

Activity for Teaching the Sociology of Religion

I created this activity to encourage active learning for an Introduction to Sociology class. In these introductory classes, students come from diverse major backgrounds and often are early in their college careers. For this reason, any activity I create for classes such as this one is designed to encourage both mastery of the material, but also to help students work on their ability to utilize a sociological perspective.

The activity described below is designed to be used on the first or second day when the topic of religion is introduced in an introductory class (total time: approximately 1.5 to 2 hours for lecture and activity). Its most basic purpose is to teach students the sociological definition of “a religion.” More than that, however, I want students to engage with the diversity of religion present in our society. As described below, I chose to use three uncommon or extreme religious groups that students were likely not overly familiar with. After the activity concludes, however, I think it is important that the instructor engages the students in discussion about the connections that can be made between the activity and the wider sociopolitical forces that influence shared images of other religious groups.

In this document, I have included a detailed summary of the short lecture that I give before the activity to introduce students to the topic of the sociology of religion. I also provide instructions for conducting the activity, the worksheet that I distribute to each student, and the documents that are shared by each group.

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A note: while all of the summaries, worksheets, etc. in the document are my work, I cannot claim total creative authorship of this activity. The idea came from a conversation with a colleague who had heard about a similar activity on a smaller scale. For my own class, I expanded the idea and designed it allow for group-based active learning.

Lecture Summary:

To start the class: ask students to recall what it means to use the sociological perspective. Have a student define it for the class. Then ask students, “using your sociological perspective, what do you think are topics that a sociologist might study if they want to learn about religion?” (record on chalkboard)

Important topics (make sure that these come up in discussion):

- religious practices
- the history of religion around the world
- the sociopolitical development of religion
- the role of religion in society
- universal themes across religions
- the social structure of religion

Note that in the sociology of religion there is particular emphasis on the recurring role of religion in nearly every society that has existed since recorded history began. Also that sociologists are interested in the effects that religion has on society, but also the effects that society has on religion.

Now ask students to define the term “religion.” (record ideas on chalkboard)

According to Durkheim (1912), “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.”

Ask students: what type of sociological perspective do we associate with Durkheim? (functionalist) Ask students: how is this definition functionalist? (it explains the purpose of religion by what it does in social life- unifies societies) Ask students: how close did we get to Durkheim’s definition as a class?

The overall idea is that, according to Durkheim, we need religion to bring people together and to help get them to work together toward a common purpose; in other words, people need to be integrated into society. Social cohesion often occurs through the creation of shared symbols or a common value system.

Ask students: what are some non-religious symbols that we use in the U.S. to create social cohesion? What are some symbols that certain religions use to create social cohesion?

Religion is good at creating this cohesion because it provides people with things like: common values (ask students for examples), common experiences (ask students for examples) and common interpretations (ask students for examples).

According to Durkheim, in early societies, religion was especially important because it was the only institution that could perform these roles- formal governments did not usually exist.

Now ask students to think about another prominent theorist they've been introduced to: Marx. Ask students: what do you think Marx would have to say about religion. Guide the discussion toward his interpretation of religion as ideology.

Marx thought that religion was ideology- which is common to all sociologists. According to Marx, however, we need to analyze the ways that religion related to the forces of exploitation in the Capitalist system. Ask students: use your conflict perspective- how could religion help Capitalism to flourish?

Possibilities:

- religion makes people feel better, and blinds them to the true nature of their situation
- religion provides justifications for being poor in this life- the Bible says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor

This is why Marx (1977) said: "Religion is the opium of the masses." (discuss with students)

A good current sociological definition of religion is (Giddens 2006): a cultural system of commonly shared beliefs and rituals that provide a sense of ultimate meaning and purpose by creating an idea of reality that is sacred, all-encompassing, and supernatural.

Key elements:

1. Religion is a form of culture- shares all characteristics of culture such as shared beliefs, values that create an identity
2. Religion involves beliefs that take the form of ritualized practices- all members engage in behaviors that identify them as members of the community
3. Religion provides a sense of purpose- feeling that life is ultimately meaningful

Ask students to name some types of religious bodies that they can think of (record on chalkboard).

In sociology, there are four typologies that are usually used to describe religious bodies: ecclesiae, denominations, cults, and sects.

Ecclesia/Church: a church is considered to be a large and all-encompassing religious body that tolerates no religious competition. They are often highly connected to the economic market and political system of a society. Ask students for an example (the Roman Catholic church in the middle ages). An ecclesia is similar to a church, except that they are not quite as good at encouraging the all-encompassing worldview among their members. Example? (state churches in some European countries)

Denomination: denominations exist in societies where churches do not hold a religious monopoly- they are one religion among many. Denominations tend to be considered

legitimate and may attempt to influence state policy. They are also usually at least tolerant of religious pluralism in the society in which they are situated, and they train and employ professional clergy. Example? (the Methodist Church)

Sect: a new religious group that forms to protest elements of a parent religion. Most commonly, sects form when a group of members become concerned with what they perceive to be liberal trends within a religious organization. Most denominations in the U.S. today originally were sects that broke away. Interestingly, leaders of sects often come from lower socio-economic classes than the average member of the parent religion. Ask students: why might that be the case? Example of a sect?

Cults: new religious groups that can form without breaking away from a parent religion-but also can be like sects in that way. The most important distinction of a cult is that the group advocates for belief in something new or something that has been lost or forgotten (new prophecies, lost scripture). Cults are also likely to be led by a charismatic leader (example: John Smith beginning Mormonism with the Book of Mormon). Tendencies of cults include (keep in mind that these are tendencies; there are always counter-examples): emphasis on esoteric ideologies; membership by the socially disenchanting; dissipation after the death/discrediting of the charismatic leader. Ask students for an example of a cult (the People's Temple).

At this point, introduce the activity.

Activity: Is this a religion?

In this activity, I ask students to draw upon what we have learned about the definition of a religion and types of religions to analyze an organization (that may or may not be a religion) using information I provide to them.

Instructions:

1. Divide the class into 3 groups (or 6 smaller groups that will eventually combine into 3 if the class is large enough).
2. Provide students with the worksheet (see page 6).
3. Provide each group with information on the three different organizations (information packets that I used in class are provided below).
4. Instruct students to read through the packets, and then work as a group to answer the questions provided on the worksheet.
5. If the class is in 6 groups, have them now combine into 3 based upon the organization that they were assigned.
6. Once students have completed the worksheet and agree on their answers within each group, have each group take a turn describing their organization to the class. Ask: do they think the organization is a religion? Why or why not? (Make sure that they use the sociological definition). If it is, what type? What would Durkheim and Marx have to say about the organization? Does anyone in the class disagree or have questions? (Encourage discussion about each organization)

Important information to know about the Church of Body Modification (to share with students after that group has finished presenting their answers): the CoBM is a legally recognized religion in the United States. It was created to legally protect the right to modify one's body and not face discrimination as a result.

What is a religion? Worksheet

Using the provided packets, answer the following questions as a group. Be prepared to discuss your answers with the class.

1. Is this organization a religion according to the sociological definition? Why or why not?

2. What type of religion is it? (If you decided that it is not a religion, what type does it most closely resemble? Why?)

3. How would a functionalist theorist understand and discuss this organization?

4. How would a conflict theorist understand and discuss this organization?

Packet 1:

The Church of Body Modification¹



The Church of Body Modification² is a nondenominational congregation that teaches ownership over our own bodies. The Church's purpose is for our modified society to harmoniously return to its spiritual roots that have been forgotten.

We are not here to offer spirituality to you so much as we are here because of the spirituality that is already in all of us; often expressed through what we do to our bodies. The church is a place for all of us to stand together and create a stronger foundation for the future. What is already inside and outside of all of us does not deserve to be shut down or ignored.

The Church of Body Modification is an interfaith church whose members practice an assortment of ancient body modification rites which we believe are essential to our spirituality. We believe that especially in these uncertain modern times, it is doubly important that we never forget these activities, and that to do so would smother a part of us that we consider to be so important: our freedom of expression. Our desire to express our spirituality on our bodies. It is our belief that by practicing body modification and by engaging in rituals

¹ All information provided here is drawn from the Church of Body Modification Website: <http://uscobm.com/>

² This form of body modification includes suspension and ritual branding- membership is not defined by simple piercing or ink (nose piercing, tattoo, etc.)

The act of suspension is hanging the human body from (or partially from) hooks pierced through the flesh in various places around the body.

There are many different reasons to suspend, from pure adrenaline or endorphin rush, to conquering ones fears, to trying to reach a new level of spiritual consciousness and everything in between. In general, people suspend to attain some sort of "experience".

Some people are seeking the opportunity to discover a deeper sense of themselves and to challenge pre-determined belief systems which may not be true. Some are seeking a right of passage or a spiritual encounter to let go of the fear of not being whole or complete inside their body.

Others are looking for control over their body, or seek to prove to themselves that they are more than their bodies, or are not their bodies at all. Others simply seek to explore the unknown.

of body manipulation we strengthen the bond between mind, body, and soul and ensure that we live as spiritually complete and healthy individuals.

Each of our ministers must be dedicated to educating people about safety and awareness. Whenever possible, each of our ministers must do all they can to help you on your path to spiritual growth.

We have made an effort to be inclusive of every one of our members while creating this doctrine. We have tried to keep it simple so as not to exclude the individual religious beliefs of anyone.

The Church of Body Modification was formed for the body modification community to reconnect with the roots of our spirituality within our culture. In many societies there have been rites of passages that brought our children to understand the culture of our growth, and bring our youth into adulthood. The mass population experience incidents that are usually dismissed as the change of life. There came a point that a group of people formed to regularly discuss the ancient societies where body modification was a vital part of the change of life into adulthood. The group continually gathered regularly to debate the loss, or misconception of these ritualistic traditions. As a group we agreed that rites of passage still exist largely in present day, and that learning the look and feel of these ideals is what we as modified individuals require to be whole in our mind, body and soul. Learning this history of our spiritual motive was the drive to begin the Church of Body Modification. As the Church began to pull together and open its doors we realized that there was so much more that we could accomplish in so many positive areas of teaching acceptance, safety and the variety of body modification in our advancing society.

We gather as a positive influential congregation to teach and learn from each other, and those cultures that succeed our present thrive for knowledge and acceptance. The Church of Body Modification is the spiritual hub in which modified individuals around the world will find strength and procure the respect from society as equal, intelligent, feeling human beings. Modified individuals will no longer be dismissed as a minority in our world. We have a voice and strong spiritual connection with our modifications. It is now that we will take back our traditions, whether old or new, and own our bodies so that we may practice our body rites. This is our birthright.

Our ultimate goal is to bring all of us together. We can share our spirituality and bring our strength to one another. The day will come that we are able to change discriminating laws based solely on the fact that we have come together. The day will come that our efforts to work with the medical community will pay off. For everyone of us who has ever been made to hide ourselves, the day will come that we worry about it less and less.

We want to help you on the spiritual path you have already chosen if at all possible.

Others are looking for control over their body, or seek to prove to themselves that they are more than their bodies, or are not their bodies at all. Others simply seek to explore the unknown.

Statement of Faith

As followers of this faith, it is our purpose to educate and inspire, to share ideas, and to help each other achieve our dreams. We strive to unify and strengthen our mind, body, and soul so we can overcome any challenges we may encounter. We assert and protect our rights to modify our bodies and to practice our rituals.

We believe our bodies belong only to ourselves and are a whole and integrated entity: mind, body, and soul. We maintain we have the right to alter them for spiritual and other reasons.

Affirmation of our living, breathing, physical beings is paramount to our self-identities and helps us define who we are. The Church of Body Modification promotes affirmation and growth of a more expansive perspective of our physical and spiritual being.

Packet 2:

Satanism³



I. Definition of Satanism

Many people use the term “Satanism” to refer to very different religions and practices. In America, some evangelical and fundamentalist Christian organizations have used the term to define as "satanic" any practice other than their own particular versions of Christianity. A more common cultural definition includes any religious practice that some consider part of the occult, including Wicca, Vodun, Santeria, and other Neopagan traditions. All of these, however, have completely different beliefs, practices, and social structures, and none of them are “Satanic.” In order to better understand the term “Satanism,” one must first examine the roots of the word.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers three definitions of the word “Satanism”:

1. A Satanic or diabolical disposition, doctrine, spirit, or contrivance. 2. The characteristics of the ‘Satanic school.’ 3. The worship of Satan, alleged to have been practised in France in the latter part of the 19th century; the principles and rites of the Satanists.

This first definition originated from *An Apologie of the Church of England* written by Thomas Harding (1565). During the 16th century, the word Satanism referred to both Protestants and Catholics, depending on which Christian group was using the term. The second definition refers to any writings or teachings of authors and poets such as Lord Byron. And, the third definition refers to the actual worship of Satan as a god. For a more detailed look at these three definitions, and a discussion of 19th-century “Satanism,” see Gareth J. Medway, *Lure of the Sinister: The Unnatural History of Satanism* (2001).

While these definitions are useful in understanding the roots of the word “Satanism,” none provide solid characteristics of what Satanism actually incorporates. As well, none of them explain modern Satanic practices such as those of the Church of Satan or the Temple of Set. For the purpose of this web site, the following is offered as a working definition of Modern Satanism.

³ Information provided here is gathered from: <http://www.churchofsatan.com/home.html> ; <http://www.dpjs.co.uk/> ; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Satanism>

II. Modern Satanism

Most modern Satanists are atheistic. They do not believe in or worship any specific deity, Satan or otherwise. Instead, they honor what they consider the spirit of Satan. Modern Satanists tend to follow what they believe are the ideals of Satan, and present him as an ideal whose traits are to be emulated. Satan is often represented as a symbol of resistance to dominant religious traditions (e.g., Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu). Some examples of organizations that follow this practice are the Church of Satan, the First Church of Satan, and the Temple of Set. This form of Satanism is generally referred to as “philosophical Satanism.”

While they are in the minority, some modern Satanists are theistic. They believe in Satan as a real entity. The Order of Nine Angels, for example, believes that Satan, as well as other “dark forces,” are individual entities beyond human control. Members of this group strive to become “one” with these sinister beings, and seek “to create new, more highly evolved individuals” through the practice of what they call “traditional Satanism” (Long 1994). This form of Satanism is generally referred to as “religious Satanism.”

As with any other religion, there are divisions of belief within modern Satanism, both between different groups and between members of the same group.

Religious Satanism is a valid religion, generally followed by adults. It is essentially unrelated to teen Satanic dabbling and to various other beliefs and practices that have been described as Satanism.

The largest of the many traditions within Religious Satanism is the *Church of Satan (CoS)*, which some people believe was founded on Walpurgisnacht, 1966-APR-30, (I Anno Satanas) by Anton Szandor LaVey (1930-1997). It was actually founded later that year.

The CoS, shares one property of the Church of Scientology: it is so controversial that many versions of "the truth" have sprung up over the years. It is impossible to separate reality from fake history. The following essay is our best shot at describing CoS history.

The beliefs, practices and rituals of the *Church of Satan* have few, if any, points of similarity with the Christian or Muslim concept of Satan. The CoS' Satan is pre-Christian, and derived from the Pagan image of power, virility, sexuality and sensuality. Satan is viewed as a force of nature, not a living quasi-deity. Their Satan has nothing to do with Hell, demons, pitchforks, sadistic torture, demonic possession, and profound evil. There are references in LaVey' writings to having conducted a few Black Masses for publicity purposes, in which the Roman Catholic Mass was ridiculed. But, it is unknown whether these references were satirical or reflected actual rituals. Assuming that the black masses were fictional, all of their rituals have no connection to those of Christianity or of any other religion.

Some of their beliefs and practices are:

- They do not worship a living deity.
- Major emphasis is placed on the power and authority of the individual Satanist, rather

than on a god or goddess.

- They believe that "*no redeemer liveth*" - that each person is their own redeemer, fully responsible for the direction of their own life.
- "*Satanism respects and exalts life. Children and animals are the purest expressions of that life force, and as such are held sacred and precious...*" 2

There are probably fewer than 10,000 religious Satanists in North America. The best known Satanic organization is the *Church of Satan*. Associated with the CoS are many local grottos. CoS membership is kept secret within the group. Many Satanists prefer to work alone as solitary practitioners.

A second interpretation of Satanism:

Satanism is a term that refers to a number of related belief systems. Their commonality is that they all feature the veneration or admiration of Satan or similar figures. Originally, the figure of Satan was the one who challenged the religious faith of humans in the Hebrew Bible. In the Greek New Testament, the symbolism of Satan became particularly developed, described in events such as the temptation of Jesus and the book of Revelations. Since then, the Abrahamic religions have variously regarded Satan as a rebellious fallen angel or demon that tempts humans to sin or commit evil deeds. In Christianity, Satan became the outspoken enemy of the Christian religion, a description which helped contribute to the mythos of Satanism. Further (especially after the European Enlightenment), some writers (for example, John Milton in *Paradise Lost*; see *Satan in Literature*), began to regard the Biblical Satan as an allegory that represents a crisis of faith, individualism, free will, wisdom and enlightenment.

Modern Satanist groups (those which appeared after the 1960s) are widely diverse, but two major trends which can be seen are Theistic Satanism and Atheistic Satanism. Theistic Satanists are said to venerate Satan as a supernatural deity, whom some consider to be entirely benevolent. In contrast, Atheistic Satanists consider themselves atheists and regard Satan as merely symbolic of certain human traits.

This categorization of Satanism (which could be categorized in other ways, for example "Traditional" versus "Modern"), is not necessarily adopted by Satanists themselves, who usually would not specify which type of Satanism they adhere to. Each "type" of Satanist will usually refer to themselves only as a "Satanist".

Packet 3:

Scientology⁴



Scientology is a body of teachings and related techniques developed by American author L. Ron Hubbard over some thirty years beginning in 1952 as a self-help philosophy, an outgrowth of his earlier self-help system, Dianetics. It claims to offer an exact methodology to help humans achieve awareness of their spiritual existence across many lifetimes and, simultaneously, to become more effective in the physical world. The name "Scientology" is also used to refer to the often controversial Church of Scientology, the largest organization promoting the practice of Scientology, which is itself part of a network of affiliated corporations that claim ownership and sole authority to disseminate Dianetics and Scientology.

A stated goal of Scientology is to "rehabilitate" the thetan (roughly equivalent to the soul) to regain its native state of "total freedom." Church spokesmen and practitioners attest that Hubbard's teachings (called "Technology" or "Tech" in Scientology terminology) have saved them from a plethora of problems and enabled them to better realize their highest potential in business and their personal lives. However, outside observers—including journalists, lawmakers, and national governing bodies of several countries—have reached conclusions about Scientology that are sharply at odds with the Church's self-representations. These include allegations that the church is an unscrupulous commercial enterprise that harasses its critics and brutally exploits its members.

The Church says that Scientology is concerned with "the study and handling of the spirit in relationship to itself, others and all of life." By contrast, Dianetics is more narrowly focused on getting rid of the reactive mind, the "bank" of traumatic memories known as engrams which are said to inhibit one's success and happiness. Scientology also covers topics such as ethics and morality (The Way to Happiness), drug and chemical residues as they relate to spiritual wellbeing (the Purification Rundown), communication, marriage, raising children, work-related problems, education (Study Technology), and the very nature of life (The Dynamics).

⁴ Information provided here is gathered from: <http://www.scientology.org/> ; <http://www.beliefnet.com/Faiths/2001/06/What-Scientists-Believe.aspx> ; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientology>

Scientology practices are structured in sequential series or levels, reflecting Hubbard's belief that rehabilitation takes place on a step-by-step "gradient"; for example, that the negative effects of drugs must be addressed before other issues can be "handled". Scientologists follow a sequence of courses that culminate in the esoteric advanced strata of Scientology's teachings. This is described as a passage along "the Bridge to Total Freedom", or simply "the Bridge," in which each step of the Bridge promises a little more personal freedom in some particular area of life.

Some central tenets of Scientology:

- A person is an immortal spiritual being (termed a *thetan*) who possesses a mind and a body.
- The thetan has lived through many past lives and will continue to live beyond the death of the body.
- Through the Scientology process of "auditing", one can free oneself of "engrams" and "implants" to reach the state of "Clear", and after that, the state of "Operating Thetan". Each state is said to represent recovering the native spiritual abilities of the individual, and to confer dramatic mental and physical benefits.
- A person is basically good, but becomes "aberrated" by moments of pain and unconsciousness in his or her life.
- What is true for you is what you have observed yourself. No beliefs should be forced as "true" on anyone. Thus, the tenets of Scientology are expected to be tested and seen to either be true or not by Scientology practitioners.
- Psychiatry and psychology are evil and abusive.

Scientology claims to offer "exact" methods of spiritual counseling to help people achieve awareness of their spiritual existence, while enhancing their effectiveness in the physical world. According to the Church, the ultimate goal is to get the soul (thetan) back to its native state of total freedom, thus gaining control over matter, energy, space, time, thoughts, form, and life. This freed state is called Operating Thetan, or OT for short.

Central Beliefs of Scientology:

- **Belief in Deity**

Scientology considers the belief in a God or gods as something personal and therefore offers no specific dogma. The nature of the Supreme Being is revealed personally through each individual as s/he becomes more conscious and spiritually aware. There exists a life energy or force (Theta) beyond and within all.

- **Incarnations**

There are no particular human incarnations of God, as the universal life force (Theta) is inherent in all. All humans are immortal spiritual beings (thetans) capable of realizing a nearly godlike state through Scientology practices.

- **Origin of Universe and Life**

All is manifestation of the universal spirit, which is all that actually exists.

- **After Death**

Rebirths continue until one consciously confronts all pre-birth, current-life, and previous-life traumas and realizes one's true nature as a "thetan," immortal spirit--transcending matter, energy, space, and time. Achieving this state enables the spirit to escape the cycle of birth and death--to operate independently of the physical universe and become one with God.

- **Why Evil?**

Painful experiences and harmful acts in one's prebirth, current, and past lives become imprinted in the reactive mind and lead to irrational behavior. Departures from rational thought and untrue ideas ("aberrations") can result in wrongdoing.

- **Salvation**

Salvation is achieved through the practices and techniques of Scientology, the ultimate goal of which is to realize one's true nature as an immortal spirit, a thetan. The path to salvation, or enlightenment, includes achieving states of increasingly greater mental awareness--Pre-Clear, Clear, and ultimately Operating Thetan. An Operating Thetan is a spirit who can control matter, energy, space, time, thought, and life. Practitioners ("Auditors") are regarded as ministers and counselors who assist others to achieve self-enlightenment. Auditors help others to identify their prebirth, current, and past-life disturbances, which are obstacles to happiness and spiritual enlightenment.

- **Undeserved Suffering**

Suffering occurs as part of the spirit's entrapment here in the physical universe. Only when the individual is aware of his spiritual nature can he identify his barriers within the universe and overcome them, rising out of a lower state and into a higher state of happiness and freedom.

- **Contemporary Issues**

Based on the belief that you cannot free yourself spiritually without working to free others, Scientology has founded and supports many organizations for social betterment, particularly in the areas of drug abuse, crime, psychiatric abuse, government abuse of law, human rights, religious freedom, education, and morality. Scientology strongly favors the use of their methodology for spiritual/mental healing over the use of conventional treatment.

The ongoing controversies involving the Church and its critics include:

- Repeated claims of brainwashing and mind control.
- Scientology's disconnection policy, in which members are encouraged to cut off all contact with friends or family members critical of the Church.
- The unexplained death of Scientologist Lisa McPherson.
- The use of high-pressure sales tactics to obtain money from members.

- Multiple criminal activities by Scientologists, both those committed for personal benefit (Reed Slatkin, Gabriel Williams, and others) and those committed on behalf of the Church and directed by Church officials (Operation Snow White, Operation Freakout, Fair Game, and others).
- Numerous differing, and sometimes conflicting, accounts of L. Ron Hubbard's life, in particular accounts of Hubbard discussing his intent to start a religion for profit, and of his service in the military.
- Scientology's harassment and litigious actions against its critics and enemies.
- Some critics charge Scientology with being a cult of personality, with much emphasis placed on the alleged accomplishments of its founder.
- Scientologists claim that government files, such as those from the FBI, are loaded with forgeries and other false documents detrimental to Scientology, but have never substantiated this accusation.
- Lobbying search engines such as Google and Yahoo to omit any webpages that are critical of Scientology from their search engines (and in Google's case, AdSense), or at least the first few search pages (now however, a search for Scientology on Google and Yahoo brings up the Wikipedia page, with both critical and official Scientology websites).

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