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Orthodox Artistic Culture as a Traditional Means of Sacralization of Basic Social Ideals

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This paper studies the phenomenon of a canonical orthodox icon-painting as a historically unaltered sacral space, which has operational characteristics of a sacralization system while semiotic-figurative structure of this space contains information on values of orthodox religion. A role icon-painting has played in the life of the Russian nation (in retrospective) and a part icon-painting plays in present-day social and cultural space were both studied. And finally, problems of modern icon-painting and a part icon-painting plays in formation of a positive national and religious identity, peculiarities of one's perception of icon-painted characters were all studied in this paper. The topic covered is currently important due to sacralization of mass culture values and global desacralization (secularization) of values which are important to religious communities such as justice, generosity, conciliarism, patriotism, love, loyalty and others. Main method used is literature review of recent (up to date) studies on this topic. A critical analysis of Russian and foreign literature sources published during the last 10-15 years was carried out, with focus on system of basic cultural ideals' sacralization. A brief review of major "sacral theories" is presented, as well as a brief review and a critical analysis of recent papers on the topic. It is inferred that the sacral art is able to resist desacralization of basic generally valid values and promote re-sacralizing of objects, which have historically lost their sacral meaning. This fact, in its turn, contributes to the establishment of generally valid values of the nation and formation of a positive national and religious identity.

Keywords: sacralization, social studies, religion, social ideals, Orthodoxy, identity.

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Research area: culture studies.

Introduction

Canonical orthodox icon-painting is a unique phenomenon of the Russian culture. Until recently icon-painting was studied only as a specimen of primitive medieval art, icon was perceived as a historical artifact. Fine art experts were carrying out their research in iconography and iconology omitting such important aspects

as icon theology and its philosophy (Della Dora, 2009; Kenna, 1995; Koptseva, 2014; Koptseva et al., 2013, Lindquist, 2001; Pop, 2009; Saad, 2010; Semenova, 2009; Shevzov, 1999; etc). The end of 20th century was marked by revival of the Orthodox Church after it has been in oblivion for almost half of a century, and the turn of the century was a time it flourished. Along with the Church

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orthodox icon-painting was revived, new graphic structure have been formed and established in icon-painting. At the moment major icon-painting development trends are already distinguishable, as well as problems that arise during new-icon establishment. New-icon's potential as an actor of cultural universals in modern society is identifiable. All above mentioned doesn't allow to see icon as an artifact. New research in such fields as art criticism, cultural studies, ethnography and theology enables us to see how valuable icon could be for development of modern Russia's spiritual culture through formation of a positive national and religious identity (Benjamin et al., 2010; Koptseva et al., 2013; Lawton & Bures, 2001; Peek, 2005; Thumma, 1991; etc.).

Concept of identity is widely used in modern sciences that study human society and different aspects of its life. Identity makes a person involved in a culture, facilitates a feeling of structure in life (Goffman, 2009; Ericson, 1959; Tajfel, 2010, etc). In this article special attention was paid to Russian national and orthodox religious identity, as to two important parts comprising spiritual culture (Bassin, 2003; Duncan, 2005; Jasinskaja-Lahti, & Liebkind, 1999; Latin, 1998; Nesteruk, 2003; Razumovskaya, 2010, etc.). Spiritual culture is a summation of a person's moral experiences within different areas of activity i.e. household activities and social production, work and rest, science and art, within the sphere of human relations with nature, God and one's self. Spiritual culture is developed from experience of all living people as well as experience of generations gone. Spiritual culture specifically sets a conceptual field to the whole culture in general as it is the nucleus of civilization. It is only natural that religious studies and theological science pertain to spiritual culture. Religious identity is a form of collective and individual consciousness, build upon a realization of one's belonging to a certain religion; religious identity

forms psychological me and a concept of the world through relevant religious dogmas (Krylov, 2012). National identity implies self identifying with certain political community (nation state) and cultural community (national culture).

Formation of positive national and religious identity is a complex process, especially during the time of mass globalization and internationalization of social life. Pending is the question whether modern icon-painting can become a foundation that would assist formation of positive national and religious identity, as such identity is the core of Russian society's spiritual culture. To answer this question we need to understand what is icon for a religious person and a non-religious person, what is its historical significance and its significance in modern post-secular sociocultural space.

Literature review

During the whole period of Christian church existence there were supporters and opponents of icons and icon worship, disputes persist and from time to time aniconism movements arise. These events are caused by the fact that Orthodoxy embraces contradictory statements, and often both supporters of icon-worship and idoloclasts use the same quotes from the Holy Scripture in their arguments. Supporters of icon worship were Fathers of the Church Basil the Great, Theodore the Studite, John of Damascus. They all have pointed at dual nature of religious worship art that is existence of unseen foretype concealed behind the visible image, and to this unseen foretype the worship is passed on. John of Damascus in his "Three defensive words against ones condemning the holy icons" writes about existence of unseen foretype concealed behind the visible image and points out that an icon itself is not the foretype, but is designed: «for good, for benefaction, for salvation, in order to recognize that which is concealed with the

help of disclosed and unveiled things [through the medium of icons], and in order to cherish beautiful and feel with it, in order to turn from antipathic, i.e. the evil, and grow to hate it » (Louth, 2002).

Understanding of icon further developed within the framework of these postulates. Russian philosophers Vladimir Soloviev, Sergey Bulgakov, Eugeny Trubetskoy, Paul Florensky, Semen Frank and others also thought that the sacral art stands on the boundary of two worlds and reveals the unseen world through the physical world. E. Trubetskoy was convinced that icon painting is the innermost layer of Old Russian culture, and thought catholicity to be its most important principle, along with externalization and edifying the catholicity in society. He paid special attention to artistic and esthetical side of an icon, as it is designed to express the spiritual essence of what it depicts. Religious philosopher and theologian Paul Florensky studied icon theme deeply and extensively. For him an icon is primarily a symbol, inseparable from its foretype, and it serves as a medium of religious thought. Through beholding an icon one gets knowledge, but not from the outside, but via ascent to the foretype one recreates in oneself a memory of the spiritual world, of one's motherland, of forgotten truths (Zenkovsky, 2003). Russian theorists of Orthodox esthetics recognized that icon has the God's grace of its foretype, therefrom springs faith in wonderworking icon so widespread in Orthodox world (Ware, 1993). In the eyes of a religious person icon never was a simple object from the real world, it always was something "absolutely different" (Otto, 1958), and this provided icon with a special significance, made it "holy", "sacral". To understand the essence of icon and its role in the life of society better, we need to understand what is "sacral".

A question of "sacral (holy)" as a part of the real world started to be of concern for

researchers in the middle of the XIX century. However problem of "sacral" has set to its final form only at the boundary of the XIX and XX centuries, due to anthropological revolution which took place in philosophy of that time. Such sophists as L. Feuerbach (2004), E. Durkheim (2013), F. Schleiermacher (1999), R. Otto (1958), O. Spengler (1991), M. Eliade (1959) and others studied theories of sacral.

According to E. Durkheim "sacral" is a derivative of society's social life, "sacral" is a natural historical foundation of genuinely human existence. "Sacral" is opposed to "secular (lay)", the latter also interpreted as individualistic(egoistic), and mix of sacral and secular engenders "filthiness" (Durkheim, 2013). F. Schleiermacher turns a concept of "sacral" into a subject of phenomenology of religion, and develops the theme as absolutely objective reality, as ultimate holiness that reveals itself in different forms, and as an originally intrinsic to human soul sense of sacred. German theologian-phenomenologist R. Otto made a major contribution to understanding of concept of sacral. He defines sacral as something "completely different", not exhausted by rational and moral factors. It is an ultimate value, it is spiritual, absolute, self-sufficient, eternally transcendental and supersensible (Otto, 1958).

Religious historian and anthropologist of XX century M. Eliade has developed these ideas. He gives the following definition to "sacral": "Sacral is something opposite to secular". According to M. Eliade "sacral and secular" are two forms of existence, two situations of being that a person adopts, and a person's place in the world is in accordance with his choice. Within his theory of world's perception by a religious and non-religious person M. Eliade develops the role of sacral in a person's and society's life most vividly. Fundamentally different characteristics of "space of existence" perception are the basis

of differences in world perception by a religious and non-religious person. Thus space of a religious person is non-uniform, it is discrete, divided into parts that vary in their significance, and these qualitative differences arise from the fact that sacral is perceived as real. Therefore some aspects of existence get sacralized. This discreteness or presence of sacral spaces is specifically responsible for making macrocosm (in its secular embodiment) stable. Discreteness holds together the macrocosm, accentuates some Center, vertical axis, around which one can build his system of values. Therewith the system of values would correlate with axiological system of a society that is united by one religion. A person's attitude to home, family, village, city, motherland and enemy is based on his/her religious beliefs. Moreover, a religious person takes responsibility on a scale of all things, because he perceives reality as Cosmos and being created after the image and likeness of God he creates his own world similar to the cosmic model. By doing so he gets closer to God. All this assigns meaning to existence (Eliade, 1959).

Secular perception of space M. Eliade defines as "splintery", it is practically uniform and neutral, everything is of the same significance, and there is no sense-making Center and no general landmarks. Eliade also points out that there is no space that is completely desacralized. No matter how great is the extend of the World's desacralization, a person cannot completely brush aside religious behavior. A person's need for a foothold makes him create his own system of values, to sacralize some parts of his existence space. Monuments, memorable dates, things that retain the quality of uniqueness, all these get sacralized, they get to be some sort of "sacral" in a person's individual universe (Eliade, 1959).

Russian spiritual culture had been forming on the basis of Orthodox worldview during

many centuries. Orthodox Cosmos model had been an archetype in accordance with which an Orthodox Christian had been building his life, and because of that Orthodox religion may well have a national status. Orthodox Church is still the largest religious organization within the territory of the Russian Federation, and one way or another it influences the society. Orthodox Church plays a big part in revival of religious culture traditions, in re-sacralization of values that have lost their significance during the atheistic soviet period. Orthodox icon-painting is the mean that can contribute to this process. "In Russian traditional icon-painting such cultural universals as "veracity", "Sophia", "good", "evil", "love of wisdom", "beauty", "duty", "salvation", "personality", "human being" are embodied", – writes a modern Russian philosopher, theologian and culture expert D. V. Pivovarov. "Icon (as well as church) is a spiritual model of Universe and a place where Grace of God is" (Pivovarov, 2005). This undoubtedly makes icon one of major representatives of the Orthodox idea.

D. V. Pivovarov defines sacral as something that pertains to a cult, worship of particularly valuable ideals. It is opposed to worldly, secular, lay and is manifested through pious (driven by the idea of presence of the omnipotent power) human behavior. The Church and the State work out a complex and delicate system that forms peoples' attitude toward basic ideals of existing culture with various methods. This is aimed at formation of society's system of values. Since birth a person is submerged into some system of sacralization. "Norms and rules of attitude to one's fellow human beings and distant people, attitude to family, state and Absolute are the first to be sacralized" (Pivovarov, 2005). According to V. Zhukovsky and D. Pivovarov sacralization systems consists of:

a) a sum of ideals sacred for this society (ideology)

b) psychological methods and means of convincing people in absolute verity of these ideas

c) specific symbolic forms of embodiment of sacred things, sacramental and hostile symbols

d) special organization (for example, Church)

e) special activities, rituals and ceremonies (Zhukovsky & Pivovarov, 2014).

Therefore icon gets directly build into a system of sacralization. First of all, icon is a “specific symbolic form of embodiment of sacred things “, it embraces “sum of ideals sacred for this society “, moreover it is in some way “ a mean of convincing people in absolute verity of these (sacred for this society) ideas “ and in one way or another icon takes part in all “special activities, rituals and ceremonies” of the Orthodox Church. Consequently, icon-painting contains the most powerful potential for a system of sacralization, icon is able to have the major influence on people, within a confession and outside it.

Russian icon-painting dates back to X-XI centuries. It is initially brought from Byzantium, but quickly and naturally fused together with Russian tradition, and by the end of XI century original icon-painting schools started to form in Ancient Rus. The XIII century was marked by discontinuation of cultural bonds with Constantinople and appearance of major national art centers. By the middle of XIV century Russian icon-painters accumulated vast experience, solid number of skilled national icon-painting masters was reached, icons acquired a strongly marked national graphic structure, and by absorbing many elements of folk esthetics Russian pictorial art attained its own artistic language. Icon’s perception by peasants had a peculiar character (agricultural people were the biggest part of a Russian population), that is icons quickly acquired a protective quality in peasants’ community, people prayed to them for protection

from fire, livestock sickness, for help to travelers on their journey etc. (Bowit, 1976; Evdokimov, 1990; Leeuw, & Green, 1963). Icons were carried around during numerous Ways of the Cross, county people went to icons on pilgrimage. Folk “uneducated” orthodoxy which flourished in a county-side was based on an emotional perception of an icon’s image. This folk orthodoxy often intertwined with heathendom, i.e. it became above all else a way of life and not a collection of ceremonial activities (Il’beykina et al., 2015; Kistova et al., 2014; Koptseva & Kirko, 2015; Zamaraeva et al., 2015). Up untill the end of XIX century there was practically no unbaptized people or people buried without an orthodox burial service, it was hard to find a house without icons. Ordinary minds’ attitude toward icon was interrelated with an ideal model of “Holy Russia” (Elsher, 1996).

As is evident from all said above, icon was an incredibly significant element of the Russian culture, and consequently preservation of its artistic and graphic structure (which embraces the ideological framework of orthodoxy) was one of overriding priority goals for the Church. And this goal is still relevant because currently icon’s artistic and graphic structure is being transformed in order to adapt to spiritual needs of the modern society. Being traditional (canonical) in its essence, icon has to always stay extremely time-sensitive, responsive to spiritual demands of a society in a particular time period (Murray & Murray, 2006). Being in line with time is a very important factor for icon, since icon’s perception depends directly on a historical moment, conditions of social life, on how human thoughts and moods harmonize with something that is icon’s essence (Stupples, 2009). Otherwise icon would fade in importance. In the process of search for a form of a “new icon” icon-painters and the Church face problems which can be united under a single term – “anti-dogmatization”. The

danger of “anti-dogmatization” is that it can lead to desacralization of icon.

Anti-dogmatization is a consequence of distortion of the icon-painting canon. This canon was developed over many centuries. It is a special and unique symbolic artistic-graphic language, which makes an icon “more than itself”, because it shows much more than is depicted (Uścinowicz, 2007). Anti-dogmatization might also be an elevation of one of icon’s functions over its dogmatism, which is in fact manifested through canon distortion as well. It is worth mentioning that there are many interrelated and inter-deterministic icon functions. At different historical periods and in different life domains the nature of their interaction changed, however the dogmatic function, the function beyond all functions, always stayed the most significant (the function that embraces the basics of religious doctrine) (Billington, 2010; Bowit, 1979; Rise, 1963). The dogmatic function specifically was a foundation, by virtue of which icon kept its distinctive Russian character, it made icon universal, above-history.

The most indicative of modern icon-painting problems that lead to anti-dogmatization is an analysis of saints’ images canonized on XX century Cathedral. Iconography of the most of them is not quite set and difficulties that modern icon-painters face fully come out here. Researches that study this subject highlight that the major problem is depiction of historical details, i.e. clothes, attributes, landscapes, portrait features of newly-canonized saints. At the heart of this problem is lack of understanding of icon’s essence and its place in the Church life by most modern icon-painters (Oksak, 2013).

Typically images of clothes of those martyrs who died in XX century are out of accord with icon-painting practice. For example intellectuals Yu. Novitskii and I. Kovsharov are depicted on icons wearing laic suits in accord with fashion of

that time. Eugene the Warrior who was expected to be canonized but wasn’t was depicted in a camouflage suit. Latter image was unusual and repelling due to its novelty, not serving icon’s purpose, however if Eugene the Warrior had been depicted in clothes of medieval warriors it would’ve been a discrepancy. A question as to what an icon-painter should do in such cases stay’s opened.

In iconography of newly celebrated saints, tsarist (royal) family members, people of top social stratum and top Church officials there are also many distortions. Most often than not these people are depicted wearing clothes too festive, the fabric too rich in ornamental decorations, wearing regalia indicative of intravital saint status and women wearing lots of jewelry with bright gems. Overall these icons resemble full-dress portraits more than holy images. Esthetical icon function (in its secular aspect) becomes prevailing, dominant, it overshadows dogmatic, faith-teaching, didactic and other icon functions (Oksak, 2013). Predominance of esthetical in an icon destroys functions’ synergetic unity and diverts an observer from perception of an foretype concealed behind a visible image and causes him to feast his eyes on an outer beauty. Esthetics of an icon image should not be viewed separately from its meaning, an icon esthetic function should serve as a manifestation of its spiritual essence. Depiction of intravital physical imperfections of newly celebrated saints (St. Matrona who was blind, depicted with a blindfold on, glasses on Protoiereus Grigorii Serbarinoy, Hieromonch Serafim Saravskij with a staff and so on), depiction of a skyline and classical perspective drawing are all distortions of the icon-painting canon. Such images highlight realities of the earthly world, whereas an icon should be a symbol of the World Above. Depiction of a three-dimensional space in an icon is an illusion of this space, and as any illusion it implies a deception, therefore

an icon image should be two-dimensional, flat, symbolic. Saints should be depicted spiritual and dispassionate, unweighted by mundane troubles and illnesses, because when one gets to the World Above he is transformed (Kornblatt & Gustafson, 1996; Kondakov, 1927).

Cessation of traditional icon perception during soviet atheistic period is the main reason for icon anti-dogmatization, i.e. its partial desacralization. This loss of traditional icon perception pertains to laic population as well as to the most part of religious population. The next reason results from the above mentioned, i.e. along with revival of icon in the end of XX century many false explanation of icon-worship and false icons appeared. These false icons did not weren't in accord with iconographic canon, with high spiritual and moral requirements of the Orthodox teaching (Lossky & Ouspensky, 1982) therefore they formed a wrong understanding of religion in general and wrong understanding of icon in particular. This in its turn leads to icon's anti-dogmatization. These false icons mainly addressed political topics (they depict government leaders, religious and religious and circum-religious figures, i.e. I. Stalin, I. Groznii, Peter the Great, G. Rasputin, Protoiereus Nikolai Gur'yanov), develop a patriotic theme ("Bogoroditsa-voskresitelnitsa Rusi", "Yako orlya kril'ya" – "God's Mother is the savior of Ancient Rus", "Like eagles wings"), mark events that resulted in many deaths ("Bogomater katinskaya", "Chernobilskii spas", "Beslanskie muzheniki" – "Katyn God's Mother", "Chernobyl Savior", "Beslan martyrs"), react to social issues ("Plach Iesusa ob abortah" – "Jesus cry about abortions") (Trapeznikova, 2013). The final goal of true religious art is not a arousal of feelings or communication of impressions, but a symbolic representation of higher realities (Savkina, 2012). False icons are empty. When a person looks at such "icons", he perceives a simulacrum, which

is unable to break uniform texture of reality. He doesn't see a symbol of a foretype. Simulacrum is build over a religious symbol and by being build over it undermines the basis of this symbol, deprives the symbol of its sacral substance. Therefore mix of secular (lay) and sacral in a false icon engenders "filthiness" (Kurakin, 2011). However due to their relevance these "impure" icons are first to become an item in mass-culture.

As for traditional canonical icon becoming an item in mass-culture, there are different opinions. Some researchers think that wherever a true icon is, in a house of God or in a museum as an item of mass culture, it remains a tool of heavenly emanation, it calls out piety and wakens religious feelings (Evdokimov, 1990). "Out of its spiritual space an icon can be a doorway of Church, it can summon and encourage a perception. Icon image's essence signals that this image is otherworldly, doesn't belong to a secular society, and thereby its spiritual-esthetical origin is escalated. This can be immensely useful at an early stage of icon perception. Nevertheless further spiritual growth of a person by the medium of icon image perception will definitely lead that person to the Church, to a sanctuary. At least this is what canonical orthodox icon is created for." (Nikolskij, 2012). Icon's pervasion into the masses has a positive rather than negative effect. In favor of these statements speaks the fact that traditionally to include general public in religious culture and initiate it to embrace religious values the religious cult was carried out of house of God (in orthodoxy). A person without a religious denomination was included into the Church activity, procession of the Cross, etc. Through these activities one acquired a religious experience and was introduced to the Church (Sazonova, 2014). Inclusion of icon into modern mass-culture can be considered an evidence of its performativity, which is a traditional orthodox

method for values' translation and introduction of orthodox values to a wider population.

Yet there is an opposite opinion, an opinion that it is important that an icon is located in a house of God, and often this is what makes it holy. Icon perception out of church puts it on a par with other masterpieces of art, and this may result in icon fetishization (Derrida & Anijar; 2002; Glagolev, 2009; Petrash, 2007) and promotes desacralization. P. A. Florenskij was totally against displaying icons in museums. According to him (and many theologians agree) icon should be perceived by a person within an integral church space, within the synthesis of church arts (Nikolskij, 2012).

Whatever the attitude toward displaying icons outside church space is, the fact that the religious art within mass-culture resonates with people greatly remains unaltered. Moreover, the religious art resonated with people not only within the framework of its traditional presentation, but it resonates to even greater extent in the process of its defiling. In this case a non-religious person's attitude to icon reveals itself, and such person would often protect an icon, and thereafter icon is resacralized via its public defiling. A perfect event to illustrate this happened in Moscow in 1998. There was an art exhibition called "Iunii bezbozhnik" ("Young atheist"), where a participant, principal of Moscow School of Contemporary Art presented a performance, in the course of which he axed orthodox icons. This provoked indignation not only in religious crowd, but in people who thought themselves non-religious as well. Public reaction was so strong that the performance was

discontinued, a criminal case was opened against the performer, which led to his emigration (Kurakin, 2011). Such reaction is indicative of the fact that soviet iconoclastic period and modern western influence haven't entirely desacralized icon in the nation's consciousness, and that a process of its resacralization is not only possible, but is already happening.

Conclusion

In consciousness of modern society icon is still stands firmly as a national symbol. Such status makes it one of the most powerful means of existing sacralization systems. Icon is a symbol of Russia and icon keeps information on values common to humanity within its semiotic-figurative structure. These values traditionally are an axiological foundation of orthodoxy. Besides icon translates these universal human values as values of Russian Federation, which promotes not only resacralization of the values but also promotes positive national and religious identity of the Russian Nation, unites it around one Center. Sacralization of basic social ideals through the religious art helps self-determination of a person in modern post-secular, disintegrated world, and forms a uniform system of crucial landmarks, which is a solid foundation for good tendencies in further socio-cultural development as this development is determined by a society's spiritual culture. Such close interaction of "social" and "religious" is historically traditional for Russian culture, and revival of this close interaction in modern socio-cultural space is in essence a revival of national tradition.

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Православная художественная культура как традиционное средство сакрализации базовых социальных идеалов

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В статье рассматривается феномен традиционного канонического православного иконописания как исторически сложившегося и неизменного на протяжении многих веков сакрального пространства, заключающего в себе функциональные особенности системы сакрализации и несущего в своем семиотико-образном строе информацию о ценностях православной религии. Показана роль иконописи в жизни русского народа как в ретроспективе, так и в современном социокультурном пространстве. В данной работе освещаются проблемы, существующие в современной иконописи, и роль иконописи в формировании положительной религиозной и национальной идентичностей, а также особенности восприятия иконописных образов. Данная тема является весьма актуальной на фоне обширной глобализации и сакрализации ценностей массовой культуры и десакрализации ценностей, значимых для традиционных религиозных обществ, таких как справедливость, свобода, жертвенность, соборность, патриотизм, любовь, верность и др. Основной метод – обзор существующих современных исследований по данной проблематике. Сделан критический анализ отечественных и зарубежных литературных источников, изданных за последние 10-15 лет, особое внимание уделено исследованиям системы сакрализации базовых идеалов культуры русского народа. Произведен краткий обзор основных теорий «сакрального», а также краткий обзор и критический анализ статей современных исследователей заданной области. Сделан вывод, что сакральное искусство способно противостоять десакрализации базовых общезначимых ценностей и способствовать ресакрализации объектов, ранее утративших свой сакральный смысл. Что, в свою очередь, способствует становлению общезначимых духовных ценностей народа и формированию позитивной национальной и религиозной идентичности.

Ключевые слова: сакрализация, социальные исследования, религия, социальные идеалы, православие, идентичность.

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