

RE-INTERPRETING CULTURE AS A PEDAGOGICAL REFERENCE IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION: A METASYNTHESIS IN THE HERMENEUTIC CYCLE

Wilson J. Temporal

University of Saint Louis Tuguegarao, Philippines
uslt_wilson@yahoo.com

Abstract: *As a result of religious heterogeneity in the classroom comes multiculturalism, which requires careful interpretation on the part of the instructor. As a result, the purpose of this research was to reinterpret culture as a pedagogical reference in the field of Religious Education. Both the hermeneutic phenomenological research approach and the descriptive meta-synthesis method were used in this study. The findings reveal four major themes that emerged from the research, namely: the cultural context, dispositions in religious education, tenets of culture in relation to typologies in religious education, and pedagogies towards an integrated approach to Religious Education - interplay of faith and culture, among others.*

Keywords: *culture, catechesis, pedagogy, education, religious education, faith, meaning, values, hermeneutic, pluralism, phenomena*

I. INTRODUCTION

Religious Education in Catholic schools is an inalienable characteristic of their educational goal. However, to keep an exclusive Catholic teaching in religious instruction when several students are not Catholic or non-Christians may lead to many questions on the real nature and purpose of Catholic schools, especially in relation to concepts such as evangelization, catechesis, and religious education.

Undeniably, the reality of religious pluralism in the classroom is integral to the actuality of multiculturalism. The diverse thinking, faith and values of students are shaped and influenced by their own culture. Hence, with the multi-religious plurality in Catholic schools, different kinds of culture also exist.

According to Panganiban (1988), “religious education always occurs in the context of a culture. Any attempt at integration between faith and culture must take into consideration the value of knowledge and culture as such.” Anent this, the inclusion of non-Catholics and non-Christian students in Catholic schools should lead the Catholic educators to evaluate their teaching and learning approaches, i.e., somehow to make a shift to inter-religious education.

However, a correct understanding of culture is a necessity in making an evaluation to Religious Education. If culture is an evolving process rather than being an inert entity, and since an authentic religious faith can only exist in a cultural form, there needs to be unrelenting dialogue between faith and culture.

Accordingly, Brennan (1999) posits that *“Today it is generally accepted that ‘culture constitutes a total context that shapes us all’. We create our culture and our own creation influences us deeply.”* Thus, in Religious Education and or catechesis, one has to consider the method or design that is relative to the emerging culture to be efficient. As Brennan says: *“the better we understand the culture of our time and our place, the more effective we will be in whatever role we have in life.”*

Premised on the foregoing discussions, this research aimed to present the historical and sociological dimensions of culture and determine the most appropriate way of describing it in relation to the rising generation's meaning system and values. Hence, if pedagogies in Religious Education would be a great concern in Catholic schools, how should it be aligned with the conceived meaning of culture? If indeed people develop their own culture and are greatly influenced by it, how can we also develop a more integrating approach to Religious Education in an inculturated manner? Thus, this study endeavoured to give a clear understanding of culture as a pedagogical reference in giving knowledge about Christianity's identity and the development of Christian life in all its aspects.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to reinterpret culture as a pedagogical reference in Religious Education. Specifically, it tried to answer the following objectives: (1) ascertain the different features of culture that influence the religious dispositions of the people particularly the young generation of today; (2) identify possible alignment between the typologies in Religious Education and the tenets of culture; and (3) propose integrated approaches to Religious Education involving pedagogies vis-à-vis the interplay of faith and culture.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study employed both hermeneutic phenomenological research method and descriptive meta-synthesis of gathered literature with the use of interpretive analytical technique for gaining a deeper understanding of particular phenomena. The meta-synthesis involved framing (identifying the research question), searching (using database search strategies), rating (sensitivity analyses), and synthesizing, reporting or writing summary of studies selected for synthesis (thematic). {Newton, 2016}

The thematic analysis of gathered literatures in Religious Education and on culture using the descriptive (comprehensive analyses of phenomena) and the theory explication (reconceptualises abstract phenomena) types of meta-synthesis were grounded on hermeneutic phenomenological research method. According to Kafle (2011, citing Merleau-Ponty, 1962), "*phenomenology is a way of researching the essence or essential meanings of phenomena.*" The researcher's understanding of an essence is always "on-the-way", partial, and particular to the experiences from which the interpretations were formed. There is the possibility, in phenomenological research that new meanings emerge about a phenomenon that draws "something forgotten into visibility" (Kafle citing Harman, 2007). Thus, this research applied the hermeneutic cycle that constitutes of reading, reflective writing and interpretation in a rigorous matter (Lavery, 2003).

III. RESULTS

After careful selection of pertinent literature for the study, four essential themes emerged for discussion on the specified objectives or research questions relative to the re-interpretation of culture as a pedagogical reference in Religious Education. Particularly, the four categories are: 1) the cultural context, 2) dispositions in Religious Education, 3) tenets of culture vis-à-vis typologies

in Religious Education, and 4) pedagogies towards integrated approach to Religious Education - interplay of faith and culture.

The Cultural Context

Culture is usually defined in dictionaries as the shared beliefs, customs, practices, and social behaviour of a particular nation or group of people. Culture may vary from one generation to another or from one place to another. Just as time changes, culture may be subject to change as well. Each individual person either learns, re-learns, or unlearns about his/her culture. Brennan (1999) citing comments from Shorter says that: *"‘culture is... essentially a transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a pattern capable of development and change, and it belongs to the concept of humanness itself’. Because of the historical dimension and because by its nature culture seeks to pass on its cumulative wisdom from one generation to the next, an inherited culture can be severely challenged during a period of rapid social change."* Further, Brennan explained that:

"The cultural context in which we live today is variously described as high modernity, late modernity, post-modernity, and, most recently, the era of globalisation. Before examining the reality in which we live and work today it is valuable to examine briefly the causes of cultural change. Cultural change begins with economic change, that is, change in the ways and means of production...

Economic change always leads to social change, that is, change in the ways in which people live, an example of which is the revolution in the ways of communication. The change from a predominantly rural population to a largely urban-based concentration of people brings huge demographic shifts with all the social consequences that follow: The result is that the urban nuclear family becomes estranged from its rural roots in family and community.

Cultural change always follows economic and social change, but whereas the latter two forms of change can be measured in GNP, GDP or demographic shifts, the former cannot be so easily understood or perceived. Economic and social change occurs at the level of observable data, whereas cultural change occurs beneath the surface of what can be seen and measured. Cultural change concerns meanings and values and it is this type of change (not economic and social change per se) that affects both religious beliefs and values.

Reading further on the context of culture, there is a research on Religious Education professed by Rossiter (2010) in the Journal of Religious Education (Australia) which talked about a dilemma in meaning vis-à-vis culture. Rossiter said:

"There was said to be a contemporary ‘crisis’ in meaning, and education was considered to have some role in helping young people in their quest for meaning and purpose in life. But whatever this crisis might entail, it should not be interpreted as a lack of cultural meanings. As never before, there is a multiplicity of cultural meanings – all looking for adherents. And this in itself creates a problem for the individual’s search for meaning. How to judge the appropriateness of cultural meanings and what criteria might be used therefore become important in education generally and in religious education in particular...

Much has been written about education itself as a process of critical interpretation of culture. Critical theory and hermeneutics, including philosophical and sociological perspectives, have stressed the need for interpreting what is going on in culture; and in turn, this is proposed as a task to which public education can contribute (Crawford & Rossiter, 2006, p. 264).

Hill (1990, p. 3) *described this role as the “interrogation of one’s cultural conditioning”. Young people are naturally very critical, but are often naive as regards the political, manipulative and exploitative aspects of culture; or if they are aware of exploitation, many may not worry too much as long as it does not affect their lifestyle.”*

Rossiter also enumerated seven concerns which should be addressed in the critical interpretation and evaluation of culture. They are: *“exploration of the shaping influence of culture on people’s thinking and behaviour; appraisal of healthy and unhealthy effects; investigation of a range of contemporary social issues; identification of the influences on decisions and events; uncovering the historical, ideological and political forces at work; identifying who stands to gain or lose; deconstructing the components of writings so that they can be understood within their original contexts and this will inform potential meanings in different contexts; searching for the underlying economic and commercial interests that affect a situation; highlighting justice and environmental issues; and, calling ideologies to account.”*

Dispositions in Religious Education

In the Philippine context, Religious Education and catechesis are usually taken as the same for both use of faith-based instruction. If Religious Education requires methods and narratives, catechesis does the same. Thus, to compare Religious Education with catechesis, we confer to the General Directory for Catechesis (GDC, nn.80-87), whereas religious education in schools gives the pupils knowledge about Christianity’s identity and Christian life, catechesis, on the other hand, aims at fostering personal adherence to Christ and the development of Christian life in its different aspects.

On October 28, 1965, the Second Vatican Council promulgated the Declaration on Christian Education *Gravissimum educationis*. The document describes the distinguishing characteristic of a Catholic school in this way; *“The Catholic school pursues cultural goals and the natural development of youth to the same degree as any other school. What makes the Catholic school distinctive is its attempt to generate a community climate in the school that is permeated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and love. It tries to guide the adolescents in such a way that personality development goes hand in hand with the development of the “new creature” that each one has become through baptism. It tries to relate all of human culture to the good news of salvation so that the light of faith will illumine everything that the students will gradually come to learn about the world, about life, and about the human person”(GE 8).* The Council, therefore, declared that what makes the Catholic school distinctive is its religious dimension, and that this is to be found in a) the educational climate, b) the personal development of each student, c) the relationship established between culture and the Gospel, d) the illumination of all knowledge with the light of faith (Baum & Ortas, 1988).

Catholic schools have diverse students in terms of faith and culture. In spite of this fact, many Catholic schools keep on emphasizing their Catholic school culture as if they were catering

to a peculiarly Catholic clientele. Many non-Catholic students enrol in Catholic schools (especially in colleges and universities) not so much because they seek a "Christian" or "Catholic" education, but more because they desire a "good" or "holistic" education. Thus, it is quite unjust when peculiarly Christian expressions and symbol systems are enforced into the Catholic school culture (Chia, 2006).

Religious education is included in the development of formal curriculum in Catholic schools. There are different facets of Religious Education where students can involve themselves such as social justice and liturgy preparation to name a few. In Australia, *"the nature of relationship between school and parents in regard to Religious Education is a key issue."* However, *"the Church documents do not provide details on this issue, although they emphasize the need for development of a supporting relationship between the professional educator and the parents, as they work together to encourage faith and educational development in students"* (Finn, 2009).

Those involved in religious education and catholic schools have stewardship of a tradition by reading and adapting what Vatican II describes as the "sign of the times." Understanding the nature and purpose of the religion classroom and its possible contribution to the overall religious development of students is critical. Hence, an educationally credible religious education is ethical in approach, whereas, ethical standards in the religion classroom are understood. For example, in delivering topics on sin, redemption, and eschatology, when misapplied can be harmful by loading students unnecessarily with guilt (Ivers, 2010).

Religious Education has a great task in the modern society. In Australia, the ***Journal of Religious Education*** is an academic refereed journal subject to peer review. It is published by the School of Religious Education, Faculty of Education of Australian Catholic University. The journal helps disseminate original writings and research in Religious Education and catechesis -- and in related areas such as spirituality, theology, moral and faith development, cultural contexts, ministry and schooling. A good research entitled *"A Case for a 'Big Picture' Re-Orientation of K-12 Australian Catholic School Religious Education in the Light of Contemporary Spirituality"* is deemed relevant in this study being conducted. Rossiter (2010) said in his research that:

"Catholic school religious education contributes to pupils' cultural exposure to Catholicism; it can extend their cultural horizons beyond what they might absorb from their immediate home and community environment. This should also include knowledge of other religious traditions in the culture. Young people need some familiarity with their own tradition and knowledge of religions generally, even if at the time they may think this has little relevance for them."

Similarly, young people's identity development needs to be resourced by their religious tradition. Religious education can contribute to the communication of a basic sense of religious identity to children; this informs their initial self-understanding and interpretation of society. Later, when more mature, they would have their own say in determining their sense of identity and the extent to which any religious identification might apply."

While affirming the important place for the study of religious traditions, this strategy is not saying that the Catholic school religion curriculum is therefore adequate and should be left unchanged. The approach to teaching religious traditions needs to be modified – it needs more problem-posing content and a critical, student- centred, research-oriented pedagogy."

Tenets of Culture vis-à-vis Typologies in Religious Education

The Council of Europe (with 47 member states) that worked on a project to look at how issues of religious diversity could be incorporated into intercultural education and citizenship education across Europe provided set of principles for policy statement which include: 1) *agreement that religion is at least a “cultural fact” that contributes, along with other elements such as language and historical and cultural traditions, to social and individual life*; 2) *information on and knowledge of religions and philosophies fall within the public sphere and should be taught in order to develop tolerance as well as mutual understanding and trust*; 3) *religious or philosophical conceptions of the world and beliefs develop on the basis of individual learning and experience, and should not be entirely predefined by one’s family or community*; 4) *an integrated approach to religious, moral and civic values should be encouraged in education*; and 5) *intercultural dialogue and its religious dimension are an essential precondition for the development of tolerance and a culture of “living together”* (Jackson, 2008). These principles led the researcher to the notion of discussing the tenets of culture vis-à-vis the typologies in Religious Education.

Smart's (1968) understanding of phenomenology continues to be one of the most influential ways of approaching Religious Education though it was not developed for the practical curricular needs of the classroom (Macmillan, 2017 citing Smart). For Macmillan, the typological approach of Habel and Moore (1982) involves practical phenomenology as an approach to Religious Education (though it largely draws on Smart's ideas).

This approach to religious education is called “typology” as it explores the types of phenomena that occur within religion. These types make up the categories or building blocks which must be studied and mastered for religion to be understood (Lovat, 1989). Unlike phenomenology, however, Habel and Moore suggested that students begin within their own religious tradition as a basis of comparison to other religious faiths. Typology maintains neutrality and explicitly makes no judgements or truth statements regarding religion; the goal is to study the religions of the world, not to evaluate them (Crawford and Rossiter, 2006; Lovat 1989; Habel and Moore, 1982).

Typology distinguishes itself by encouraging a student to being with his or her own tradition, even though it has objectivity as a goal. In most religious education courses, the starting place would be Christianity (Lovat, 1989).

The eight types of religious phenomena, according to Habel and Moore, are beliefs, religious experience, sacred stories, texts, ritual, social structure, religious ethics, and symbols.

The diversity of cultural situations which have developed in one way or another from the perspectives of different religions is most noticeable about the world in which the Church carries out her mission of evangelization today. Undeniably, this affects every continent and every country, since there are ever more frequent intercultural and interreligious exchanges in the global village. On this mind-set, education can play an outstanding role in promoting the inculturation of the Gospel (Poupad and Praem, 1999 citing *Ecclesia in America*, 71). The Church's Pontifical Council for Culture, in its *Magisterium - Towards a Pastoral Approach* says:

"From the time the Gospel was first preached, the Church has known the process of encounter and engagement with cultures » (Fides et Ratio, 70), for «it is one of the properties of the human person that he can achieve true and full humanity only by means of culture» (Gaudium et Spes, 53). In this way, the Good News which is Christ's Gospel for all men and the whole human person, «both child and parent of the culture in which they are immersed» (Fides et Ratio, 71), reaches them in their own culture, which absorbs their manner of living the faith and is in turn gradually shaped by it. «Today, as the Gospel gradually comes into contact with cultural worlds which once lay beyond Christian influence, there are new tasks of inculturation. At the same time, some traditionally Christian cultures or cultures imbued with thousand-year-old religious traditions are being shattered. Thus, it is not only a question of grafting the faith onto these cultures, but also of revitalizing a de-Christianized world whose only Christian references are of a cultural nature. On the threshold of the Third Millennium, the Church throughout the world is faced with new cultural situations, new fields of evangelization."

In a circular letter of the Church's Congregation for Catholic Education addressed to the Presidents of Bishops' Conferences on Religious Education in schools dated May 05, 2009, the role of schools in the Catholic formation of new generations, with the complex task of education, was given emphasis due to the rapid social, economic, and cultural changes in the world today. Accordingly, the specific mission of education remains the 'integral formation of the human person'. *"Children and young people must be guaranteed the possibility of developing harmoniously their own physical, moral, intellectual and spiritual gifts, and they must also be helped to develop their sense of responsibility, learn the correct use of freedom, and participate actively in social life (cf. c. 795 Code of Canon Law [CIC]; c. 629 Code of Canons for the Eastern Churches [CCEO])"*.

The human person's experiences that give meaning to life is culture-bound. Undeniably, in the context of young people, *"their ideas, values and general attitudes to life are largely determined by the type of culture to which they are exposed. Metaphorically speaking, culture is a matter of life or death, and sometimes literally so. Thus, any educational or religious educational endeavour that does not take account of the contemporary cultural milieu in which all age groups, especially the young, are immersed is destined to be less than adequate"* (Brennan, 1999).

Pedagogies towards Integrated Approach to Religious Education: Interplay of Faith and Culture

The quest for pedagogies in Religious Education requires particular teaching and learning approaches which integrate faith and culture. Such pedagogies, however, should be juxtaposed with the reality of religious pluralism in the classroom. Interreligious dialogue in the classroom makes Religious Education not exclusive but inclusive. As Phelps (2009) put it, *"explorations into other religions are essential to laying down a basis for lifelong respect for difference."*

The traditional Catholic view of Religious Education which gives emphasis to the doctrinal approach (usually emphasizing Church dogmas with exclusivity) is no longer exempted from critique in a pluralistic or multi-cultural classroom. According to Bagir (2008) *"Religion becomes an issue when the immigrants carry with them different cultures of which religion is an important part"* (cited Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity, The Socio-political Context of Multicultural Education*, Longman, 2000; and Robert Jackson *"Religious Education's Representation of*

'Religions' and 'Cultures'", British Journal of Educational Studies, 43: (September 1995), 272-289). Thus, if pluralism or multiculturalism exists in the educational setting, Religious Education should be in the context of multi-religious education.

Bagir says that *"a good religious education has to involve critical pedagogy, that is, empowering the teachers and students to take a critical stance, to 'critically analyse different perspectives and use them to understand and act on the inconsistencies they uncover'"* (cited Robert Jackson *"Religious Education's Representation of 'Religions' and 'Cultures'"*, British Journal of Educational Studies, 43: (September 1995), 272-289). Hence, to unleash any biases in the Religious Education of Catholic schools is to have pedagogies in teaching that are attuned not only to the person of the learners but also to everything and anything that affirms them. *"Religious education is then faced with the challenge of searching for a pedagogy or presentation of the faith that will bring the learner close to God and at the same time to the historical realities in his life"* (Carillo, 1976). Such historical realities are embedded in the culture, whereas it operates into the developed systems of the individual.

Buchanan (2005) discussed different approaches and paradigms in Religious Education. Referring to these approaches and paradigms as pedagogical drift, Buchanan says that *"knowing about these developments in curriculum theory, and the reasons for them, makes for intelligent religious educators who are able to focus and justify their own curriculum position. Moreover, this knowledge enables educators to adopt appropriate approaches in the light of the many social, religious, and cultural factors that impinge on their world."* The said approaches and or pedagogies include: Doctrinal Approach, Kerygmatic Approach, Life-Centered Approach, Shared Christian Praxis, Phenomenological Approach, Typological Approach, and Educational Approach.

Since this research intended to re-interpret culture as a pedagogical reference in Religious Education, it specifically selected the Typological Approach by Habel and Moore as the most appropriate approach to foster unity of interest in a multicultural academic learning environment. Parallelism of this approach to the tenets of culture vis-à-vis the nurture of faith shall be addressed in the succeeding discussion.

IV. DISCUSSION

One's culture may be embedded in his/her religion in one way or the other. A critical understanding of religion in the context of culture is a necessity to determine the quality of Religious Education in Catholic schools. And this is what gives meaning to every individual who is searching for a deeper understanding of one's life. The concern for meaning in culture, in one way or the other, is also a concern of the values embedded to that culture, which includes the virtue of faith among all others.

Religious Education does not focus only on beliefs, sacred texts, symbols and rituals. It includes also stories (of the learners and even the teacher) based on their experiences, ethics or values, and the social structure where each one belongs. Learning then in Religious Education should be holistic, so that young people's identity development (whether Christian or not) will never be jeopardized.

Changes in the world today are not only rapid but even revolutionary to some extent. And if indeed people develop their own culture along with the changes of time, it would be quite dangerous if some would opt for the culture of death rather than the culture of life. Where there is culture of hatred and violence, the Church continues to carry out her evangelizing mission. Education plays a great role in the promotion of the values learned, more importantly from

Religious Education itself. Keeping one's individual faith, either with God, Allah, Buddha Jehovah, and Brahman among all others, even with these cultural situations, blended evangelization is a possibility.

Religious Education in Catholic or other Christian schools can be immensely accelerated along with the fast-evolving culture in the academic setting (like culture of excellence and culture of research), or the emerging culture of the society itself. In his published article entitled *Pedagogy for Christian Education in the 21st Century*, Gauuan (2012) mentioned that *"Philippine culture has been influenced by the teachings of Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam and Christianity. These teachings, combined with a wide variety of animistic indigenous beliefs, have melded into a syncretic form of Christianity as currently practiced by a majority of Filipinos today."* He further posited that *"the pedagogy of questioning, participation and transformation to continually discover truths and live by the truth is the pedagogy we need to continue using in this new century."* To keep abreast with new trends in education, Religious Education, per se, should not fail to enrich itself even in research.

With the given proposition to use Habel and Moore's Typological Approach in the context of Religious Education as challenged by a pluralistic and multi-cultural classroom, the types of components mentioned should be inclusive of the culture and or religion of each individual. Hence, with the use of scriptures, Biblical texts or stories, the Catholic Bible (which is usually required of students to bring that with *Nihil Obstat*) should not be treated as the only reference to supplement Church's Teachings or the lessons in class. The beliefs, sacred texts, experiences, and rituals of other non-Christian may be used as reference.

The approach to Biblical pedagogy is not an exemption for critique, especially when the religious educator is not eloquent in contextual pedagogy and teaching context as text. According to Lee (n.d.) *"the Bible has different meanings when it is addressed to people living in different situations. Their culture, social class, political situation, religious backgrounds, and life experiences provide different tools thus to understand and interpret the Bible. The authority of the Bible does not and cannot remain the same to one and all. It should change through time and is also subject to new social, historical and cultural interpretations as human consciousness evolve."*

Catholic education in the Philippines should take into account that Religious Education is not a matter of Catholicity. Catholic educational institutions should take the initiative for a dialogue within and beyond their learning environment. According to Baring (2011), *"not much is heard about proposing a platform of dialogue within religious education... if religious education should be an instrument in the formation of the right Christian attitudes among the young, dialogue must be an urgent Christian agenda in Philippine religious education."*

The institutional Catholicity of schools delivering Catholic Education cannot be measured by pen and papers. The big question is what kind of alumni these Catholic schools will produce. According to Sarmiento (2017, cited Baring, 2011) *"religious education in the Philippines has a struggle meaning because the term "religious education" has been typically associated with Christian religious education. He further explains that, "It is no wonder then that numerous Catholic institutions in the country identified religion courses as the "core curriculum" of the institution. This packaging somehow provides some challenges to secularizing attitudes that question the place of religious instruction in the academe."*

If Religious Education is to be considered as the "core curriculum" in Catholic schools in the Philippines, then that would be a matter of religious and or spiritual nurture to provide all the students. Such religious nurture should be coupled with values integration and the use of timely,

relevant and research-based pedagogies and approaches to teaching-learning, albeit *the effectiveness of any methodology depends on its intelligent use* (NCDP n.405).

V. CONCLUSION

The historical and sociological background of culture affirms that as people progress and develop in time, culture does the same; it is not static. Culture evolves with the personal, economic, sociological, political, religious or spiritual, and even with the educational aspects of human life.

Culture of people varies with place, age, economic status, and religious dispositions in life. Today's young generation is technologically savvy; it is characterized as well with hash tags like K-Pop, *lodi*, *petmalu*, and others, that as if they have a culture of their own. Hence, when it comes to Religious Education in the school setting, many get lost into holistic learning, especially when the classroom is in a multicultural or pluralistic set up. In here, the need of pedagogy for religious instruction is considered.

There is much pedagogy that may be used in teachers' approach to Religious Education. Great minds have conceived, proposed, and experimented on these pedagogies. Different Catholic/Christian schools adhered to what they believe fits-in to their curriculum. But none was adjudged as the best pedagogy. There may be more approaches that will emerge in time to cater to the current generation of youth, and with the evolution of culture, but what matters most would be the intelligent use of such methodologies and its grounding with faith in the Divine whom it serves together with others.

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