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Religion: God Now Serves the Nation

Richard Lopes

De Nobili College, Pune 411014

Abstract: Inspired by Harari's understanding of religion, the author reflects on the relevance of religion in the context of COVID 19. Emerging questions about the relevance of faith, religion and God have been raised with urgency today. What would be our response to these questions? How do we get to the depth of our Faith, to a deeper experience of God and to a renewed understanding of Religion? The author claims that today's world infected by Corona provides us an opportunity to create another world and show that another Religion is possible, another Church is possible. The author argues that true God is found in the Humans inter-connected and inter-related in the network of relationship striving to create global nationalism.

Keywords: God and Religion, Religion for Corona Times, Global Nationalism, Yuval Noah Harari.

Introduction

The world today is different from what it was a few months ago. Things have changed. We are faced with the biggest challenge of our times: COVID 19. Do we have a response to it? The future looks

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bleak and uncertain. In his book *21 Lessons for 21st Century*, Yuval Noah Harari comes up with 21 challenges the world will be facing in the 21st Century. Though the book was written much before COVID 19 infected the world, it becomes more relevant in today's context of sickness, selfishness and blame game.

I am inspired to reflect one of the chapters of his book 'Religion' precisely because in the context of COVID 19, questions about the relevance of Faith, Religion and God have been raised. What would be our response to these questions? How do we get to the depth of our Faith, to a deeper experience of God and to a renewed understanding of Religion? I wish to claim that today's world infected by Corona provides us an opportunity to create another world and show that another Religion is possible, another Church is possible.

Lord, knowing fully well that you are the Lord of this tragedy we experience, we surrender ourselves to you. We pray for all those who have died of this terrible sickness. As we grieve their parting, may we draw strength from your tragic death and glorious resurrection.

Relevance of Religion

In the 8th Chapter: "Religion – God Now Serves the Nation", the author poses the fundamental question: "So how relevant are religions such as Christianity, Islam and Hinduism?" and asks further whether the religions can help the world solve the major problems faced by the world today. He distinguishes these major problems into three types, namely "Technical Problems", "Policy Problems" and "Identity Problems" (118)¹

Harari claims that traditional religions are irrelevant to technical and policy problems but are extremely relevant to identity problems –

¹ The numbers in bracket refer to the page numbers in Yuval Noah Harari, *21 Lessons for 21st Century*.

but the irony is that they constitute a major part of the problem rather than a potential solution (119), and that is the challenge for the 21st Century: How to make religion POSITIVELY relevant for people to have a sense of belonging to their own group while at the same time becoming all inclusive.

Japan is presented as an ideal example of how people can integrate modernity with religion, interiority with progress, rootedness with openness. Japan upheld the native religion of Shinto, in fact they reinvented Shinto, from “a hodge-podge of animist beliefs in various deities, spirits and ghosts” to “an official version of Shinto, while discouraging many local traditions.” The Japanese elite fused the ‘State Shinto’ with very modern ideas of nationality and race, they “picked from the European imperialists. Any element in Buddhism, Confucianism and the samurai feudal ethos that could be helpful in cementing loyalty to the state was added to the mix” (125-26).

Every religion and every nation can learn from Japan. This is the task of every authentic religion. Indeed many states and religions have begun to follow the Japanese example. The Orthodox Christianity in Russia, Catholicism in Poland, Shiite Islam in Iran, Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and Judaism in Israel are seen as the examples that follow models similar to the ‘State Shinto’ Model (126). Indeed, the ‘State Shinto’ Model could be a great model for the modern religion. We need not be dogmatic about our dogmas. Only Dogma that makes sense is the good of the entire creation.

But the exaggerated loyalty to the State could have its draconian consequences as in the case of the fanatical state religion of North Korea called ‘Juche’ (126). India faces the danger of the draconian rule due to the One Rashtra, One Bhasha, One Praja ideology of the Sangh Parivar. The Ganga-Gau-Ghar-Vapasi movement of the Sangh Parivar and the draconian Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) by the BJP led government in order to declare the “they” as non-Indians are clear indications of the Indian version of the Juche.

The author rightly says that “the division of humans into Jews and Muslims or into Russians and Poles still depends on religious myths” in the 21st Century (123). This is very true of India. Elections are won in India not by showing solidarity with the poor and less privileged. Elections are won by polarizing people on the basis of religion. The decades long fight between the Hindus and Muslims over the Ram Janmabhumi – Babari Mosque dispute has brought the Hindu Nationalist Party (BJP) to power, not because of their love for the poor and their humanitarian works, but because of their Hindu Nationalistic Fanatic stand, all in the name of Lord Ram (*Ram ke Naam*) equating ‘being Indian’ with ‘being Hindu’. Those liberals including the Hindus who don’t agree with this ideology are asked to leave the country and go to either Pakistan or Italy. In this connection the author rightly says that “in the twenty-first century religions don’t bring rain, they don’t cure illnesses, they don’t build bombs – but they do get to determine who are ‘us’ and who are ‘them’, who we should cure and who we should bomb” (123).

There are beautiful practices in different religions that bring the members together in bonds of fellowship and charity for people of their own, and at the same time there are ugly practices that have divided people, discriminating on the basis of ideology, theology and caste system etc., finding in their scriptures justification for this discrimination. But as the author himself says, “whether beautiful or ugly, all such religious traditions unite certain people while distinguishing them from their neighbours” (124). Religions play a huge role in creating identities such as ‘we’ and ‘they’. This is very true of India. The politicians backed by the religious ‘Gurus’ ‘Yogis’ and ‘Babas’ take advantage of this role of the religions to divide and rule – but the tragedy is that the poor and vulnerable have to pay a huge price for that. That is one of the reasons perhaps why today’s ‘Masters of Suspicion’ declare God as dead, Religion as the Opium of the People and Dogmas as Enslavement of Humans who are in fact born to be free.

The biggest problem is that the traditional religions are part of humanity's problem today and not part of the remedy. Religions have a lot of political power, but that does not account much to solve the problems of humanity. The COVID 19 is a classical case. No religion can offer any solution to the problem; neither are people expecting anything from them, except some humanitarian charity works and prayers. Religions divide because they are used by the dictators as the handmaid of modern nationalism. They make things difficult for a tiny minority who wishes to engage in dialogue, collaboration, networking and reconciliation and make it "even harder to transcend national differences and find a global solution to the threats of nuclear war, ecological collapse and technological disruption" (127). These religions call themselves as 'God's chosen Nation', 'New People of God' or 'Sanatana Dharma' in a tribalistic sense, getting trapped in the 'frog in the well' mentality. The ideas such as 'God's chosen Nation', 'New People of God' or 'Sanatana Dharma' are meant to create 'World Family Ideal' (*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*) or 'Kingdom of God' or 'Universal Religion' that unites all into one. Alas! The original charism of the founders of Religions has not been taken as a mandate by their followers.

There are two contrasting scenarios that the world is facing today: Dividing factors such as 'Nationalism and Religions' that lead to "problems such as nuclear war, ecological collapse and technological disruption" (127) on the one hand and on the other hand, 'a Single Civilization of Global Nationalism', making the whole world as one Nation. Making the world a global village is a great challenge. Religions must look for values that would unite and harmonize the human community and the cosmos rather than dividing and disintegrating it. In order to make the world one family living in one global village, the religious and political leaders must go beyond their selfish motives to the common good.

Religion: Solution or Problem?

Right at the beginning in the introduction to the book, the author declares that he has a global agenda and looks "at the major forces that

shape societies all over the world, and that are likely to influence the future of our planet as a whole” (10-11). He acknowledges that religion is relevant and plays a vital role in addressing the problems of our world, but at the same time being the part of the problem. The author agrees that “Billions of humans still profess greater faith in the Quran and the Bible than in the theory of evolution” (118).

Harari gives us a taste of an encounter between Science and Religion in many of the themes he deals with in the book. It is self-evident that Science gives scientific answers, yet there are issues that Science cannot address. There one enters into the realm of Religion. In the present crisis of COVID 19 the entire scientific community is still grappling with the search for an effective vaccine for the Pandemic.

Religions teach many positive values. We need to integrate them in our life journey. Both Science and Religion can be great means to solve problems faced by humans provided they are used for the good of the people and not for mass destruction.

We can agree with the author at many points, but must emphatically contest that religions do have a lot to offer in the areas of Technical problems and Policy problems as well as in the area of Identity problems. The author attempts to show that “traditional religions are largely irrelevant to technical and policy problems. In contrast, they are extremely relevant to identity problems – but in most cases they constitute a major part of the problem rather than a potential solution” (119).

We shall look at each area to show how religions are still relevant in the areas of Technical Problems as well as Policy Problems, besides being relevant in the area of Identity Problems.

What has religion to offer in the area of Technical problems?

We don't fully agree with the author who says that the “victory of science has been so complete that our very idea of religion has changed” (119). The COVID 19 situation has exposed the inadequacy of Science and Medicine in treating the pandemic effectively. When people are in distress and don't know where to look, Churches, Mosques and Temples become places of relief. Religion and religious

leaders still play an important role in the area of Technical problems. The situation of COVID 19 has raised questions about the relevance of religion, but so has it also about the efficiency of Science and Medicine. Till a solution is found, we come across ‘the priest going out with the Blessed Sacrament’; ‘the Prayer service and blessing Urbi et orbi by Pope Francis’, and people believing that it is because of the Prayer Service by Pope Francis at St Peter’s Square on 27th March 2020 that the graph of COVID 19 patients in Italy not only began to flatten, rather started becoming smaller and smaller by each day. That is why millions of people all over the world joined him to pray the Rosary with him as he invited the people affected by the pandemic and those involved in the fight against COVID 19 to recite the decades of the Rosary on the Eve of Pentecost referring to the upper room where the Apostles prayed with Mary the Mother of Jesus (Acts 1:14). Even in India, the Prime Minister invited people to get involved in ‘the clapping of hands, cymbals, the lighting of lamps etc’, use the religious symbols of India. In the Christian circle, all the Churches of India came together virtually on Pentecost Sunday, 31st May 2020 at 12:00 noon to pray the Ecumenical prayer for the end of the Pandemic.² All these are expressions of something that is deep within. It does not compensate for the medical work of the doctors and nurses, but adds something to the efforts; even the doctors and nurses would pray before engaging in their medical ministry. Prayer is a powerful tool and that is why the US President Donald Trump has ordered the Governors of US to open the places of worship for the public. He identifies “houses of worship – churches, synagogues and mosques – as essential places that provide essential services”³

² Leaders of Catholic, Protestant, Orthodox and evangelical fellowships of India rang bells, sang hymns and prayed together online at noon on Pentecost Sunday, 31st May 2020, evoking the power of the Holy Spirit on the nation as it struggles against the growing number of Covid-19 infections. The United Christian Forum, an ecumenical group, organized the prayer initiative. The prayer ended with the singing of the national anthem, indicating Church’s solidarity with and loyalty to the Nation.

³ Trump told a news conference at the White House on 23 May 2020 (Yahoo News).

All the same, we must agree with the author that the religious leaders because of their ignorance and arrogance and good at making excuses have fallen out of favour in comparison to Scientists and Medical personnel.

What has religion to offer in the area of Policy problems?

In India, Ganga, Gau Mata-Mutra-Gobar, Ghar Vapasi are all policies backed by the government because they have a strong mileage to gain from such movements that are ruled by religious ideology. Though negatively, religion indeed plays an important role in making policies in India. The lynching of the Dalits, the anti conversion persecutions and the discrimination against the minorities etc. are all results of religions playing their role in the government protecting the perpetrators of the law and order in India.

The author himself agrees that religion and religious leaders positively address the policy problems when he cites the example of the Liberation Theology movement of Latin America and the *Laudato Si* (and now *Querida Amazonia*) of Pope Francis (122-23). These movements in the Church and many other movements all over the world carried out by different religions are based on the eternal religious principles, as drawn out by the religious texts and the founders of the religions. The religious texts interpret the harmony in the cosmos and human dignity as the will of God. God has created us in God's image and likeness to be co-creators and hence it is our responsibility to maintain the order (*rta*) that would enhance human life and cosmic order. This is the Kingdom ideal that Jesus preached and commanded his followers to live by; this is the ideal that we come across in various religions of the world: *Lokasamgraha* of the Bhagvad-Gita, *Mangal Maitri Geet* of Vipasana, *Shanti Mantras* of the Upanishads, *Shalom* of Semitic religions, *Karuna* and *Metta* of Buddhism etc. Governments following one or the other religions with such religious principles make their policies that are in congruence with the teachings of the religious texts and their founders. Religion indeed plays an important role in addressing the Policy problems.

What has religion to offer in the area of Identity problems?

The author gives an interesting example citing it as the Joy of living a purpose driven life: Though about 50% of ultra Orthodox Jewish men never work in Israel, as they dedicate their lives to studying Holy Scriptures and performing religious rituals, they are found to be living a contented life. It is so because Faith, Religion and God make a lot of sense to them. As the author points out, “these ultra Orthodox Jewish men report higher levels of life satisfaction than any other section of Israeli society. This is due to the strength of their community bonds, as well as to the deep meaning they find in studying scriptures and performing rituals” (49)

Religion, Faith and God help the person to go to the depth of one’s being, where one finds the true meaning of life. It is through these factors that one comes to the realization that there is a core, a cave of the heart, a secret chamber in the life of human person, where one turns to when confronted with decision or crisis. Here is where one is able to realize one’s true identity, as a dignified child created for greater things that come in the realm of the Divine.

The human person is ‘Spirit in the World’, an identity elaborated by Karl Rahner, human as well as spiritual; related to the divine as well as to the human reality. The Spirit, Intellect and Will play an important role in the life of the person. That is why in Indian tradition we come across the three Margas – namely Jnana (Intellect), Karma (Will) and Bhakti (Spirit) in pursuit of the ultimate Truth. Through these Margas one realizes that religion is not a private affair – me and my God; it is rather a communitarian and cosmic endeavour. There is a horizontal dimension to it. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), the service to the least of God’s people (Mt 25:31-46), the Washing of Feet and the Last Supper (Jn 13) are significant events in the life of a believer. We come across this aspect of the love of the neighbour in other religions as well. The practice of Zakat in Islam, Karuna in Buddhism, World Family ideal in Hinduism etc are all integral parts of one’s identity. Religions help people to move towards Global Nationalism (the whole world as one global village inter-related and inter-connected and no more alienated nations) through the process of Dialogue, Emancipation and Justice. The true follower of any religion

does not have any ‘tribalistic’ understanding of the reality. He or she rather engages in the pursuit of Global nationalism. I am because we are, is a strong conviction of the Ubuntu people. All of us are moving together as co-pilgrims towards our final destiny. That destiny is understood as the Omega point, Jennat or the realization of the Advaita of Brahman and Atman (Aham Brahmasmi), singing together the concluding verse of the *Rg-Veda*: United our resolve, united our hearts, may our spirits be at one, that we may long together dwell in unity and concord (10.191.4): *Sam ghachadhvam sam vadadhvam sam vo manamsi janatam; Samani va akrutih, samani hridayani vah, samanam astu vo mano, yatha vah susahasati.*

We are on a pilgrimage moving from dystopia to utopia. This process is spiral and not linear. The more we advance further, the deeper we enter into the Mystery of life and in the process there come times when we wonder whether we have fallen to the state of dystopia again? But here we need to look at the reality with a holistic perspective. Religions teach us that everything is inter-connected and everything has its consequences – good and bad.

The Response of the Church Today

In the midst of the chaos created in the world largely by humans who are in the bondage of egotism and self-centredness, authentic religion plays an important role to liberate people. The longing of each human person is expressed in the Upanishadic prayer (Br Up 1.3.28): *Asato Maa Sad-Gamaya* (lead us from untruth to Truth), *Tamaso Maa Jyotir-Gamaya* (from darkness to Light), *Mrtyor Maa Amrtam Gamaya* (from death to Life). This is the purpose of human existence: that all may experience Truth, Enlightenment and Fullness of Life. This same longing is expressed by different religions in their own way for the followers of those religions.

The different religions have a role to play for human beings to achieve this goal. The Church in India should play that role effectively, if it wants to be relevant in the present context of India. COVID 19 has brought life to a halt, locked down thoroughly, but more than that the plight of the migrants, refugees and labourers is pitiable. Millions of

them have been walking barefoot for days at times towards their homes. The issue of the migrant labourers in India becomes acute simply because more than food and security, these people seek the inner joy of being with their dear ones. They want to die at home with their dear ones. They are ready to let go the security of food and employment that will definitely come their way once the pandemic is over.

Commitment to the suffering poor makes for authentic religions and followers of the humanitarian religions the need of the hour. As the author says, suffering teaches us the truth about the universe, about the meaning of life and about our own identity (268). Since suffering is an important thesis of the author, we look for answers in religions. The Church in India can look for answers in her Christian tradition to deal with the suffering of millions of Indians. The call from the burning bush (Ex 3) was heard by Moses because he had experienced the plight of the people, enslaved, oppressed and suffering. The Church can look upto the Cross and know who they are, whom they follow and for whom they should take the way of the Cross.

Whatsoever you did to the least of my people that you did unto me (Mt 25:31-46), is the gospel for India. This gospel has been lived by many people today in India. There are many Corona warriors and messiahs of the migrants reaching out to the suffering lot. They receive the inspiration from their own religious tradition. Their desire is to make the world a little better place. They think along the same lines as the author himself: “If we cannot leave something tangible behind – such as a gene or a poem – perhaps it is enough if we just make the world a little better? You can help somebody, and that somebody will subsequently help somebody else, and you thereby contribute to the overall improvement of the world, and constitute a small link in the great chain of kindness” (244). There is a very inspiring Hindi movie named ‘Jai Ho’ starred by Salman Khan who is known as Jai in the movie. This Jai of ‘Jai Ho’ creates a system that would encourage citizens to help each other. Each day, citizens are to help three other people in return to the help they have received from someone else. The three people would in turn help three more people, and the chain of people helping grows exponentially and they are able to create a network of inter-related, inter-

connected and inter-concerned people. This is because the Jai Ho 'religion' is able to foster kindness and a sense of community among the citizens. The positive effect of this chain reaction is that those who help the others have a sense of feel good factor. They repeat the sutra when they help the others: "Don't say thank you for the help you have received. Instead, try and help three people, it feels good. And tell those three people to help three people each." Give and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you (Lk 6:38). The Gospel of the Lord is lived by many people of goodwill belonging to many 'Jai Ho' religions.

Time has come that we come out of our 'frog in the well' mentality, our narrow tribalistic nationalism and embrace a world that is a 'global village'. The Catholic Church and many world religions are moving in that direction. Not fanatic dogmatism, but liberal humanism is the creed of many religions today including the Catholic Church. For centuries, the Catholic Church held that there was no salvation outside the Church. This arrogant and triumphalistic attitude of the Church led to many problems all over the world for most of the two millennia. Only after the middle of 20th century with the advent of the Second Vatican Council, the Church made a paradigm shift in her approach to other religions and ideologies. From the theology of 'Discontinuity' to the theology of 'Fulfilment' the Church has now made the shift to accepting the other religions as 'Ways of Salvation' (Kunnumpuram, 1971). *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus* has been changed towards the Church's efforts to becoming the 'World Church'. Karl Rahner suggests that what began in the Second Vatican Council was the first step toward the evolution of a truly 'World Church.' This world church will make up the 'third stage' in the history of Christianity. The first stage was the church in its Judaic form, as found in the earliest period of the New Testament; the second stage was the church transformed into Greco-Roman, European or Western culture characterizing Christianity for most of its history. The third stage, or world church, will be the church as it incarnates and reassesses itself within new cultures and enters into dialogue with Islam and Eastern religions. This will make the church a new church – 'not *totally* new, but *genuinely* new' (Cf. Knitter, 1985). Ever since the Papacy of Pope Francis, the Church is becoming more and more the Church of the poor and the Church that cares

for our common home, ideas that are strikingly evident in *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si*.

This path would then lead us to the conviction that ‘Another World is Possible’ and ‘Another Church is Possible.’ Then it would not be my Church and your Church, my Religion and your Religion, my Nation and your Nation, rather we all will belong to one Global Family. Another world is indeed possible and for that Religions of the world have a great role to play. Such an all inclusive approach would bring to surface the authentic experience of God who is the God of all and not of one particular tribalistic religion that thinks of itself as the ‘Chosen People’. Such an approach would help us to go to the depth of our Faith, which has the divinity and dignity of the human person originating from One God who has created everything as good. Such an approach would help us understand Religion in its original sense: to bind together – all people into one ‘People of God.’ Today’s world infected by corona and by many other evils provides us an opportunity to come together in order to create a new world. Such an all inclusive religion would enable us to respond to the challenges of our time. As the author says, the challenges of our times are global in nature. The ecological crisis, the control of AI over the human beings, the issues raised by biotechnology and many grassroots problems that the world is facing are global in nature. But these challenges will force us to be “ever more interdependent. Though humankind is very far from constituting a harmonious community, we are all members of a single rowdy global civilisation” (103).

The author makes a practical suggestion to be relevant in 21st Century. He says, “A person can and should be loyal simultaneously to her family, her neighbourhood, her profession and her nation – why not add humankind and planet Earth to that list?” (116). Here India has a greater scope to be a model of Global Nationalism in miniature. India is one country but many states, cultures, religions, races, etc... a miniature world, and that is why it is called the sub-continent. India could do well to extend her self-identity as unity in diversity first to South Asia, then to Asia and to the world. And the Church in India can play a great role by making this utopian desire a reality.

Conclusion

The author has presented the role of religion very creatively in the chapter on 'Religion' while drawing our attention to the fact that religion has a potential to make or break the world. Today more than ever, religion becomes important and relevant but at the same time could be dangerous and divisive. The leaders of the world take advantage of this double edged characteristic of religion and mesmerize people to propagate their hate mongering agenda. Perhaps because of this, while accepting the "effectiveness or potential benevolence of religion" and the inspiration people can draw for human cooperation in order to engage in humanitarian mission, the author would equate religion as a made up story, believed by a billion for a thousand years (206).

The author tends to equate religion with 'Goebbelsism', the phrase "a lie told once remains a lie but a lie told a thousand times becomes the truth" attributed to the Nazi propagandist, Joseph Goebbels. The Nazi regime went on repeating their lies in order to create an opinion against the Jews, weak, sick and old in order to create their so called pure race. What happened to Nazi rule in the middle of 20th CE and to many other tyrants in the history of the World will be the fate of the hate mongers in the name of Religion and Nationalism. Abraham Lincoln's words are very true: "You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all of the people all of the time." Religion cannot sustain if it is some sort of 'fake news' or a lie told repeatedly in order that billions of people believe it for thousand years. But an authentic message of any true religion would stand the test of the times. Already in the Acts of the Apostles we come across the 'Gamaliel Test' (Acts 5:33-39) as Gamaliel cautions the Jewish leaders not to be in a hurry to discard the New Religion as fake: "If it is of God you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God."

The credibility of any religion or of any person is lost when one tends to compromise for petty reasons. Unfortunately, the same thing happens to the author himself. Though the author claims to be a fighter for freedom of expression and a promoter of democracy, he seems to be changing the narrative by changing the examples. The Russian translation of his book proves the point. In order to appease Putin, the Author in the Russian translation of his book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century*, has omitted lies told by Russian President Vladimir Putin. The author has admitted that the adaptation and censorship was done with his consent. "Whitewashing the

Russian government and positing the president of the United States as equivalent to it (the United States is still a democracy) creates more damage to readers than it contributes to them” (Slyomovics, 2019).

True followers of authentic religions would not compromise for any petty gains. They would stand the test of the times, facing bravely the consequences of their prophetic stand, in order to serve the One True God. I would suggest that the chapter should be re-read with a new title: “Religion – Humans ought to serve God.” This One True God is not the one described by different religions in their narrow tribalistic way. That would be a form of idolatry. True God is found in the Humans inter-connected and inter-related in the network of relationship striving to create Global Nationalism. Such One True God could be served by human beings through their own religions.

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Richard Lopes, SJ, teaches systematic theology at Jnana Deepa, Institute of Philosophy and Theology.
Email: richylopes@gmail.com ORCID:
0000.0002.3050.2365



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