

Religion as a Matrix for Lasting Political Legacy in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper argued that religious moral virtues are precursors to an enduring political legacy in Nigeria. Religious virtuous of love, sincerity and related concepts have been the motivation for good political behaviours. Ironically, robust literature on the relationship between religion and politics in Nigeria has shown an increasing incidence of violence, corruption and underdevelopment. Indeed, the interplay of religion with politics in the political history of Nigeria is believed to be one of the major problems responsible for the consistent religious bigotry and political crisis bedevilling the country today. Using the theory of duality of function, it is imperative to add that despite the strong link between religion and political crises in Nigeria, there seems to be aspects of religion that promote peace and unity in political administration. This paper established that religious virtues of love, honesty and so on are capable of influencing political actors towards sustaining enduring political legacy in Nigeria. Qualitative method of data collection was used in this study. Through desk-research method, various archival materials, journals, government documents and books were reviewed to draw the relation between religious moral virtues and lasting political legacy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Religion, virtue, political legacy, honesty, morality

Introduction

Religion has been an indispensable phenomenon in Nigeria. It has become an important factor in political discourse (Adigwe and Grua 2007). The influence of religion is not only limited to politics but its power influences every other facet of life. Religion plays important roles in daily lives of her citizens including the way people interact, choice of dressing, food and their politics. Among the Africans for instance, every occurrence is interpreted through religious prism.

In other words, all human experiences are explained through the “will and plan’ of a perceived supreme reality or divine being. This way of thinking most likely influenced the famous African traditional religion’s scholar, Mbiti (1969.1) to postulate that Africans are notoriously religious. Mbiti’s premise is rife in Nigeria as people tend to solely rely on religion; miracles and prayers to achieve economic, educational, political etc successes.

Studies on the role of religion in politics in Nigeria have shown an increasing hostilities and violence as Nigerians of different religious persuasions compete among themselves. Akpanika (2017) was right to argue that many of the violent conflicts in the world (and of course in Nigeria in particular) today involve religious animosities. The deepest tragedy of the history of religions is that the very movements that should bring human beings closer to each other and to their ultimate source and goal have time and time again become forces of division. In one conflict after another around the world, religious convictions and interpretations of revelation have been used and abused as justifications for violence (Azuma, 2008, p. 1-2). Thus religion has been used and abused to promote wars, violence and hatred among humans. The numerous religious conflicts in Nigeria and the ongoing Boko Haram insurgency () are a testament of the devastating influence of religion in Nigerian socio-political space. From this backdrop, it is not out of place to affirm that religion has been abused by men, hence the constant conflicts, violence and war among religious groups. One of the major factors in Nigerian polity is the link between religion and politics which people consider as inseparable. This leads observers sometimes to speak of the politicization of religion, and aver that it is against the original intent of the founder of religion or God himself (Van der Veer, 1996, p. 50). Despite the aforementioned negative influences, there seem to be a robust positive means in which religion lead to an enduring political legacy. One of

the blueprints of all religions (Islam, Christianity and African Traditional religion) is the virtue of love, kindness, almsgiving, honesty and so on. With the principles of duality of function in mind, it is not surprising how religion notwithstanding its negative influences could as well be source of human kindness and related virtues. With this background, this study focuses on inherent values in religion that can be viable in creating worthy and lasting political legacy in Nigeria.

Qualitative method of data collection through desk-research was used in this study. Through this style, journals, archival materials and books were mainly used and analyzed to draw relation between the religious virtues and the lasting political legacy in Nigeria. The paper is divided into sections which include Introduction, clarification of terms, Religion and Politics: The Embrace, Religion and politics in Nigeria since independence: A fraught relationship, Religion as a tool for creating lasting political legacy and the conclusion. This paper concluded that virtues of love, kindness inherent in religion are precursor to enduring political legacy in Nigeria.

Clarification of Terms

Religion. Religion is a complex phenomenon. It is therefore difficult to articulate a universally accepted definition of religion. Etymologically, religion is from three Latin words vis-à-vis *Ligare* meaning to bind, *Relegare* meaning to unite or *link*, and *Religio* meaning relationship. It denotes that obligation which we feel in our minds from the relation we stand to some

superior power(s). Aderibigbe (1997) corroborated in the words of Immanuel Kant who explained religion from a moralist point of view as:

The belief, which sets what is essential in all adoration of God in human morality... Religion is the law in us, in so far as it obtains emphasis from lawgiver and judge over us. It is a morality directed to the recognition of God (p. 6).

The strength of this explanation lies in the interaction it implies between the moral law giver (God) and man, who is the recipient of the law, with emphasis on the obedience it engendered from those who express a belief in Him. Furthermore, Milton Yinger explains religion as a system of beliefs and practices through which a group of peoples with problems of human existence. Emile Durkheim claims that religion is a phenomenon that unites people into a moral community, which must adhere to its ethics (Aderibigbe, 1997, p. 3). To Yinger and Durkheim, religion could lead to positive interactions and social identification through observance of and reliance on its ethical codes. The submissions also suggest that religion is a social instrument with the capacity to engender socio-political development in a society, depending on its usage. From the above definitions, it is observed that religion has serious social dimensions and implications with positive or negative effects depending on how man reacts and accepts the precepts, doctrines, principles and laws that form the bedrock of religion.

Politics: There is no single definition to politics. No scholar has furnished a universally accepted definition of politics; but some have offered different but overlapping definitions. The term is derived from two Greek root words *polis* meaning city and *tikos* meaning art, skill or method. It is the art of governing a city which according to Nwoko (1988, pp.2-3), represents an organized territory as a state under the jurisdiction of city. In this regard, politics is held to be the art of organizing men in a society to live and interact with one another for the realization of their social nature. It therefore requires the establishment of legal and government systems to facilitate this interaction. It is an essentially social activity inextricably linked on the one hand to the existence of diversity and conflict, and on the other, to a willingness to co-operate and act collectively. Politics is an everyday affair. Naturally, man is a political animal and makes use of politics all through his life, in his home, office, school, Church, Mosque, market, Organisation etc. it is about control, supremacy and authority.

Religion and Politics: The Embrace

Religion has been a major factor in Nigeria, affecting almost every sphere of life of the people. Politics, education, and social interactions are all shaped by religion and its associated beliefs. Religion appears to be a superstructure upon which every experience is explained. Nigeria as a multi-religious country has three dominant religions: African Traditional Religion, Islam and Christianity. African Traditional

Religion was the 'natural religion' (founded by the African forebears). It pre-dated Islam and Christianity on the African continent. Being the original religion of the people, it reflects the socio-cultural orientation, history, and legacies of the progenitors and forbearers. Besides, it emphasizes a belief in a supreme being that created heaven and earth. Traditional politics of the people has a strong linkage to belief in theocracy. In this case, the Supreme Being is conceived as the origin and source of all powers. He has full prerogative and exercises it over all. His will is absolute (Idowu, 1996, p. 37). Leaders derived their authority from Him (God), discharge their duties for Him as his direct representatives and were answerable to Him,- the Supreme Being. This is referred to as the concept of Divine right of kings. In Yoruba land for instance, the selection and appointment of kings (Obas) are based on the directives of the *Ifa Oracle*. Therefore, politics and religion in traditional society are intertwined and have direct influence on each other. This is still the situation even at the close of the 20th Century (Laguda, 2008).

Islam on the other hand, is believed to be a way of life and therefore governs and dictates the totality of life of Muslims from cradle to grave. As a result, their politics, economy, social values and interactions are often given Islamic interpretations based on the Holy Quran, prophetic practices and other sources of law recognized in Islam. Islam also believes in the concept of divine right of Mohammed and the Caliphs who succeeded him as direct

representatives of Allah. Hence Mohammed was the spiritual as well as the political leader of the Muslims during his lifetime. In line with the above beliefs, Abubakre (1984, p. 129) arguably writes that Islam is a way of life, which dictates the political ideology and practice in any Islamic society. Irrespective of the nature of the society, Islam encourages Muslims to hold on to its practices by allowing the Holy Quran and the *Sunnah* to be their guide. In the words of Akintola (1987, p. 138), we can conclude here that Islam allows for a spiritual relationship between religion and politics.

Invariably too, Christianity which is an offshoot of Judaism also believes in the interplay of religion and politics. In Judaism, Yahweh, the God of Israel is all in all in Israel's traditional, religious, political and economic thoughts. He vested the Israelites with the absolute authority and power to subdue, dominate, control and rule the heathen nations of the world, religiously, politically and otherwise. He is always interested in the wellbeing of both the religious, political and otherwise life of the nation of Israel. Besides, both Jesus, and the apostle Paul encourage political process and advocate respect for those offices since they are representatives of God (Matt. 22:17-20; Rom.13; 1-2). Indeed, Christianity also believes in the theocratic concept of governance, and allows for the inseparable relationship between religion and politics.

From the foregoing, it is evident that from the outset of the three main religions in Nigeria, religion and politics have effectively

complemented each other. Thus both the Divine (God) and man have their roles to play even though the positive result largely depends on the ability to follow the ethics and principles. Theologians aver that man is a religious animal just as political scientist postulate that man is a political animal. As a result, man can neither do without religion nor politics. He must synergize the two in his day to day activities. Consequently, both must influence each other. Thus, Adogame (2006, p, 126) argues that Nigerian politics is characterized chiefly by “politicization of religion and religionization of politics”.

Religion and politics in Nigeria since independence: A fraught relationship

Nigeria became independent in 1960 and a republic in 1963. Prior to that, the colonial administration had systematically introduced religion into the politics. During the colonial administration, Lord Lugard favoured indirect rule system. The system was believed to minimize cost as the locals became involved in the administration. It is well established that

Lord Lugard, also known as Fredrick Lugard was the governor general of Nigeria (1914-1919) during the British colonial rule of Nigeria. Theocratic rule in the Northern Nigeria attracted Lugard. Emirate system and style of organization that is consistent with Islamic principles were used in the political administration of most of the Northern Nigeria. Perhaps, Lugard favoured this system as he protected the Islamic institutions (Iwuchukwu,

2013). Consequently, the Islamic leaders were instrument of tax collections and control during the indirect rule system. It is likely that the benefit of saving resources and manpower through this system of indirect rule made the colonial government to protect Islamic institutions. To this end, the thought that Islam is favoured more than other religions in Nigeria became not uncommon. Whatever is the case, even after the end of the colonial rule, there has been an increasing competition among different religions in Nigeria especially between Islam and Christianity.

Today, the Nigerian political trend is characterized by instability, violent conflicts, discord, division, war and wanton destruction of lives and property; and religion is often blamed. Thus, every facet of the Nigerian political space and life has been affected. In the Muslim dominated north, for instance, Islam appears to be influencing politics while in the South, it is Christian ideologies. Given the above, religion then represents a strong social force in the politics of the nation considering its significance to the electoral process: formation of political parties and choice of leaders, its capacity for effective political mobilization, voting preference and behavior of the electorates, political legitimacy of the leaders, governance and other national issues.

In the formation of political parties, religion plays a dominant role. It is based on religious affiliation. It is, therefore, not surprising that the first political party that emerged from the north, the Northern People’s Congress (NPC), would overtly or covertly bore

the touch of Islam (Onapajo, 2012, p. 47). Then, despite oppositions from the non-Muslim groups such as the Tiv Progressive Union (TPU); Middle Zone League (MZL0); Middle-Belt People's Party (MBPP); United Middle-Belt Congress (UMBC); Northern Nigeria Non-Muslim League (NNNML); Birom Progressive Union (BPU), Islam legitimized their political hegemony in the north. Hence Islam marked the rallying political point of the Muslims with the motto-All Muslims Are one and attached its major agenda to the promotion of Muslim unity (Kukah & Falola, 1996, p.87). Consequently, challenged by the activities of Islam in the north, the political consciousness of the Christians was ignited and sharpened. The Christian-dominated Action Group ruling party in the South-West followed suit defying all oppositions by the United Muslim Party (UMP). As a result, Christianity started playing a political unifying force to Christians. Interestingly, political parties formed in subsequent political dispensations toed the same faith-inclined pattern. In the 1979 election, the majority of popular parties (NPN, UPN, PRP and NPP) were either associated with Christians or Muslims (Onapajo, 2016, p. 18) and in 1983 the same old major parties resurfaced (NPN, NPP and UPN) as in 1979. Till date, the pattern has not changed.

Religion is also a strong factor in the choice of political leaders; that is, presidential flag bearers, their running mates and governors. The practice most often is that if a Christian is a president, a Muslim automatically becomes the Vice President and vice-versa. It was either a

Muslim/Christian or Christian/Muslim ticket, otherwise the system will crash. For example, in 1979 election, the winning party, the National Party of Nigeria (NPN) adopted Muslim/Christian (Shagari/Ekwueme) and the Unity Party of Nigeria (UPN) that promoted Christian/Christian ticket lost the presidency. Further examples include, Obasanjo/Atiku, Yaradua/Goodluck, Goodluck/Sambo, Buhari/Osibanjo regimes as presidents and vice presidents respectively. Military regimes are not even exceptions. Examples are the Murtala/Obasanjo era which was Muslim/Christian ticket. When Obasanjo became the Head of State, he adopted the Christian/Muslim ticket. Both Abacha and Abubakar chose Diya and Akhigbe (Christians) as their second in command respectively (Familusi, 2012, p. 23-32). It must be noted also that at the state level, a gubernatorial flag bearer is often drawn from the popular religious group in the state. It is a Muslim for the Muslim states and a Christian for the Christian states. Even within the state, there is intra-religious politics in which the choice is determined by popular denomination. These, most often, have turned party primaries into a do or die affair.

From independence to the present, religion plays a key role in mobilizing the electorates and canvassing the masses for support and votes in both the federal and state levels. In this regard, political aspirants and leaders drew on religious ideas, practices and symbols as a tool of negotiation with the electorate and campaign for the masses' votes and support. On this, Oguntola-Laguda (2015) writes,

During the presidential election campaigns leading up to the 2011 presidential election, political Parties used religious images, symbols and icons as some of the tools of negotiation with the electorate. The candidates of People Democratic Party (PDP) and Congress for Progressive Change (CPC) visited religious ritual spaces to canvas for votes. It was reported in the media that the PDP candidate visited and participated in the worship services of prominent Pentecostal churches in the country. For example, he was at the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), The Lord Chosen Church and the Covenant Church. The three churches were the leading Pentecostal in Nigeria at the time. The candidate of CPC also visited churches. Islamic ritual places were also visited by both leading candidates (p. 227).

The same was true in governorship election in the southeast. Okafor (2011) observes that Catholic Priests in Anambra State openly enjoined their members to vote for Peter Obi (former governor) because of his religious inclination. According to him, he always clutched his chaplet tightly in his hands to demonstrate to the Catholic faithful that he was certainly one of them and they accepted him. Other states are not exceptions.

A widely recognized point of religious factor in Nigerian politics is that of the voting preference and behavior of the people. Experience of elections from independence to date

shows intense interest in religious affiliation. No wonder Muslim candidates win more votes in Muslim dominated areas and Christians in highly populated Christian areas. State elections follow the same pattern of voting. Johnston (2011) states that such interest gives explicit recognition to the correlation that exists between religious affiliation and commitment on the one hand, and voting behaviour on the other. That religious interests are expressed without recourse to the ability of the candidate cannot be disputed. Moreover, the voting exercise is fraught with violence and conflicts, and election results with disagreements, riots and mayhem in the name of religious interest.

Studies have shown that political legitimacy and dominance is the prime reason for some of the coups and counter coups in Nigeria from independence. Commenting on the January 1966 coup, Onapajo (2012, p. 49) argues that the Igbo felt aggrieved with the dominant regime of the Hausa-Fulani (Muslims) after independence. This being the case, the 1966 coup that ended the First Republic was given outright religious interpretation. Against this backdrop, Gumi & Tsiga (1994, p. 123) are of the opinion that "the plotters who carried out the January 1966 massacre should have had the courage at the time of the coup to admit their hatred for Islam as the real motive for their action." Thus it unfolded into a counter coup in July 1966 and finally degenerated into the civil war of 1967-1970. Even the later Gideon Orka attempted coup of 1990 was also understood from a religious point of view. Muslims pointed accusing fingers at the Christian

Association of Nigeria (CAN) as the architect of the aborted coup. The Ibrahim Babangida's government unofficially indicted the Christian Organization wherein 59 notable Christians were arrested and detained for 2 months for the coup (Falola, 1998, p. 112). It is also to be noted that the motive behind the formation of all the religious opposition groups and constitutional debates from independence to date is the struggle for political legitimacy and dominance.

In the light of the above, the political atmosphere was heightened. In the 1970s and 1980s, new Islamic movements surfaced to challenge the status-quo and, most especially to provide the impetus to the modernization agenda kick-started by the first prime minister of the northern region, Ahmadu Bello (Loimeier, 2007, p. 50). Worthy of note is the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs founded in 1977 as a unifying force for all Muslims. The Christians had already formed the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in 1976, following the emergence and rise of the new generation Pentecostal Churches of the 'born again' doctrine in the 1970s which strengthened the political might of the Christians. The 'born again' Pentecostals and traditional Christians who had earlier stiffly opposed each other over doctrinal matters, had to bury the hatchet and unite to give a stronger political weight to CAN, with the principal objective of challenging an 'Islamic oligarchy' (Kukah & Falola, 1996, p. 239).

Additionally, the entire constitutional debates from pre-

independence to the 1960 and post-independence, especially that of 1978 and 1998, were dominated by religious interest and intrigues. The Sharia debate which started in 1978 was so serious that it re-appeared in 1998 transition to democracy constitution debate and resulted to more religious acrimony and bigotry. Finally it was approved for internal use in Muslim states who may wish to apply the Islamic law to Muslim faithful only. Following the development, the Zamfara State Governor, Ahmed Yerima first adopted it in his state in 1999 and eleven (11) other northern states followed suit. Christians in the north interpreted the move as another attempt by the Muslim majority to finally silence their voice in the scheme of affairs. Thus, Archbishop Ola Makinde, Chairman of the Abuja chapter of CAN, echoes that:

...Part of the aim of the introduction of the political Sharia in Nigeria is to prevent or crush the spread of Christianity in the North. Another aim is to pull down the government of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo which the political Sharia apostles see as a government headed by an infidel. (Post Express, 25 July 2001).

The Christians, led by CAN, protested and the protest resulted into a serious bloody religious crisis that destroyed so many human lives and property worth millions of naira as well. Another issue that inflamed the polity was the debate on the Nigeria membership of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). The move initiated by Buhari and amplified by

the Babangida administration in 1985 almost tore the nation apart. This development did not go down well with the Christians, as it was perceived as a plan to Islamize the country and to gradually reduce the Christian religio-political strength in the national structure. It was believed to be one of the reasons for the Kafanchan religious crisis of 1987 in which many lives and property were lost. At the Federal Government's intervention, a 20 man committee of Christians and Muslims was set to resolve the issue. Despite every reason postulated by the Christian members, the Muslims argued that the prevailing customs and practices rooted in Nigeria's Christian colonial heritage give pre-eminence to Christianity over Islam (Kilani, 1998, pp.102-103).

Religion as a tool for creating lasting political legacy

Religion has a place in the lives of every nation, Nigeria inclusive. Irrespective of the faith or denomination, religion when truly practiced in its truest form, has been and remains sacred. It plays a vital role in purposeful leadership, community building, social justice, law and order, peacemaking, reconciliation, forgiveness and the healing of wounds, be it political, family or personal (Eso, 2003).

Religion molds an ideal heart in man for an ideal society. It is interesting, therefore, to note that those who struggle for political positions in Nigeria, in spite of their claims to be religious, are not faithful to the doctrines, teachings and precepts of their religions. They only

pay lip services to them. As a result, they abandon their religion once they had secured power to rule without any spiritual inspiration to lean on as a guide. Consequently, the result will always be counterproductive. On the contrary, therefore, Adeleye (1988, p. 75) states that;

Religion breeds an ideal heart in man to be able to be conscious of the need to have a clean heart by this, he will grow to have a philanthropic or patriotic thought before venturing to lead or represent his people in government of the state. In order words, religion will prepare the mind of man to a good politician who will constantly fall back on his religion to guide him. The teachings or traits of religion are expected to guide him to be able to lead his people aright as a politician with the fear of God in him. He will never consider himself first, rather he knows that he is the servant of the electorates – his people. In fact, we want to note at this point that Religion in an idealistic set up serves as oil to lubricate politic for a peaceful political process and lasting political legacy. It is inconceivable that peaceful and prosperous society – a society which nourishes a spectacular diversity of religions and cultures, can be established and sustained without directly and substantively involving religion in its design and support.

Religion also has the capacity to reform characters and behaviors of man by transforming the inner man – the heart. The heart is the fountain of

all thoughts; the engine room and the basis of all actions. It is the target of every religious teaching. Once the heart is won, the individual is holistically won and that automatically leads to a change of character and action that will help in creating the desired human atmosphere to make for lasting political legacy.

Religion can bring about a worthy political legacy by inculcating high sense of morality. Human potential comes to fruition when cultivated in a spirit of selfless service and humility, without pride, with no desire to be seen as superior to anyone else, and always ready to accompany others in their own acts of service. Religion teaches about service, love, peace, justice, contentment and other altruistic values that build virile society. In developing moral consciousness in the people, religion acts as an inspiring factor in building moral probity that will aid lasting political legacy. Omoregbe (2003, p.309) favours the above argument when he asserts that;

Religion can bring about sustainable political development through the inculcation of high sense of morality: sense of duty, selfless service, love of one's neighbor, sense of humanity, abhorrence of violence, love for peace, and contentment with what one can Legitimately have incorruption, justice etc. in the citizens as well as the leaders.

Furthermore, religion can function as a unifying factor to ensure a lasting political legacy, because, religion influences every aspect of human lives

and serves as basis for human existence. Religion can boost inter-religious dialogue to ensure ultimate religious tolerance and peaceful inter-religious co-existence in the society. In this sense, religious leaders orientate people about the essence of religion and its efficacy in the society. By this the leaders guide against hypocritical teaching that can disrupt peace and tranquility in the polity. Also, ideas are exchanged which serves to remove ignorance and eliminate religious bigotry and conflicts. Prayers and worships are also great instruments in this regard, to sooth and direct the minds of the worshippers to the Supreme Being (God) and to remind them of the unflinching obligation and obedience they owe to Him as people who serve a peaceful God. From the foregoing interpretation, it is imperative to infer that if indeed guided by the principles of their religion(s), Nigerian politicians would be conscious of their political actions and see religious ethics as a matrix upon which sustainable political sanity could be built and worthy political legacy enthroned.

Recommendations and Conclusion

Summarily, the effect of religion on politics is bifocal, in the sense that it is both positive and negative. It is positive in the sense that religion as earlier identified; is value-driven and it naturally robs off on the polity the things that mar political stability, through the participation of ardent religious believers. The negative could be deciphered from the perspective of sectarian tendency, where religious bigots do anything in the name of religion to ensure that positions or

offices are gained by their adherents. Such people stand on position that their ideals and beliefs dominate any environment they find themselves (New York Times, 2005); and the activism of the self-centred politicians who play on religion as a tool to secure political office or position without abiding to ethics and principles of religion.

This paper therefore recommends that, to achieve a lasting and worthy political legacy, religion should serve as a guiding factor in all political dealings in Nigeria with proper and adequate religious education on the purpose of religion in life *vis-a-vis* the essence of human existence. At this level, effective personal responsibility and accountability can be instilled into the citizens and institutions in the society to positively transform the polity. It is observed that what is lacking in Nigeria is that level of spiritual education that can empower every individual to refine their character and contribute meaningfully to the achievement of peaceful political advancement and the enthronement of lasting and worthy political legacy.

There is again an urgent need for accurate knowledge of the teachings and beliefs of religions other than ones' own. Ignorance is believed to account for much of the fear, suspicion and hatred that lead to violence and open confrontation between Christians and Muslims in Nigeria. Such knowledge will draw adherents closer, dispel the fear and clear the misunderstanding that tends to divide the nation than unite it. This could be achievable through consistent ecumenical seminars,

followed by inter religious dialogue. Azuma (2008, p. 2) strengthened the above argument when he succinctly posits that; "No world peace without peace among religions, and no dialogue among religions without accurate knowledge of one another." In an issue of national interest, therefore, dialogue should be adopted for peace to reign and a 'better-tomorrow' inaugurated. In fact, it is pertinent to note, in conclusion, that the problem in Nigeria does not lie in the impulse of religion on politics, but in the level of moral standard of the citizens, their level of patriotism towards our acclaimed beloved nation and obscured understanding of religion and its role in human existence by the citizens.

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