of the greatest number of people in any given society. According to another scholarly opinion, politics can be defined as: that which concerns the state: as a method of conflict resolution; as conflict; as the exercise of power; as a social activity; as a public activity; as dependent on context and interpretation; and as struggle over the meaning of political concepts (Openlearn, 2020). These definitions can be considered to be distinct and in some cases contradictory, yet they do also overlap, and they certainly do not correspond to mutually exclusive realms of political activity. The fact is that avenues for political involvement are multiple and there is certainly nothing to prevent anyone from engaging in as many kinds of politics as he/she has time and desire to.

In addition, Ayokunle (2017, 155) defines politics to mean “*the intrigue to gain authority or power to rule*”. The key meaning of this definition hangs on competition for authority or power. This is to seek for people’s mandate

to influence others, or to have access to governance. Furthermore, Ajayi (2020, 1) sees politics as “*an art or science of governance*”. Ajayi believes that politics could be described as a process of balancing competition between competing interest groups or individuals in a social system or human setting, ostensibly for power, control or leadership. Furthermore, Ajayi (2020,1) argues that it is widely believed that in contemporary times, politics is a set of activities characterized by artful and often dishonest practices. In the perception of Ogundiran (2018,126), “*politics conjures manipulation, pretense, betrayal, deception, stealing, looting, brutal use of power, corruption of privilege, killing, exclusive and secret organizations, and all activities hidden and involving in unpredictable dangers.*”

Meanwhile, Nigerian politics takes place within a framework of a federal, presidential, representative democratic republic, in which executive power is exercised by the government. Legislative power is held by the real government and the two chambers of the legislature: The House of Representatives and the Senate. (Wikipedia, 2020). The father of Nigerian politics is Herbert Macaulay who founded the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP), Nigeria’s first political party to take advantage of the new Clifford constitution which succeeded the 1914 Nigerian Council. In addition to this, politics within a religious organization relate to one another and to others in exercising power and authority as well as in determining the way things will be done in their religious organizational community. Meanwhile, political actors in the churches, mosques, or African traditional religious shrines usually attempt at hiding behind the façade of spirituality, or as embarking on a rescue mission of an unwholesome trend or practice, whereas in many instances, one of the competing interest parties, or both, often act in direct opposition to the scriptural principles.

III. Religion

The term “Religion” has many definitions. In fact, there are as many definitions of religion as there are scholars and schools of thought. Kalu and Obinna (2016, 55) are of the view that religion is as natural to humans as other essential dimensions of human nature. Smart (1973) defines religion as a set of institutionalized rituals identified with tradition and expressing and/or evoking social sentiments directed at a divine and/or trans-divine focus seen in the context of the human phenomenon-logical environment, and at least partially described by myth or by myths and doctrine. From social point of view, religion is a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people struggle with the ultimate purpose of human existence (Ekarika, 1984). Thus, religion faithful in most cases react to the sacred realms with awe, fear, homage, and submission.

Sacred realities are not under human control, and religions needs may or may not be satisfied. Even when individuals give voice to their religious needs, they generally do so in the context of their preexisting religious tradition, which defines for them both the character of the sacred reality and the kinds of prior relationship’s human have had with that reality (Kalu & Obinna, 2016:55).

IV. Relationship Between Religion and Society

There are great synergies between religion and society. The fact is that religions are social by nature. Their forms, ideas and sanctions have an enormous impact on their societies. They provide a wider symbolic context that people can understand and to which they feel they belong. The relationship between humans and the sacred typically includes a notion of transformation that involves society and reconstitutes it as a religious community (Kalu & Obinna, 2016:56).

Further to this, in agreement to the functionalist theory, religions have great influence on economic forces of any society. For example, in a community that is dominated by the Muslims, the selling and buying of pig meat will be minimal; whereas, it will be a reversal of this in a Christian populated areas. Likewise, religious behaviors may also be influenced by psychological factors.

Meanwhile, religious factors also have great influence over the culture and traditions of a community. In the northern part of Nigeria where Islamic religion dominated the populace, the Arabic culture has taken over the Hausa traditions of the local people. This has also influenced their educational institution as Arabic language, custom and tradition have been included in their educational curriculum. Likewise, in a Christian school, the European languages and their culture and traditions have great influence on the teachers and students.

Lastly, according to Kalu and Obinna, (2016:57), religious traditions equally have political implications. Many religions always have sanction in existing political structure. For example, Confucianism supported the imperial structures of China for 2000 years, Protestantism sanctioned nationalism during the reformation and religious rhetoric is interjected into political campaigns and warfare even today. Christian missions were initially successfully in sixteenth century (16th C) Japan, because Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries alighted themselves with certain political forces.

In his seminar paper titled “Religion and Good Governance: Nigerian Experience” Okebukola (2012) believes that religion is, without doubt, a potent force to achieve political stability in the land, considering the role it can play in bringing about development in the light of corruption that pervades society. To Okebukola, the advantage of religious involvement in politics will bring political peace and blessings of God, since no nation could survive without God and his laws (Okebulola, 2012). From this statement, Okebukola concludes that any political leader who follows God’s laws and directives in righteousness and who allows the fear of God to rule over his life, in conjunction with the Bible dictates will rule his state successfully in peace, unity and progress for the benefit of his people.

Similarly, another scholar argues that religion is an important feature of human existence that cannot ordinarily be underplayed. (Onwuka, 2004). The human’s background is replete with man’s adherence to various supernatural constraints; such have added to socio-educational development, interpersonal and international cooperation. Also, it has been an underlying force, precipitating conflict, civil and international oppression. As a double edged sword, religion can make or mar, depending on how it is used. Nevertheless, if well harnessed, the religiosity of Nigerians can be used (for example) to build a politically stable Nigeria. This is because, every religion has inherent in it all that makes peace and progress. (Onwuka, 2004).

In another dimension, another scholar sees religion as human interaction with the supernatural in order to cope with life’s crises. Among other functionalities, religion is really a social phenomenon which has both philosophical and social dimensions of religion which he draws our attention to is, by no means exclusive of the challenges of democratic governance expected by the electorate in the practice of politics in a multi-ethnic society peopled by multi-faith communities. (Anyawu, 2004)

Likewise, another academician opines that religion is a link between man and God. He believes that religion is the sum total of man’s relation with God (Okereke, 1983). Likewise, religion can be seen to mean an essential relationship, a link established between two persons namely a human person and a divine person believed to exist. In other words, religion is man’s relationship with the supernatural (Omoregbe, 2019).

V. Religious Perspectives to Politics

The three religions that this paper will consider for our discussions are as follow: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion.

VI. Christian View On Politics

According to the Christians, God rules his people through chosen individuals. There is no government that can rule well except God allows it. A scholar points to the fact that Jesus was a political activist and Messianic revolutionist who like the zealots of his time, wanted freedom for Israel. (Apata, 2003). Christians generally believe that the Christian Church does not uphold any single political system but accommodates itself to many forms of secular government even when they are highly imperfect. The Church is always in support of any political system of the state which allows the Church to freely perform its Spiritual purpose.

Some Christians view political participation as evil, claiming that drinking and driving do not mix, and neither do religion and politics. Some see this world as evil claiming that they are in it and not of it, quoting Jesus statement in John 17:16. These set of Christians regard politics as a dirty game which Christians should avoid in order not to corrupt themselves. This attitude is rooted in our colonial history and a failure to distinguish between partisan politics and political participation (Obijole, 2012). It is the belief of Obijole that the Scripture in Romans 13:1-7 instructs Christians not only to abide on civil obedience, and payment of tax, dues, and revenue to state coffers; they also have a duty to exercise their political rights to vote and be voted for, of speaking out against wrongdoing by those in power, as well as holding leaders accountable for their actions. Such a culture of political participation has deep roots in the communal orientation of traditional African society where decision-making was based on democratic principles that formed the basis of communal life and fits well with western democratic values (Obiojole, 2012).

Meanwhile, some have argued that the Lord Jesus Christ who is the model for every Christian did not separate religion and politics in all his teachings. His mission is found in Luke 4: 18-19, which makes his ministry holistic. In this passage, Jesus Christ declared that his ministry to those suffering from various forms of bondages and oppression, including economic oppression or poverty; physical oppression (diseases and disabilities), political oppression (injustice and oppressive rule), and demonic oppression (various forms of

occult practices) as we can find in many parts of the world of today. Many other examples of Godly people who speak about political participation are spread in the Bible. Good examples are Joseph of Egypt who saved many from hunger and starvation in Genesis 41, Amos who warned the leaders of his time against injustice (Amos 4:7) and Nehemiah who personally sacrificed to save his people (Nehemiah 1-2&5) among others. Meanwhile, the scholar holds the belief that throughout history, the Christians have been the voice of the voiceless in speaking against injustice and oppression. The challenges of moral bankruptcy, corruption, poverty, disease and ignorance all call for Christian participation in politics (Obiojole, 2012).

Furthermore, the Christians believe that both state and church are God-ordained to lead the people, they should be partners in the sense of humanity and of God. Both have duties to God, to one another and to the society. Just as the Christians have duties already enumerated by Paul so have the state duties to her citizens irrespective of their religious, ethnic or political affiliations. The state has the right to rule and must be accountable to the people. The state which makes laws must not be above the laws, while legitimately punishing citizens for breaking them. Government has a duty to guarantee good governance, stability, peace, security of her citizens, administer punishment, and restrain evil, promote justice and the general welfare of her citizens (Omoyajowo, 1989).

The fact therefore is that categorically, all Christians have not agreed on what should be the ideal relationship between Church and state. While some like mission related Bible churches and traditional evangelical Churches argue for separation because the Church and state are unique institutions with different roles and duties that differ and should not interfere with each other, the Jehovah's witnesses have gone into the extreme, they have become isolationist; that is, totally separated from politics. The main line denominations such as, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, support transformation. They argue that Christians are called to exert Christian influence on the state or society and transform it on the basis of Biblical values and principles. This can also lead to the extreme, like that in Zambia where former President Fredrick Chiluba declared it a Christian state. The third group is supporters of liberation theology in Latin America and Black theology in South Africa and many African American theologians in the United States of America who argue that the Church must work for radical change and promote human rights, the conscientization of the people advocate for education for living and the liberation of the oppressed (Obijole, 2012). This radical approach is believed to be difficult to put into practice.

The Church on its own has three responsibilities to the state in their relation. First, the church has a priestly function, which is to pray for those in authority and for the protection and healing of the nation as supported by the Scripture in 1 Timothy 2: 1-3. Second, the church has a pastoral duty, which is to provide leading and direction to the leaders and those being governed (Matt 28: 19-20) and to encourage Christians to be good citizens who obey the state and pay their taxes as found in Romans 13:1-7, 1Peter 2:13, and to see both the state and the citizens do nothing contrary to the word of God. The third duty of the Church to the state is the prophetic function which is to declare the mind of God to the state and her citizens, rebuke and oppose the state when it acts unjustly and turns against God as found in 2 Samuel 12:1-4, Daniel 4:20-27, 5:17-28. But the limitation to this is that when it comes to choosing between compromise and obedience, the Church must choose to obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29) without minding the cost. This fact was demonstrated in Uganda during the tyrannical rule of Idi-Amin, while the Ugandan Church suffered brutally, Archbishop Luwum was assassinated for opposing the policies of Idi-Amin. The Church through Christians in her fold has always been the voice of the voiceless in speaking against injustice and oppression (Kantiok, 2006).

Conclusively, for the citizenry to enjoy good governance, all stakeholders irrespective of their religious, educational background, tribe and so on, must actively participate in politics. Christians must show more interest in both political participation and partisan politics. Especially, African Christians need to understand that the destinies of their nations rest on their political participation. In the same manner, to improve people's participation in politics, the political class should embark on political programmes and policies that are friendly to the people, that cushion the effects of economic hardship and make life bearable for the people. The state must judiciously use her resources to provide social amenities to the people. All government institutions like schools, hospitals, roads, security and so on, must be provided to the people with little cost. All these and many others will foster the state and Church relationship. The judiciary must be allowed to operate freely, the election into all political offices must be free and fair and the legislature must carry out her responsibilities in accordance to the constitution without executive interference of any kind.

VII. Islam's View On Politics

Islam as a religion is inseparable from politics because the polity under Islamic control must practice theocracy (Okebukola, 2012). This indicates that political power resides with the religious leaders; a political order of a secular pattern will be non-existent. In Islam therefore, politics and religion are parts of a single alley. It is said that the greatest achievement of Prophet Muhammed (SAW) was the religious and political unification of Arabia (Odunuga, 1998). In Islam, the most functional political system is "theocratic" in the sense that Allah is the only recognized authority (Odunuga, 1998). This explains that the Muslims understand the importance of politics and that is why they zealously and aggressively get involved in both political participation and partisanship and consequently control political power in many African states. Muslims in order words believe religion is an essential aspect of a person's identity that influences every part of one's life. The Muslims see religion of Islam as a total way of life that affect how Muslims think and behave whether they are in the Mosque, the home or the marketplace. Every area of human existence comes under the authority of Islam (Kenny, 1999).

The close connection between the trio was established in the earliest days of the faith, when the Prophet Muhammed was considered to be both a religious guide and a political leader (Kaltner, 2019). After his migration to Medina from Mecca in 622 to serve as a judge, he insisted that they should acknowledge him as both a mediator for settling disputes and likewise as Prophet chosen by God. He was seen also as a model of piety by his people, a supreme authority in matters relating to faith, as well as a statesman, a political leader who has been entrusted to play a key role in shaping nascent Muslim Ummah.

This paradigm was followed by his earlier successors who led the Islamic community after his death. The four Rightly Guided Caliphs, who ruled between 632 and 661, also functioned as religious and political leaders who enjoyed special status by virtue of their having been Muhammed's companions (Kaltner, 2019). The changes in leadership style began when the demands and challenges of governing a community that was spread over a vast geographic area was conceived and exercised,

It is on this basis that political and religious authority were eventually separated and no longer identified with the same individual. Various religiously based positions and offices- like lawyer, judge, and theologian emerged and these individuals became the de facto authorities on issues related to faith. This arrangement has continued into the present day, and there is currently no Islamic country that gives complete religious and political authority to one person (Kaltner, 2019). But this division of labour did not guarantee a clear separation of power between Islam and politics. In Islam, religion is supposed to inform and influence politics. The Islamic principles and values are expected to be at its core in any Islamic state.

On this premise, there are at least three various opinions on the relationship between Islam and politics. While some believe that Islamic law, or Sharia, must be fully implemented as the law of the land so that all can come under the authority of God and fully submit themselves to the divine will, some also prefer a modified version of this that would reserve Islamic law for only specific aspects of human's life, such as marriage, divorce and inheritance. Meanwhile, others believe that it is only necessary that the state and its representatives not hold views or engage in activities that go against the teachings and spirit of Islam.

But generally, Islam tries to strike a balance between politics (good governance) and other worldly life and exhorts its followers to live a moral life on earth and also to prepare for the other world through "Ibhada" (various spiritual acts of worship). An Islamic scholar therefore stresses that Quran, the main source of Islamic teachings, stresses cooperation of goodness (bir) and 'tagwa' (fear of Allah and avoidance of evil) and prohibits cooperation with each other in sin and aggression (Ganiyu, 2012) among both political and religious leaders.

VIII. African Traditional Religion's View on Politics

African traditional society regarded religion as a rallying factor. For example, in the African Traditional Society, the same individual plays the roles of both political rulers of his community as well as the chief priest of the community. This is popularly practiced in Yorubaland where the 'Oba' (King) is known as "Igba keji Orisa" (Next in rank to the supreme being) and he is also known as 'Olori awon Aworo' (Leader among the priests). To this end, it means in any African traditional society, religion and politics are both interdependent or interwoven. It means religion played a vital role in dictating how the community would be run

and virtually the king does nothing until direction and guidance is received from the 'Ifa' (god of divination) priest.

Furthermore, the African traditional religion has the rare quality of accommodation and tolerance than other religions especially in Nigeria. In essence, traditional religion is not proselytizing in the sense that it does not go forth seeking converts neither does it pick offence when deserted by its adherents nor assume that its object of worship is superior. Meanwhile, for its docility, the religion has remained a recruiting ground for other religious groups to enlarge their membership scope. While there is a cut throat contest between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria which gave way to monstrous religious crises which have claimed many lives and properties, the traditional religion in Nigeria has never been in competition with any religion and religious crises that can be traced to it are very minimal when compared with the other two major dominant religions in Nigeria.

IX. The Roles of Religions in the Political System of Nigeria

First, it should be noted that Nigeria is a secular state, with a constitution that allow separation of religion and state. This is the foundation of secularism. Secularist theory ensures religious groups do not interfere in affairs of the state, and the state does not interfere in religious affairs. In other words, secularism assures religious freedom to all members of the society. It defends the absolute freedom of religions and other beliefs, and protects the right to manifest religious belief in so far as it does not impinge on the rights and freedom of others. Secularism in a nutshell ensures that the right of individuals to freedom of religion is always balanced by the right to be free from religion (Explore Secularism, 2019:4). Meanwhile, secularism is a theory that protect the interest of all members of the society irrespective of age, religion, social status, sex, education, wealth and so on. It ensures that everyone is fairly treated.

In Nigeria, the state is confused on whether to remove the faith-based institutions in the affairs of the state or to entrust certain roles to them. The Nigeria politicians are under religious influence to gain power in the political system of the state. In an article titled "Islam and Politics in Nigeria," Falola (2009) believes that religious pluralism and ethnic differences do undermine the process of building a Nigerian-nation state. But the divisions prevent or undermine equally the attempts by one group or religion to impose itself on the country. Furthermore, Falola is of opinion that a combination of factors has made religion a powerful factor in Nigerian politics (Falola, 2009). First, is the failure of political leadership. Second, the failure of institutions and structures of governance has been interpreted as the failure of the state itself. To many Muslims, the failure represents the limitations of secular institutions. Third, the structural Adjustment Programme and its failure in the 1990's integrated tensions expressed as religious conflicts. As the economy declines, more and more people see religion as an escape or a source of opposition to the state. Finally, religion, like ethnicity, is a source of mobilization for political actors. Once a political candidate defines himself as a Muslim and his rival happens to be a Christian, politics can acquire the coloration of religious conflict (Oshelowo, 2015). Another belief is that Nigerians have demonstrated a strong link or alliance to their religious organisations than the political body. This perhaps, is one of the reasons why Nigerians have been adjudged as the most religious people on earth (Ojo, 2016).

The findings in the survey of ethno-religious crisis in Nigeria reveals that blood of innocent citizens in the country are shed and properties wasted on the basis of religious passion, fervour, emotional and emotive reactions, moral certitude and religiosity. (Omonokhua, 2018). Meanwhile, Omonokhua believes that the relationship that had existed in Nigeria between Religion and Politics could be perceived as a kind of symbolic and mutual extortion. This relationship has nothing to do with Inter-Religious conflict but the impression given is that Christians and Muslims are struggling for leadership position to outwit each other (Omonokhua, 2018). The scholar finally suggests that a government can give meaning to the life of the citizen by doing the will of God with the knowledge of truth (1 Timothy 2:4) (Omonokhua, 2018). He further says: "What Nigerians actually need is a change of attitude and interior conversion to be better human beings who care for the common good." Oshelowo, (2015) on this basis, is of the view that religion from the beginning of the Nigerian State has been playing and still plays fundamental roles in the political dispensations. It has been unofficially accepted as our nation's culture. Based on the above opinions, a brief summary of the six important roles of religious organisations in the political activities of Nigeria as given by some scholars can be highlighted as follows:

- Restraining or criticising the conduct of government.
- Encouraging political participants.
- Promoting democratic values and norms.
- Articulating and aggregating distinctive societal interests.
- Generating cross-cutting identities.
- Providing avenues for the development of leadership skills (Wikipedia, 2019).

X. Recommendations

First, every citizen of this country should not be coerced to embrace any religion at the expense of others by the government. The philosophy of the secularism should be strictly adhering to by all people. Government policies should not be formulated to support one religion against another.

Second, the government especially at the central should always put in place an all-inclusive type of administration. No tribe or religion should be favored than others. This is one of the major reasons for the breakdown of law and order in Nigeria. No section of the country should be taken care of at the expense of others.

Third, the government should always be truthful in the use of the state resources in developing the nation and in the provision of basic amenities for the Nigerian communities. Fraudulent activities, mal-administration and corrupt practices should be avoided. Leaders should lead by good examples.

In addition, electoral mal-practices should be discouraged, the judiciary should be allowed to do its jobs without executive interference, and there should be independence of the judiciary and electoral commission. Moreover, leaders of FBOs should not shield any erring members of their faith from being tried by the law court if found to have transgressed. Those who corrupted themselves with public funds should be tried according to the constitution without religious sentiment. Also, they should not use their messages to incite their members against others and the government. Likewise, FBO leaders should also watch out their own lifestyles. It is advisable for them to live a life of God fearing, moderate and simple that will draw people to God rather than that of immorality and corruption. Also, it is advisable for FBO leaders to live lives of sacrifice, honor and service to Divine Being and man.

Finally, FBOs should work together as a unit to cooperate with the Federal Government to overcome the incursion of the Islamist religionists especially Boko Haram, so as to return peace and security of lives and properties in the North East of Nigeria. Moreover, if Nigeria is to take her due place of glory in the comity of nations, the FBOs, their leaders and media practitioners must leave the league of ethnically compromised fortune hunters and be awakened to their social responsibilities of savaging politicians, edifying the public mind, fighting corruption and promoting equity, fairness and justice. It is when these factors and others are strictly followed that Nigeria can be sure of a peaceful and harmonious coexistence.

XI. Conclusion

This study has established that there are great synergies between religion and politics, and that Nigeria as a nation has failed in her relationship between the state and religion. The paper has also proved that many innocent lives have been terminated prematurely and valuable properties and resources wasted on the basis of religious passion, fervor, emotional and emotive reaction, moral certitude and religiosity. For Nigeria to be at peace therefore, this paper has also recommended that the Federal Government should stand up to her responsibilities, to always put aside sentiment, and be fair in her dealings with all religious groups. The FBOs are also admonished to live lives of morally uprightness, lives of sacrifice and lifestyles that are worthy of emulation. Furthermore, this paper also is of opinion that all citizens should aspire to be more matured on the spiritual matters, and to see themselves as their brothers' keepers. Finally, FBOs and government at all levels should stand up against religious extremists, corrupt politicians and citizens should also do their possible best to vote into government offices, politicians with credible credentials rather than voting on the bases of ethnic and religious affiliation.

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