

The Soldier's Covenant: a critical examination of its place within a contemporary context in The Salvation Army (TSA) in the United Kingdom as a new monastic Rule of Life.

By Tom Dunham

Abstract

The Soldier's Covenant is used as an expression of faith and a framework for discipleship for soldiers in The Salvation Army around the world. Rules of Life have also been used as a framework for discipleship within monastic communities and more recently with the emergence of the new monastic movement. With this in mind, this article seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is the original essence and purpose of the Soldier's Covenant?
- In what ways is the Soldier's Covenant reflective of a new monastic Rule of Life?
- How could the Soldier's Covenant be contextualised as a Rule of Life in relation to covenanted new monastic ways of being?

At the age of 17 I knelt at the mercy seat and signed the Soldier's Covenant, at the time not fully aware of the promises that I was committing to, but with something of the intention to live the life as a Salvation Army soldier. Since then I have grown to understand and feel a growing passion for this covenantal relationship. My wife and I also have a shared Rule of Life that forms part of our spiritual formation as a couple. We are committed to grace, boldness, rest and hospitality, both personally and together. As my understanding of Rules of Life has developed, it is interesting to note various similarities with the Soldier's Covenant. As someone who lives within the covenantal relationship of the Soldier's Covenant and who is passionate about it as a form of discipleship and commitment to building God's Kingdom, I firstly acknowledge any positive bias, but will seek to be objective in my evaluation. Fewer people are committing to Soldiership in the United Kingdom, in a context where 'consumer culture corrodes commitment, individualises society, counterfeits spirituality, and forms character...in a different direction from the way of Christ' (Cray

2010:3), This article gives an introduction to the Soldier's Covenant and Rule of Life in new monastic communities, and then explores, compares and contrasts them in order to provide a critical examination of the Soldier's Covenants in the UK as a new monastic Rule of Life.

Those who become soldiers must profess their faith in Jesus Christ, have studied the doctrines and principles of The Salvation Army (TSA) through the soldiery preparation material, received acceptance from the local pastoral care council (Street 2008:44), and sign the Soldier's Covenant in a public ceremony whereby they 'make a public confession of faith and a covenantal commitment to living a life of discipleship with The Salvation Army' (TSA 2018:25). It is 'a lifelong commitment to God that binds him/her to The Salvation Army's Christian beliefs and lifestyle practices' (TSA 2018:25). The Soldier's Covenant, initially known as the 'Articles of War', was introduced in 1882 (Sandall 1950:53). Little is written on why the Articles of War were only introduced at this stage but could be because the movement was never set up to have its own congregations but to refer converts to other churches for membership and discipling (Needham 2018, p.33). Therefore, as the movement grew with its own congregations, a more formalised structure was needed, covering doctrine, disciplines and a commitment to a life of service. Prior to this, soldiers were simply urged to sign a pledge card however this was not compulsory (Sandall 1950, p.55). While the essence and primary aims were retained, in 1989 the 'Articles of War' were revised, including a name change to 'A Soldier's Covenant', modernised language and the addition of personal commitment within marriage and family life (Garipey 2000:180).

Booth and Court (2017:10) emphasise that the Articles of War were introduced 'to focus personal conduct and loyalty in the execution of the Salvation War'. Through the military metaphor there is a strong emphasis in joining a fighting force for the salvation of the world, coupled with the commitment to discipleship. Street (2008:43) describes it as costly discipleship that 'demands ongoing radical obedience' in response to God's call to follow him. Needham (1987:11) adds that

'the soldier enrolment makes clear that discipleship is the purpose of conversion, and it celebrates the convert's acceptance of this calling by

utilising the military metaphor of enlistment into a life of spiritual discipline and warfare’.

Here the language of discipleship and warfare are coupled. While the importance of mission is not lost, the latest soldier preparation material (TSA 2018:25) appears to have a stronger emphasis on personal discipleship and less on the military language of joining a fighting movement. Holiness teaching is also important, with Court (2004:153) stating that the Soldier’s Covenant is ‘intended to provide a means to holiness’, as soldiers seek to grow in Christlikeness through discipleship.

‘No one is a full member of The Salvation Army who has not been enrolled and sworn-in as a soldier’ (TSA 1994:72). This quote indicates a viewpoint that soldiership can be viewed as full membership of TSA. While the language of membership is often used, this is not to be confused with membership within the body of Christ. Any membership of a denomination is therefore a witness to salvation through Jesus Christ at an earlier point. However, Sandercock-Brown (2014:12) rejects soldiership as merely membership and views membership to a local corps as broader than soldiership alone. Equating soldiership to full membership gives the sense of exclusivity. It indicates that people who attend and commit to a Salvation Army corps but choose not to be soldiers are less than full members. This would include Adherent Members. Adherency was introduced as early as 1886 for anyone connected to TSA (Clifton 2018:250). In 2004, their title became ‘Adherent Members’ instead of ‘Adherents’ and included a statement of declaration of faith (Clifton 2018:250). Adherent Members commit to TSA as their church, participate in the life of the congregation and identify with its mission (2018:27). In relation to soldiership, adherency could be perceived as a secondary form of belonging. Taylor (2014:145) highlights how this view leaves adherent members ‘in a strange state of limbo’, existing on a lower tier of membership while having still made a declaration of faith. However, the soldiership preparation material (TSA 2018:25) adds that becoming a soldier does not elevate anyone to a higher position. Furthermore, Taylor (2014:145) highlights the confusion within a movement that promotes a theology of the priesthood of all believers but reserves certain ministries and roles to only those that make the ‘full commitment’. Amidst this confused theology and praxis, Sandercock-Brown (2014:13) concludes that ‘we must affirm a simple biblical model that leaves

us free to equally embrace soldiership, adherency, attendance and anything in between as spiritual membership of a church (a corps) and The Church'.

The change of name to 'A Soldier's Covenant' emphasises the centrality of covenant relationships for soldiers. Court (2004:149) states that 'God is a covenant-keeping God' which is evidenced throughout scripture as God binds himself to his people through covenant. Covenant is important in TSA theology as indicated through a number of Salvation Army covenants. In response to God's love, children are encouraged to commit to the Junior Soldier's Promise, adults to the Soldier's Covenant and the Officer's Covenant for those that are called by God to be officers. Physically signing a promise or covenant is also proven to help people stay committed to that promise. Statistics suggest that people who enter into marriage are more likely to stay committed to each other than couples that choose not to make the promises of marriage (TSA 2018:27). Therefore, the inference is that 'committing to the 'Soldier's Covenant' will help to keep you strong in the faith over the long haul' (TSA 2018:27). Shakespeare (2016:13) highlights that this is a 'sacred covenant' and is more than being put on a membership roll. Through the commitment to the 'Soldier's Covenant' an agreement is entered 'that flows from the invitation to love and summons us to obedient living. We make our vows before God and promise our devotion to him and our service as a soldier' (Shakespeare 2016:14).

This highlights that the covenant is initiated by God, and the response is obedience to him. Clifton (2007) also emphasises the commitment to God and that 'through sacred covenant we bind ourselves to him with deep seriousness of intention'. Cartmell (2011) disagrees stating that the 'Soldier's Covenant' 'positions The Salvation Army as the covenant holder rather than the vehicle by which this commitment is expressed'. However, a glance through the covenant reveals that it is centred firstly around a relationship with God. Any misunderstanding here should be corrected otherwise this is no longer a sacred covenant but becomes a contract with an organisation. Bringing these ideas together, the 'Soldier's Covenant' can be both a formalised sacred covenant initiated firstly by God, yet also a commitment to the mission of TSA.

Court (2004:152) is concerned that 'we've watered down our end of the covenant so much that soldiership, for some, has come to mean just signing a piece of paper'. The risk is that entering into soldiership becomes a rite of passage in order to be part of a movement or to fulfil certain roles, rather than being fundamentally a relationship with the living God. It either then becomes totally redundant or needs re-establishing and reimagining as discipleship for today. Cartmell (2011) concludes that to continue to have value and meaning, soldiership must:

'be a call to radical discipleship and not merely a symbol of membership. It must point to and be intimately connected with the One for whom we are called to lay down our lives. If we can recapture this essence, then soldiership has a future'.

Monastic life has existed in most major religions, usually associated with contemplative practices and simplicity of lifestyle (Sheldrake 2013:50). From the fourth Century onwards during a time of major social and political change in Europe, Christian monasticism began to grow. The values and understanding of the Christian faith were also shifting as Christianity transitioned from the persecuted margins to become the official religion of the Empire (Sheldrake 2013, p.49). The Church soon became part of the establishment, 'absorbing the values of political power, money, patriarchal hierarchy and a focus on the rich and influential rather than the poor and marginalised' (Mobsby and Berry 2014:2). Wilson-Hartgrove (2008:46) describes that in this changing context, the monastics sought to discover faithfulness to God and live radically different lives. Freeman and Greig (2007:40) add that 'nearly all major monastic movements began with a violent reaction to compromised religion'. The movement was also a counter-cultural witness within society where it powerfully modelled Godly living (Freeman and Greig 2007:40), and monastic communities were centres of missionary work (Sheldrake 2013:49). This mirrors some of the motivations within the founding years of TSA.

Bonhoeffer (cited in Wilson-Hargrove 2008:26) believed that the restoration of the church would come through a new monasticism in its uncompromising obedience to Christ. As the church declined in the UK and USA in the late twentieth century, new monasticism was birthed. In the UK this was through the Fresh Expressions

movement (Mobsby and Berry 2014:31). The UK is once again in a time of transition, being described as post-church, post-Christian, post-secular, post-Christendom, and postmodern, where commitment is primarily to the self, individualism and consumerism (Mobsby and Berry 2014:2). Within this context, monasticism offers people a way to commit 'to living an ancient way of life in a radically different context' (Mobsby and Berry 2014:1). This new movement seeks some of the ancient principles that guided people to be faithful disciples. However, Muldoon (201:123) states that new monasticism is not monasticism, and only connect because they simply focus on 'radical discipleship', interestingly also a description used earlier about soldiership. Looking at the founding motivation of monasticism, new monasticism and TSA, there is a clear fundamental desire for faithful holy living and mission to others in response to a changing culture.

In both monasticism and new monasticism, Rules of Life are used to give rhythms and patterns for living. The first known monastic community living by a formalised Rule of Life is credited to Pachomius in c.320 (Sheldrake 2013:56). Sheldrake (2013:56) describes the rules as 'normative texts' setting out the spiritual principles to guide the community. Others have also produced rules, learning from the Desert Fathers. One of the most well-known monastic rules is that of St Benedict, which is 'simply a handbook to make the very radical demands of the gospel a practical reality in daily life' (Askew 2010:94). The rule, which is not seen as a set of laws to confine or restrict but to give life, outlines the values, the character and ethos of that community's way of living. 'The great, buried gift' (Scazzero 2006:198) of St Benedict's rule has shaped western monasticism for the last 1500 years and continues to guide a range of Christian traditions today. In the way of monasticism, a feature of new monasticism, but not exclusive to, is a formal written Rule of Life. The new monastic Rule of Life draws on traditional monastic rules as they focus people to develop holistic, healthy spiritual rhythms in the complex context of the 21st century. Mobsby and Berry (2014:51) describe the new monastic Rule of Life as:

'a guide, hopefully to inspire, an aspiration seeking to affirm what is good concerning contemporary society, but also seeking to be countercultural to the overly individualistic, materialistic and consumptive cultural norms'.

In summary, Peters (2015:67) provides a definition for a Rule of Life stating that it is 'a dynamic document...that reflects the reality of how one believer chooses, under the guidance of God, to live out her Christian life'.

Having introduced the 'Soldier's Covenant and Rule of Life within new monasticism, we will look at how they can be compared, and in any ways that TSA could learn from the application of rules of life in the new monastic movement.

Also, a feature of many rules of life, the 'Soldier's Covenant' is holistic, beginning with doctrines followed lifestyle practices covering many areas of life. This includes commitment to a developing relationship with God; having integrity in all areas; relationships with others including family and spouse; stewardship of resources; abstinence from alcohol, tobacco and drugs; faithfulness to witness; commitment to the local Salvation Army; and to the principles and practices of the international Salvation Army. In the same way monastic rules are 'a holistic and all-embracing approach to opening up a healthy approach to the spiritual life in community' (Mobsby and Berry 2014:51), covering beliefs, actions and well-being.

Peters (2015:66) notes that everything, except humankind, in creation follows rules and patterns. In many aspects the human body also follow rules, yet to grow and flourish there is still a need for intentional rules or rhythms. Within the spiritual life a rule 'serves the purpose of keeping us disciplined so that we behave properly and grow in holiness' (Peters 2015:66). Following the 'Soldier's Covenant' can be considered a disciplined lifestyle in that it commits the person to certain patterns of belief and behaviour. However, many Rules of Life are more specific than the 'Soldier's Covenant', giving strong guidance to daily and weekly rhythms. Maybe the 'Soldier's Covenant' could be viewed as scaffolding, in that it is not the building but enables the building to happen. However, since the 'Soldier's Covenant' is less specific in daily rhythms, the danger is that no building takes place and the scaffolding simply becomes purposeless. Shigematsu (2013:24) uses the imagery of an athlete from 1 Corinthians 9, indicating the need for deliberate practice rather than an undisciplined life. All areas of life require intentional training and focus and so 'in order to thrive in our life with God we need a spiritual ecosystem that includes deliberate practice' (Shigematsu 2013:24). Obedience to the way of Christ and a

disciplined life involving spiritual disciplines results in a deepening relationship with Christ and also shapes character (Cray 2010:5). Without rhythms the result could be a drifting spiritually. The disciplined lifestyle may appear to be a challenging path, yet it is considered a necessity for meaningful growth. This could explain why there is a re-establishing of some of the ancient traditions as people seek something meaningful to commit to within a postmodern context.

Sandercock-Brown (2014:14) proclaims that TSA needs 'people who are prepared to publicly commit to the Army's mission, to promise to live counter-cultural, holy lives as living witnesses to the counter-cultural Kingdom'. In the same way that the monastics communities were set up to live counter-culturally with the use of a Rule of Life, Street (2008:45) affirms that in a postmodern society, those that make the promises in the 'Soldier's Covenant' are 'swimming against the tide'. This is a challenge in a 'commitment-shy culture and rampant individualism' (Ryan 2007:22). Commenting on monasticism, Freeman (2010:54) warns that young people risk being patronised by not expecting any depth or commitment, 'yet contentment with shallow commitment can sometimes lead to teenagers simply not connecting'. However, Cartmell (2011) highlights that today's generation are not interested in signing pieces of paper or wearing special clothes but will be committed to action. This demands evaluation of the lived values of the 'Soldier's Covenant' so the priorities are a relationship with Christ, a disciplined lifestyle, with a clear mission rather than formalities within a movement. Maybe a new generation requires something new that seeks to be relevant in a postmodern context is instead of repackaging soldiership. Alternatively, TSA could embark on the rediscovery of the original essence of soldiership rather than abandoning it altogether. This approach would echo the essence of the Rule of Life which is not legalistic, but within the new monastic movement, draws on traditional monastic principles of living as missional disciples within our context. Cray (2010:5) warns that 'the evasion of commitment is a recipe for permanent immaturity'.

A potential risk for any Rule of Life is that it becomes so specific that it does not allow for individuality within the community. As already noted, within the 'Soldier's Covenant' there is space and flexibility for each individual to find practices and rhythms depending on their personality, gifts, temperament, location and particular

calling from God. Peters (2015:67) states that 'a Rule of Life should be flexible enough to adjust to the realities of a person's life but firm enough to require obedience'. This flexibility is equally not about having the freedom to change it just to suit an individual's own desires since this would not require any obedience or discipline but allows for personal rhythms and individuality.

Many new monastic communities create their own rule together (Mobsby and Berry 2014:66), which is a point of difference for the 'Soldier's Covenant'. The 'Soldier's Covenant' is held internationally rather than created in the local context. Mobsby and Berry (2014:61) praise an inclusive development process of the rule that is formed from the 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down'. The rule is then widely owned by the local group rather than dictated by an organisation. This approach also allows for a rule to naturally 'emerge out of the life of a community' (Adams 2010:46). Therefore, each community's Rule of Life can respond to the context in which it is created. However, the risk is to lean towards simply suiting the needs of the individuals in the group rather than seeking the spirituality of the ancient traditions. Therefore, a formation approach should include deep knowledge of ancient traditions and obedience to the Holy Spirit's leading. The challenge for the 'Soldier's Covenant' is that it is adhered to internationally and therefore needs to be transferable to different cultures. The 'Soldier's Covenant' therefore needs to be transferable to a diversity of local contexts without becoming meaningless to all contexts or of little substance.

Mobsby and Berry (2014:66) also emphasise that a Rule of Life needs to be simple and memorable in order to have maximum impact to daily life. While the 'Soldier's Covenant' is relatively easy to understand, it is quite long to memorise. This then requires regular review of the covenant to be reminded of the detail and to assess current progress. A feature of any Rule of Life is the inclusion of regular reviews and opportunity for renewal. During Holy Week in the monastic tradition, monastics and priests would reaffirm their vows. This is replicated by many new monastic communities through an annual reaffirmation service which serves to embed the rule in the life of the community (Mobsby and Berry 2014:73). Scazzero (2006:207) suggests that any rule should be reviewed and revisited at least once a year and even comments on the pattern of St Augustine who had his rule read once a week. In my own experience, the 'Soldier's Covenant' is rarely revisited in any depth with

soldiers. There could be opportunity for soldiers to use the annual commitment Sundays to review and refocus on their 'Soldier's Covenant'. Also, for new monastic communities the review serves the purpose to reshape the rule, a practice that is not open to soldiers as it is internationally held. This strengthens the argument to look at introducing something more locally specific. Shigematsu (2013:37) suggests that a rule needs to flex and change in order to serve the current purposes, since the rule exists to help the person flourish rather than being something that a person serves. However, within many rules and within the 'Soldier's Covenant' there is flex that allows for individuals to create their own rhythms within the structure of the covenant but this is reliant on individuals to act upon. Regular renewal also gives the opportunity for those who can no longer commit to the rule to withdraw. Adams (2010:47) deviates from the life-long commitment of a rule and states that for today, it may be better to take a vow for a season. This allows for people to leave with grace if circumstances change, or God calls people to follow differently. However, this also feeds the postmodern consumer mentality in that people seek other options as soon as something no longer fulfils. Reflecting on the fast pace, casual, commitment-shy culture, Peterson (2000:17) uses a quote from Nietzsche which says 'the essential thing in heaven and earth is...that there should be long obedience in the same direction'. A disciple who desires to mature and grow must commit to be a pilgrim on the long journey. While not explicitly stated within the wording of the covenant, soldiership in its current form is a commitment to a life devoted to God. This counter-cultural covenant is a powerful witness over what could be considered a seasonal whim, but equally if someone chooses to leave, it should be without shame or guilt.

Needham (2018:201) highlights the importance that soldiers recognise that they are part of the body of Christ and suggests that soldiers should 'support one another and hold each other accountable for growing in holiness and living missionally'. While a Rule of Life can be created individually and can play an important part in personal spiritual growth, they are 'meant to be lived out in community' (Shigematsu 2013:38). Benedict originally isolated himself from society, living in a cave, in order to seek spiritual maturity, but soon formed a community (Shigematsu 2013:38). Community is needed for support, inspiration, challenge and love, and without this sustained change is difficult. This poses a challenge in a 'culture of temporary allegiances and

communities, of many encounters but few relationships' (Cray 2003:11). Within new monasticism many communities do not live together, as with ancient monastic traditions, but form dispersed community, yet they recognise the need for regular patterns of connection (Cray et al 2010:153). There are also examples where traditional monastic communities are dispersed such as the Third Order of Franciscans who share in the life and prayer of the community but live outside of the monastery (Runcorn 2006:64). While dispersed, Holland (2010:135) encourages that the community is 'attentive to what is connecting [them] as a whole community'. An advantage of the international covenant is that the worldwide connection is strong. In local settings, soldiers could learn from the monastic tradition of accountability, support and encouragement. Needham (2018:209) proposes that our corps could be considered as covenant communities,

'together living in gratitude for what God has given the world through Jesus, together exploring and putting into practice what it means to be a covenant community of Jesus' disciples, together supporting one another in live and service'.

However, this becomes challenging as local corps are made up of those who have committed to the 'Soldier's Covenant', adherents and those who make no formal commitment. Aspirations for a Christ-like community are the same, but there needs to be specific support and accountability for those who have committed to be soldiers. Adams (2010:54) proposes that the community needs to be 'radically committed at the core, but easy to access at the edges'. This is a difficult to achieve where soldiership and adherency can sometimes be confused as tiers of membership creating a hierarchy of commitment. Adams (2010:54) aspires that a community can have a significant committed core, but still have capacity for others to explore without the formal commitment that the core demands. This forms an aspiration for Salvation Army corps but requires deep commitment and understanding from all within the community. The other extreme presents the danger that in order to become welcoming and accessible, church communities make discipleship easy, attractive to all which risks simplifying faith.

As the values and nature of rules of life are evaluated, similarities can be found with the 'Soldier's Covenant'. There is also much that TSA could learn from the new monastic movement. Firstly, it is to have an understanding of the 'Soldier's Covenant' as a form of distinctive discipleship rather than being defined as membership. The discipleship question is critical in any context or time. Cray (2010:3) states that 'the cultural shift we have been living through....has put new questions to our familiar patterns of Christian life and relationship'. It appears that soldiership has become that familiar way for TSA, at risk of being viewed as membership over a form of discipleship. In evaluation, this creates an opportunity to reimagine soldiership and return to the original essence and purpose. Muldoon (2010:124) highlights that new monasticism brings into light the importance of radical discipleship within the ancient traditions. Similarly, the new monastic use of the Rule of Life informs what the 'Soldier's Covenant' could be for TSA in the 21st Century. The term 'radical discipleship' has been used within TSA to describe soldiership previously. Echoing a new monastic Rule of Life, it is radical in the sense that it is counter-cultural, a disciplined lifestyle and deeply committed to Christ, TSA and the growth of the Kingdom of God.

Secondly, the Rule of Life also reminds TSA of the need for a holistic approach. The 'Soldier's Covenant' is holistic. Further application of the 'Soldier's Covenant' and its impact on daily life may need to be highlighted with regular teaching in order for it to be lived as a Rule of Life daily. A regular review and renewal of the covenant would also serve as a reminder of their covenant with God, drawing them back to its principles. Askew (2010:94) highlights the Northumbria Community whose rule 'calls us back to see if our dreams are still there. It has more to do with a spiritual vision of community life, with roots continually to be rediscovered than with a legalistic document'. Also, a periodic review would allow those who no longer feel they can uphold the covenant to leave with grace, without any shame or guilt. There is opportunity to create synergy between ancient traditions and contemporary experience to produce 'a way to live that is both connected to the past and liveable in our current setting' (Adams 2010:46).

Thirdly, while the international nature of the 'Soldier's Covenant' connects Salvationists worldwide, there is a need to consider variations in local contexts. This

could involve locally formed membership structures and promises in addition to the 'Soldier's Covenant'.

Considering the 'Soldier's Covenant' as a new monastic Rule of Life will inevitably impact on ecclesiology. While not the focus of this article, it should be noted that Taylor (2014:144) wonders whether TSA is more accurately described as 'a special quasi-missionary religious order within that Church' with a highly disciplined expression of discipleship. Clifton (2004:8) disagrees and concludes that with a broader understanding of what it means to be a church, TSA can only be considered as a denomination of the Christian church. Court (2004:153) also states that 'some people think that soldiership is irreparably damaged and so they propose the institution of a holy order to fill the operational gap left by our desertion of covenant', and instead encourages TSA to return and remain committed to its original purposes and principles. Maybe viewing TSA as a holy movement or order gives a sense of flexibility for TSA to respond to the needs of the day.

Having looked at the nature and essence of both Rules of Life and the 'Soldier's Covenant' within Christian communities, it is evident that there are similarities. Gibbs and Bolger (2006:228) consider the monastic model attractive given 'its holistic understanding of spirituality, its emphasis on community support and accountability, and its commitment to mission beyond the brotherhood'. Essentially, they both include a commitment to a counter-cultural disciplined life of radical discipleship. While this is not exclusive to these groups, they both include a formal written pattern for distinctive living and are committed to the mission of God beyond their own community. In function, the 'Soldier's Covenant' could be considered as a Rule of Life. However key differences include the 'Soldier's Covenant' being less specific in its direction of daily rhythms and also the international nature opposed to a locally crafted new monastic Rule of Life. There is also a difference in whether the commitment is seasonal or lifelong, an area that TSA need to consider. The challenge for TSA is to make the 'Soldier's Covenant' relevant in each context. The role of the local corps is important as places of accountability and support. In the same way that the new monastic movement has reimagined the disciplined life of the ancient monastic tradition, there is opportunity for TSA to reimagine, dream and be faithful to its calling.

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