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**Sport and Religion:
Culture, History and Ideology¹**

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Abstract

Over the past 30-40 years there has been a steady growth in the academic literature concerning the relationship between sport and religion, particularly Christianity (see Watson & Parker, 2012a). What this article sets out to do is to map the key features of this relationship focusing specifically on developments in the UK during the 19th and 20th centuries. The aim here is not simply to reiterate a series of existing arguments around the alleged origins of modern-day sport, but to bring together two key narratives which feature heavily within related literatures; those concerning ‘muscular Christianity’ and ‘rational recreation’. To this end, we begin by addressing the formative and innovative role which the English public schools and the Protestant church in Britain played in the growth of modern sport through what has been termed ‘muscular Christianity’; an ideology subsequently exported around the globe via British imperialism. The emergence of neo-muscular Christian groups during the latter half of the twentieth century can be seen as a direct consequence of this historical legacy. Modern-day evangelical Protestant organisations, such as, *Christians in Sport* (CIS) in the UK and the *Fellowship of Christian Athletes* (FCA) and *Athletes in Action* (AIA) in the US, have resurrected many of the basic theological principles used to promote sport and physical fitness in Victorian Britain. The article examines the historical and theological development of muscular Christianity and how this has impacted the relationship between sport and religion in twenty first century Britain and North America.

Keywords: Sport, religion, Protestantism, spirituality, muscular Christianity.

¹ Sections of this article have previously appeared in Parker and Watson (2011).

Introduction²

Over the past 30-40 years there has been a steady growth in the academic literature concerning sport and religion, (see Watson & Parker, 2012a), with Novak's, arguably seminal book, *The Joy of Sports* (1967/1994) providing a platform for a small number of other foundational monographs and anthologies (e.g., Higgs, 1995; Hoffman, 1992; Guttman, 1978/2004). During the past decade, however, there has been an exponential growth in Protestant and Catholic writings that address the sport and religion interface and related scholarly activities, for example, conferences, post-graduate research and specific journals (see Watson & Parker, 2012b, forthcoming 2014a; Kelly, 2012; Lixey, Hubenthal, Mieth & Muller, 2012; Overman, 2011; Parry, Nesti & Watson, 2011; Hoffman, 2010; Baker, 2007; Parry, Robinson, Watson & Nesti, 2007). Within the sport-religion literature (specifically around sport and Christianity), authors have explored a wide variety of topics and issues, such as: prayer and ritual (Hoffman, 2011), identity (Watson 2011), idolatry (Watson and White, 2012), pride and humility (White, 2008), disability (Watson and Parker, 2012c), ethics and morality (Hamilton, 2011), and the socio-theological movement of muscular Christianity (McLeod, 2012; Erdozain, 2010; Krattenmaker, 2010; Putney, 2001; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999; Vance, 1985; Mangan 1981; Haley, 1978); arguably the most frequently discussed topic, and the most important with regard to the aims of the present article, as outlined below.³

Evident in the more recent literature on the sport-religion interface is the way in which this relationship has developed over time and how religion has come to be seen as one social institution among many which became implicated in the momentum surrounding the wider popularization of sport. Since then the relationship has fluctuated; characterised on the one

²Some of the ideas in this section are taken from Watson and Parker (2012b).

³ See also the work of Dunning and Sheard (1979) and the contribution of these authors to the mapping of the socio-historical relationship between sports and protestant Christianity in Western Europe.

hand by a more general (and growing) acceptance of sport as a physical, moral and emotional practice, and on the other by an increasingly commercialised sporting world the values of which, as time goes on, appear to sit less and less easily with formal religious beliefs of any kind. What all of this demonstrates is that sport does not exist in a social vacuum. Rather, it evolves and develops in accordance with a variety of cultural and historical practices whilst at the same time embedding itself further into the fabric of everyday life. Modern-day sport has been (and continues to be) shaped and formed in line with the turbulence of social and cultural existence. The sport-religion relationship is no different. This too is a reflection of the extent to which sport has increasingly impacted wider society and has progressed from being a marginal past-time to an established feature of popular culture. What the following discussion illustrates is the way in which the sport-religion relationship has developed over time in specific social and cultural circumstances.

Our specific focus is the relationship between sport and Protestantism in the UK and the US during the 19th and 20th centuries and, in particular, the ideology of muscular Christianity.⁴ Our aim is not simply to reiterate a series of existing arguments around the alleged origins of modern-day sport, but to bring together (and draw clear connections between) two key narratives which feature heavily within related literatures: those concerning ‘muscular Christianity’ and ‘rational recreation’. We begin by addressing the formative and innovative role which the English public schools and the Protestant church in Britain played in the growth of sport. We then locate these developments against a wider cultural backdrop of 19th century social change through the muscular Christian ethos and its subsequent dissemination via British imperialism. The emergence of neo-muscular Christian groups during the twentieth century can be seen as a direct consequence of this historical legacy. Modern-day

⁴ For more on the role of sport within the context of the Roman Catholic Church, see, for example: Lixey *et al.*, (2012), Kelly (2012) and Chandler (2002).

evangelical Protestant organisations, such as, *Christians in Sport* (CIS) in the UK and the *Fellowship of Christian Athletes* (FCA) and *Athletes in Action* (AIA) in the US, have resurrected many of the basic theological principles used to promote sport and physical fitness in Victorian Britain. The article goes on to present an examination of the historical and theological development of muscular Christianity and how this has impacted the relationship between sport and religion in twenty first century Britain and North America.

Sport, Protestantism and the English public schools

A well-rehearsed argument in the literature surrounding the development of modern sport is that during the mid-19th century certain sporting activities were transformed from a collection of unruly pastimes into a series of structured and codified games via the English public schools. This transformation, it is argued, was primarily triggered by changes within the governance and curricular practices of these institutions and, in particular, through the work of Thomas Arnold, Headteacher of Rugby School between, 1828-1841 (Holt, 1989; Mangan & Walvin, 1987; Mangan, 1981).

For all the prestige that the English public schools portrayed during the early 19th century one of the characteristics that they often failed to exhibit was a sense of leadership and order (Neddham, 2004; Mangan, 1981).⁵ This was something that Thomas Arnold sought to address when he arrived at Rugby in 1828. Central to Arnold's subsequent reforms were his own religious beliefs and his desire to transform his young charges into 'good Christian gentlemen'. A common misconception surrounding the prevalence of the games playing ethos at Rugby is that Arnold himself was the instigator of such activities (Tozer, 1985; Mangan, 1981). Yet it was his colleague the Revd. George Cotton, who is said to have overseen

⁵As both of these authors have noted, opinions concerning the influence and achievements of Arnold during his time at Rugby are far from unanimous.

athletic provision at the school (Watson, Weir & Friend, 2005; McIntosh, 1979; Honey, 1978).⁶ Moreover, the Arnoldian regime amounted to much more than simply playing games. An education in the ‘classics’ continued to be upheld as the guardian of moral character, and the passing of responsibility to older pupils (*prefects*) as the gateway to discipline, respect and ‘Christian manliness’ (Hargreaves, 1986; Mangan, 1981). Word of Arnold’s reforms quickly spread and Headteachers of other schools followed suit, at least partly guided by parental demand for sporting practice. Indeed, news of Arnold’s work traveled fast both inside and outside of the public school system. One reason for this was the writings of two well-known authors of the time, Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes.

Sport and Victorian Culture

During the mid-19th century Charles Kingsley (clergyman, academic, novelist and poet), and his friend and associate, Thomas Hughes (lawyer, politician and novelist), became key players in the relationship between sport and religion in the UK. Specific aspects of their work stand out as particularly influential in this respect, perhaps most notably Hughes’s *Tom Brown’s Schooldays* (1857/1995) the story of a boy (Tom Brown) whose character is shaped during his days at Rugby school. Hughes had been a pupil of Arnold at Rugby between 1834-1841, but the book is said to have been based on the life of his brother, George Hughes. Along with the work of Kingsley, the sense of high moral value and masculine physical endeavour which Hughes’s novel portrayed collectively formed the basis of what came to be known as ‘muscular Christianity’; a term encapsulating spiritual, moral and physical purity alongside

⁶According to Honey (1978), Cotton’s promotion of organised games as part of the curriculum at Rugby came in response to demands from the boys themselves for such activities to take place.

notions of Christian manliness (Simon & Bradley, 1975).⁷ In reality muscular Christianity had its roots in a whole range of ethical and moral concerns which were prevalent in Britain in the mid-1880s: the protection of the weak, the plight of the poor, and the promotion of moral virtue. The incorporation of these (and other) concerns into a framework of physical endeavour and spiritual cleanliness resulted in the establishment of a series of core values which, in time, came to underpin the relationship between sport and religion: fair play, respect (both for oneself and others), physical and emotional strength, perseverance, deference, subordination, obedience, discipline, loyalty, co-operation, self-control, self-sacrifice, endurance. Especially significant here was a fervent Christianity and stoic masculinity which collectively engendered the formation of personal character and a respect for the physical body. Revered too were virtues such as courage, temperance and *esprit de corps*, the ‘holy trinity’ of moral stature, most notably upheld by Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and the modern Olympic Games, who expressed a familiarity with Thomas Hughes’ novels and, after visiting Rugby in 1883, was said to be heavily influenced by the work of Arnold (Lucas, 1967).⁸

Likewise, Kingsley and Hughes were not the first to infer the moral value (or manly qualities) of sporting pursuit. Such sentiments are certainly evident within the work of previous writers such as J-J Rousseau, George Lawrence and William Clarke (Hargreaves, 1986; Watson, Weir & Friend, 2005). Specific to the work of Kingsley and Hughes was a belief in the power

⁷ Kingsley did not approve of the term ‘muscular Christianity. Indeed, though commonly attributed to him the phrase did, in fact, emanate from a review of his book *Two Years Ago* which appeared in the *Saturday Review* in 1857 (see Simon and Bradley, 1975). Hughes, however, was more agreeable to the term and used it in the less successful sequel to his first novel which was entitled, *Tom Brown at Oxford* (1861/1995). The tenets of muscular Christianity should not solely be associated with Protestantism. On the contrary, a range of faiths and denominations have since allied themselves to such values and ideals, for example: (Greenspoon, 2012; Farooq, 2011; Freeman, 2010; Kimball, 2008; Baker, 2007; Pressner, 2007; Watson, 2007; Alter, 2006, 2006; Gurock, 2005; Chandler, 2002; Hughes, 1996).

⁸ The manifestation of these ideals within the context of the Olympic Games is, of course, most notably portrayed in the film *Chariots of Fire*, which tells the story of the athlete Eric Liddell at the 1924 Paris Olympics (see Cashmore, 2008).

of the culture of games to combat the perceived effeminacy of society and of the public schools (Putney, 2001; Baker, 2000; Crossett, 1990; Dobbs, 1973; Newsome, 1961).⁹ More importantly, there was a growing concern in the mid-1880s that church congregations, (and Christianity *per se*), were succumbing to a wave of effeminacy. Some wanted Protestantism to become more intimately re-connected to the masculinized structures and practices which had long since dominated its existence. Sporting manliness was seen as the antidote to this debilitating malaise and muscular Christianity as a response to the puritanical religiosity of the time and the somewhat static nature of the church with regards to broader social issues. Be it attributable to Kingsley and Hughes or not, the upshot of the wider dissemination of the muscular Christian ideology was that the Protestant elite began to advocate the use of sports to promote the relationship between the development of mind, body and spirit. In turn, a series of broader social conditions and circumstances can also be seen to have nurtured its emergence, one of which was the Victorian pre-occupation with sanitation and health, a mind-set exacerbated by the vagaries of an increasingly industrialised working class.

Sport and the Church: A new era?

Given the social tensions surrounding sport and other popular cultural pastimes in Victorian Britain, how then, we might ask, was the relationship between the Protestant church and sport configured? In line with the work of other historians, McLeod has noted that from the 1850s sport grew in popularity in Britain (both at a participatory and at a spectatorship level) and that as a consequence the church came to recognize more readily the value of sport both in terms of its social status and its religious significance (McLeod, 2007). It is clear, for example, that from the mid-19th century churches actively began to explore connections with sport. From this time on the Anglican Church appears to have encouraged sporting links

⁹For a broader analysis of the perceived effeminacy of US and UK society at various points in history, see Kimmel (1987).

primarily out of a desire to eradicate the strong sense of ‘puritanism’ permeating its orbits and the resultant alienation of ‘ordinary folks’. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a spectacular explosion of sport in Britain. By 1900 half a million or more played regularly in leagues (Holt, 1989). In Birmingham, for example, the number of football clubs had grown from one in 1874 to 155 in 1880 (Birley, 1993). Church sports teams began to spring up all over the country, although they were much more common among liberal than among evangelical churches (Scott, 1970). It has been estimated that in Birmingham in the years 1871-1880, 20% of the total number of cricket clubs and just under 25 % of the association football clubs had connections with religious organizations (Molyneux, 1957). Lupson has highlighted in detail the involvement of church and chapel during the mid-19th century in the formation of football teams which would ultimately go on to develop into Football League clubs (Lupson, 2006). Likewise, the work of Cox and Williams has charted the connections between the church and cricket in various geographical regions and localities of Britain (Cox, 1982; Williams, 1996, 1990; Reid, 1985).

The inclusion of sport as a part of church life often came about as a consequence of the introduction of a series of broader activities into congregational leisure time. These comprised such things as afternoon teas, picnics, and games and amusement events. Such innovation was not without its doubters. Indeed, there were still criticisms from some quarters regarding the vagaries of sport, primarily that amusement should not become the main business of the church and that all the energy of God’s people should not be spent trying to retain the interest of the young. But church provision in this area was more complex than simply the setting up of football teams or the organisation of leisure pursuits. Evident also was the formal

establishment of libraries, chess, billiard, tennis and cycling clubs and, specifically for females, rounders, table tennis and hockey teams and gymnasia and calisthenics.¹⁰

All of this culminated in the development of a sophisticated network of activities the underpinning principles for which appear common to both Anglican and Nonconformist churches. For McLeod, the developing relationship between sport and the church in the mid-late 19th century can be summarised via a chronological framework comprising five broad categories (McLeod, 2003). First, the spontaneous emergence of sports activities along the lines of ‘fellowship and fun’. Second, the provision of sporting clubs and facilities for the purposes of maintaining the interest of teenagers (mainly boys) who had attended Sunday School but who were in danger of ‘falling away’ from the faith. Third, the provision of other kinds of leisure and sporting facilities in order to attract people from outside of the church. Fourthly, the promotion of sport by clergy and church leaders who advocated that it should be viewed as a legitimate part of a broader holistic (spiritual) lifestyle and as a form of personal development. And fifth, that by the 1920s and 30s sport was so well embedded in the functions of chapel and church that it had, quite simply, become an acceptable part of institutional life. Notwithstanding the increased level of tolerance demonstrated by liberal in comparison to evangelical churches, what McLeod neatly establishes is that from 1850 onwards Protestantism in Britain had, at the very least, begun to accept sport as a legitimate and holistic lifestyle pursuit. To this end, it can be argued that sport added to what some have observed to be a broader secularization of the church around this time.

¹⁰Cycling, in particular, received a mixed reception during this period, being advocated by some within the church and denigrated by others. For further detail see Wigglesworth (1996) and Lowerson (1984). The engagement of females in church sport around this time was, of course, reflective of broader social trends (see Hargreaves, 1994).

Religion and Sport in the Modern World

Few would argue with the assertion that, as a popular cultural activity, sport has changed markedly since its early configurations in Victorian Britain. Modern day sport is a worldwide phenomenon and one which features large in the new global political economy. Technological advancements in recent years have spawned a growth and intensification of media resources which, in turn, has led to the wider popularisation of sport as a cultural spectacle (Boyle & Haynes, 1999; Rowe, 2003). Today sports coverage is commonplace amidst the offerings of numerous television and communication networks as the sport-media relationship becomes ever more intimate and lucrative. Such advancements necessarily bring with them a level of commercialisation which has the potential to promote a series of highly negative consequences; corruption, greed, selfishness, violence (Krattenmaker, 2010). Yet, amidst all of this, sport maintains a series of what might be termed socially cohesive properties being utilised widely as a tool of engagement for those who find themselves on the margins of society and by governments eager to promote notions of social inclusion (Collins, 2010). While addressing the participants of the World Swimming Championships in Rome in August 2009, Pope Benedict XVI emphasised the positive virtues and values of sport which such events may bring:

With your competitions you offer the world a fascinating spectacle of discipline and humanity, of artistic beauty and tenacious determination. You show what goals the vitality of youth can achieve when young people submit to the effort of a demanding training and are willing to accept numerous sacrifices and deprivations. All this is also an important lesson for life for your peers ... Sport practiced with enthusiasm and an acute ethical sense ... become a training ground for healthy competition and physical improvement, a school

of formation in the human and spiritual values, a privileged means for personal growth and contact with society.¹¹

Just prior to the 2004 Olympics in Athens, the Vatican recognized the importance of promoting ethics in sport and formed an office for ‘Church and Sport’ within the Pontifical Council for the Laity. The remit of the Office includes: the fostering of pastoral work in and through sport, the propagation of teaching and research on sport (especially its ethical nature), the encouragement of initiatives to evangelize the world of sport, and the promotion of “a culture of sport” that is “an instrument of peace and brotherhood among peoples” (Glatz, 2004: 12).

Recognising the potential of sport as a powerful socialising agent, during the second half of the 20th century Protestant evangelical groups demonstrated an eagerness to replicate the approach of the early muscular Christians with a series of ‘sports ministry’ organisations being founded on both sides of the Atlantic (Watson & Parker, forthcoming 2014b). In the US, the *Fellowship of Christian Athletes* (FCA), and *Athletes in Action* (AIA) are two of best known and are active in nearly all intercollegiate athletic programmes as well as in sending ‘sports ministers’ to countries such as Africa, Latin America and south-east Asia to deliver the gospel message while providing fun and healthy activities (Ladd & Mathisen, 1999). In the UK, the Protestant evangelical organization *Christians in Sport* (CIS) has developed a similar profile preparing young people for evangelism in and through the world of sport.

The sport-religion interface has also developed at an altogether more academic level on both sides of the Atlantic. For example, the University of Notre Dame and Neumann College have

¹¹ Benedict XVI, Speech to the participants of the World Swimming Championships, *L’Osservatore Romano*, No.31, 5th August 2009, p.12.

formed a sports ministry partnership with the aim of promoting the spiritual and ethical dimensions of faith-based sport.¹² A key part of this venture has been the establishment of the *Centre for Sport, Spirituality and Character Development* at Neumann College and the *Mendelson Centre for Sports, Character and Culture* at Notre Dame. The UK has also witnessed the establishment of university-based teaching and research centers which have as their focus the relationship between sport, spirituality and religion. Leading the way in this respect have been the *Centre for the Study of Sport and Spirituality* (2003-2009) at York St. John University and, more recently, the *Centre for Sport, Spirituality and Religion* (2009-) at the University of Gloucestershire, the latter of which offers professionally-based postgraduate qualifications for sports ministers and sports chaplains. This development, alongside an emerging literature (see Parker, Watson & White, forthcoming 2014; Dzikus, Waller and Hardin, 2010; Waller, Dzikus & Hardin, *in press*), represents a positive shift toward professionalizing the field of sport chaplaincy, not least, by providing a variety of accreditation pathways.¹³

These developments contrast markedly with the highly celebritized and often tarnished complexion of modern-day professional sports where allegations of rule-breaking and performance enhancing drug use, and instances of personal degradation and violence are commonplace (Hoffman, 2010; Krattenmaker, 2010). In turn, this decline in ethical and moral standards within professional sport has somewhat predictably been absorbed into the Olympics. Alongside others, Watson & Parker (2012a) attribute this primarily to the professionalization and commercialization of top-level sport which has distorted the notion of fair play and the true spirit advocated by Pierre de Coubertin at the end of the 19th century. The Olympic Charter includes references to freedom of religious worship, which has led

¹² For further details see: <http://www.neumann.edu/mission/ISSCD/default.asp>

¹³ For further details see: <http://www.glos.ac.uk/research/dse/cssr/Pages/default.aspx>

evangelical sports organizations to recognize the opportunity for witness and service at major sporting events in the form of ‘sports chaplaincy’ (Weir, 2004).

Explicit Christian ministry of this nature began at major sporting events at the 1972 Munich Olympics, with chaplains providing an ‘unofficial’ service to athletes but took on a more formalised structure in 1988, at the summer Olympics in Seoul and the Winter Olympics in Calgary, Canada (Watson, Weir & Friend, 2005). The International Bible Society produced an evangelistic booklet in the form of a souvenir program for the 1988 games, which proved to be a significant development in the history of sports ministry. From this, the use of evangelical literature was a key strategy at the 2000 Sydney Olympics. Christian publishers also created many other resources for the 2000 games, such as CDs, websites, and *Sports New Testaments*. It is estimated that more than one million Christian sports resources were distributed during the period leading up to the Sydney games with over 200,000 *Sports New Testaments* being sold. Christian outreach agencies also played a major role with approximately 45 denominations and para-Church ministry groups and 700 Churches involved in service and witness across Australia. It has been estimated that sports ministry outreach, in one form or another, took place in over 100 countries during the period of the 2004 Athens Olympics. In Athens, the Church of England’s Greater Athens Chaplaincy and the local Greek Evangelical Church corroborated to form a group of 40 Protestant Chaplains to minister to Olympic athletes during the games in August and the Paralympics in September. In addition, many evangelical sports organizations sent representatives to Athens for the 2004 Olympics (Watson, Weir & Friend, 2005). It could be argued that such events have resulted in the (re)emergence of ‘sports ministry’ as a worldwide phenomenon.

Conclusion

Throughout the preceding discussion our intention has been to present a brief (and selective) overview of the way in which the relationship between sport and religion has developed in the UK and the US over the past 150 years.¹⁴ In so doing, we have explained how Victorian Britain played host to the emergence of the sport-religion relationship, and, as a consequence, longstanding religious values began to permeate and underpin sporting endeavor. We have subsequently highlighted how, over time, the ideological sporting values formulated during this period have seen something of a resurgence in recent years. Here, in closing, we offer our thoughts on the further development of this relationship and its potential in terms of broader notions of sports ministry, outreach, and mission.

In his book, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea: The Protestant Revolution from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-First Century* (2008), theologian and historian, Alistair McGrath, suggests that because Protestant attitudes and opinions towards sport have traditionally demonstrated a tendency to fluctuate over time in accordance with prevailing theological and cultural assumptions, it is somewhat unwise to try to predict how such things might develop in future years. Given McGrath's words of caution, how, we might ask, should we begin to think about future work in this area? For sure, there is evidence to suggest that, in the UK at least, the vestiges of evangelical negativism towards sport remains. It is true, for example, that some churches and church leaders still see sport as something which detracts from (or counters) spiritual growth and maturity. On the other hand, sport, as a specific area of ministry, has witnessed something of a resurgence in recent times and is now an established field of outreach both within church and para-church organisations and within secular settings. Likewise, those involved in sports ministry continue to forge forward in relation to

¹⁴ For critique and comparison of the varying approaches to sport by the Protestant and the Roman Catholic Church, see: (Kelly, 2012; Hoffman, 2010; Ladd & Mathisen, 1999; Watson 2007).

establishing a presence in elite sport and within the context of mega-events. This has most recently been evidenced in and through the operationalisation of the *More than Gold* strategy, the interdenominational organisation that coordinated the Christian community's involvement in the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games in London.¹⁵

On a broader scale, modern-day sports ministry also has a host of practical matters with which to deal. The culture of 21st century secular sport is such that moral and ethical issues feature large amidst the day-to-day processes of participation, spectatorship and media commentary, all of which have the potential to manifest themselves, to some degree or another, within the context of church-based sports programmes. Likewise, Sunday church attendance nowadays often competes for the attentions of those wishing to play sport in secular circles. Nevertheless, the popularity of sport (especially as an aspect of youth culture) continues to grow and in this sense one of the greatest challenges facing sports ministry workers is not simply to promote the moral and ethical values that sport so clearly needs, but also to provide a quality of service (resources, facilities, coaching, organisation) which competes with and surpasses all that the secular sporting world has to offer.

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¹⁵ See: <http://www.morethangold.org.uk/>. For more information on the network of sports ministry organisations within the UK see: <http://www.uksportsministries.org/>. For more on UK sports chaplaincy see: <http://www.sportschaplaincy.org.uk/>

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