THE MAORI-CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY OF
MICHAEL SHIRRES

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Abstract: Christianity has constantly enriched itself with the intellectual traditions of the peoples it converted. In Polynesia, however, no generally accepted synthesis of Christian and native thought has been formulated. The Roman Catholic priest Michael Shirres attempted to combine both in a New Zealand Māori theology of unusual expertise and detail. But inconsistencies revealed incompatibilities between the two traditions, which Shirres was too faithful “to both” to ignore. Shirres work reveals basic problems that must be faced by any Polynesian-Christian thinker.

Keywords: Christianity. Māori. theology. Thomism. Neoscholasticism. Polynesian Christianity. acculturation. syncretism.

Encountering Christianity, Polynesians immediately began comparing this new religion with their old.1 Such comparisons stimulated diverse attempts to relate the two religions. A Samoan story depicted them as separate but subordinate to an undefined higher power (Charlot 1988). The Hawaiian writers of the Kumuhonua legends traced the similarities of the two religions to an older, common tradition, which they then attempted to reconstruct (Barrère 1969). Polynesians also recast their traditional religions under the influence of Christianity.

A major example of such recasting is the nineteenth-century New Zealand Māori teachings of the high god Io. Much controverted by Māori and non-Māori alike, they were accepted by

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1 E.g., “O Kekahi Mau Mea o ka Baibala i Ano Like me Kekahi Mau Mea i Hanaia ma Hawaii Nei i ka Wa Kahiko’ “Some Things in the Bible Similar to Some Things Done Here in Hawaii in the Olden Time” 1918–1919. For a general introduction with references, see Charlot 1986. All my cited articles can be accessed at www2.hawaii.edu/~charlot. This paper was written for “A Group Presentation on Issues in Hawaiian and Polynesian Theology” at Global Christianities in Comparative Perspective: A Colloquium, organized by Professor Andrew Crislip for the Department of Religion, University of Hawai‘i, Honolulu, Hawai‘i, April 13–14, 2006. I have profited from discussions with colloquium participants, especially my fellow panelists, the Reverend David Ka’upu and Father Tom Van Culin. I thank Margaret Orbell and Mervyn McLean for information and Dr. Orbell again for many earlier discussions of Māori literature and religion. Dr. Orbell died before she could comment on the final form of this essay. Orbell 1995 provides the best introduction to Māori thought along with sources and should be used by the reader of this essay.
prominent scholars and long influenced studies of Polynesian religions.\textsuperscript{2} Io is now considered by scholarly consensus to be an impressive reformulation of Māori religion to meet the perceived advantages of Christianity.\textsuperscript{3} As a single, highest god, Io corresponds to Jehovah. Below him begins the traditional genealogy starting from the earth goddess Papa and the sky god Rangi. Born from them are the major gods, each of which is accorded a distinct sphere of influence. Some have seen the influence of the organization of the New Zealand government ministries on this systematisation of originally variegated and overlapping descriptions of the gods. Indeed, despite the variety of Io teachings, they all attempt to bring unity and hierarchical clarity—qualities perceived and admired in Christianity—to the rich diversity of Māori religious traditions.

Much rarer, for historical reasons, have been attempts to recast Christianity under the influence of Polynesian religions. Many Polynesian practices have been introduced into Christian communities, and many Polynesian ideas are accepted as Christian. Māori “new religions” and Hawaiian-Christian churches have combined religious thinking from different sources with varying degrees of consciousness. However, a deliberate, open articulation of a Polynesian-Christian theology still awaits its Thomas Aquinas.

The fullest attempt that I know has been made by Michael Shirres O.P. (July 12, 1929–October 5, 1997). A pākehā ‘non-Māori’ New Zealander, Shirres was ordained as a Dominican priest in 1954 and began working with Māori congregations in 1973 (Shirres My Life). To provide better pastoral care, he learned the language and, from 1974 to 1986, earned his B.A., M.A., and PhD. in Anthropology, concentrating on Māori Studies. His M.A. thesis, Tapu: being with potentiality for power (The University of Auckland Library, thesis 80–018; summarized in Shirres 1982), and his PhD. thesis, Introduction to Karakia (thesis 87–188), or ritual chants, allowed him to claim to have been the first to earn a doctorate in Māori religion. His interest was clearly theological: “In 1989 Father Henare Tate, a Māori, and myself started a Maori Theology Course at Auckland University.” Shirres turned his lectures into informal and formal writings, which benefited from his unprecedented double expertise: a scholarly command both of Māori literature and of Christian theology.

Shirres described his project to me in conversations and in several letters:

\begin{quote}
I think I can show now, from doing the Maori theology, that there can be a partnership with Maori and other theologies, and in the partnership, Maori theology, coming out of a Maori revelation, has its own strengths. Maori theology does not have to be a junior or subservient partner to European theologies, but in some ways, especially in facing up to suffering and death, Maori theology has much to teach European theologies. (letter, May 9, 1994)
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
It is an attempt to show what I mean by a Maori Christian theology, by doing Maori theology, rather than just talking about it theoretically. (letter, October 14, 1994)
\end{quote}

Working with like-minded Māori intellectuals and community members, Shirres was anxious to have their approval:

\begin{quote}
Enclosed at last long, is the book on tapu. All the feed-back from Maori who have read it has so far been very good. (letter, May 9, 1994)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{2} E.g., Handy 1927. Similarly, the Kumuhonua legends were accepted as ancient by Beckwith 1970.

The positive reception of his book *Te Tangata: the human person* (1997) was intensely gratifying to him (letter, June 18, 1997):

The launching of *Te Tangata* was a great success, much greater than I thought it was going to be. The hall where we had it was full and the speeches were really tops, twelve of them, and as one friend told me, she just sang her heart out the whole time. Another one came up to have her mother’s book signed and told me: “Mum can’t come up. She is sitting back there bawling her eyes out.” There were tears and singing and laughter and everybody had a great time even though the Pakehas understood very little of what was being said. Also the people came from all over the place, from the north and from the South Island too, and it was truly ecumenical.

Maori, young and old, seem to love the book. I think the reason is that there is so much of their old people’s writings in it. As one wrote to me, when she reads the book she hears her old people talking to her.

The composition of the book and its unpublished companion volume had been a heroic effort for Shirres. In 1993, he was diagnosed with Progressive Bulbar Palsy, which gradually deprived him of his motor functions. He wrote about his affliction with great humor:

I cannot talk and swallowing and breathing is [sic] getting more difficult . . . They have also supplied me with a small talking machine. I type and it talks, with any one of eight different voices. So now I have an American accent. (letter, October 30, 1995)


He devoted his last strength to finishing his work:

About the only thing I can do now is write, so I am trying to complete two books, one on a Maori Theology and the second on a Maori Christian Theology . . . (letter, October 30, 1995)

Peter Murnane emailed to me on October 16, 1998:

Yes, he did face death bravely, and with good spirits. The Maori people he had loved and served gave him a typically caring “send off,” a three-day funeral celebration [tangi]. He is buried in the ‘far north,’ about four hours drive north of Auckland.

The above quotations reveal the life-setting of Shirres’ work: his scholarship served his pastoral mission. His most purely scholarly work was his philological study of *karakia*, for which he read widely in unpublished materials. Shirres, however, moved beyond philology to hermeneutics, using *karakia* as texts on which to expound religious teachings. He could stay within a Māori context (e.g., 1997: 77–103), that is, “doing Maori theology, rather than just talking about it theoretically.” He could append “My own Christian understanding” (*Maori Theology: “Tuatua i te Orooro* (a ritual chant for peace): 7) and apply a *karakia* to Christian theology (*Maori Theology: This is Humanity. This is Jesus. This is God*). He could also compose original Christian *karakia* (e.g., *Maori Theology: Jesus the Māori*).

Most important, he used *karakia* in his pastoral care (*Maori Theology: “A Maori Theological Response to Violence*”). Conducting the service over the body of a young man killed while drunk-driving, Shirres intoned:

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a ritual chant used for prisoners on their being returned to their own people . . . recited to take off from them all the negative effects of being a prisoner, a slave, and to restore to them their dignity as human beings. In Maori terms, it was to take away the negative noa that was upon them . . . their state of being a nobody, and to restore their tapu.

As he told the story in 1991 to my Polynesian Religions class, one of my students burst into tears and said, “I have lost my dignity, my kapu. I am a nobody.” Without hesitation, Shirres chanted the karakia over her there at her desk, and she was greatly comforted.

Shirres’ writings were informed by his life and mission, and his natural tendency was to join and even blend his historical research with his dogma. As a Dominican, Shirres had been educated in Neoscholasticism and was particularly influenced by the contemporary Thomism of Jacques Maritain.5 I recognized in Shirres’ talk to my class and in the article he later sent me, “Tapu” (1982), Maritain’s articulation of the “analogy of proper proportionality,” which was in fact central to Shirres’ understanding of Maori religion. Although Shirres intended to describe tapu on the basis of native-language texts, his primary intellectual means were Thomist.6 Besides the philosophical definition of analogy that pervades the article, Shirres used the distinction between potency and act for the central subject of the relation of tapu to mana.7 As a conventional academic without a pastoral role, I advised him to distinguish more clearly between his historical, philological foundation and his theological constructions. He did this with a characteristically pastoral justification:

I have managed to finish the two books I wanted to write. One on a Maori theology and one on a Christian Maori theology. I have followed your advice in keeping the two separate and the Maori appreciate this too. (letter, October 30, 1995)

I am very pleased now that I followed your advice and didn’t combine the two books. The launching of Te Tangata and the feed-back from people made it very clear just how much the Maori appreciated having a book they could call their own. (letter, June 18, 1997)

I consider Shirres’ work a major contribution to the formulation of a consistent Polynesian-Christian theology, a stimulating discussion of unusual expertise that addresses a wide range of issues. I will focus my criticisms on certain key points that reveal, I believe, major problems in formulating such a theology. Shirres produced a number of writings, but they all agree on the points I will discuss. I will take as my base text Shirres’ most technical work (1994), adding at times points from Shirres 1997.

Firstly, in his major published works (1982, 1994, 1997), Shirres is describing traditional Maori religion, but to do this, he uses Western philosophical and theological language; the imposition of foreign concepts is, in fact, an endemic problem in the field. Besides the examples given above, Shirres uses creation even when the texts speak of procreation.8 Polynesians used

5 In a draft of Shirres 1997, he mentions also A. Woodbury S.M.
7 Analogy: e.g., Shirres 1982: 38: “all things are tapu in themselves, each tapu in its own way, according to its own mode of being”; 45, “Each is truly tapu, according to its own mode of being . . .” Potency and act: 1982: 46, 50; see also 1997: 37, “tapu—being with potentiality for power, for mana.” Shirres is using a modern definition of mana as general power, a definition developed in anthropology rather than philology and prominent in contemporary discussions by Polynesians and non-Polynesians alike. The word is used rarely and more specifically and diversely in traditional texts.
several models for the origin of the universe, and their differences should not be ignored. By treating the creation and procreation models as equivalents, Shirres is obscuring a principal difference between Christian and Polynesian thought and appropriating Māori religion into Christianity. Some consequences of this will be discussed below.

Shirres also introduces the distinction between reason and faith, a major problem in Christianity but indiscernible in Polynesian religion. Although Christianity is “a faith in things unseen,” Polynesian religion and traditions are based on experience. One does not believe in one’s family gods, one interacts with them. These are two very different kinds of religion. Shirres’ version of Māori religion requires faith because he introduces a topmost level of a Supreme Being that is beyond experience.

Shirres also uses Western theological definitions (1997: 27):

In the English language the spiritual powers are often referred to as gods, but they are not gods. These atua are created. They are the children of Rangi and Papa, who themselves are created out of nothingness.

Besides treating creation and procreation as equivalents, Shirres introduces a Christian theological principle: only God is god because only he is uncreated; only he enjoys aseity. However, in Polynesian religions, gods can indeed be created. Hawaiians have a ceremony for turning dead relatives into family gods. Smaller fetcher gods can be created by other rituals. Polynesians themselves, not just English speakers, refer to these beings as atua ‘gods,’ and they used that word for the Christian god. Shirres himself admits that god is among the possible glosses for atua (1994: 7). The practice of the Polynesians reveals that their definition differs from Shirres’. His view is clearly based on Christianity:

the six major created spiritual powers, all created by and coming under the power, the mana, of Io the one supreme uncreated being. (1997: 34)

There is only one atua who is given the qualities of God, and that is Io, Io-matua-kore, God uncreated and eternal; Io-taketake, God the source of all. (1994: 7)

Polynesian gods are also not eternal. They have an origin and can have an end. Māui’s birth and death stories are famous: Kamapua’a is born wondrously and kills other gods. The Christian conception of god is outside the traditional Polynesian thought world.

Secondly, Shirres relies on nineteenth-century Māori texts, subordinating to them the undoubtedly older traditions. He does quote texts in which the universe develops as a genealogy starting from Papa and Rangi, who themselves have no antecedents whatsoever (1994: 6; 1997: 25 f.). But he privileges late speculations that go behind Papa and Rangi to Te Kore ‘Nothing,’ so he can introduce the Christian idea of creatio ex nihilo ‘creation out of nothing’ (e.g. 1994: 7; 1997: 16). That creation is done by Io, who thus resembles more nearly the Creator God Jehovah. Shirres was convinced that both these traditions—Te Kore and Io—were pre-nineteenth-century, but was unable to produce indisputable textual evidence (e.g., n.d.: 23 f.). Perhaps as a consequence, he relied at times on contemporary formulations of Io teachings (n.d.: 23 f., 28 f.). The two late traditions nonetheless provided him with the mental framework

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9 E.g., Charlot 1985, 1991.
10 E.g., Shirres 1997: 33, “The primary meaning given tapu in this study is made up of two elements, one from reason and the other from faith.” I have objections also to Shirres’ idea that Polynesians had the concept of an immaterial spirit; e.g., n.d.: 30, “a two-world system, a material world and a spiritual world.”
in which he understood Māori religion as a whole. He recognized the great variety of Māori traditions (1997: 16 f., 25, 33, 37, 57 f.), but felt they could be unified or accommodated in a new system: “Different words are used for the same reality . . .” (1997: 33).

The Io teachings provided Shirres with a Māori theology that was already formed by the encounter with Christianity: a hierarchy starting from a single supreme god, through Papa and Rangi to their children, the major gods, and down to human beings, animals, plants, artifacts, and so on. This is a classic Western scheme that has been applied by several scholars and modern native religious teachers to Polynesian religions. Shirres’ achievement is to have articulated this view with more sophistication—because he was more knowledgeable about its sources in NeoPlatonic and Thomistic thought—and with more completeness, extending its consequences down into a large number of details.

In what has been popularly called the Great Chain of Being, God has the fullness of being, which is then passed down in diminishing proportions to the progressively lower ranks of creation. Each thing participates in God’s Goodness, Truth, and Beauty—dimensions of His Being—in proportion to its rank. Therefore a thing is called good, true, or beautiful according to its proper proportion: the terms are not univocal or equivocal but analogical, the analogy of proper proportionality (e.g., 1994: 12). Shirres argues that key Māori terms can and should be understood analogically and thus reveal a hierarchy.

The principal difficulty of applying this Western view to Polynesian thought is the lack of a word for being in Polynesian languages. Consequently, a substitute must be found in Polynesian terms, such as mana, or concepts, such as purity. Mana or purity comes from the gods to the chiefs and from them downwards. The last stages, which Shirres himself discussed in detail, are usually left vague.

Instead of one substitute, however, Shirres uses two words, tapu and mana, which he defines for his purposes and, as seen above, coordinates with the aid of the Thomist ideas of potency and act. That the two words are being used in place of being is revealed in the passages in which Shirres connects tapu and mana to existence, for instance: “Both intrinsic tapu and mana are linked with ‘being’, with ‘existing’.”11 Shirres’ accepts the added complication of using two words because of his grounding in the Māori language. Both words are prominent, with tapu more frequent in traditional literature and ritual, and mana more frequent in contemporary discussion. In his commitment to Māori thinking, Shirres refrains from simplifying his task by ignoring one of the words.

The second point on which Shirres is faithful to Polynesian thinking introduces an important inconsistency into his scheme: the problem of intrinsic and extrinsic mana and tapu. In the Great Chain of Being, God is the source of all being, truth, goodness, and beauty. All others derive theirs from God, and the world is a reflection of the glory of God. In passages, Shirres expresses this view clearly:

Our tapu as human beings comes from the spiritual powers from whom we receive our life . . . (1994: 11)

every part of creation has its tapu, because every part of creation has its link with one or other of the spiritual powers, and ultimately with Io, Io matua kore, “the parentless one”, Io taketake, “the source of all”. (1997: 33)

11 Shirres 1997: 36; also 1994: 10 f.; n.d.: 22, “Tapu, therefore, in its first and primary meaning refers to the very being of each reality . . .”. An advantage of not having a Polynesian word for being, Latin esse, is that Shirres can ignore the central Scholastic problem of the relation of esse ‘being’-verb to essentia ‘being’-noun.
Shirres uses this scheme in his discussions of “extensions of tapu”: “These are not tapu in themselves, but tapu because of their relationship to the primary tapu, to those things which are tapu in themselves” (1994: 12; also, 18 f.; 1997: 37–42).

Into this clear scheme, Shirres introduces the inconsistency. Rather than Io enjoying intrinsic tapu and mana and all others enjoying extrinsic—because derived from Io—Shirres states that subordinate tapu and mana are also intrinsic: e.g., they “receive their ‘being’ and therefore their intrinsic tapu from the different spiritual powers” (1994: 8); “Everything that is, has its own intrinsic tapu, a tapu which begins with its existence and which has its source in the mana of the spiritual powers” (1997: 36). If tapu is connected to being, and all being is derived from Io, how can the tapu of subordinate beings be intrinsic? Extrinsic and intrinsic are mutually exclusive terms.

The nearest Shirres comes to addressing this problem is in his “Conclusion” of Tapu (1994: 18). He defines the “primary meaning” of tapu as “being with potentiality for power.” This tapu is also “the mana of the spiritual powers”; the six areas of “creation” derive their tapu from those six powers. However,

Above all, and the source of all, Is Io . . . There is no potentiality in Io. Io is being, the source of all being, of all tapu, of all mana. In Io, tapu and mana are one and the same.

Io’s tapu is, therefore, essentially different from the tapu of those under him: it is fully realized, not merely potential. Io has the fullness of being, in Thomist terms. So the “intrinsic tapu” of those lower than Io is lesser than Io’s own tapu. This accords with the “Great Chain of Being” but does not solve the intrinsic-extrinsic problem. That problem arises in the very next sentence:

Everything in creation has its own intrinsic tapu, and therefore its own value or worth, a value or worth which comes, not just from itself, but from its relationship with Io, with God.

At this point, Shirres is combining intrinsic (“from itself”) and extrinsic (“from its relationship”), but not explaining how this is possible within his mental scheme. Finally, Shirres seems to cut the Gordian knot:

The belief in Io, in God, is essential for this understanding of tapu. A belief in the existence of the spiritual powers as distinct created beings is not essential . . . Others regard the spiritual powers . . . only as different manifestations of the power of Io, of God.

Removing the highest layers under Io brings the hierarchical scheme nearer to modern Christianity, and the intrinsic tapu of created items is derived more immediately from Io. But the intrinsic-extrinsic problem has not in fact been solved. That is, Shirres has not been able to formulate a consistent theology.

Why did Shirres not apply his Thomist scheme more consequentially? I believe he was too sensitive to Māori thinking to ignore a central point of the Polynesian world view: things have value, power, importance and so on, in themselves. They do not derive all their worth from exterior sources. A valley, mountain, stone, or bone can be sacred in itself, not because some god lives there. Shirres could not absorb this point coherently into his system, but he was too knowledgable about Māori literature and practices and too faithful to those sources to ignore it. In encountering this difficulty, Shirres revealed a fundamental difference between two models of the origin and thus the nature of the universe. In Christian creationism ex nihilo, everything is derived from the creator. In the Polynesian genealogical model, all things have their
individual place and worth, just as children do. The difference between these two views presents a major challenge to any Polynesian-Christian theologian.\textsuperscript{12}

Once Shirres has established his basis in Māori religion, he then constructs on it a Māori Christianity, establishing links between the two. This project is again pastoral, designed for use in rituals and prayers that combine similar Māori and Christian ceremonies, traditions, and ideas (e.g., \textit{Maori Theology}, “The Ancestors and Jesus the Carpenter from Nazareth”; n.d.: 45–49). Shirres’ most extensive writing on this subject is the unpublished second volume to his \textit{Te Tangata}—Ko Toou Manawa, Ko Taaku Manawa—\textit{Your heart, My Heart} (n.d.)—some of which has been published on the Web.\textsuperscript{13}

Shirres heeds the call of those Māori who are rediscovering their native spirituality and promoting a rebirth of their indigenous culture (n.d.: 5, 11). He himself believes that their traditional religion is based on an authentic “revelation” given to the Māori by God; it is, therefore, as legitimate a basis as the Bible for a Christian theologian (n.d.: 5). The Māori project resembles the movement from the original Jewish community to the larger church of the Greek world as well as all the adaptations of Christianity as other cultures received it (e.g., n.d.: 7). The goal is “to inculcate Jesus into Maori society and Maori religion” (n.d.: 1–5), a process of transformation like that of the Transfiguration and the appearance to the disciples at Emmaus. The Māori Christian church will place the same emphasis on the powerful word as traditional ritual, a conviction from Shirres’ life and practice (e.g., n.d.: 15 ff.). This will be a “liberation theology” and include a reformation of the church to support the aspirations of the Māori people (n.d.: 6, 41). Māori Christianity can also transcend the denominational differences that obstruct Western forms of Christianity (n.d.: 13).

Shirres’ Māori-Christian theology redefines concepts from both religions. The roles of the Māori ancestors and Christian saints can be compared and coordinated (n.d.: 13), as can the \textit{waituhu} ritual and baptism (n.d.: 45 f.). \textit{Mana} is centrally important, as modern Māori thinkers argue, but should not be understood as a power that can be used indifferently; rather, \textit{mana} should be considered more protective than destructive (n.d.: 32). The kingdom preached by Jesus involved “the rejection of any mana that was an exercise of power over another” (n.d.: 33). As in the Māori ritual used by Shirres over the dead adolescent, Jesus came to restore the \textit{tapu} or \textit{mana} of the poor and the sinner (n.d.: 34). \textit{Mana} is thus giving, and Jesus, the most powerful of all, gave himself unto death (n.d.: 33–38). Both Māori religion and Christianity are concerned with suffering and death, and the Māori have developed teachings and rituals that can contribute to Christianity (n.d.: 19–22, 25 f.). But Jesus conquered death successfully whereas the Polynesian Māui failed (n.d.: 16 f.). Therefore, Jesus can be leader, high priest, and intercessor. Most important, the traditions of Io can be fitted to those of Christianity and further defined (n.d.: 28 f., 44): “In this understanding of \textit{mana}, to be is to give. Io, the fullness of being, is also the fullness of giving.” The Thomist ideas of being as refugent find here a Māori expression. Ultimately, Io, God, gave his only son. The most extreme stories of the Bible and Māori literature proclaim “both Jesus and Io, the prodigal son and his more prodigal

\textsuperscript{12} This challenge is, I believe, an opportunity for a Polynesian contribution to Christian theology. The Great Chain of Being is in fact closer to the genealogical model than to \textit{creatio ex nihilo} and is probably a spiritualisation of earlier Middle Eastern genealogical origin myths: the very being of God is transmitted without a break between creator and created. Polynesian theologians could also interpret less symbolically the considerable remnants of the genealogical model in the Bible, such as fatherhood, sonship, and begetting.

\textsuperscript{13} See also \textit{Maori Theology}, “Research and Publications.”
father” (n.d.: 56). Shirres endows the Christian deity with the marvelous surprise of Polynesian
gods.

In his final sickness, deeply moved by a traditional *karakia*, Shirres composed his own
summary of his life’s message (n.d.: 56):

- Jesus is bigger than European Christianity.
- Jesus is bigger than any one religion.
- Jesus is bigger than the Gospels.
- Jesus embraces all peoples, all persons.
- Jesus is found with the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, with the ‘non-persons.’

The words of the Maori ritual chant express
what Jesus says to me,
what Jesus says to every person and to every people,
what Jesus says to the whole of creation.

They express what is at the heart of being human.
They express the ‘being’ of Jesus.
They express the ‘being’ of Io, God.

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