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God's Household Economics

Charles W. Calomiris | Hellenic American Women's Council, Sixteenth Annual Conference: "Oikonomia: Women as Pillars of the Home"

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Oikonomia is a Greek word with multiple meanings, or rather, one meaning that has different aspects, and applies to various levels of human organization (individual, family, community, and society). *Nemein* means to manage or control and *oikos* is a house. The concept can have a purely individual connotation: "the rules which control a person's manner of living," or "making the most of one's resources." The management of a household is the most literal translation. In addition to applying to a person or a family, *oikonomia* is also used to describe the stewardship of a community or a society. "The administration of the concerns and resources of any community or establishment with a view to orderly conduct and productiveness."[1]

The ladies of HAWC asked me to talk about the concept of *oikonomia* from a religious standpoint, and the role of women in spiritual stewardship. I am no theologian, but I couldn't resist giving it a try. So, here I am. There are three aspects of the religious application of the concept that I want to discuss: (1) what Orthodox Christianity has to say about our *oikonomia* as individuals and families, by which I mean the stewardship of our souls; (2) God's *oikonomia* for us, meaning ***His*** stewardship of our souls, and (3) the role that cultural values play, in addition to religious beliefs, in realizing righteous *oikonomia*.

I. The Physical World We Experience Daily Is Sacred

Jesus's life, and Mary's life, are the primary source material for teaching us how Orthodox Christians are supposed to live. One of the most important lessons we learn from those lives is that the physical world that we experience every day is sacred. We are supposed to focus on our lives ***here***.

Jesus did not arrive in splendor, riding clouds with lightning and impressive special effects, causing everyone to drop what they were doing and bow down to an other-worldly God. He came not as an ***outsider***, but as an ***insider***, to teach by example how to transform our physical world and make it holy.[2]

Jesus was born humbly, not to royalty in Jerusalem, but to a family of modest means in the hinterland of

Nazareth, a small city of little apparent significance. But His parents, especially His mother, were chosen very carefully.

What do we know about Mary? She was born to older parents who sent her at a very young age to the Temple in Jerusalem to be educated and cared for. Mary was a ***non-conformist***, apparently the first woman raised in the Temple to insist that she be permitted to remain unmarried after coming of age for marriage. The matter had to be settled by the High Priest, who appealed to God for guidance. It was decided that Mary's desire to remain a virgin would be respected by her husband, and that she should be betrothed through a widower-only lottery, which the unwilling Joseph won.[3]

Mary was a theological wunderkind, something unusual for a woman of her time. According to apocryphal sources, as a student at Temple, Mary studied scripture unceasingly, and her precocity was so amazing that it was believed that "instruction was given to her by the angels of God."[4] People marveled at Jesus's knowledge of scripture from an early age, especially growing up in Nazareth; that knowledge largely was the result of home schooling by his mother.[5] There were no formal religious schools for Him to attend in Nazareth, and the responsibility of teaching Him was largely His parents'.[6]

The Antiochian Orthodox Church, under the early leadership of Saint Ephrem, followed that example; it gave women a prominent role in Church teaching and in chanting the Liturgy; it tasked women with the theological education of children and liturgical chanting in part because of the obvious importance of women in training children;[7] to this day, women play a key role in the chanting tradition of the Antiochian Orthodox Church, and in its scholarly writings.[8]

Mary did much more than teach Jesus about life's basics and about their faith. She taught Him about what it is to be obedient to God under difficult circumstances (for example, when God asks you to become an unwed teenage mother, or to watch your guiltless Son die on the cross). Mary and Jesus both chose to do extremely difficult things out of obedience to God. One could argue that Mary's obedience was even more remarkable, since she did not have the advantage of a Divine will. The Orthodox Church reveres Mary as the courageous and obedient "ladder" of God's descent. Without her willingness to trust God and put her life on the line in obedience to God, there would be no Messiah, no Resurrection, no salvation.

Once, a stranger, hearing Jesus preaching, complimented Mary for having given birth to Him ("Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked" Luke 11: 27-28). He responded: "Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and keep it" (Luke 11: 27-28). This is sometimes misinterpreted as Jesus "dissing" his mother; theologians see this passage differently: Jesus is saying that the greatest accomplishment of His mother was her obedience to God, which was obviously front and center in His thinking about her.[9]

But more fundamentally, Mary, as a physical person, was Jesus's model for how to be human. There is so much Orthodox theological writing about Mary as the embodiment of the ideal way to approach life, as a unique example of human possibility. Mary was so close to perfection that St. Gregory Palamas said that Mary "dwells on the frontier between created and uncreated natures." And St. John of Damascus says of Mary that "the whole mystery of Divine *oikonomia* is personified in her." He also used the metaphor of Jacob's ladder to describe Mary: whose super-human *oikonomia* made her the connecting point between the physical and the Divine worlds.[10] That ladder metaphor lies at the heart of why we Orthodox view Mary as an intercessor and advocate for us before God, a religious practice

that is unique to the Orthodox Church.

Indeed, the theological debates over whether Jesus should be regarded as fully human largely revolved around Mary. The iconoclastic controversies were largely a fight over whether physical incarnations (including icons) should be revered as holy, but the iconoclasts also wanted to do away with the name "Theotokos," and the Orthodox devotion to Mary, precisely because it highlighted the fact that God was born of a woman and was, like her, fully physical. ***These theological debates were important because fundamentally they had to do with the question of whether physical human life really can be sacred***. The debate was resolved in part by reflecting on Mary's remarkable achievements as an unambiguously fully physical being, which made it easier for people to accept the notion of the physical as holy.

Is it coincidental that it was a woman who became the purely-human being to achieve the closest thing to Divine perfection? God does not play dice with chromosomes. Perhaps something about feminine human nature, perhaps its greater gentleness, makes it easier for a woman to connect with God. The Greek word that defines spiritual wisdom is the feminine ***Agia Sophia***, which is iconographically depicted as a woman. Moreover, the Greek concept that defines the presence or dwelling place of God in this world is also feminine: ***Parousia***. The ancient Hebrew word for *Parousia* was ***Shekinah***, and like *Parousia*, it is a feminine word. These concepts of *Sophia* and *Parousia*, according to the theologian, Sophia Compton, are ancient prefigurations of a feminine spirit and mediator, which became embodied in the Theotokos.[11]

Mary was not perfect, but even her rarely observed imperfections offer life lessons for Jesus and for us. St. John Chrysostom (in Homily 44 on the Gospel of Matthew) noted one of Mary's faults; her excessive maternal pride, documented in the Gospel of Matthew (12: 46-49),[12] is visible when she and her relatives disrupt one of Jesus's sermons, apparently more interested that everyone recognize their connection to Jesus than in listening to what He had to say. There was a lesson here for Jesus (the need to put his mission from God above even his personal loyalties to His beloved mother), and there is a hopeful lesson here for all of us parents, too; even the greatest mother in the world sometimes got it wrong.

Having Mary as His mother gave Jesus a head start on another important insight. Jesus respected women in a way that was millennia ahead of His time. Women returned the favor, following Him with devotion, unabashedly washing His feet, courageously standing by Him on the cross and visiting His tomb, even as most of His closest disciples were scattered in fear, and spreading Christianity throughout the world from the very beginning.

Jesus's disciples were shocked to find Him conversing with a Samaritan woman at a well (who later became St. Fotini)--a double taboo, as she was a woman and a Samaritan. Jesus didn't care; they spoke about the intimate details of her life, and He revealed the most important fact about Himself (His identity), all over a cup of water.

Jesus teaches us how to accomplish things in our lives. He got close to people, met with them eye to eye. He did not command from on high, but rather conversed with them while sitting at their table or in their fishing boat. He not only healed their physical infirmities, He asked them to choose to be better. He taught by example, by telling stories, and by questioning people about what really mattered ***to them***. Jesus respected people's freedom to make up their own minds.

Jesus's ministry did not consist only of well-attended sermons; he participated in the daily lives of ordinary people and stressed that the physical world of home and family and community was sacred. His first miracle was to make water into wine at the behest of His mother at the wedding in Cana. He had meals with individuals or small groups that would redirect their lives (as with Zacheus the tax collector). He went fishing with them, or to visit friends in need of help (including his close friends, Lazarus, Mary and Martha), or to preach at His home or at the homes of others, or to have a last meal with His closest friends.

How did Jesus manage His *oikos*, both in the narrow sense of His household and in the broader sense of His community of followers? We know that Jesus took responsibility for His mother's and his friends' physical well-being, despite all of His other responsibilities. One of His last actions, while dying on the cross, was to make sure that Mary would be cared for by His closest friend among the twelve, John.[13]

Jesus's life also offers powerful lessons about how we should manage our careers. He understood how to motivate people, and how to accomplish His objectives. Jesus was a single-minded manager who focused on the bottom line, His mission. He could not be distracted by measures of success that he knew didn't really matter. In particular, popularity did not matter to Him. He did not mince words about the challenges of becoming His disciple, even when He knew it would lead many disciples to abandon Him (John 6: 66).

In the Parable of the Talents, or Minas (Matthew 25: 14-30; Luke 19: 11-27), Jesus tells us that God expects us to have the courage to take productive risks with our lives. Three servants receive different amounts of money, which two invest productively, but one buries in the ground for safekeeping. When their master returns he takes the money away from the servant who played it safe. The point is living righteously requires boldness in using your gifts. Playing it safe is not acceptable, and doing so demonstrates a lack of faith in God. Jesus is the quintessential entrepreneur.

He was strategically wise, too. Jesus set up headquarters in Capernaum, not Jerusalem, which was far enough from Jerusalem to avoid trouble from the Roman or Jewish authorities based there. The cost of living was lower in Galilee, too; by one account, it was one-fifth that of Judea.[14] Capernaum was a commercial town, and a crossroads for trade, including the slave trade. Some believe that this choice reflected Jesus's plan to rely on slaves, who were particularly receptive to Jesus's teachings, to spread His teachings widely. Jesus knew how to use the worst of the world, even the slave trade, to His Divine purpose.

Jesus and Mary's examples for us about the holiness of daily physical life, and the importance of individual choice, responsibility and effort in living daily life--especially in dealing with its challenges and horrors--has profound, disturbing and inconvenient consequences for each of us. What we choose to do to and for each other, in every little thing we do, every day, within our families, our jobs and our communities, is what matters. That is what will make our little worlds holy or not, and that will also be the basis for how we are judged--a fact that Jesus reiterates in so many parables, and in His vision of the Final Judgment of men (based on their love for others in this life, as demonstrated by their daily actions) in Matthew 25:31-46.

II. *Oikonomia* as Practical Divine Love

Oikonomia as a religious concept involves more than ***our*** virtuous management of daily life. It also has

to do with ***God's*** stewardship of our lives, if we let Him, and the ***Church's*** management of God's salvation plan. The various aspects of managing God's salvation plan show up in St. Paul's uses of the word *oikonomia*: the word sometimes is used to mean God's plan for us and His grace toward us (Ephesians 1:9-10, 3: 2-3); sometimes *oikonomia* refers to God's entrusting to men the preaching of God's word (1 Corinthians, 4:1), and sometimes it refers to His entrusting to the clergy the stewardship of the Church (Colosians 1:24-25).[15]

If one were to ask clergymen to define the Church's *oikonomia* the first thing that many would mention would be ***dispensation***, meaning the Church's decisions to occasionally bend its rules.

St. Basil the Great, in discussing *oikonomia* in the sense of dispensation "urges that the needs of the time and advantages of the Church are the two main requisites for a just dispensation" (*Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*). St. Basil granted *oikonomia* to a group of believers by accepting the legitimacy of their baptisms, even though doing so was not in accord with the rules of the Church. But what exactly defines the "needs of the time" and the "advantages of the Church"? Is everything just "up for grabs" depending on what is convenient for the Church, financially or otherwise?

Fr. John Meyendorff discusses the requirements for appropriate *oikonomia* (dispensation).[16] Dispensation is an embodiment of mercy, a recognition that people take different paths to God, and consequently may require somewhat different treatment. It is applied properly only for the sake of the salvation of the people. It is not permissible for Church officials to bend or put aside rules for money or privilege or any other worldly goal. Dispensation can only be justified to the extent that it results in salvation that could not otherwise be achieved, and the decision to grant dispensation must take into account how bending the rules for one person or group affects the whole body of the Church.

A Church that never bends or puts aside its rules has lost sight of its ultimate purpose--"God would have all men saved" (1 Timothy 2:4). Properly understood, *oikonomia* has nothing to do with ***compromising*** the values or the mission of the Church; rather, it has to do with ***fulfilling*** them.

III. Greek Culture and Divine Purpose

Without doubt Greek-American women have played the most important role in preserving and transmitting a Greek cultural identity for their children in America. Does the perpetuation of Greek culture in America serve the Divine purpose of *oikonomia*--that is, communion with God (*theosis*)?

I confess that sometimes it seems to me that Greek-American culture is not helpful to Orthodoxy. I suffer sometimes from "OCA envy"; Greek-American churches can have the feel of ethnic social clubs, especially in contrast to Orthodox Church of America congregations, where religious observance is more devout (e.g., measured by the frequency with which parishioners attend church, participate in confession, or perform prostrations).

And yet, the humanistic aspects of Greek culture have served and continue to serve the Divine purpose of *oikonomia*. St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory the Theologian, who studied at the University of Athens, integrated elements of ancient Greek teaching into Orthodoxy; and the Greek classical aesthetic sensibility, which revels in physical beauty, must be credited with the stunning and inspiring beauty of Byzantine architecture, iconography, and music.[17]

Ancient Greeks, perhaps more than any other people, from the beginning embraced the religious ideas

flowing from Jerusalem in the first century, as St. Paul's letters confirm. Three of the Gospels were written in Greek, and one was written by a Greek (Luke, who also wrote the Acts of the Apostles). All four Gospels were written in areas of Greek settlement (locations that are now within Turkey).

That close connection between the early development of Orthodox Christianity and ancient Greek civilization was not a coincidence; rather, it reflected a central assumption that was common to Christianity and ancient Greek culture, namely that the purpose of life was to fulfill the needs of individuals.

Keith Roberts, in his forthcoming book, *The Origins of Business*, argues that ancient Greek economy and society, unlike other ancient economic and social systems that had preceded it, was decentralized in its structure. The laws and institutions that governed economic and political life in Greece reflected the goals of relatively small groups of people living in scattered settlements. Unlike the great riverine societies of Egypt, Mesopotamia, Assyria, or Persia, Greece's geography and political structure produced a society in which economic activity uniquely reflected the goals of individual Greeks. This is reflected in the etymology of the word oikonomia, which defines the purpose of economic life as serving the aspirations of the household, not the ruler.

Uniquely in Greece, the central premise of social and economic organization was that individual purpose mattered. Material pursuits, philosophy, and religion served the individual's well being, dignity, and understanding. That mindset likely explains why Greeks found Christianity so attractive. Christianity was a religion focusing on the salvation of individuals, not the promotion of a ruler or a ruling class. The apostles taught that all people are equal before God and that the salvation of each individual has equal importance. The dignity and worth of the individual, and the importance of the individual's freedom to choose, are at the center of Christian theology.

The ancient cultural Greek values that predated Christianity continue to guide the individual pursuit of Christian virtue for the sake of edifying the lives of individuals. These values are embodied in everyday concepts that guide life: ***philotimo*** (love of honor), ***philosophia*** (love of wisdom), ***philoxenia*** (love of human diversity), the revulsion to ***aharistia*** (ingratitude), ***philokalia*** (the celebration of beauty)[18], a commitment to the importance of love that insists on distinguishing the nuances of each of the different ways of experiencing it (***philia***, ***agape***, ***eros***, and ***storgi***), the enjoyment of the simple pleasures of family life and the honor accorded to those who are truly committed to making a loving home for their families (the ***nikokyra*** and ***nikokyris***). Those concepts appear both in actions and in words, especially in the seemingly endless treasure trove of Greek proverbs that Greek parents have used for centuries to transmit our culture.[19]

Winston Churchill, citing Alexander the Great, argued that the essence of the Greek cultural commitment to individual dignity and freedom lay in the unique willingness of its citizens to "pronounce the word 'no'."[20] The Greeks have always celebrated the courageous withholding of consent. Leonidas's refusal to surrender at Thermopylae is an early and prominent example. It was followed centuries later by thousands of Christian martyrs who were tortured and killed for their refusal to deny Christ ("martyr" means witness). The Greeks courageously said no (***ohi***) to the Italian invasion of 1940, and still celebrate that decision every year on a day dedicated to the word 'no' (Ohi Day, October 28).

Greek cultural values that celebrate individual dignity, virtue and freedom serve the central religious objective of oikonomia--making the daily world sacred. Even those who do not regard themselves as

religious can reveal through their actions what is known as "the hidden Christ," meaning actions that promote Christian life without the explicit recognition of Christ. In Orthodox theological tradition, such actions can be a route to eventual salvation even for those who do not accept Orthodoxy.[21]

Indeed, one of the most powerful illustrations of the way Greek culture has promoted oikonomia comes from outside Orthodox Christianity. In his monumental memoir of Auschwitz, Primo Levi wrote about the ways that maintaining simple daily routines and cultural values preserved individual dignity in the camp (Lager):

...precisely because the Lager was a great machine to reduce us to beasts, we must not become beasts...to survive we must force ourselves to save at least the skeleton, the scaffolding, the form of civilization. We are slaves, deprived of every right, exposed to every insult, condemned to certain death, but we still possess one power, and we must defend it with all our strength for it is the last--the power to refuse our consent. So we must certainly wash our faces without soap in dirty water and dry ourselves with our jackets. We must polish our shoes, not because the regulation states it, but for dignity and propriety. We must walk erect, without dragging our feet, not in homage to Prussian discipline but to remain alive, not to begin to die.[22]

Levi saw the Jews from Thessaloniki as unique:

...those admirable and terrible Jews of Salonica, tenacious, thieving, wise, ferocious and united, so determined to live...those Greeks who have conquered in the kitchens and in the yards, and whom even the Germans respect and the Poles fear...They now stand closely in a circle, shoulder to shoulder, and sing one of their interminable chants...And they continue to sing and beat their feet in time and grow drunk on songs.

....their aversion to gratuitous brutality, their amazing consciousness of the survival of at least a potential human dignity made of the Greeks the most coherent national nucleus in the Lager, and in this respect, the most civilized.[23]

A central purpose of culture, I suppose, is to empower individual humanity, to give us a storage chest of songs, sayings, tastes, images, and dance steps that we can draw upon as the moment requires, to affirm our humanity. When women preserve cultural traditions in their homes, they build human dignity one meal, one song, one proverb at a time.

I remember reading, at the Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki, about one of those groups of Thessalonican Jews at Auschwitz, facing their end, knowing that they were about to be gassed, who broke out in song together one last time, singing until death the Greek national anthem. In that moment, standing powerless and about to die, they demonstrated the importance of being Greek, and in the process, made that moment of their lives forever sacred for all people.

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Footnotes

1. The *Oxford English Dictionary* is the source for all these various definitions, and it contains many more.
2. My emphasis here is on how Jesus presented Himself to us, and how his actions and the methods of

his ministry were designed to demonstrate ideal humanity. The holiness of the physical is a distinguishing theme of Orthodox Christianity. Christological debates of the first Ecumenical Councils recognized the important link between Jesus's full physical humanity and His role as our savior. St. Gregory Palamas's theological teachings on the holiness of the physical, which had a profound effect on Orthodox philosophies regarding physical aspects of prayer, are also relevant to this theme. The Orthodox liturgical experience emphasizes the physical sensory experiences of worship that appeal to sight, sound, speech, touch, and taste: incense, chants, spoken prayer, icons, robes, lights, and communion. Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture, unlike Western cathedrals that reach to heaven to find God, celebrates the physical presence of God in our midst – the Byzantine church is an iconographic jewel box that unites God, His saints, and the living in a single community on earth.

3. *The Life of the Virgin Mary, The Theotokos* (Buena Vista, Colorado: Holy Apostles Convent, 1989), pp. 60-8.
4. *Ibid*., pp. 54, 78.
5. Of course, as part of the Holy Trinity, Jesus eventually had direct access to knowledge beyond anyone else. But Jesus emptied Himself of His Divine powers when He came to earth, and so presumably depended on His parents to meet His needs, including His early education.
6. *Ibid*., pp.295-7.
7. For sources on the historical importance of women in the Antiochian Orthodox church, see Sebastian Brock and Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Holy Women of the Syrian Orient* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
8. In the Greek Orthodox tradition, St. Kassiani was one of the most famous Byzantine hymnographers. She was also famous for her beauty and her outspokenness (which prevented her from winning Emperor Theophilos's "bride show"). Theophilos the Iconoclast made an insulting comment about women at the bride show: "Through a woman came the basest things," referring to Eve's sin, to which St. Kassiani responded: "And through a woman came the best things," referring to the birth of Christ and its consequences for humanity.
9. Vladimir Lossky, "Panagia," in *The Image and Likeness of God* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), Chapter 11, pp. 195-210.
0. St. John of Damascus argued that the moment of Christ's conception was the moment in which the deification (*theosis*) of physical humanity became a fact. M. Sophia Compton, "John of Damascus, Holy Matter and the Mother of God," *Theandros*, vol. 5, no. 3, Spring/Summer 2008.
1. *Ibid*.
2. "While He yet talked to the people, behold, His mother and His brethren stood without, desiring to speak with Him. Then one said unto Him, Behold, Your mother and Your brethren stand without, desiring to speak with You. But He answered and said unto him that told Him, Who is my mother, and my brethren? And He stretched forth His hand towards His disciples, and said, 'Behold my mother and my brethren.'"
3. "When Jesus saw His mother and the disciple whom He loved standing by, He said to His mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then He said to the disciple, 'Behold your mother!' And from that hour that disciple took her to his own home." (John 19:25-27). Jesus cared for His friends, too. Just before He was crucified, he prayed to God the Father on their behalf: "Those whom you gave me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I come to You....I do not pray that you should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one." (John 17: 12-15).
4. *The Life of the Virgin Mary*, p. 290.
5. References here follow the list of Biblical references in Fr. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press), p. 88.
6. *Ibid*., pp. 88-90
7. The Phrygian mode, for example, survived from ancient times to become the Plagal 1st Mode of

Byzantine music.

8. The *Philokalia* also refers to a collection of texts written between the fourth and fifteenth centuries by spiritual masters of the Orthodox hesychast tradition, originally written for the guidance and instruction of monks, and compiled in the eighteenth century by St. Nikodemos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth.
9. See Elaine G. Bucuvalas, Catherine G. Lavrakas, and Poppy G. Stamatos, *Treasured Greek Proverbs: The Greeks Have a Saying for It* (New York: D.C. Divry, 1980), and Panos Karagiorgos, *Greek and English Proverbs* (Corfu: Panos Karagiorgos, 1999).
0. Radio address of October 16, 1938.
1. Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, in his essay, "Eschatology" (in Orthodox Christian Theology, edited by Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff, Cambridge University Press, 2008, Chapter 7) describes Orthodoxy as traditionally taking the position that "God's mercy cannot be limited to just a certain category of the deceased. The Orthodox belief is based on the idea that, until the Last Judgment, changes for the better are possible in the fate of any sinner. In this sense one can say that Orthodoxy views the fate of the person after death with greater optimism than Catholicism, and never closes the door of the saving Kingdom of God to anyone. Until the final verdict of the Judge is pronounced, there is hope for all the departed to enter the Kingdom of heaven." Bishop Hilarion goes on to point out that St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. Isaac the Syrian both taught that God's plan was for the salvation of all people (pp. 116-117). Similarly, St. John Climacus writes that "although not all people can be completely free of passions, it is not impossible that all be saved and reconciled with God" (p. 117).
2. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 41. See also Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).
3. *Survival in Auschwitz*, pp. 71, 79.

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