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Secularism and Multiculturalism: Interrelated Political Challenges¹

Abstract: There may be various reasons to rethink political secularism but, in my view, the most significant today, certainly in Western Europe, is what I understand as the multicultural challenge. It is clear West European states are now highly challenged by the issues posed by post-immigration ethno-religious diversity, and that the new Muslim settlements of the last fifty years or so are at the centre of it. This has forced new thinking, not only about questions of social integration but also about the role of religion in relation to the state and citizenship. Accordingly, a fundamental issue that many thought had long been settled has re-emerged with new vitality and controversy, namely political secularism, especially as it articulates with questions of tolerance, recognition, and governance. My own contribution to the climate of 're-thinking secularism' has been to argue that what is sometimes talked about as the 'post-secular' or a 'crisis of secularism' is, in Western Europe, quite crucially to do with the reality of *multiculturalism*.

Keywords: multiculturalism, secularism, Western Europe, religion

Abstrakt: Istnieje szereg powodów, by raz jeszcze przemyśleć sekularyzm polityczny. Najbardziej znaczącym z nich jest wyzwanie wielokulturowości, z którym mierzy się Europa Zachodnia. Państwa zachodnioeuropejskie są obecnie bardzo skoncentrowane na wyzwaniach wynikających z różnorodności etniczno-religijnej będącej następstwem imigracji. Nowe osiedla muzułmańskie powstałe na przestrzeni ostatnich pięćdziesięciu lat znajdują się w samym centrum tego problemu. Okoliczności te zmuszają do nowego sposobu myślenia, nie tylko o kwestiach integracji społecznej, ale także o roli religii w odniesieniu do państwa i obywatelstwa. Fundamentalna kwestia, którą wielu uważało za dawno rozstrzygniętą, wyłania się ponownie z nową siłą i budzi nowe kontrowersje – jest nią sekularyzm polityczny, szczególnie w kontekście tolerancji, uznania i zarządzania. Autor

¹ This account of my *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism* is derived from the Introduction to that book [Modood 2019].

niniejszego artykułu twierdzi, że postsekularyzm czy kryzys sekularyzmu mają w Europie Zachodniej dość zasadniczy związek z rzeczywistością wielokulturowości.

Słowa kluczowe: wielokulturowość, sekularyzm, Europa Zachodnia, religia

There may be various reasons to rethink political secularism but, in my view, the most significant today, certainly in Western Europe, is what I understand as the multicultural challenge. It is clear West European states are now highly challenged by the issues posed by post-immigration ethno-religious diversity and that the new Muslim settlements of the last fifty years or so are at the centre of it. This has forced new thinking, not only about questions of social integration but also about the role of religion in relation to the state and citizenship. Accordingly, a fundamental issue that many thought had long been settled has re-emerged with new vitality and controversy, namely political secularism, especially as it articulates with questions of tolerance, recognition, and governance. My own contribution to the climate of 're-thinking secularism' has been to argue that what is sometimes talked about as the 'post-secular' or a 'crisis of secularism' is, in Western Europe, quite crucially to do with the reality of *multiculturalism*. By which I mean not just the fact of new ethno-religious diversity but the presence of a multiculturalist approach to this diversity: the idea that equality must be extended from uniformity of treatment to include respect for difference; recognition of public/private interdependence rather than a dichotomized entity as in classical liberalism; the public recognition and institutional accommodation of minorities; the reversal of marginalisation and a remaking of national citizenship so that all can have a sense of belonging to it. This multiculturalist challenge, at one time seen to go with the flow of liberalism – of human rights, racial equality, decomposition of collectives such as the nation – is properly understood as requiring not just the reform and extension of liberal democratic institutions but a re-thinking of liberalism [Levey 2019]. Equally, the question arises, with greater and greater force, what implication does the emergence of this ethnoreligious socio-political complex have for political secularism (indeed for secular institutions such as workplaces, schools, hospitals, universities etc more generally). These are the themes of my *Essays on Secularism and Multiculturalism* [2019].

The first step of my argument is to show that Islamophobia is a form of cultural racism. The next step is to show that anti-racism, whether in terms of difference-blind neutral liberal state or in terms of active de-Othering, is not enough. We

need a conception of equal citizenship that brings together the equality of same treatment with the equality of respect for difference, in short, multiculturalism. Combining a sociology of cultural racism, an analysis of several Western European political controversies involving Muslims and a political theory of multiculturalism, I show that equal citizenship requires a difference-sensitive accommodation of Muslim and other religious identities and that this means revisiting and rethinking the concept of political secularism. I distinguish between the US religious freedom-based separation of church and state, a French style marginalisation of organised religion in the public space and, thirdly, what I argue is the dominant mode of political secularism in western Europe. I call this 'moderate secularism' and I elaborate its norms as a Weberian ideal type or contextualised political theory, demonstrating that it does not consist of a separation of religion and the state. It in fact includes state recognition of and state support for religion (e.g., all the states of the EU, including France, fund specific faith schools or instruct specific Christian faiths in state schools [Stepan 2011: 217]) but insists that religious authority must not control political authority. In giving primacy to liberal democratic constitutionalism, it marries a conception of religious freedom with an understanding that religion can be a public good - or harm - and that the state may need to assist it in achieving that good. I argue that Muslims can be and should be accommodated within moderate secularism; and to do so is to achieve an egalitarian integration, a multicultural secularism.

Religion and Multicultural Accommodation

How in Western Europe groups and controversies defined in terms of race or foreignness came to be redefined in terms of religion and how the accommodation of Muslims came to be the dominant issue in relation to multiculturalism has now been well established [Modood, 2005 and 2007/2013]. Part I of my *Essays* probes further this trajectory of racialisation in relation to issues such as Islamophobia, hate speech and Muslim assertiveness. The rest of the book looks at how these controversies have a multiculturalist aspect and as such have stimulated debates about what was thought to be the dead topic of secularism; and reflect a little on the modes of analysis I deploy.

This identarian thrust of anti-racism, besides showing the religious roots of anti-racism in the US in the third quarter of the twentieth century, and the influence of that movement in Britain, is, however, critical to the emergence and development of multiculturalism. Whilst Canada's state multiculturalism and the contribution of its illustrious political theorists such as Charles Taylor, Will Kymlicka, James

Tully and Joe Carens is, with good reason, often cited as a beacon of multiculturalism, in Britain, African American influence is stronger. It gave to British multiculturalism its bottom-up and anti-racist character, which is not so evident in say Canada or Australia, where in both cases multiculturalism was largely led by European-origin white ethnic minority lobbies and elite policymakers [Uberoi 2009 and 2016, Levey 2008, Modood 2022, forthcoming]².

This is partly because group identities are not just a ‘multi’, but groups can shift from say a race to a religious focus, or fuse foci, for example, by combining ethnicity and religion. Moreover, religion itself is, of course, a multi-dimensional activity. For example, there is scripture, doctrine, worship, organisation, codes of living, community, art, architecture and so on. The multicultural interest is centred on an ethnoreligious identity group that needs to be protected against racism, and whose practices and symbols need to be accommodated in a respectful way in the public culture and institutions of a country in which currently they are marginalised or not recognised as part of that country. A good example of such an ethnoreligious group which has been subject to racialisation are the Jews. Jews could be understood to be followers of a religion, Judaism, but ‘follow’ here clearly cannot mean to believe in and strictly adhere to its rules. Many proud, self-defined Jews, who are recognised as Jews by fellow Jews, as well as non-Jews, are atheists and/or do not participate in approved collective worship and/or do not follow the rules of living, such as keeping a kosher kitchen or covering their heads. Indeed, it is perhaps better to think of Jews as a people with a religion, such that peoplehood and religion mutually influence each other, with religion a characteristic or a possession of a people, not of individuals per se. So, while Jews would not be the people that they are without Judaism, not every individual Jew has to be religious to be a Jew. Moreover, there can be sources of Jewish identity other than those that are the strictly religious, such as the Holocaust as a memory of a people or a collective commitment to the state of Israel. I hasten to add I am talking of a socio-political understanding of Jews, including the self-understanding of many Jews, not an understanding internal to Judaism. I am aware that different branches of Judaism have their own and differing criteria for defining who is a Jew, and that

² Relatedly, it meant that British multiculturalism was built on and incorporated a prior focus on socio-economic issues, especially on racial disadvantage and social mobility. A happy consequence was that few in Britain thought socio-economic integration and ethnocultural accommodation were rival policy programmes as in the Netherlands, where the initial culturalist accommodation was abandoned in favour of socio-economic integration, as if one could only have one or the other. It has recently been argued that Norway too is exhibiting a bottom up multicultural struggle [Stokke 2019].

the differing criteria are a matter of great religious and – in so far as it pertains to the state of Israel – political dispute, both amongst different branches of Judaism and between them and non-religious Jews.

As with Jews, as with Muslims [and Hindus, Sikhs and so on, albeit not discussed here]. Various Islamic schools and sects have their own view on what is expected of a Muslim, and while they have some influence on how Muslims will decide who is and is not a fellow Muslim, as in the Jewish case, that is not decisive. Muslims also relate to each other as family members, as a community, as a political unity against Islamophobia or for justice for Palestinians, where non-religious Muslims, if they are not conspicuously anti-Islam, are taken to be Muslims. Muslims, in my book, are primarily understood in this way, namely as a people or ethnic groups with a religion, Islam, without any assumption that all individuals are religious or that the unity of the group is exclusively religious. In recognising they are a group or a people, we do not need to assume an exaggerated unity, just as in talking of black people in Britain or as an Atlantic diaspora we do not. Indeed, in thinking with my chosen category, 'ethnoreligious', we not only make explicit that we are talking about people not simply doctrines or organised religion, but these just being also a feature of the people, as in my example of the Jews, not exhaustive of the category. We also have a tool for recognising internal variation, especially in terms of ethnic group aspects. For example, many British Muslim parents have a strong preference that their children marry a Muslim. In communicating this to their offspring, whether they are aware or not, they are likely to assume 'Muslim' means a specific ethnicity: for example, Pakistani parents may feel that their offspring have not understood them if one of them introduces a Somali Muslim as a prospective partner. The parents' image of a Muslim – at least in a context like this – is likely to be an ethnoreligious one, namely of a Pakistani Muslim. This ethnic dimension can be found at the very heart of the religion. Of the more than 1,100 mosques in Britain for which data are available, a large majority are mainly mono-ethnic and less than five percent have a multi-ethnic management committee [Naqshbandi 2017].

Thinking of groups such as Jews and Muslims as ethnoreligious has another advantage in that these terms do not just describe religiosity or people in terms of religion. They are groups who are racialised as a homogeneous, single group with uniform characteristics (sometimes this refers to a biological appearance, but it does not have to [Modood 2005]). This is done because the group in question is perceived to be a threat or inferior or simply exotic; and each of these

can be the basis for discrimination and unfavourable treatment of members of the group.

This complicates the phenomenon of racism. For example, Asian Muslims suffer from colour racism. But they also suffer from cultural racism. The perception of such Muslims, whether it be in some hard-core racist discourses, such as those of the British National Party, or implicit in wider British society, is that their defects lie deep in their culture rather than in a biology that produces their culture. This means that Asian Muslims, more than, say, black Britons, suffer double racism. This does not mean that they suffer more racism—such as harassment, discrimination, and institutional exclusion—than blacks. That is a complex empirical question, and one would have to be sensitive to the fact that the answer may vary by class, age, gender, geography, social arena, and so on. I think that systematic research of this sort would indeed show that the racism against Asian Muslims has been underestimated since at least the 1960s. My point is that research of this kind requires a conceptualization of racism that includes cultural racism as well as colour racism, and an understanding that Asians suffer a double or a compound racism.³

Racialised groups should be protected against incitement to hatred. The latter involves not just the danger of immediate violence, but the production as well of a climate of opinion or emotions, or the exploitation of that climate; not just the arousal of certain hatreds in the dominant group but also a fear and humiliation in the victim group that can lead in turn to conflict and violence. Whilst the purpose of such laws is to protect people not religious beliefs, the people in question may be people marked by religious identity: Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland, Jews and Muslims in Britain. It is evident that some Muslims are connected to aspects of their faith with such deep emotion that disrespectful attacks upon it will cause them the kind of distress that is caused to other groups by reference to (say) images of black bestiality or by holocaust-denial [Modood 1993]. Add to this a set of domestic and geopolitical circumstances in which these Muslims – and here we might include Muslims as well who are less intense in their religion – feel that they are being targeted and harassed as culturally backward, as disloyal and as terrorists, in short as not belonging to Britain, as unwanted and under threat. Does this not explain the explosions of protest,

³ It should be clear that arguing that some groups suffer more racism and related disadvantages than others is quite different from an a priori ‘hierarchy of oppression’ argument [Modood 2021].

anger and violence sparked by *The Satanic Verses*, for example, or to the cartoons of the prophet Muhammad published in the Danish newspaper, *Jyllands-Posten* [Modood et al 2006, Levey and Modood, 2009]? Such cases may or may not be caught by a suitably framed law but thinking about such vivid examples is necessary to understand what should be prohibited and what should be censored. Indeed, censure is important for those who, like myself, want to limit the use of the law here. To rule out legal restrictions *and* censure is to leave minorities friendless and risk developing violent responses today and deep-seated divisions for the long term [*Essays* chapter 3].

Religion and Secular Accommodation

The emergence of the non-racial forms of minority identity assertiveness that I mentioned in the last section was not anticipated or welcomed by British (or European) politicians or society. Similarly, just as the sociology of race for some time had a poor and distorted understanding of the identities of Muslims and the kinds of exclusion they experience in the West – a ‘misrecognition’ of an ethnoreligious group in terms of race and class – political theory, including political theory of multiculturalism, has been slow to rise to the occasion [Parekh 1990 and 2006 [2000], Modood 2013 [2007]]. If we have to think normatively of the place of religion in a polity and ultimately a multicultural citizenship, then existing political theory is not a good place to start, because it has too limited a traction with actual liberal democratic secular polities in which the challenge of a multicultural citizenship is being exercised. Normally, theories of political secularism assume that it consists of separation of state and religion and/or state neutrality in relation to religion. Yet even a cursory glance at what we might take to be secular states shows this to be false. Nearly a third of all western democracies have an official religion and more than half of all 47 democracies in the Polity dataset officially or unofficially give preference to one religion. Indeed, most of the others give preference to more than one religion [Perez and Fox, 2018]. So, let us seek greater empirical traction than political theorists usually do by beginning with a minimalist understanding of secularism, namely, the view that there are two significant modes of authority, political and religious, and each must be allowed to enjoy a certain autonomy within their own spheres of concern. Each actual political instantiation or normative concept will be more than this but by beginning with this minimalist concept, we will not take a particular interpretation or set of institutions to exhaust the possibilities that exist. Rather, it enables us to work with the full range of empirical cases without normatively excluding them or misdescribing them empirically.

Even ‘autonomy’ of spheres is perhaps too strong to cover all the cases we observe in the world, and it is best to just recognise there are two sets of institutions and activities, the political and the religious, each to some extent, sometimes to a limited extent, organises itself in its own way, with its own conception and practice of authority. Specifically, political secularism is the claim that religious authority should not control political authority in the sphere of government, law, and citizenship. Note that this understanding of secularism does not give automatic priority to religious freedom, conscience, toleration, or democracy. Of course, all these are important but for me they are constituent features of liberal democracy and so become features of secularism in a liberal democracy. One such version of secularism, which I identify by a grounded, empirical-normative focus on the institutions and practices of countries like Britain, is what I call ‘moderate secularism’, and it does indeed give an important place to freedom of religion [chapter 8]. Yet, at the same time when one considers the former Soviet Union, the People’s Republic of China, the Republic of Turkey and even aspects of *laïcité*, one sees that there is no necessary connexion between religious freedom and secularism, and secularists in certain times and places prize secularism above freedom of religion - as in France.

Nor should we attribute liberals’ concern to not treat religion as special [Eisgruber and Sager 2009] to secularism. For secularists, religion *is* special; their concern to delimit the sphere of religion is not extended to economics, science, the arts and so on but is singularly targeted on religion. Moreover, moderate secularism is characterised by an additional specialness as regards religion. It recognises that religion has a public good (and not just a harmful) dimension, and this may be supported by the state if it is judged by the state that it assists in bringing out the good. It does not promote the idea of political authority/autonomy in an anti-religious way, rather it allows organised religion and religious motives to play their part in contributing to the public good. This may be taken to be a form of privileging religion and of course it is. What must be borne in mind is that few if any states uniquely privilege religion. Whether our criteria are the expenditure of tax revenues, management by the government or symbolic status as ‘national’ or teaching in state schools, most states privilege various sectors of the economy, science and universities, museums, areas of natural beauty, the arts and sport and so on – all matters strictly outside the sphere of political authority. Therefore, apart from extreme libertarians and anarchists, most of us rightly have no problem with the idea of state privileging various social activities and judge each case on its merits – what I call ‘multiplex privileging’ [Essays, chapter 10]. It may be that we think that religion is unworthy of privileging in some or all the above ways. Yet that is not the existing political context

in which multiculturalists are seeking egalitarian inclusion. Moreover, the liberal goal of state neutrality about culture or religion is impossible [Modood 2013 [2007]].⁴ Indeed, there is a sense in which the separation of religion and state is not a neutral view about religion; it is a very definite view that favours some religions and attitudes to religion while disfavouring religions that want a partnership with the state. Or, to put it another way, if non-separation of religion and the state is reflective of an ethical-cultural perspective – what following Rawls is referred to as ‘a conception of the good’ – then so is its negation, the separation of religion and politics. There may be good arguments for separation, but they describe few contemporary states and to pursue separation is not an ethically neutral position. Most liberal democratic states may not choose multiculturalism or to accommodate ethno-religious groups, but they are not prevented in doing so by their existing form of political secularism. That is my key conclusion here.

Multiculturalist Moderate Secularism

Let me offer two examples of how I think multiculturalism and moderate secularism can be brought together. It is meant to illustrate how the two ‘isms’ may work together, not be an institutional blueprint to be applied everywhere.⁵ It also gives an indication of how I think majority and minority identities can be part of a national framework.

The first example is that of the Church of England, which clearly is an institutionalised feature of England’s and Britain’s historical identity. This is reflected in symbolic and substantive aspects of the constitution. For example, 26 Anglican bishops sit by virtue of that status in the upper house of the UK legislature, the House of Lords. It is the Archbishop of Canterbury that presides over the installation of a new head of state, namely the coronation of the monarch. I do not see the presence of a state church, such as the ‘established’ Church of England, as contrary to political secularism⁶, if it does not impinge upon political authority, is consistent

⁴ Worth noting is how some political theorists, who argue that cultural neutrality on the part of the state is impossible and so support the state endorsement of one language, argue that state endorsement of any number of religions is a wrongful breach of neutrality. It is interesting that such discussions usually include reference to Quebec [Kymlicka 2001a; Bouchard and Taylor 2008].

⁵ I show how my key concepts have some traction in relation to Flanders, Belgium in Modood 2017.

⁶ Laborde 2018 has also come to the view that a Church of England type of establishment – ‘modest establishment’ – is compatible with minimal secularism [in Laborde 2013, she argued that it was compatible with a Rawlsian liberalism but not republican liberal secularism].

with liberal democratic constitutionalism, and contributes to the advancement of the public good – which, in the context of religious diversity, includes the promotion of multiculturalism. Given the rapidity of changes that are affecting British national identity, and the way in which religion, sometimes in a divisive way, is making a political reappearance, I think it would be wise not to discard lightly this historic aspect of British identity, which continues to be of importance to many even when few attend Church of England services and when that Church may perhaps have been overtaken by Catholicism as the religion with the most participants in the country. Yet, in my advocacy of a multicultural Britain, I would like to see the Church of England share these constitutional privileges—which should perhaps be extended—with other faiths. However, multiculturalism here does not mean crude “parity”. My expectation is that even in the context of an explicit multifaith arrangement, the Church of England would enjoy a rightful precedence in religious representation in the House of Lords and in the coronation of the monarch, and this would not be just a crude majoritarianism but be based on its historical contribution. To this must be added the multicultural condition, namely the Church’s potential to play a leading role in the fostering and development of a multicultural national identity, state, and society. Both the historical and the multicultural contributions to national identity have a presumptive quality, and usually they qualify each other, yet where they are complementary, the case for “establishment” is enhanced, and most of all where there is simultaneously a process of inclusion of non-Anglican faith communities.

My second example is about religion in non-denominational state schools.⁷ I think multicultural moderate secularism should support a compulsory religious education (RE) in which children of all faiths and none are taught about a variety of faith traditions and their past and current effects upon individuals and societies, upon the shaping of humanity, taught to classes comprising those of all religions and of none. Such classes should certainly include the contribution of humanism as well as the atheistic critique of religion and can be combined with ethics. In many countries, there are advocates for RE as part of a national curriculum. The main issue in relation to majority precedence is in relation to religious instruction (RI), the induction into a specific faith. Broadly speaking, there are two majoritarian possibilities. We have a society where there is a majority religion and that alone is allowed as RI, and minorities might be exempted from those classes, but no

⁷ I am not here discussing state-funded faith schools, which are common in many European countries. For discussion of such schools and why such funding should be extended to Muslim faith schools, see Meer [2007] and Tinker [2009].

alternative religious instruction is provided. Or secondly, the majority view is that there should be no RI in state schools, as in the USA or in France (except in French state-funded religious schools). Is it fair to impose either of these policies on minorities that do want RI?

That is an appropriate subject for a national dialogue, but if after that certain minorities want RI as well as RE, then a truly national system, certainly a multicultural system, must make an effort to accommodate minority RI. In my understanding then, under both the majoritarian possibilities, the minorities should have the right to have their religions instructed or worshipped within the national system. On the other hand, minorities do not have the right to stop the majority from including the instruction of their religion. We should not, for example, ask schools to cease Christian RI or worship or celebrating Christmas *because* of the presence of Muslims or Hindus; rather, we should extend the celebrations to include, for example, Eid and Diwali. Such separate classes and faith-specific worship needs to be balanced with an approach that brings all the children together and into dialogue; indeed, without that it would be potentially divisive of the school and of society. But where that is in place, voluntary pursuit of one's own faith or philosophical tradition completes the multicultural approach to the place of religion in such schools. Learning together about different faiths, including what they have in common and – separately - being instructed in or inducted into one's faith community heritage as a normal school occurrence and not something excluded from the school community are then the two mutually balancing aspects of multiculturalism.

- i) In this example, I draw on three principles which are derived from my discussion of multiculturalism in the *Essays*:
- ii) Schools should promote cross-cultural understanding and nurture inclusivity so all can develop a common sense of belonging
- iii) The presence of minority identities should be accommodated on an *additive* not a subtractive basis

The needs of minorities should not simply be understood in terms of majority preferences: just because the majority does not want something (e.g., to display faith through dress or RI classes), it does not mean there should not be institutional provision for a minority if it strongly feels it needs it and it is not harming anyone.

These two examples also illustrate an important point about national culture. The general liberal and civic nationalist approach is to say that diversity requires a

‘thinning’ of the national culture so that minorities may feel included and do not feel that a majoritarian culture is imposed on them. This is also the approach of liberal multicultural nationalists. Will Kymlicka argues that ‘liberal states exhibit a much narrower conception of national identity. In order to make it possible for people from different ethnocultural backgrounds to become full and equal members of the nation....In so far as liberal nation-building involves diffusing a common national culture throughout the territory of the state, it is a very narrow form of culture...’ [Kymlicka 2001b: 55-56].⁸ Yet the two examples above are not a dilution of moderate secularism or of religion in state schools: they are a pluralistic enhancement. Multiculturalism adds to the national culture by not disestablishing the national church but bringing other faiths into relationship with it. Indeed, in general, a multicultural society requires more state action to not just respect the diversity but to bring it together in a common sense of national belonging and that in many instances means adding to a sense of national culture not hollowing it out. In the kinds of cases my book is concerned with, the bringing of minority faith communities into playing a role in aspects of the national or public culture alongside Christians and humanists requires us to think differently about the country, and so may require an appropriate public narrative about the kind of country we now are [CMEB 2000]. In this way, making secularism multicultural means making our national identity multicultural; and conversely, making our national citizenship multicultural requires making secularism multicultural – what we might call ‘multicultural nationalism’ [Modood 2018, Modood and Sealy 2021].⁹

⁸ On how to evaluate if a minority is alienated from a national religious framework, see Modood and Thompson 2021].

⁹ The multi-continental GREASE project, on which this contribution is based, has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement number [770640]. To see the framework for global comparative analysis that has now been developed, see Tariq Modood & Thomas Sealy [2022] Developing a framework for a global comparative analysis of the governance of religious diversity, Religion, State and Society, DOI: 10.1080/09637494.2022.2117526.

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