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Religious Education and Freedom of Education in Ghana: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract:

There seems to be apparent silence on the discussion of the influence of religion on human and national development due to the intolerance and divisiveness amongst the various religious groupings in Ghana. Contemporary discourse on the right to education and freedom of education finds it confusing whether harmony exists between the two or if one infringes on the other. Ghanaian educational environments suggest that the existence of academic and religious freedom is not present in the actual educational settings. School syllabi, rules, regulations, and pedagogical approaches pose considerable challenges to the quest for freedom of education and religion. Through documentary analysis and the concepts of freedom of education and the right to education, this research examined the challenges and opportunities of religious education in the Ghanaian educational environment. The research suggested that relevant and critical pedagogical approaches should be used to teach religious education to allow religious tolerance and coexistence amongst the various religious bodies within schools and communities.

Keywords: Religious education, freedom of education, right to education, critical pedagogy, human development, spiritual development

1. Introduction

There is often a complicated relationship between secular schools and religious institutions. Religion as a system maintains different elements, such as supernatural agents, moral obligations, myths, rituals, sacred values, and taboos (Sosis, 2020). Many religious sectors demand freedom of education, which gives parents the right to have their children educated in accordance with their religious and moral convictions within public education (Franken, 2016). However, there is a concern that such freedom could affect children's right to education by decreasing the delivery of critical education. Hence, many countries offer religious education, citizenship education, and other subjects to balance such differences and allow the coexistence of their societies (Ashraf et al., 2021). Moral issues such as murder, theft, and adultery have entangled the world for a long time. Considering the concerns associated with such immoralities, critical education, as a process of behavioural change, is expected to ensure and enlighten learners of such dangers and help them develop values and attitudes that would challenge unethical behaviours and promote social harmony (Opoku et al., 2015; Tsegay & Bekoe, 2020). As many studies have shown, religious education plays a vital role in developing a good character among citizens through religious morality, which is mostly associated with reduced drug use and alcoholism (Ashraf et al., 2021; Ministry of Education 2019). The inclusion of religious education into the curriculum also suggests the connection or, rather, coexistence between education and religion. Although education is considered the backbone of socio-economic and political development, some scholars have also expressed the role of religion in peace and development (Opoku et al., 2015). The contribution of religion to the development of physical and psychological well-being and social coexistence can also be an engine for promoting peace, security, and social justice in the world and within nation-states, in particular. However, it is important to note that religious education within schools needs careful planning and execution. The sensitivity of societies to their religious beliefs and the assumption that their God is the only true one could bring chaos and polarization in societies (Hunt, 2016). The world has experienced that religious intolerance leads to social and political conflicts, leading to the fall of countries into civil wars and the displacement of their people (Ashraf et al., 2021; Tsegay & Bekoe, 2020).

The connection between religion and education in a particular society mostly depends on the nature of the education and the society's religious understanding (Ashraf et al., 2021; Opoku et al., 2015). Some consider formal education and certain subjects, in particular (for example, global citizenship), as a threat to their religion, while others are happy to navigate between the two regardless of the challenges. They do not want to lose the benefits of multicultural education relevant in today's globalized world. Education is not only an issue of social justice, but it is also the fundamental human right of every individual. According to the Constitution of the Republic of Ghana, everyone has the right to equal educational opportunities and facilities (Ministry of Education, 2013). The same is true for many other sectors, such as the freedom of association and religion. Nonetheless, it is significant to understand the boundaries of these freedoms and the responsibilities of individuals to other people, particularly those different from them. Similarly, it is important to

comprehend the influence of freedom of education and freedom of religion on the right to education of an individual or the learner.

The main goal of countries and educational sectors has been to provide accessible and quality education to citizens (Oyeniran & Bekoe, 2019). Nevertheless, various factors, such as social and economic factors, have influenced the distribution of educational services in different regions (Tsegay, 2016; Akyeampong et al., 2007). The Ghanaian case is not different from this. In addition to socio-economic factors that affect students' access to education, evidence has shown that some schools prohibit certain students because of their religion. For example, two Ghanaian students were denied admission into one of the prestigious second-cycle institutions in the country due to their dreadlocks, a Rastafarian hairstyle that signifies their spiritual value (The Ghana Report 2021). Although the school argued that the dreadlock is against their rules, the Ghanaian Constitution states that children should not be deprived of any service, including education, because of their religion or belief (Ministry of Education 2013). These two Rastafarian students had to go to the court of the land to secure admission into the supposed school.

Another interesting scenario was the impasse between the parents of a Muslim student and the authorities of Wesley Girls Senior High School concerning Ramadan fasting (Asante, 2021). Ramadan is a religious obligation or strict fasting from dawn to sunset that Muslims observe at a particular time. The school authorities insisted that students are not allowed to fast once they are on the school premises. These issues hinder students' access to education, complicate the relationship between educational sectors and religious groups, and put students in a dilemma when their families and schools are fighting. The exclusion of students due to their religious beliefs also creates more concern for parents concerning the delivery of religious education. Some might view religious education as a means of religious deposition rather than religious awareness and understanding for mutual respect and tolerance (Ashraf et al., 2021).

This study employed documentary analysis to explore the development and ongoing discourse of religious education and freedom of education by examining the challenges and opportunities. The study is guided by concepts of freedom of education and the right to education, including critical pedagogy. Specific cases and examples are used to validate some arguments.

2. Religious Education in Ghana: An Overview

Religion plays a vital role in different aspects (for example, health, safety, and well-being) of societies. However, the concept of 'religion' has been a contested terrain with different definitions and perspectives from different scholars (Sosis, 2020). Durkheim (1969) defined religion as the belief and practice-based conception of the sacred. Shorter (1999) also claimed that religion is a fundamental mode of cultural behaviour or an interpretation of life that culture offers. Mbiti (1969), on his part, posited that beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, and religious officials are central to the institution called religion. These definitions suggest that human beings intensely relate with and even depend on religion which is often associated with supernatural powers (Knoss, 1969). In most cases, countries also recognize religion in their constitutions and offer their citizens the freedom to worship whatever they want. Similarly, the Ghanaian constitution and other laws and policies of the country offer citizens freedom of religion or the right to practice any religion they choose. Hence, as in any other civil right, the government is expected to protect and respect freedom of religion.

Ghana is a multicultural country with a population belonging to various religious groups, mainly Christianity (71%), Islam (18%), indigenous religious beliefs (5%), and other religious groups (6%) such as Bahai, Hindu, Buddhist, Rastafarian and Jewish (United States Department of State 2021). In most cases, each religious group is also divided into different sects. For example, the Christian groups include:

- Methodist,
- Pentecostal,
- Roman Catholic,
- Anglican, and
- Mennonite

Similarly, the Muslim people also belong to different Islamic sects such as Ahmadi, Sunni, Sufi, Tijani, and Shia. Considering the diverse religious affiliation of Ghanaians, the Ministry of Education deemed it right to include religious and moral education in the public education curriculum to promote tolerance and interfaith understanding among the people.

Ghana's religious education has a long history, dating back to the colonial era (Asare-Danso, 2012; Olivier & Wodon, 2014). However, research shows that the delivery of religious education in Ghana has not been continuous. Like most African countries, Ghana's education system is based on colonial education. In fact, the educational policies of the country started during the colonial era. At that time, religious education, which was known as religious instruction, consisted of reading, writing, and arithmetic (Wise, 1956). In his education reform, Sir Gordon Guggisberg, the British Empire's colonial administrator, created sixteen principles of education that encouraged the teaching of religious education (McWilliam & Kwamena-Poh, 1975). In 1951, Kwame Nkrumah also included religious education in the educational policy known as "Accelerate Development Plan for Education" (Olivier & Wodon, 2014). Asare-Danso (2012: 59) stated:

Between 1957 and 2007, 'Religion' was taught in Ghanaian Basic Schools under different titles due to the government's educational policy initiatives. The titles were Religious Instruction, Religious Knowledge, Scriptures, Bible Knowledge, Cultural Studies, and Religious & Moral Education.

A cursory look at the 1972 Dzobo Education Reforms reveals that religious knowledge was recommended as an integral part of the curriculum under 'Cultural Studies,' which comprises the study of dance, music, and religion at all basic

levels (Dzobo, 1972). However, the leaders of Ghana thought that further work or reform was needed to help people understand the role of religion as a unifying or dividing factor in society.

At the second cycle level, the Dzobo reform focused on integrating Islamic and Christianity teachings as part of the General Certificate of Education "Ordinary" Level (Dzobo, 1972). Furthermore, Islamic Studies and African Indigenous Religion were offered at the General Certificate of Education 'Advanced' Level. Nonetheless, the Advanced level was abolished in 1996, which also marked the end of the African indigenous religious course. Moreover, the review of the Dzobo reform by the government led to the removal of cultural studies from the curriculum of basic schools in 1994. However, this did not go well with the religious fraternity, especially the Islamic and Christian bodies (Awuah-Nyamekye, 2010). As a result, National Education Reform Review Committee reintroduced religious education with a new name - 'religious and moral education' (Olivier & Wodon, 2014).

In 2007, the Anamoah-Mensah Education Reform Committee (AERC) asked the government to abolish religious and moral education, which the government accepted. However, the suggestion of the AERC and, thus, the decision of the government did not last for long as the government was forced to re-instate the course (but with a clause that it would be a non-examinable program) due to the outcry of the people, particularly by the Christian Council. However, many call for abolishing religious education from the curriculum because they argue that it erodes the creativity and critical thinking of students (Ghana Web 2021). These demands suggest the contradiction between freedom of education and religion on one part and the right to education which aims to produce critical and responsible global citizens, on the other. Some parents feel threatened about critical education as it might affect the religious determination of their children and the beliefs and attitudes associated with it. This concern, therefore, puts many societies and parents to want to exercise their freedom of education and ask their children to be educated in accordance with their religious beliefs. On the other side, such concern puts the schools and the government at large in a dilemma to reconcile the freedom of education and the right to education. Religious education also has various benefits.

3. Benefits of Religious Education

Religion plays a significant role in the well-being of individuals and the nation at large. Its impact is substantially actualized in social, economic, political, spiritual, and human development by cultivating good characters and advocating for peace and social justice. The influence of religion is essential in the development of Ghanaian society, including establishing hospitals, schools, and other vocational institutions (Opoku et al., 2015). For example, the Basel missionaries, the Wesleyans, and the Catholics missions have made massive contributions to the health and education sectors. The following explains the benefits of religious education to the learner, the society, and the nation.

3.1. Acquisition of Knowledge and Skills

As Opoku et al. (2015) illustrated, education and religion are closely linked to each other. As a foundation of human development, education is understood to train and empower citizens through the acquisition of knowledge. Considering the importance and sensitivity of religions to their followers, religious education has become indispensable in widening people's understanding of different religions and the obligations, rituals, myths, and taboos associated with them (Sosis, 2020). Religious education provides students with the knowledge needed to think critically beyond their specific faith and, thus, live alongside each other with peace, respect, and solidarity without losing their religious identities (see Kim 1988). They can also clearly understand the difference between the state and religion (Opoku et al., 2015), which promotes the social, economic, and political development of the country (Ministry of Education 2019). Overall, the role of religious education and its integration into the curriculum, in most cases due to people's demand, suggests that there is hope for the future. Religious education will keep its position in Ghanaian schools, and knowledge in the field will continue to help people understand other religions and societies.

Furthermore, one of the major aims of schooling is to help people acquire relevant knowledge and skills that could enable them to be competitive for jobs worldwide. In this regard, learners need to understand how societies function within and beyond their borders. This also includes knowing the vital factors close to people's emotions and behaviours, such as religion and culture. Therefore, introducing religious education in the curriculum best prepares students to interact with employees and customers from other faiths (Hofstede, 1991). It is also true that interested students can further their religious education studies, develop their profession, and acquire related jobs. Pastors and moral education teachers are typical beneficiaries of religious studies in the education sector. In a nutshell, religious education also supports the development of one's profession and career.

3.2. Good Character Formation

Education contributes to bringing desired characteristics that define a responsible citizen (Opoku et al., 2015). It is not surprising that most scholars and theologians, in particular, emphasize the need to integrate moral education in the form of religious education or citizenship education to nurture students who care about societies, the environment, and the world (Ashraf et al., 2021). This indicates that religious education contributes to character formation by molding learners to have the right and acceptable manners expected by society and the nation. Similarly, the primary aim of the Ministry of Education in Ghana is to teach students the desired standards, ethics, and values in order to contribute immensely to the socio-economic and political development of the nation and the world at large (Ministry of Education 2019). The ministry has also clearly stipulated the rationale for moral and religious education as follows:

'Religious and Moral Education' is a vital and indispensable part of human growth and development in Ghanaian society. The subject reinforces the informal religious and moral training young people acquire from their homes and

communities. The nation is confronted with major moral issues, including corruption, poor attitude to the environment, and uncritical following of certain foreign values and cultures. Education must make learners aware of the dangers these pose to themselves as individuals and the nation as a whole and make them acquire values and attitudes that would address these challenges (Ministry of Education, 2019: vi).

Although good character development should be an integral part of every subject or discipline, religious and moral education shares the largest burden. In most cases, religious principles, which serve as a base for good morals, are the targets of religious education and the guiding principles that lead to the development of good character in students. However, as indicated above, religious education needs qualified teachers who can teach a multicultural class and act as role models in exhibiting exemplary character. It can be reiterated that when it comes to religious education, an emphasis must be placed not only on the context or the syllabus but also on the teacher.

3.3. Spiritual Development

Hooks (2010) argued that education should be holistic to fully activate the learners' overall personality to develop comprehensive and effective learning. This approach to education enhances the intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual development of the learners. It can be argued that the all-around development of the soul, body, and mind could better work in religious education (Ministry of Education 2019). This also connects to the rationale that one of the supreme or fundamental aims of education is the spiritual development of individuals (Hooks 2010). In this case, religious education serves as a source of comfort, well-being, and guidance in good and bad times.

When religion becomes part of education, it helps learners to better understand their religion and create a close spiritual connection. This transforms many from simply claiming to be members of a certain religious group to fully understanding the truth and myths about their faith because religious education unveils the 'truth' by focusing on the main pillars of the religions. Most Ghanaians and Africans, in general, believe that there are supreme beings that protect their lands. It is common to see parents advising their children to pray, especially before they eat or travel. These cultures show how deep-rooted religion is in society. However, many have no adequate knowledge, even about their religions. Therefore, religious education is vital to increase students' spiritual development, which in most cases affects an entire family as religion often transfers from parents to their children.

4. Challenges of Religious Education

Ghana's education sector has many challenges related to human and material resources, such as a lack of adequate and qualified teachers and teaching aids. For instance, Akyeampong et al. (2007: 63) indicated that "about 5 percent of primary schools in Ghana had only one or no teacher at all," and the ones available had poor attendance. On the other hand, religious education has particular challenges that it poses to the education system and schools. The following discusses the challenges of religious education.

4.1. Reconciling Right to Education and Freedom of Education

As indicated above, there is a complicated relationship between the right to education and freedom of education. It is not easy for teachers to teach religious education without any impediments when parents are involved to see and determine what and how their children should be taught. The inclusion of religious education in the curricula does not necessarily guarantee the freedom of education and the right to education at the same time (Ghana Web 2021). For instance, an instructor cannot use the banking method of teaching to deposit a particular religious belief in a multicultural class because it can cause an alarm among students with a different religious background. A critical approach to teaching where everything is questioned could also bring a confrontation with religious sectors and parents. In contrast to critical pedagogy, the banking method of teaching is an approach that makes the teacher a source of knowledge, whereas students are expected to receive, memorize, and repeat (Freire, 2010; Hooks, 2010).

Overall, since the colonial period, Ghana has been encouraging and promoting religious education (Olivier & Wodon, 2014). However, it is important to critically analyze the issues of freedom of religion and the right to education to help students acquire critical thinking skills and, at the same time, learn to live in peace and harmony regardless of their religious identity. For instance, as can be seen below, it is challenging to adopt critical pedagogy while adhering to freedom of education, which allows parents to demand schools teach their children in accordance with their religious and moral convictions (Franken, 2016; Freire, 2010).

4.2. Sensitivity of Teaching Religious Education

Religion is a very sensitive area that needs a careful approach to teaching students (Hunt, 2016). This indicates that there must be a specially trained teacher to teach religious education by including anyone in the class, regardless of their religious affiliation. However, such a teaching method could raise various questions and heated debates within and among students of various religious sectors. Besides, the identity of the teacher could also be a problem as some students feel that religious education should be taught by someone who shares their religious beliefs. Therefore, these factors can pose an obstacle to the promotion and delivery of religious education in schools. For instance, teachers need to have a profound knowledge of the main religions, their holy books (e.g., the Bible and Quran), and their different interpretations of the scriptures to understand students' questions and answer accordingly.

Addressing the issue of teacher and student identity is also of paramount interest to addressing freedom of education and, thus, religious education in schools. Clarke and Drudy (2006) stated that the level of teachers' preparation and its impact on the education system could better be understood in accordance with students' approaches to praxis. This

suggests that much emphasis must be given to teacher education or training because teachers play a vital role in nurturing critical and responsible students who appreciate or tolerate cultural and religious diversity and live together in peace and harmony (Tsegay & Bekoe, 2020). This then avoids (or lessens) the religious confrontation that arises due to competition on whose God is the true God and whose way of life is the sacred one. On the other side, the role of teachers also indicates that policy scrutiny alone cannot ensure the freedom of education or the right to education (Akyeampong, 2009; Akyeampong et al., 2007). Tsegay (2016), on his part, argued that there is an important interplay between moral education and critical pedagogy, showing that moral education (including religious education) can be integrated into critical pedagogy regardless of the subject matter taught. For example, students in an English class could be given a writing assignment about the role of religion in developing a peaceful and tolerant society. However, teachers need to have good pedagogical skills and multicultural understanding to handle such a sensitive topic with care and professionalism.

4.3. Religious Diversity

As discussed above, Ghana is a country with many religions and denominations. According to Lelwica (2008), a conference leader addressed a gathering by saying, "We are going to hear about the beauties of several traditions, but that does not mean that we are going to a fruit salad." The existence of several religious bodies in Ghana and the world has introduced different beliefs and practices, where many compete with each other not only for religious missions but also for socio-economic and political reasons because "like all communities, religious groups are influenced by external factors including social, political, economic, ecological, and religious environment in which the group is situated" (Sosis 2020: 145). The feeling of becoming the dominant religion, leading a better life, or getting salvation has caused many religious leaders to preach the superiority of their religion or God above others (Hunt, 2016). Having many followers can also be socio-economic and political capital in times of elections and other philanthropic works. However, the perception of superiority above others poses a threat to social cohesion (Ashraf et al., 2021). The assumptions or belief that only their religion carries "the truth" and, as such other faiths are on the wrong path motivates extremism and, thus, leads to religious conflict.

In such a situation, religious and moral education are perceived as a government or Western mission to weaken one's faith rather than an initiative to bring social solidarity despite religious differences (Ashraf et al., 2021). In addition, educational institutions are assumed to be a distraction from the truth that leads to salvation (Ashraf et al., 2021). Although the degree varies, some people share these sentiments from most of the religious sectors of Ghana. As a result, it impedes the delivery of religious education. Furthermore, religious education should be taught to all students regardless of their faith. However, this did not happen since some families were not convinced about the actual motive and importance of teaching religious education in schools.

4.4. Religious Bias and Exclusion

The fact that every religion portrays its faith as the best one has made it difficult for people to accept and understand those who do not belong to their religion. Religious bodies with a large number of followers try to intimidate or exclude those religions or denominations that have a smaller number of followers. This intimidation is also reflected in the delivery of religious education in classes. A teacher who is acquainted with a particular religion tends to favour students from their religions both in class discussions and other circumstances because they see their religion as superior as and better than others. Moreover, some students are not interested in learning or knowing the principles of other religions as they do not see the need to challenge their principles and beliefs.

Religious bodies founded many private schools, and as such, those schools hold strong values of the religious bodies they are affiliated with. Therefore, they prefer students who fit their religious principles and beliefs and deny certain students admission into their schools because of their identity or beliefs. These restrictions mostly exclude minorities whose religious organizations do not own schools. Even though the law of the land permits students from all walks of life and religions to have access to education without restriction, some schools do not comply. This is because the schools believe that allowing students from other religions would go against their principles and expose their students to unnecessary experiences and temptation. Other schools also discriminate against students from other religions since they are not happy with the students practicing their faiths on the schools' premises. For example, a student from Wesley Girls' Senior High School was denied the right to fast during Ramadan, which is unlikely to happen in an Islamic school.

Furthermore, the scope of the syllabus is developed with much emphasis on the three main religions: Christianity, Islam, and indigenous religions, respectively. The syllabus focuses on the beliefs, values, pillars, practices, and traditions of these three religions, but the other religions are not given much attention. This indicates that the syllabus, to some extent, favours the main religions, which aggravates the invisibility of the minority religions. The focus on the major Ghanaian religions also neglects the globalized nature of the world, where students need to understand issues both at local and global levels. Religious and Moral Education is a compulsory subject for students from the primary/basic level to the junior high school level. At the senior high school level, it narrows to a specific course (i.e., Christian Religious Studies) and becomes an elective subject. The delivery of one course (Christian Religious Studies) excludes all the other religions by favouring Christianity, which is often attributed to the number of followers in the country—69%. However, this could send a wrong signal to the followers of other religions, as they might feel excluded and marginalized. At the senior high level, the syllabus demands teachers to thoughtfully take account of and value the religious and cultural diversity within their local communities using appropriate pedagogies such as culturally relevant teaching and learning. Nevertheless, it does not emphasize teaching the students about the beliefs and principles of other religions and the ways they could coexist together in peace and solidarity.

4.5. Interest of Non-Religious Groups

Like any religious body, non-religious groups like agnostics, skeptics, free thinkers, humanists, and atheists also have the right for their voices to be heard in schools. However, they are not acknowledged and included in the syllabus. Religious studies are based on the beliefs of supernatural beings that are not fully or partially acknowledged or regarded by non-religious groups. Therefore, teaching religion in schools might make these non-religious groups feel left out and discriminated against (Kurtzleben, 2017). Religion, to some extent, conflicts with science on many things, including the origin of human beings. However, students are taught science and its principles and, on the other hand, religious studies. This sometimes leaves students in a state of confusion and dilemma as they find science and religion in two opposite positions on the origin of humankind and other significant issues.

5. Conclusion

The study revealed the benefits and challenges of religious education in Ghana. It indicates that religious education is significant for the development of critical, peaceful, and tolerant learners and society. Moreover, religious education can help individuals to strengthen their spiritual world and advance their career opportunities. On the other hand, religious education could bring competition among students from various religions and exclude students from minority and non-religious groups. Therefore, it is a significant and delicate issue that should be implemented with care and professionalism.

Despite the complication between freedom of education and religion and the right to education, the benefits of religious education suggest that the program has a significant place in the school's curriculum. As stated above, it is enshrined in the constitution that citizens should enjoy the freedom of both education and religion. However, this study indicates that the right to education, regardless of one's identity, is not often guaranteed, which compels parents to go to court to appeal a decision taken by schools. Some school authorities prevent students from exercising their fundamental right to education because of their faith. Furthermore, the lack of qualified teachers and the sensitivity of religion create additional challenges to religious diversity within a school. This is because schools need a pedagogy that allows the interaction and recognition of all students. After all, such pedagogy could help students to create alternative perspectives on their perception of other religions (Tsegay, 2016; Zabit, 2010). In such cases, teachers become the facilitators of knowledge and role models, while students learn through interaction and information sharing to develop religious tolerance or avoid religious biases and discrimination.

Overall, the broader aim of religious education in Ghanaian schools is not to indoctrinate students into any form of religion or tradition but to educate them about the various religions or traditions. Considering the diversity of religion, the teaching approach is also meant to ensure that there is neutrality and objectivity on the sides of the curriculum and teachers. However, there is favouritism towards the main religions in the syllabus and towards Christianity at the senior high school level, which is often justified based on the number of followers in the country. Some teachers also tend to favour students from their religious groups, which suggests that religious education should be handled by efficient and professional teachers who could be exemplary to students. This means that a critical look should be directed to the teacher training colleges where special training is given to student-teachers who will teach religious education in schools. The discussion further displayed that religious education is vital in shaping individual beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes and making them see the reality. This helps them expand their horizon beyond their religion and God and respect other religions as much as they want their religion to be respected. Finally, despite the challenges encountered, the benefits of religious education to the nation and the world at large cannot be underestimated. Therefore, all stakeholders must play their roles properly to ensure the continuation and relevance of religious education in the school curriculum and the inclusion of excluded religious groups.

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