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*Istituto Affari Internazionali*

## The Metamorphosis of Religion: North Africa in the Modern Era

by Mohammad Haddad



### ABSTRACT

Since the nineteenth century, North Africa's religious life has witnessed a slow and uncertain metamorphosis. It is still unable to settle into a constant and sustainable model. The traditional order could not resist the emergence of the nation-state, modern education and new forms of social organisation. However, religion has remained on the margins of these developments. Although used in the anticolonial struggle, religion was then abandoned during the formation of the postcolonial state. Yet the difficulties faced by governments since the 1970s have entrusted religion with a predominantly opposition function, which is negative and sometimes violent. This paper argues that only neo-reformism can give a positive spin to religion's role in politics and can serve as the basis for a new religious order.

*Islam | North Africa*

keywords

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by Mohammad Haddad\*

## Introduction

Contrary to widespread claims, North Africa is not witnessing “a religious return,” “the revenge of god” or “a word re-enchantment.” Many analyses of these issues that have appeared in recent years have provided arguments that might be appropriate for the Western world, but that do not apply to the Arab world, including North Africa. The latter, in fact, seems to have witnessed, since the modern era, a religious metamorphosis that cannot be fixed to a particular stable model.

In modern times, various disruptions have weakened what has been considered for centuries the traditional religious order, but they have not supplied any new alternative. Religion was transformed first into a reformist religion, then into an identity and national one, and finally into a protester one. However, none of these three models was able to impose itself in a continuous manner.

To develop this thesis, I will briefly present the methodological approach adopted to analyse the *fait religieux* and the major characteristics of “traditional” religion. I will then discuss the various religious metamorphoses of the modern era. The final section will provide some suggestions concerning a potential new religious order that might allow North Africa to go beyond its past and current crises.

## 1. Tradition and modernity

This analysis is based on the principle according to which religions do not disappear but rather integrate into the modern era. They are not, nonetheless, unchangeable realities. They metamorphose according to their environment. Hence, it would

\* Mohammad Haddad (PhD, Sorbonne) is a Professor at the University of Carthage. He is an expert on Islamic Studies in the Modern Age, holder of the UNESCO Chair on Comparative Studies of Religions, and President of the Arab Observatory for Religions and Freedoms.

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be better to use the “sober” term metamorphosis,<sup>1</sup> and we would suggest in the following paper a historical analysis of this metamorphosis.

To understand these metamorphoses, two questions must briefly be addressed: (a) How do we define the modern period? (b) What are the characteristics of the traditional religious order?

Arabic historiography relates the modern era to the nineteenth century, unlike Western historiography, which divides it into five parts, relating the first one to 1453 – a date that corresponds to the occupation of Constantinople by Mohamed II. There is no doubt that the history of North Africa underwent an important change in the fifteenth century. This change did not, however, radically distinguish it from previous periods, nor from that of modernity. On the contrary, Arabic historiography – being highly influenced by the conceptions of *Nahda* (renaissance) and *Yaqada* (awakening) – tends to classify the period dating from the fifteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century as a period of *Inhitat* (decadence).

In order to avoid applying the parameters of Western history to a different geographical area, we will adopt here the opinion that marks the nineteenth century as the opening of the modern era in North Africa. However, we will avoid the debate on the issues of decay and revival. We will focus mainly on “traditional” order, which was established between the fifteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, in order to trace its major features in the religious field.<sup>2</sup>

After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottomans decided to expand their empire in three regions: Europe, Persia and the Arab world. In the Arab world, their success was considerable and rapid. In reality, the native inhabitants did not consider the Ottomans as invaders. On the contrary, they were welcomed. In North Africa, in particular, part of the population considered them to be their protectors from the threats of the Christian Crusades. After taking the “*Sham*” (Syria and Palestine) and Egypt, the Ottomans seized the coastal cities of Libya, Tunisia and Algeria. They preferred, however, to avoid attacking the Kingdom of Morocco, which was engaged in a ferocious struggle against the Spanish *Reconquista*. Consequently, the religious situation in North Africa closely followed the Ottoman model, while preserving certain local specificities. This model can be summarised in the following points:

- Distinction, without any radical separation, between the state and religion: The classical political order was based on the power of the Sultan,<sup>3</sup> who represented

<sup>1</sup> See José A. Pradès, *Persistence et métamorphose du sacré. Actualiser Durkheim et repenser la modernité*, Paris, PUF, 1987.

<sup>2</sup> The idea of an Eastern modernity that started at the beginning of the fifteenth century should itself be questioned by many specialists. See, for example, Janet L. Abu Lughod, *Before European Hegemony. The World System A.D. 1250-1350*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> The term “sultan” is derived from the word *Sulta*, which means power or authority.

both the civil governor and the Caliph.<sup>4</sup> The Sultan delegated his two powers to two different boards, independent of each other.

- Sunnism as the official religion: The Muslim world was divided very early on into several branches, including principally Sunnism and Shi'ism. Arabs were divided between them: Persians were predominately Shi'ite, Turkish people were Sunni. The Ottoman Empire – founded by a Turkish dynasty – imposed Sunnism. The mystic (*soufism*) was an essential component in this Sunnism.
- Diversity in separation: North Africa was diverse. The traditional order allowed for a certain amount of religious diversity and a considerable degree of tolerance, provided that the fundamental principles of Islam and government security were preserved.

After several centuries of stability, by the nineteenth century this traditional order had declined. As we have seen, this order was autonomous from the political order. It could not, however, function without it. Thus, the degeneration of one meant, inevitably, the decline of the other. Apart from Morocco, North Africa was divided into several Ottoman regencies, each of which enjoyed a certain degree of autonomy. The successive defeats of the Ottoman Empire by the new European powers weakened the religious and spiritual authority of the Sultan-Caliph and the official religious institutions. In 1798, Napoleon Bonaparte seized Egypt, which was a severe loss for the Ottoman Sultan, who was shown to be unable to protect his Egyptian subjects or al-Azhar, the most prestigious university mosque of Islam. In 1830, France conquered Algeria, another Ottoman regency. And in 1844, the Kingdom of Morocco was soundly defeated in the Battle of Isly.

The collapse of the traditional order with all its political, social and religious sides took place in two main periods. First, the Reform Period was marked by the search for a new form of organisation of the government and religion. The second corresponded to the colonial and postcolonial period, which radically changed the role of religion by substituting the quest for spirituality with a quest for identity.

## 2. Metamorphoses: the "reformist" religion

The first metamorphosis was the transition from the traditional religion to the "reformist" religion.

Until the eighteenth century, the most influential type of religious figure, called *alim* (scholar) or *faqih* (hermeneutic/lawyer), was characterised by a great ability to understand, teach and apply a centuries-old, established and uninterrupted tradition. However, from the nineteenth century, this tradition (still valued) proved to be increasingly unable to provide answers to new questions that Muslims started to tackle.

<sup>4</sup> The term "caliph" means the governor of the faithful and the defender of Islam.

One example was the question of the role of the military forces, formerly founded on a rigorous and mystic religious education. The frightening Janissaries who terrified Eastern Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the corsairs who controlled Tunis, Tripoli and Alger, and the marabouts who dominated maritime borders, had lost their social role due to the development of new war weapons and modern warfare techniques.

As a result, the Sufi brotherhood declined. The main consequence was their degradation and poverty. The armies fighting in the name of Allah found themselves obliged to follow the instructions of the "impious" advisors from France, Italy and England in order to learn new fighting techniques. The two main sciences, jurisprudence and Qur'anic exegesis, were no longer able to provide convincing explanations for the disruptions caused by the globalisation of European civilisation. Minor jobs that had formerly been left to the non-Muslim minorities, such as those of banker, accountant, translator, doctor and printer, later turned out to be valuable in the City. The programmes of traditional religious institutions did not include natural or physical sciences, geography, foreign languages, and so on.

All these conditions prepared the ground for the emergence of a new category of "scholar" which gradually achieved independence from traditional institutions in order to better adjust to the rapidly changing environment. Often, the political power encouraged the new scholars' type of learning to become outstanding and to defend the religious legitimacy of the reforms that were undertaken by the governors under the restraint of Western capitals. Accordingly, these reforms were not generally appreciated by the "high clergy" (sheikhs), whose influence on public opinion remained strong. Scholars were often graduates of traditional institutions that were introduced to the new modern world.

The term "reformist religion" that we use here refers to two interrelated aspects: firstly, the aim to rely on religion to reform society, or at least to prevent it from being used to obstruct the necessary reforms in Muslim societies; and secondly, the aim to reform religious thought through new interpretations of sacred texts (including the Qur'an). Religion was reduced to its foundations, the sacred texts, and detached from the exegetical tradition that prevented the interpretations of these texts. For this reason it is necessary to talk about a reformist religion and not reformed religion.

The reformist religion called for *ijtihad*, that is to say, the innovative and personal efforts of interpreting sacred texts, without putting into question the sacredness of these texts and criticising their philological and historical origins. It denounced the *taqlid* (imitation) of the religious institutions, that is to say, conformity and conservatism. Fundamentalism (the return to the foundations of religion, *usûls*) relied on reformism, but this was rather a "war tactic," since it mainly aimed at discrediting religious institutions, namely the founding texts. Reformist religion called for unity among Muslims centred around the basic tenets of Islam that were supposed to be shared among them all. Thus, the authority of dominant thinkers

such as Achaari (d.935) or Ghazâlî (d.1111) declined. Reformists opted for a direct manipulation of the Qur'anic text. The main requirement was knowledge of the Arabic language and the rules of exegesis.

Actually, reformists have actively contributed to the decline of traditional religious institutions, but they have hardly managed to substitute them with newly "reformed" institutions. The great misfortune of modern Islam is perhaps the fact of being cut off from its traditional institutional basis, without the presence of new, recognised and legitimate institutions. Until the present moment, one may wonder: who is allowed to speak on behalf of Islam? Until the eighteenth century, the answer to this question was obvious: great *sheiks*, *cadis*, *faqih*s and *muftis*. During the nineteenth century, the representativeness of Islam was discussed by a multitude of social activists with conflicting ways of interpreting it, focusing on its relations to the state, to society and to non-Muslims.

In the meantime, a significant reformist literature was produced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, embodying the early stages of a regeneration of religious thought in Islam and reviving the Islamic tradition of previous centuries, without showing any sign of a radical break with this tradition. Among the known reformers were Tahtâwi (d.1873), Ibn Abi Dhiyâf (d.1874), Abdelkader (d.1883), Khair-Eddine (d.1890), Kawâkibi (d.1902), Muhammad Abduh (d.1905), Rashîd Ridâ (d.1935), Tâhir Haddad (d.1935), Ibn Bâdis (d.1940), Abdulaziz Thaalibi (d.1944), Tahar bin Achour (d.1973), Allal Fâsi (d.1974), Mahmûd Shaltût (d.1963), Abbâs Aqqâd (d.1964) and many others.<sup>5</sup>

These reformists, all of whom were North African or at least lived in North Africa, formed the largest constituency of reformist religion, although some less well-known representatives were found in Turkey and in the Indian sub-continent as well.

### 3. Metamorphoses: "identitary" and national religion

It is worth noting that many of those whose names we have already mentioned participated in the national liberation struggle. Reformist Islam had been fighting on two fronts: against "traditionalism" on the one hand, and against the "Westernisation" of Muslim societies on the other. Accordingly, the process of reformism refused to combine the sacred foundations of religion and traditional religion, long considered as regressive. It insisted on a separation between the necessary modernisation of Muslim societies and the attempts to impose the Western model. Henceforth, it was not easy to draw a line between the sacred and the traditional, or between what is modern and what is Western. Thus, the pressure of Westernisation was negatively perceived by Muslims, particularly because of

<sup>5</sup> See Mohamed Haddad, *Le réformisme musulman. Une histoire critique*, Paris, Mimesis, 2013.

colonisation (Algeria in 1830, Tunis in 1881, Cairo in 1882, Tripoli in 1911, Morocco in 1912), and also because of the globalisation of a modern capitalist economy, with all its inevitable implications for manners and behaviour. The religious discourse was centred on identity rather than on spirituality.

Religion was increasingly invited to assume a function of self-defence against the colonial and "materialistic" West. The impulsive eagerness which had been focused against tradition and immobility then became directed against the West. Thus, the opposition Islam–West grew, recalling the old conflict memory dating back to the Crusades. The Palestinian problem, the origins of which began with the exodus of Jews from Eastern Europe to the "promised land" between 1904 and 1914, supported, for Muslims, the idea of a new crusade and a total conspiracy against their religion. The reformist spirit was fading, while the conflicts of the colonial era were developing.

Religion was no longer the monopoly of religious and traditional reformists. Its leaders became the leaders of national liberation, despite the fact that some of them were secular nationalists. The proposed reform was downgraded. In this context, it is important to say that this "identitary" religion preserved the spirit of tolerance and coexistence, which can be explained by the spirit of reform. Moreover, the colonised societies were not monolithic. They included Jewish and Christian communities in the national struggle, but also Muslim minorities, who were undermined by the traditional religious order. The liberation movements best represented the entire nation (the majority and well as minorities), and considered the Islamisation of the national struggle as highly disadvantageous. Paradoxically, the most difficult moments of the struggle revealed that the national network prevailed over religious and sectarian affiliations. These moments reinforced the famous slogan: "Religion is for God, the homeland is for all."

By the 1960s, all the North African countries had gained independence (Egypt in 1922, Libya in 1951, Tunisia and Morocco in 1956 and Algeria in 1962). All of them adopted a modern political organisation based on the nation-state. North Africa was divided into seven separate countries: Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Sudan. There is no doubt that the project of a great Maghreb was emerging. But the "colonial" division of North Africa was much more natural than that of the Mashreq, as most of these countries had long been quite distinct entities. For example, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt had been, since the nineteenth century, nearly independent political units. One of the major changes occurring at that time was the growing separation between the three Islamic worlds: the Arab world, the Persian world and the Turkish one. From the beginning, Arabic Islam was clearly distinguished from the others. However, the main problem was how to manage religion in a nation-state. It was evident that in all the North African countries, the choice was to "nationalise" religion, or in other words, to establish Islam as the national religion. Hence, the constitutions adopted after independence each included an article designating Islam as the state religion, or the official religion. Each country has a ministry or an administrative institution to manage "religious affairs." Traditional religious institutions were nationalised and made subject to

the administrative authority of the state government. Generally, each state had an official *mufti*. Islamic law was restricted to the consideration of issues related to personal status. Tunisia initiated in 1956 a reform of the traditional personal status code prohibiting polygamy and guaranteeing women the right to divorce. Modern universities replaced the old form of universities-mosques, the latter of which lost the control of knowledge. Civil registers and documents were no longer under the control of religious authorities. In short, the secularised public space was rapidly emerging.

During the 1960s the ideology of progress became dominant. No special attention was paid to the future of Islam. There were two types of ruling elites. Firstly, there were many national figures, like Nasser in Egypt, who referred back to the Arab nationalist ideology and encouraged a "revolutionary" Islam, which is populist and simplistic in its theological foundations. Secondly, there were liberal leaders, like Bourguiba in Tunisia, who encouraged local Islam to support plans of economic and social development for the recently independent countries.

The national religion was imposed thanks to the authority of the nation-state. It was quite evident that in periods when the nation-state experienced crises, religion was directly affected and weakened. The situation enabled various "religious entrepreneurs," to adopt an expression from Max Weber. Without universal authority (the caliphate system was abolished in 1924) and without legitimised national religious authorities (as new institutions were perceived more as religious administration than as religious authority), Islam became subject to all forms of manipulation.

Certainly, the presence of religion itself did not decline, as the ideology of progress claimed it would. On the contrary, religion erupted with greater eagerness. The nation-state crisis reached its ultimate culmination in 1973. The worldwide economic crisis, the oil embargo, the end of the "*trente glorieuses*" in Europe and many other factors negatively affected the non-oil-producing countries. The decision by Egyptian President Anouar Sadat to sign a bilateral peace agreement with Israel in 1978 undermined the ideology of Arab Union. The Iranian revolution of 1979 re-initiated the conflict between Shi'ism and Sunnism by setting in opposition the two fundamentalisms derived from these two traditions.

#### 4. The outbreak of religious order: sectarianism and globalisation

In less than two centuries, traditional Islam declined, reformist Islam proved unable to take its place, and national Islam, with its two components "developing" and "revolutionary," was disturbed by the nation-state crisis. "Identitary" Islam has since undergone a deep change. Indeed, during the colonial period, Islam had a "civilisational" connotation that included all the social groups that had built Muslim "civilisation," which itself included Jews, Christians and also secular figures. It was only during this time that an identity was established in opposition to Western

colonisation. This latter was not defined as a religion but as a project to “civilise” the world. The main issue, therefore, was the opposition between Muslim and Western civilisation.

However, during the postcolonial era, identity was not understood in the sense of civilisation. The term “Islam” had a dogmatic meaning. But at the same time there was no recognised authority to define dogma, nor a recognised reference for the definition of religious meaning. Accordingly, since the 1970s predominantly Arabic societies have been following a fragmented religious order. North Africa differs from the Mashreq in that Shi’ite communities are absent. However, the influence of the Iranian revolution on the politicisation of religion was nevertheless important.

As we have demonstrated earlier, the dominant role of religion in North Africa, in modern and contemporary times, is to provide identity. This is the reason for which religion had small impact on development, which can explain the fact that secular nationalism could hardly have a clear place in this context.

We will start with the first aspect: small impact of religion on development. During the period of independence, the ideology of progress and unalterable secularisation was extremely widespread. The newly emerging nation-states considered development as a uniquely economic and management issue. They did not adopt “religious policies” or develop clear strategic visions for religious management. The common view among the ruling elite was that traditional religion prevented progress – particularly popular religion, which was represented by mystical brotherhood. Traditional religious education was considered as regressive, devoid of any value and divergent from modern knowledge. They called for the restriction, if not the abolishment, of the religious sector’s dominance over education, the civil register, public charity and justice.

This finding is not totally wrong. Yet the nation-state limited itself to the destruction of traditional religion without suggesting an alternative. They were concerned with founding religious administrations that would cover what they considered as a vestige of the past. Actually, the idea that religion is a past inheritance was widely shared around the world at the time. Nowadays, we are in a better position to judge the defects of such policy.

Thus, religion did not have a role in the development projects, as it represented an obstacle for the achievement of these projects. However, in the late 1970s, the crisis of the nation-state led to a severe degradation of the development process. The social and political opposition to this model of development could find in religion a valuable tool to arouse protest and gather crowds. Fundamentalist movements, which embody an extreme version of religious identity, benefited greatly from this situation. Henceforth, social protest became the equivalent of the “return to authentic Islam” – the two became interchangeable and mutual processes. The latest Arab revolutions have clearly demonstrated the strength of this relationship and its impact on public opinion.

The second aspect, related to the failure of secular nationalism, is the inability of the nation-state to acquire an intrinsic legitimacy. It was unable to sustain its legitimacy, while its frontiers were considered to be colonial ones, and its politics were accused of Westernisation. The principle of the nation-state was challenged by the pan-Arabism ideology that promoted Arabic Union, by Islamist ideology that advocated the restoration of the Caliphate and by the Marxist ideology that advocated international proletarianism. And as all political debates are founded on the affect and on utopia, "identitary" religion was better placed to succeed. The nation-state, the legitimacy of which relied on the struggle for liberation and the restoration of national identity, could not challenge religious nationalism, which supported a more radical identity based on a religious fundamentalist interpretation.

### Conclusions

Nevertheless, North Africa seems to be well situated to establish a new theological-political balance, even if the road will be, undoubtedly, filled with obstacles. Certainly this balance will not be attained without the foundation of a peaceful relationship with religion and a deeper understanding of religious phenomena.

How can we face this historical trouble, which repeatedly re-emerges? There are currently two major options for the states of the region in what concerns the religious field.

1) The model of State's religious neutrality – Since the nineteenth-century Arabic "renaissance" there have emerged numerous calls for secularism. Ali Abd Al-Râziq, a sheikh from Al-Azhar (d.1966), published a book in 1925, entitled *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*,<sup>6</sup> criticising the idea of the religious state and the religious legitimacy of the Caliphate. He was attacked by many people and thus chose not to pursue the issue, especially after the decision of Al-Azhar to condemn him and ban his book. Abd Al-Râziq tried to go further in developing his thesis. His arguments were not philosophical but rather religious, providing an example of the state's religious neutrality from a heritage viewpoint.

Despite the fact that the secularist thesis seems nowadays to be reserved to intellectuals, and that opportunities for its wide dissemination are limited – especially within the actual situation characterised by the growing authority of the religiously based discourses, both moderate and violent – there is an important side that should be taken into consideration. If we remember the way the thesis of the state's neutrality in the West was established, we can note that it was the outcome of the sixteenth-century religious tensions and the arrival of Luther and the many previous religious wars. Nowadays, the Middle East is experiencing an undeclared religious war that may lead at some point to clashes, to human and material loss,

<sup>6</sup> Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press in association with the Aga Khan University, Institute for the Study of Muslim Civilisations, 2013.

and to a necessary conviction of the importance of the state's neutrality thesis and its value to the spread of societal peace.

2) The new reformist national model – As we saw, the emergence of the modern state in North Africa is a phenomenon that occurred in the period from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, with some local variations. The landmarks of the Egyptian state emerged in 1805 with the rule of Mehmet Ali (1805-1849), while other countries were able to achieve national liberation only in the mid-twentieth century. It is worth noting that, generally, states' emergence was often related to the appearance of reformist religious discourse, which tried to introduce some reforms to this discourse to give legitimacy to some of the political and economic reforms necessary for the existence of the modern state. The emergence of the modern state is strongly related to the appearance of the principle of citizenship to replace the old authoritarian regime. Accordingly, what distinguishes the reformist movements most are their continuous attempts to reinterpret the ancient religious heritage to better fit the idea of citizenship.

It is not by chance that this idea took shape first in Egypt, Tunis, Sham and Turkey, as these regions witnessed the beginning of the citizenship-based modern state formation in the nineteenth century. The Muhammad Ali dynasty (founded in 1805) projected Egyptian independence from the Ottoman Caliphate by instituting a ruling power inspired from European nationalism. The first constitution to be adopted was in 1861 in the Tunisian Kingdom. The movement for independence from the Ottoman Caliphate in this kingdom started from the era of Hammuda Pacha (1782-1814) and was maintained during the era of Ahmed Bey (1806-1855). Both Hammuda and Ahmed were influenced by the French Revolution. All countries were following the same path, albeit with considerable differences in details and intellectual contents. It is generally perceived that the beginning of the construction of each modern state was accompanied by the rise of a new religious reformist experience, each state with its own traditions and religious heritage.

These reformist constructive experiences can be nationally supported nowadays as the background for a reconstruction of the religious discourse according to current requirements. Previous reforms have focused on the conception of the state because the main requirement then was independence from the unstable Caliphate regime. It is now possible to focus on pluralism, democracy and human rights in order to achieve total autonomy from the traditional Republic system, which was subject to globalisation effects on the one hand, and to revolutions on the other. The intention here is not to the return to an early reformist position, but rather to be inspired by their liberal and audacious spirit in facing everyday problems.

Because the religious heritage differs from one country to another, the goal would not be to found an international Islamic organisation responsible for issuing *fatwas*, or to appoint a religious man to become the great representative of Muslims. It would not be the creation of Islamic parties, which would profit from religion in order to gain political power. What is required is to encourage national

reformist organisations and thinkers. It is different from the classical state/religion relationship. The objective is in no way to use religion to serve the state's interests, nor *vice versa*. The objective is rather to integrate religion in the general social movements in a way that makes the religious discourse develop according to the development of society, liberating itself from the conflicts within which it became entrapped when it turned into a medium to justify ruling and opposition or to serve sectarian and partisan purposes. has been questioned.

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### Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

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Via Angelo Brunetti, 9 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 3224360

F + 39 06 3224363

[iai@iai.it](mailto:iai@iai.it)

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