

A Commentary on Religion and Domestic Violence

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Religion is a fact of life in the United States for the vast majority of people. Whether in childhood or adulthood, most people have had some association with a faith tradition. For some it has been positive; for others, negative. But many retain and rely on values and doctrines that they received within a faith community. Because of the extraordinary diversity within the United States, many different traditions exist among us: Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Native Americans, and many varieties of Christians including Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, Mainline Protestants, Pentecostals, and so on.¹ One chapter cannot do justice to the richness of these many traditions. Rather, here we provide a discussion of the basic understanding of the place of religion in addressing domestic violence, illustrated through three western religious traditions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

The Importance of Religion: Roadblocks or Resources?

The crisis of domestic violence affects people physically, psychologically, and spiritually. Each of these dimensions must be addressed both for victims and those in the family who abuse them. Certain needs and issues tend to be disregarded when the issue is approached from either a secular or religious perspective alone. This reflects a serious lack of understanding of the nature of domestic violence and its impact on people's lives. Thus, the importance of developing a shared understanding and cooperation between secular and religious helpers for addressing domestic violence cannot be emphasized strongly enough.

Religious traditions, teachings, and practices represent a fundamental aspect of culture for the vast majority of Americans. The intertwining of religiosity and culture are common and complex. For example, secular Jews may not participate in a synagogue but still identify themselves as Jewish and honor Jewish values. Many Korean immigrants are closely affiliated with Korean Christian churches, so issues related to Christian teaching and practice will be common. For many people, their racial/ethnic heritage is bound to their faith history, such as with African American Baptists, Irish Catholics, Russian Jews, or Sudanese Muslims. This is one of the reasons that cultural competency in addressing domestic violence must include some awareness and appreciation of religion and faith traditions.

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1. For additional information on many of these traditions, see Anton, J. (Ed.). (2005). *Walking together: Working with women from diverse religious and spiritual traditions*. Seattle: FaithTrust Institute.

Occasionally, a social worker, psychotherapist, or other secular service provider will wonder: "Why bother with religious concerns at all?" The answer is a very practical one: religious issues or concerns which surface for people in the midst of crisis are primary issues. If not addressed in some way, at some point, they will inevitably become roadblocks to the client's efforts to resolve the crisis. In addition, a person's religious beliefs and community of faith (church, mosque, or synagogue) can provide a primary support system for an individual and her/his family in the midst of an experience of domestic violence.

For a pastor, priest, rabbi, imam, or others approaching domestic violence from a religious perspective, religious concerns are paramount. They may, however, doubt the importance of dealing with concerns for shelter, safety, intervention, believing that “getting it right with God” is enough for things to be fine. Such a perspective overlooks the importance of practical issues. Domestic violence is complex and potentially lethal. Consequently, seemingly mundane concerns represent immediate and critical needs.

When confronted personally by domestic violence, most people also experience a crisis of meaning in their lives, as occurs with all other crises, whether chronic or unexpected. Very basic life questions arise, often expressed in religious and/or philosophical terms. Questions like “Why is this happening to me and my family?”, or “Why did God let this happen?” or “What meaning does this have for my life?” all indicate people’s efforts to understand, to make sense out of experiences of suffering, and to place the experiences in a context of meaning for their lives. We recognize these questions to signal health because they represent an effort to comprehend and contextualize the experience of domestic violence, allowing the individual to regain some control over their lives in the midst of crisis.

Religious concerns can become roadblocks or resources for those dealing with experiences of domestic violence because these concerns are central to many people’s lives. The outcome depends on how they are handled. Misinterpretation and misuse of religious texts and traditions have often had a detrimental effect on individuals and families dealing with domestic violence. Misinterpretation or misuse can contribute substantially to guilt, self-blame, and suffering among victims. Likewise, they can contribute to rationalizations used by those who abuse. For example, “But the Bible says...” is frequently used to explain, excuse, or justify abuse by one family member to another. This need not be the case. Reexamining and analyzing those sacred texts can result in reclaiming the traditions in ways that support victims and abusers, while confronting and challenging abuse in the family.

A careful study of sacred texts makes it very clear that while it is possible to misuse texts to justify abuse of persons in the family, the texts do not in fact serve to justify abuse. Misuse is a frequent practice (see below). Teaching people simple answers to the very complex issues faced by many is another potential roadblock within contemporary teachings of some faith groups. Thus, religious groups often have not adequately prepared people for the traumas that they will face at some point in their lives: illness, death, abuse, divorce, and so on:

Keep the commandments and everything will be fine.

Keep praying.

Just accept Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior and you will be healthy, prosperous, popular, and happy.

Get closer to God.

Be patient, and you will be rewarded.

Go to services each week.

Pray harder.

Although these teachings may be fundamental to many religious faiths, alone they are inadequate to deal with the complexity of such an experience of human suffering as

domestic violence. When offered as simple and complete answers to life's questions, they may create illusions of simplicity that leave adherents vulnerable to becoming overwhelmed by suffering. Furthermore, the teachings may set up a dynamic that blames the victims for their suffering:

If you are a good Christian, a good Jew, or a good Muslim, God will treat you kindly, or take care of you, or make you prosper as a reward for your goodness.
If you suffer, it is a sign that you must not be a good Muslim, a good Christian, or a good Jew and God is displeased with you.

If one accepts this simple formula (which makes a theological assumption about God's unconditional love being conditional), then suffering can be interpreted as punishment or abandonment by God. The simple answer alone cannot withstand significant personal or familial suffering. When people use simple answers that prove insufficient, they can feel that their faith has failed them or that God has abandoned them. Jewish, Muslim, and Christian religious teachings have the depth to adequately address the experiences of contemporary persons, but only when they are allowed to acknowledge the complexity, the paradox, and sometimes the incomprehensible nature of suffering. The most important resource which the synagogue, church, or mosque can provide is to be available to support those who are suffering, to be a sign of God's presence, and to be willing to struggle with the questions which any crisis may raise. Offering sweet words of advice to "solve" life's problems reduces the experience of the one who suffers to a mere slogan, and denies the depth of the pain and the potential for healing and new life.

One's faith tradition can offer spiritual resources as well as material resources to victim/survivors and their children as well as to repentant perpetrators. Whether it is the Psalms from the Hebrew Bible or teachings from the Qur'an or the life of Muhammad, or the Christian Gospels, religious teachings can comfort, reassure, and strengthen. Congregations also can provide material support in times of crisis.

Cooperative Roles for Secular/Counselor and Minister/Rabbi/Imam

Both the secular advocate/counselor and the religious leader have important roles to play when confronting domestic violence. Families in which there is abuse need support in times of crisis. Sometimes their respective efforts will come into conflict, as illustrated by the following situation:

We received a call from a local shelter for abused women. The shelter worker indicated that she had a badly beaten woman there whose minister had told her to go back home to her husband. The worker asked us to call the minister and, 'straighten him out'. Ten minutes later we received a call from the minister. He said that the shelter had one of his parishioners there and the shelter worker had told her to get a divorce. He asked us to call the shelter and 'straighten them out'.

In the above case, both the shelter worker and the minister had the best interests of the victim in mind. Yet they were clearly at odds because they did not understand each other's concerns for the victim's needs. The shelter worker did not understand the minister's concern for maintaining the family and the minister did not understand that the woman's life was in danger. We arranged for the minister and the shelter worker to talk directly

with each other, the victim, and one of our staff to share their concerns in order to seek a solution in the best interest of the victim, a task which was accomplished successfully. The need for cooperation and communication between advocates/counselors and imams, ministers, or rabbis is clear so that the needs of parishioners/congregants/clients are best served and the resources of both religious and secular helpers are utilized effectively.

Role of the Secular Advocate/Counselor. In the secular setting, an advocate, social worker, or mental health provider may encounter a victim or abuser who raises religious questions or concerns. When this occurs, the following guidelines are helpful:

Pay attention to religious questions/comments/references.

Affirm these concerns as appropriate and check out their importance for the client.

Role of the Clergy. The minister/rabbi/imam can most effectively help domestic violence victims and offenders by referring to and cooperating with secular resources. When combined both provide a balanced approach that deals with specific external, physical, and emotional needs while addressing the larger religious, ethical, and philosophical issues. When approached about domestic violence, the minister/imam/rabbi can use the following guidelines:

Be aware of the dynamics of domestic violence and utilize this understanding for evaluating the situation.

Use your expertise as a religious authority and spiritual leader to illuminate the positive value of religious traditions, while clarifying that they do not justify or condone domestic violence.

Identify the parishioner/congregant's immediate needs and refer to a secular resource (if available) to deal with the specifics of abuse, advocacy, intervention, and treatment.

The other important role that the clergy and religious leaders can play is at the point of pre-marriage.² If a couple is planning a religious ceremony for their wedding, they will meet with their religious leader hopefully for reflection and counsel before taking this important step. This is an opportunity for the religious leader to do two things: first, to inquire about any history of abuse in the partners' families and second to teach about the religious values which support a healthy marriage and to correct any erroneous understandings that either partner may have.

Nature of the Marriage Relationship:

A Christian Perspective

Christian teaching about the model of the marriage relationship has traditionally focused heavily on Paul's letters to the Ephesians, Corinthians, and Colossians.

Misinterpretations and misplaced emphasis on these texts create substantial problems for many heterosexual married couples. Most commonly, directives on marriage, based on scripture, are given to women by clergy but not so often to men, and state that wives must "submit" to their husbands, a directive interpreted to elevate the husband/father as the absolute head of the household whom wife and children must obey without question. Unfortunately, this idea has also been misinterpreted to mean that wives and children must submit to abuse from husbands and fathers as well. Those who abuse their families

2. See Morris, S. Y. (2006). *Opening the door: A pastor's guide to addressing domestic violence in premarital counseling*. Seattle: FaithTrust Institute.

rationalize their misdeeds through such interpretations, as do counselors, clergy, and the victims of the abuse themselves.

A closer look at the actual scriptural references reveals a different picture. For example, Ephesians 5:21 says: "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." (RSV)

This is the first and most important verse in the Ephesians passage on marriage and also the one most often overlooked. It clearly indicates that all Christians - husbands and wives - are to be mutually subject to one another. The word that is translated "be subject to" can more appropriately be translated as "defer" or "accommodate".

"Wives accommodate to your husbands, as to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22).

This teaching implies sensitivity, flexibility, and responsiveness to the husband. In no way can this verse be taken to mean that a wife must submit to abuse from her husband.

For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the Church, his body, and is himself its savior. As the church is subject to Christ, so let wives also be subject in everything to their husbands. (Ephesians 5:23-24, RSV)

The model suggested here of husband-wife relationship is based on the Christ-Church relationship. It is clear from Jesus' teaching and ministry that his relationship to his followers was not one of dominance or authoritarianism, but rather one of servanthood. For example, Jesus washed his disciples' feet in an act of serving. He taught them that those who would be first must in fact be last. Therefore, a good husband would not seek to dominate or control his wife, but would serve and care for her, according to Ephesians:

Even so husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it, as Christ does the Church, because we are members of his body. (Ephesians 5:28-29, RSV)

This instruction to husbands is very clear and concrete. A husband is to nourish and cherish his own body and that of his wife. Physically battering one's spouse is probably the most blatant violation of this teaching and a clear reflection of the self-hatred within the abuser.

It is interesting that the passages quoted above from Ephesians (5:21-29) which are commonly used as instruction for marriage, are instruction primarily for husbands. Nine of the verses address husbands' responsibilities in marriage; three of the verses refer to wives' responsibilities, and only one addresses both parties. Contemporary interpretation, however, often focuses solely on the wives, misusing passages to justify wife-abuse. While spouse-abuse may be a common pattern in a number of Christian marriages, it certainly cannot be legitimated by scripture.

In terms of sexuality in marriage, again this passage from Ephesians (see also Colossians 3:18-21) has been used to establish a relationship in which the husband has

conjugal rights and the wife has conjugal duties. In fact, other scriptural passages are explicit on this issue:

The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to the husband. For the wife does not rule over her own body, but the husband does: likewise, the husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does.
(I Corinthians 7:3-4, RSV)

The rights and expectations between husband and wife in regard to sexual matters are explicitly equal and parallel, and include the right to refuse sexual contact. The expectation of equality of conjugal rights and sexual access and the need for mutual consideration in sexual activity is clear. The suggestion that both wife and husband “rule over” the other’s body and not their own refers to the need for joint, mutual decisions about sexual activity rather than arbitrary, independent decisions. A husband does not have the right to act out of his own sexual needs without agreement from the wife; likewise, the wife. This particular passage directly challenges incidents of sexual abuse (rape) in marriage that physically abused wives frequently report.

A Jewish Perspective

The Jewish marriage ceremony is known as “Kiddushin” or sanctification; through this ritual a couple’s relationship is made holy and dedicated to God. This sanctification reminds Jews to strive to express their holiness through marriage and the home in a covenantal relationship that is based on mutual love and respect.

Judaism views marriage as necessary for personal fulfillment³ and is the fundamental unit of community life. Marriage is part of God’s plan. In the early account of creation God observes that it is not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18).

One of the fundamental values of Jewish family life is “*Shalom Bayit*,” peace in the home. “*Shalom*,” which is simply translated as “peace”, also signifies wholeness, completeness, and fulfillment. Domestic harmony encompasses the good and welfare of all the home’s inhabitants.

The rabbis consider domestic tranquility as one of the most important ideals because it fulfills the biblical mandate to “love your friend as you love yourself”, an obligation which speaks first and foremost to marital partners (Talmud, Kiddushin 41a & Niddah 17a.). In addition, it is the essential forerunner to peace on earth. “Peace will remain a distant vision until we do the work of peace ourselves. If peace is to be brought into the world we must bring it first to our families and communities”.⁴

The concept of *Shalom Bayit* should not be invoked to place the onus of domestic harmony solely on the shoulders of a wife, nor should it be used to encourage maintaining an abusive marriage. When domestic harmony is impossible because of physical abuse, the only way for peace may be the dissolution of marriage. Although marriage is a sacred institution, divorce has always been an option according to the Jewish tradition. In Judaism conjugal rights are obligatory upon the husband who must be available for his wife:

3. “A man who has no wife lives without joy, without blessing, and without goodness” Talmud, Yevamot 62b.

4. *Gates of Repentance* (High Holy Days Prayer Book) Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1978, p.67.

A wife may restrict her husband in his business journey to nearby places only, so that he would not otherwise deprive her of her conjugal rights. Hence he may not set out without her permission. (Maimonides, Hilkhoh Ishut 14:2)

Just as a husband is responsible for his wife's sexual fulfillment, a wife, in return, is expected to have sexual relations with her husband. Jewish law, however, grants discretion in this area and requires consent on her part to every act of intimacy. And if she refuses sexual relations with her husband:

she should be questioned as to the reason... If she says, 'I have come to loathe him, and I cannot willingly submit to his intercourse,' he must be compelled to divorce her immediately for she is not like a captive woman who must submit to a man that is hateful to her" (Maimonides, Hilkhoh Ishut 14:8).

This suggests that no wife is expected to submit to sexual activity with a husband she fears or hates. The arena of sexual sharing for Jewish couples is one of mutual responsibility and choice.

A Muslim Perspective

The first Qur'anic verse in a chapter entitled "The Women" establishes the equal nature of men and women and reminds each gender that God is a witness to their fulfillment of their mutual rights. The verse states:

O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single soul, created of like nature its mate, and from them both scattered (like seeds) countless men and women - Fear God through Whom you demand your mutual rights. And (reverence) the wombs (that bore you) for God ever watches over you. (Qur'an 4:1)

The Qur'an provides guidance for male/female relations, and describes believing men and women as "friends and protectors" of one another. Needless to say, this relationship is expected to carry into the marriage. Marriage is described in the Qur'an as a "solemn covenant"; (Qur'an 4:21) it is a contract witnessed by God between two consenting adults who agree to live together in accordance to His laws. The Qur'an says that "He created for you mates from among yourselves that you may dwell in tranquility with them, and He has put love and mercy between your (hearts)" (30:21).

The mutuality of the marital relationship is described in many teachings. One example is the Qur'anic reference to spouses as garments for one another (Qur'an 2:187). This verse specifically refers to the sexual relationship between spouses, highlighting the accommodation that each spouse should make for the other, and the comfort that each should find in the other.

The Qur'anic teachings are exemplified and reinforced by the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad who said: "The best among you is the one who is best to his family, and I am the best to my family". According to his example, husbands and wives are partners; they should encourage each other to live in accordance with divine laws, consult one another in decision-making, support one another emotionally, and accommodate each other's needs.

Within this partnership, Islam recognizes that each partner may be better suited to particular areas in the relationship. For example, men have been given a leadership role, with the responsibility of providing financially for their families. Women, by virtue of their biological design, are obviously the only partner who can bear and nurse children. The roles of husband and wife are interdependent and complementary, perfectly manifesting the Arabic word for spouse (*zawj*), which means pair.

In his role as leader, a husband must remember his accountability to God and his responsibility to lead his family in accordance with Islamic values which include justice, compassion, and equity. A wife should accept her husband's leadership as long as he is living according to God's teachings. She should never obey him or follow his lead in any matter that is contrary to these teachings.

In the case of domestic violence, abusers often distort or manipulate teachings to rationalize or justify their behavior. The same verse that holds men responsible for protecting and maintaining women financially also prescribes a process for men to use with a wife that has behaved in some immoral manner that compromises the integrity of the relationship (*nushuz*).⁵ In a situation where there has been a serious breach, he is advised to talk to her first, then to sleep separately from her, and finally to chastise her if she does not change her behavior. This chastisement has been the subject of great controversy, with interpretations about its execution that range from a symbolic beating (using a handkerchief or something similar that would not cause injury) to abandonment. The goal of this verse is to preserve the marriage by bringing a wife back to the right path, not to give the husband a permission to be violent or abusive. In fact, there is a parallel verse that addresses how a woman can respond if her husband is guilty of the unacceptable behavior (*nushuz*).⁶

What is most important when considering the Islamic perspective on marriage is that teachings cannot be taken in isolation, rather the Islamic paradigm must be considered as a whole. Using a holistic approach, the teachings provide a model for healthy relationships, with guidance that prevents any kind of abuse or oppression. An important juristic maxim that guides legal rulings is: "Do not commit harm or allow reciprocation of harm". In addition, the teachings that reference equitable and just relations, mutuality, love, compassion, and tranquility between spouses all lead to the conclusion that violence has no place in a relationship between two God-fearing partners.

Although marriage is highly encouraged and the preservation of a marriage is extremely important, the Qur'an also recognizes that not all marriages are sustainable. Couples are encouraged to either live together in kindness or to separate in kindness if they are unable to live according to God's teachings. Divorce is provided as an option of last resort to protect individuals from experiencing any harm or from finding themselves in a situation where they may commit sins against the other out of their own misery.

5. Qur'an 4:34.

6. Qur'an 4:128.

Unfortunately, in many cultures that are predominantly Muslim, divorce is surrounded by so much stigma that women may not even know it exists as an option. However,

both the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad provide detailed instruction on the process of divorce, which can be initiated by either the husband or the wife.

The Marriage Covenant and Divorce: Shared Perspectives

Strongly held beliefs in the permanency of marriage and sanctity of its vows may prevent an abused spouse from considering separation or divorce as options. For the Christian, the promise of faithfulness "for better or for worse... 'til death do us part" is commonly taken to mean "stay in the marriage no matter what," even though death of one or more family members may be a real possibility when/where there is abuse. Jews view marriage as permanent, but, "til death do us part" is not part of the ceremony.

The Jewish attitude embodies a very delicate balance. Marriage is taken very seriously. It is a primary religious obligation and should not be entered into or discarded casually. Nevertheless, since the days of Deuteronomy, Jewish tradition has recognized the unfortunate reality that some couples are hopelessly incompatible and divorce may be necessary. Similarly, Islam emphasizes the importance of keeping a marriage and doing whatever is possible to maintain it. However, it also provides for divorce as a peaceful solution for those couples who are unable to live together in peace and tranquility, or who are simply unhappy together.

For some Christians, a strong doctrinal position against divorce may inhibit them from exercising this means of dealing with domestic violence. For others, a position against divorce is a personally held belief often supported by family and church. In either case, there is a common assumption that any marriage is better than no marriage at all and, therefore should be maintained at any cost. This assumption arises from a superficial view of marriage that is concerned only with appearances and not with substance. In other words, as long as marriage and family relationships maintain a facade of normalcy, there is a refusal by church and community to look any closer for fear of seeing abuse or violence in the home.

There are many cultural values and attitudes that prevent Muslims from seeking divorce as a solution. Divorced women often face criticism from families and communities who hold them responsible for the success or failure of the marriage. There is also a belief that two parents, regardless of what type of parent he or she is, is better than a single parent. This belief often keeps abused women in their relationships, unaware of the damage incurred by children who witness abuse. Marriage also provides a social status that many people are unwilling to lose, preferring instead to remain in an unhealthy relationship.

The covenant of Christian marriage is a life-long, sacred commitment made between two persons and witnessed by other persons and by God. Jews also regard marriage as sacred and intend that it be permanent. Muslims enter into marriage as a covenant witnessed by God, and by at least two other people. It is a relationship that is to be used as a vehicle for worshipping God. For Jews, Christians, and Muslims, a covenant between marriage partners has the following elements:

It is made in full knowledge of the relationship.

It involves a mutual giving of self to the other.

It is assumed to be lasting.

It values mutuality, respect, and equality between persons.

A marriage covenant can be violated by one or both partners. It is common thinking in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions that adultery violates the marriage covenant and destroys the relationship. Likewise, violence or abuse in a marriage violates the covenant and fractures a relationship. In both cases the trust assumed between partners is shattered. Neither partner should be expected to remain in an abusive situation. Often, one marriage partner feels a heavy obligation to remain in the relationship and do everything possible to make it work. This is most often true for women. A covenant relationship only works if both partners are able and willing to work on it. In all three traditions, it is clear that God does not expect anyone to stay in a situation that is abusive. In the Christian tradition, just as Jesus did not expect his disciples to remain in a village that did not respect and care for them (Luke 9:1-6), neither does he expect persons to remain in a family relationship where they are abused and violated.

Similarly, the Qur'an reminds those who are oppressed that "God's earth is spacious enough to move away from evil" (4:97), and that believers who are oppressed " (are not cowed but) help and defend themselves" (42:39). From these verses, it is clear that God would not want anyone to stay in an abusive or violent relationship.

In Jewish literature, this expectation is also clear:

... if a man was found to be a wife beater, he had to pay damages and provide her with separate maintenance. Failing that, the wife had valid grounds for compelling a divorce" (Lamm, 1982, p. 157).

If there is a genuine effort to change on the part of the one who is abusive, it is possible to renew the marriage covenant, including within the renewal a clear commitment to nonviolence. With treatment for the family members, it may be possible to salvage the relationship. If the one who is being abusive is unwilling or unable to change, then the question of divorce arises. At this point in the marriage, divorce is really a matter of public statement: "Shall we make public the fact that our relationship has been broken by abuse?". The other option, of course, is to continue to pretend that the marriage is intact (a woman reported that she divorced only a month ago but that her marriage ended 10 years ago when the abuse began).

In a home where one partner is abusive, divorce does not break up the family. It is the perpetrator's violence and abuse that breaks up the family. Divorce is often the painful, public acknowledgement of an already accomplished fact. While divorce is never easy, it is, in the case of domestic violence, the lesser evil. In many cases divorce may be a necessary intervention to generate healing and new life from a devastating and deadly situation.

Conclusion

This commentary addresses some of the common religious concerns raised by people dealing with domestic violence within Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. We attempted to help the reader begin to see ways of converting potential roadblocks into valuable resources for those dealing with violence in families.

Personal faith for the religious person can provide much needed strength and courage when facing a very painful situation and making changes within. Churches, mosques, and synagogues can provide a much needed network of community support for victims, abusers, and their children. It is clearly necessary for those involved in religious congregations and institutions to address these concerns directly. In ignorance and oversight, we can do much harm. In awareness and action, however, we can contribute a critical element to the efforts to respond to domestic violence in our communities.

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