



THE ESSENCE AND HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT OF “SALAF”

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Abstract. *This article analyses the theoretical, historical and linguistic foundations of the concept of “salaf”. It examines the lexical meanings of the Arabic term “salaf” – precedence, continuity and relations of lending – and their connection with its technical meaning in Islamic teaching, namely the concept of “salaf al-salih” (the righteous predecessors), representing the first three centuries of Islam. The study explores the distinctions between the classical understanding of the salaf and modern Salafism, which emerged in the eighteenth century. It further examines, on the basis of scholarly sources, the role played by the views of such figures as Ibn Khuzayma, al-Darimi, Ibn Taymiyya, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya and Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the formation of the ideology of modern Salafism.*

Keywords: *salaf, salaf al-salih, modern Salafism, Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama'a, usul al-fiqh, ijtihad and disagreement, manhaj (methodology), sectarianism.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the questions giving rise today to the greatest debate in Islamic and source studies is the true essence of the concept of “salaf” and its interpretation by contemporary religious and ideological movements. In the scholarly heritage of Islam the term “salaf” has, above all, the place of a lexical and historical-blessed stage: it denotes the first three golden centuries – the age of the Companions, the Successors and the Successors of the Successors – which the Prophet (peace be upon him) characterised by “khayriyya”, that is, as the best of ages.

In later centuries, however, and particularly from the eighteenth century onwards, the movements of modern Salafism have attempted to turn this term into the private banner of a particular sect and group. Narrowing the circle of “Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-

Jama'a", they seek to exclude from it the Maturidi and Ash'ari schools, which for centuries have been the doctrinal and juridical support of the community.

The relevance of the present study consists in determining the scholarly and methodological boundary between the concepts of "salaf" and "Salafism" and in disclosing, on the basis of the classical sources (usul al-fiqh) and of lexicographical analysis, the true manhaj followed by the righteous predecessors. In the course of the study the verses of the Holy Qur'an, sound hadiths and the views of classical and modern scholars – Ibn Abd al-Barr, al-Maturidi, al-Bukhari, al-Tirmidhi, Ibn Taymiyya and al-Buti – are analysed from the point of view of source criticism.

MAIN PART

In examining the theoretical and historical foundations of the concept of "salaf" it is necessary first of all to consider the lexical layers of the term. In Arabic the word "salaf" denotes, in its various forms, a wide range of meanings.

"Al-salaf", when vocalised with fatha, is applied to the passing away and coming to an end of something. In the Holy Qur'an it is said:

﴿إِلَّا مَا قَدْ سَلَفَ﴾

"Except what has already passed" (Surat al-Nisa, verse 22) (Muhammad Sodiq Muhammad Yusuf, 2019:95).

The expression "fulanun salafan wa suluufan" is likewise used with reference to a person going ahead of others, that is, to precedence. A person's forefathers and relatives who lived before him are called, in the plural form, "sullaf wa aslaf". This shows the connection of the concept with lineal and historical continuity.

"Al-suluf", when vocalised with damma, is applied to the leading she-camel that goes at the head of a herd of camels coming to drink water. The same name is also given to the long tip of an arrow and to the swiftest horses.

"Al-silf", when vocalised with kasra, denotes the relationship between brothers-in-law, that is, the relation of two men married to two sisters; the bond between them is called "usluufa", while the corresponding relationship between the women takes the form "al-sulfatan" (al-Firuzabadi, 2008:793).

The root of this word also gives the meaning of preparing the land for cultivation or of levelling it by means of the "mislaf", a levelling implement. In financial relations it is applied to a loan given without any material benefit being sought, on the sole condition that the amount received be returned.

In Islamic teaching, proceeding from the lexical meanings set out above, the concept of “salaf” denotes the “predecessors”, that is, the age of the Companions, the Successors and the Successors of the Successors (the salaf al-salih). Such lexical meanings as “preparing the land” or “going at the head of the herd” point figuratively to the fact that the figures of the earliest period of Islam “levelled” and prepared the spiritual and legal path for the generations that followed.

In technical usage, by “salaf” or “salaf al-salih” (the righteous predecessors) are understood the Muslims who lived in the first three golden centuries of Islam, whose learning, piety and religious understanding served as a model for subsequent generations.

Modern Salafism is a religious movement founded in the eighteenth century by Shaykh Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab al-Najdi. Its adherents claim to follow the school of Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal in law, yet in practice certain differences exist between them and the Hanbalis. Their designation as “Salafis” is connected with the fact that they gave this name to themselves (al-Buti, 1988:16). By this they claim to rely, in questions of creed and law, on the concept of the “salaf al-salih”. In reality, however, they derive their understanding from the views of certain individual figures which have no connection with the generality of the scholars of the salaf.

Ibn Khuzayma (223–311 AH / 838–924 CE) was Muhammad ibn Ishaq ibn Khuzayma al-Sulami, Abu Bakr. In his own time he was the imam of Nishapur; he was born there and died there.

Al-Darimi (d. 280 AH; 200–280 AH / 815–894 CE) was Uthman ibn Sa‘id ibn Khalid al-Darimi al-Sijistani, Abu Sa‘id, a hadith scholar of Herat. He composed works refuting the Jahmis, among them “Al-Naqd ‘ala Bishr al-Marisi” (“Refutation of Bishr al-Marisi”), which the publisher entitled “The refutation by Imam al-Darimi, Uthman ibn Sa‘id, of the obstinate Bishr al-Marisi”. He is also the author of a “Musnad” (al-Zirikli, 2002:IV/205).

Ibn Taymiyya (661–728 AH / 1263–1328 CE) was Ahmad ibn Abd al-Halim ibn Abd al-Salam ibn Abd Allah ibn Abu al-Qasim al-Khidr al-Namiri al-Harrani al-Dimashqi al-Hanbali, known as Abu Abbas Taqi al-Din ibn Taymiyya. He began to issue fatwas and to teach before the age of twenty. Among his famous works are “Al-Fatawa” and “Al-Jam‘ bayna al-naql wa-l-‘aql” (Ibn Taymiyya, 2018:I/120).

Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (691–751 AH / 1292–1350 CE) was Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr ibn Ayyub ibn Sa‘d al-Zur‘i al-Dimashqi, Abu Abd Allah, Shams al-Din. He was

born and died in Damascus. He was a pupil of Ibn Taymiyya and scarcely departed from his words, supporting everything that issued from him. He arranged Ibn Taymiyya's books and disseminated his learning, and for this reason he was imprisoned with Ibn Taymiyya in the citadel of Damascus, insulted and tortured, and paraded through the city seated backwards on a camel and beaten. He was released only after the death of Ibn Taymiyya (al-Zirikli, 2002:VI/56).

Ibn Abd al-Wahhab (1115–1206 AH / 1703–1792 CE) was Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab ibn Sulayman al-Tamimi al-Najdi, regarded as the leader of the modern religious reform movement in the Arabian Peninsula (al-Zirikli, 2002:VI/257).

As the scholars note, since the representatives of this movement drew most of all on the ideas of Ibn Taymiyya, some researchers call them not “Salafis” but “Taymiyyans”. The application of the epithet “modern” (al-mu‘asira) to this movement is explained by the fact that its adherents form the last link in an intellectual chain that began in the time of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the eighteenth century and continues to the present day, in which living representatives and leading figures of this tendency may still be found.

The most important point is that the representatives of this movement restrict the concept of “Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama‘a” to themselves alone and exclude the Maturidis and Ash‘aris from its circle. They attempt to justify these claims by means of the term “Salafi”, that is, “those who follow the path of the predecessors”. In the language, however, the word “salaf” is a relative concept: every age is a “predecessor” in relation to the age that follows it. With the passage of time, nevertheless, this word acquired, rather than its broad lexical sense, a fixed technical meaning applied to the first three golden centuries of Islam.

In its technical sense this word is used when the discussion concerns the most excellent of the Islamic centuries, those most worthy of being followed and imitated. The established technical meaning of the term is the first three centuries of the life of the Islamic community, that is, of the community of our master Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace. This period includes the age of the Companions, the Successors and the Successors of the Successors. The scholars of Islam are agreed that this period is the age of felicity, and they adduce as evidence for this the following hadith (al-Buti, 1988:19):

عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ عَنِ النَّبِيِّ ﷺ قَالَ: خَيْرُ النَّاسِ قَرْنِي، ثُمَّ الَّذِينَ يَلُونَهُمْ، ثُمَّ الَّذِينَ يَلُونَهُمْ

Abd Allah ibn Mas'ud, may God be pleased with him, related that the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) said: "The best of people are those of my generation, then those who come after them, then those who come after them; after them there will come a people whose testimony outstrips their oaths and whose oaths outstrip their testimony" (al-Bukhari, 2021:IV/10).

What, however, is meant by the three centuries to whose excellence the Messenger of God bore witness in the order mentioned above? Is it the totality of the Muslims who lived in those centuries – that is, does the ruling of excellence pertain to the community as a whole, irrespective of the condition of some or many of them – or does this excellence pertain to every individual among those Muslims, so that none of them remains outside its scope?

On this point a well-known disagreement exists. According to the view of the majority of scholars, excellence is established for all the persons of these three centuries, irrespective of their degrees and differences in righteousness and uprightness. Ibn Abd al-Barr (363–463 AH), however, advanced the view that this excellence is established with regard to the community of Muslims of those three centuries, but may not apply to certain individuals, and that among those who came later there may be persons superior to some of them (Ibn Abd al-Barr, 1967:XX/248–251).

There is no doubt that the reason for the excellence of the Muslims of these three centuries is that they constituted the first links attached to the source of prophethood and to the teachings of the divine message. The first link is that of the “first generation” of predecessors, who received the doctrines, principles and divine norms of Islam directly from the Messenger of God, so that their minds and hearts were pure of the defects of innovation and of the turbidity of doubt and temptation. The second link is that of the Successors, who were immersed in the light of prophethood by following the Companions – who had been granted the light obtained by seeing the Messenger of God, sitting in his assembly and being influenced by his testaments and counsels – and by finding their way through their guidance. The third link is that of the Successors of the Successors, which marks the completion of the stage of intellectual purity and of the freedom of the Islamic natural disposition from alien elements.

From this time onwards innovations began to spread widely, and misguided sects appeared one after another and departed from the straight path of those three centuries. Each sect opened for itself crooked paths branching off from that broad and straight way and began to call others to it. In so doing they acted contrary to the words of God:

﴿وَأَنَّ هَذَا صِرَاطِي مُسْتَقِيمًا فَاتَّبِعُوهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا السُّبُلَ فَتَفَرَّقَ بِكُمْ عَنْ سَبِيلِهِ﴾

“And this is My straight path, so follow it; and do not follow other ways, lest they separate you from His way” (Surat al-An‘am, verse 153) (Muhammad Sadiq Muhammad Yusuf, 2019:162).

The winds of caprice, innovation and error have continued to multiply and to spread from that period down to our own day, century after century. This is confirmed by the words of the Messenger of God related from Abu Hurayra: “No time will come upon you but that the time which follows it will be worse than it, until you meet your Lord” (al-Bukhari, 2021:VIII/124).

To what, then, does this indubitable truth call us? It calls us to bind our reason and our character with the bond of fidelity to the salaf and of following their example; to approach the rules of understanding the texts in a disciplined manner; to adhere firmly to that on which they were agreed in almost all, or in most, of the principles of creed and the practical rulings; and to reject everything invented by those who lead astray or by the ignorant. Indeed, this is the sound testament of the Messenger of God transmitted through many chains by al-Tirmidhi, Ibn Maja and Abu Dawud:

عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ عَمْرٍو رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمَا قَالَ: قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ: ... وَتَفَرَّقَتْ أُمَّتِي عَلَى ثَلَاثٍ وَسَبْعِينَ مِلَّةً، كُلُّهَا فِي النَّارِ إِلَّا مِلَّةً وَاحِدَةً. قَالُوا: مَنْ هِيَ يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ؟ قَالَ: مَا أَنَا عَلَيْهِ وَأَصْحَابِي

Abd Allah ibn Amr related that the Messenger of God said that what befell the Children of Israel would befall his community in exactly the same manner; that the Children of Israel had divided into seventy-two sects and that his community would divide into seventy-three, all of them in the Fire save one; and when the Companions asked which that was, he replied: “That upon which I and my Companions stand today” (al-Tirmidhi, 2002:IV/367; al-Tirmidhi, 1998:IV/367).

This obligation of following the salaf, however, is not fulfilled in a manner consistent with holding fast to the Book of God and being guided by the Sunna of His Prophet except by observing that “manhaj”, that method, which the righteous predecessors held fast to in understanding the Book of God and the Sunna of the Messenger of God.

Following the salaf is not merely because they lived earlier in the history of this community, but also because they were the persons most fitted to understand the Word of God and to know the Sunna of the Messenger of God. Their Arabic was pure, almost free of defects of speech and of the admixture of foreign languages, and for this reason they were the people who understood most correctly the clear and lucid Arabic

Word of God. Moreover, they were the people closest to the life of the Messenger of God, to converse with him and to live in his company, and therefore they became the most entitled of people to transmit the religion from him and to grasp its meanings. They were, furthermore, the most sincere of people in religiosity, the purest in natural disposition and the furthest removed from any inclination to artificiality or deviation into innovation. It was precisely these qualities that made them the persons most worthy of the trust and confidence of others.

Since a correct understanding of the Book of God and the Sunna of the Messenger cannot be complete without following a definite path and set of rules, that path consists of the rules required for interpreting the texts and for correctly understanding and reconciling the apparent contradictions and divergences among them. This need became still stronger after foreign influences had entered the Arabic language and the pure Arabic style and taste had weakened. The first generation of Muslims, possessing such knowledge and such qualities, knew this path of understanding best and were the most fitted to teach people how to understand the Qur'an and the Sunna correctly, how to interpret them and how to derive rulings from them.

Thus, following the salaf does not mean accepting every one of their words literally or clinging blindly to certain opinions expressed by them, for they themselves did not act in this way. True following consists rather in observing the fundamental rules that they applied in understanding and interpreting the texts of the Qur'an and the Sunna, in exercising *ijtihad* and in deriving rulings. A return to these rules and principles is the duty of all Muslims of every age.

This criterion is peculiar neither to the salaf, nor to the khalaf (the later generations), nor to any particular group. Accordingly, any researcher in the Shari'a sciences who violates one of the agreed rules is to be regarded as one who makes a plaything of religion and resorts to stratagems against it. Indeed, such conduct is a mark of *zandaqa* – that is, of professing Islam outwardly while concealing unbelief within, or of following false views that deny the immutable foundations of the Shari'a (al-Maturidi, 2005:I/312) – and a departure from the substance and core of Islam. By contrast, whoever observes those agreed rules and methods, and builds his *ijtihad*, his interpretation and the meanings he assigns to the texts upon these foundations, is a Muslim faithful to the Book of God and the Sunna of His Messenger, and belongs to the "Jama'a" which the Messenger of God commanded to unite under his shadow.

This holds whether such a person lived in the age of the salaf or in that of the khalaf, and irrespective of whether the community that calls itself “Salafiyya” counts him among its own or pushes him aside and regards him as misguided. The criterion of correctness in this community’s understanding of the Book and the Sunna is one and does not multiply. Whoever observes it is, by the grace and favour of God, among the rightly guided leaders who fall within the circle of “Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama‘a”; whoever deviates from it wholly or in part falls outside that circle and is among those who go astray. The passing of ages and years, or the appearance of various groups and communities that have fabricated a separate Islamic existence for themselves, is not capable of introducing any change into this criterion, of creating a duality within it, or of producing an alternative to it.

There are, indeed, certain rules of this methodology whose understanding depends on ijtiḥad. For this reason disagreements have occurred among the imams and scholars of the Muslims in this regard, and even after mutual debate they have not arrived at a single conclusion. There is no doubt that the differing views arising from the obscurity of these questions and from their openness to ijtiḥad all fall, by the grace and generosity of God, within the compass of that general criterion, and that the holders of these views all belong to “Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama‘a”, the community described as the saved group.

Accordingly, in these questions of ijtiḥad each mujtahid holding one of two views or opinions is entitled to be at ease that the path he has chosen is correct. He is by no means entitled, however, to judge those who hold a view contrary to his own as persons who have gone astray and left the fortress of guidance. Were it otherwise – that is, were only one opinion absolutely true – there could not properly exist in these questions the degree of uncertainty that causes them to be called questions of ijtiḥad, and no disagreement would ever have occurred in them. But since it is established that an obscurity preventing agreement and consensus exists in these questions, it is evident that they fall within the sphere of ijtiḥad.

It is entirely wrong for the holder of one of two views to grant himself, out of self-regard and intellectual despotism, the right to reflect on a question and to adopt whatever decision he wishes, while withholding this very right from another who possesses an equal right of examination and ijtiḥad. There is no doubt that the imposition by one mujtahid of his own view upon another in a question of ijtiḥad has no priority; were it otherwise, the right of ijtiḥad would not be equally established for each of them.

According to this methodology, therefore, in questions in which disagreement and differing views have arisen, a mujtahid may hold his own opinion to be correct and consider his colleague's opinion mistaken. Yet God accepts the endeavour of both parties, of the one who erred as well as of the one who was right, provided that they exerted all their effort and were sincere towards God in their understanding, as the Chosen One (peace be upon him) informed us:

عَنْ عُمَرُو بْنِ الْعَاصِ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ: إِذَا حَكَّمَ الْحَاكِمُ فَاجْتَنَهَ ثُمَّ أَصَابَ فَلَهُ أَجْرَانِ، وَإِذَا حَكَّمَ فَاجْتَنَهَ ثُمَّ أَخْطَأَ فَلَهُ أَجْرٌ

Amr ibn al-As related that he heard the Messenger of God say: "When a judge gives judgement, exercising ijtihad, and is right, he has two rewards; and when he gives judgement, exercising ijtihad, and errs, he has one reward" (al-Bukhari, 2001:IX/108).

A mujtahid, however, is by no means entitled to accuse his colleague of error, of apostasy, of innovation or of deviation from the path and guidance of the righteous predecessors. For the path of the salaf is precisely the following of this methodology, and disagreement in questions falling within this methodology is itself a part of that methodology.

From the considerations set out above al-Buti draws the conclusion that the word "Salafiyya", in scholarly and Islamic reality, is not a concept applicable to any particular group of Muslims, since such an approach would attach to it a distinguishing mark separating its bearers from other Muslims who believe in God and His Messenger and adhere sincerely to the sources and principles of Islam. The righteous predecessors did not, during those three centuries, cling word for word to the utterances that issued from them, nor did they become so fixed upon any single view or custom as never to depart from it; had they done so, that rigidity would have become the constitution of membership in a group distinct from other Muslims. Their methodology for understanding the Book of God and the Sunna of His Messenger is the science known today as "usul al-fiqh", or the rules of interpreting the texts, and this is the methodology of all Muslims in applying Islam, not the badge of a particular Islamic group. The matter here is like that of taking the rules of the Arabic language as arbiter: just as it would be improper to regard reliance on the rules of Arabic as the private mark of one group apart from other Muslims, so it is impermissible to regard the rules of usul al-fiqh and the methods of interpreting the texts as the private mark of any single community (al-Buti, 1988:16–19).

The first three centuries of the history of this community are distinguished from those who came after them by one thing only – the quality of "khayriyya", or supreme

excellence, which the Messenger of God attributed to them. Yet this does not constitute for the people of those centuries a special structure by which they might be assimilated to the various innovating sects that call themselves “Islamic”. The converse, the meaning of “sharr” (evil) in the hadith, is similar:

عَنْ أَنَسِ بْنِ مَالِكٍ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ: لَا يَأْتِي عَلَيْكُمْ زَمَانٌ إِلَّا الَّذِي بَعْدَهُ شَرٌّ مِنْهُ، حَتَّى تَلْقُوا رَبَّكُمْ

Anas ibn Malik related that, when he was asked about al-Hajjaj, he said: “No time will come upon you but that the time which follows it will be worse than it, until you meet your Lord. I heard this from your Prophet (peace be upon him)” (al-Bukhari, 2001:IX/47).

If the established excellence peculiar to the people of the first centuries had made of them a private community distinct from the generality of Muslims, then the “evil” attributed to those who came after them would likewise have turned them into a private community distinct from other Muslims; and if we bear in mind that the people of every age are described as being better than those who come after them, then the people of every age would constitute a separate community among the Muslims, and the Islamic community would be seen to have split into hundreds of scattered and mutually opposed groups.

The results of the study may be summarised as follows. First, freedom of ijtihad and the rejection of monopoly: the study has shown that the imposition by one mujtahid of his view upon another, and his denial of the right of others to examine and exercise ijtihad, are without scholarly and legal foundation. According to the hadith related from Amr ibn al-As, since a mujtahid who exerts all his effort and arrives at a correct decision receives two rewards while one who errs receives one, no one is entitled to accuse the opposing party in disputed questions of error, innovation or apostasy.

Second, the non-sectarian character of the concept of “Salafiyya”: it has been established that in scholarly and Islamic reality the term “Salafiyya” cannot pertain to a particular group of Muslims. Otherwise this concept would remain a private distinguishing mark separating its bearers from other Muslims who believe sincerely and follow the sources of Islam. The representatives of the first three centuries did not become fixed upon any single view, expression or custom, nor did they form a separate organisational group distinct from others.

Third, *usul al-fiqh* as the common and single methodology of the community: the method of the righteous predecessors in understanding the Qur’an and the Sunna is today called “*usul al-fiqh*”, the rules of interpreting the texts, and it is not the private

property of any class or group but a scholarly and legal criterion that is common and binding for all Muslims. Its role is like that of taking the rules of the Arabic language as arbiter: just as it would be improper to regard the rules of Arabic as the private banner of one group, so it is impermissible to interpret *usul al-fiqh* as the particular mark of a single community.

Fourth, the correct analysis of the hadiths on “*khayriyya*” and “*sharr*”: the principal quality distinguishing the first three centuries is the description of “*khayriyya*” given by the Messenger of God. Yet neither this excellence nor the report of “*sharr*” concerning later times, related from Anas ibn Malik, denotes a separate organisational sect distinct from the generality of Muslims. To distribute these qualities among separate communities would divide the Islamic community into hundreds of scattered and mutually opposed groups.

Fifth, the innovatory character of a separate “*Salafiyya*” community: “*Salafiyya*” denotes simply a historical and blessed stage that has passed. If by the concept of “*Salafiyya*” a particular separate group, a distinctive organisational tendency and an “Islamic community” entering under its banner are meant, then such a structure is itself one of the new innovations that appeared after the Prophet.

CONCLUSION

The term “*salaf*” denotes a fixed and blessed historical stage in the history of Islam, namely the first three golden centuries – the Companions, the Successors and the Successors of the Successors. To turn this concept into the private name of a particular narrow group, school or sect is incorrect both scholarly and doctrinally. To interpret “*Salafiyya*” as a separate organisational community and to claim union under its banner is one of the innovatory tendencies that appeared after the time of the Prophet.

Following the righteous predecessors does not mean clinging blindly and literally to their words. The path of the *salaf* is the general methodology applied in understanding the texts of the Qur’an and the Sunna and in deriving rulings from them, that is, the rules of *usul al-fiqh*. This methodology is not the private property of any class but a scholarly and legal criterion common and binding for the whole Islamic community, like the observance of the rules of the Arabic language.

The circle of “*Ahl al-Sunna wa-l-Jama‘a*”, the saved community, is not confined to a single group: all mujtahids who exercise *ijtihad* while observing the general principles

and rules of Islam, including the Maturidis and the Ash‘aris, belong fully to this circle. Disagreements arising in questions of ijtihad are natural, and both the mujtahid who errs and the one who is right receive reward for the effort made with sincerity. For this reason, accusing other mujtahids in disputed questions of error, innovation or apostasy – that is, intellectual despotism – is entirely contrary to the manhaj of the righteous predecessors.

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