

Trends in the Religious Composition of the Population in the Republic of Ireland, 1946-71

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Abstract: Compared with 1946 there were more Catholics in the Republic in 1971 but 24 per cent fewer in the main Protestant denominations. More strikingly the number returning "no religion" or "no statement" has risen sharply. The age structure of the Protestant population results in their experiencing a high death rate and helps explain in part their low birth rate. Together these factors account for much of the decline.

Emigration by Church of Ireland members is lower at all ages than that of Catholics or other Protestants. The increase in numbers returning "no religion" or "no statement" would appear to be due mainly to changes in returns made by Catholics. Evidence also suggests that a significant proportion of Church of Ireland members marry in Catholic ceremonies.

THERE is an obvious need for accurate data on the trend in the number of Protestants in the Republic, the emigration rate of Roman Catholics from Northern Ireland, and so on. I have already attempted to set out the basic data for both parts of Ireland in an ESRI paper (Walsh, 1970). In this paper I wish to up-date and develop that part of my 1970 study which dealt with the Republic. The main reason for confining attention to the Republic in the present study is that in the 1971 Northern Ireland Census, the response to the question on religion became a political issue and the numbers giving "no statement" rose to 9.4 per cent of the total: this renders an analysis of the 1961-71 trends for Northern Ireland very complex and worthy of a separate study.

The meaningfulness of the religious inquiry in the Census in either part of Ireland is open to question, and has, indeed, been questioned in a recent thesis,

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(Macourt, 1974). The actual question in the 1971 Census in the Republic was framed as follows:

“Religion—state particular denomination”.

There is a presumption in the phrasing of this question that the respondent adheres to some denomination. However, as explained in the preface to volume VII of the 1961 Census, the enumerators “were instructed not to insist on the completion of this section of the form in cases where householders were reluctant to give the required information”.

In this study I analyse the population returned in the three post-war Censuses in which this question was included (1946, 1961, 1971), broken down into religion on the basis of responses to this question. I do not wish to discuss the meaning of returning oneself as “Catholic” or “Church of Ireland” etc. in the Census. Macourt’s thesis provides an excellent discussion of this issue in historical perspective.

Trends in the Religious Composition of the Population

Table 1 sets out the population classified into the various religious denominations in the three post-war Censuses. Of the major religious groups, only the Roman Catholic recorded more adherents in 1971 than in 1946. There was a 24 per cent decline in the numbers in the main Protestant denominations.¹ But perhaps the striking feature of Table 1 is the rise in the numbers returned as having “no religion” or “no statement” between 1961 and 1971. As a result of the increase in this category, the proportion of the total population in all the religious denominations was lower in 1971 than in 1946.

Components of Population Change 1961–71

The most basic demographic equation is

change in population = births *less* deaths *plus* net migration.

When dealing with the population classified by religion these terms need careful interpretation. “Births” refer to babies recorded as belonging to the particular denomination in the Census (no record of religion is included in the State’s birth registration form). “Deaths” relate to the number of people of a particular denomination estimated to have died in the period in question (the estimates are derived by use of the Life Tables, as no record of religion is included in the State’s death registration form). Estimated net migration has to be derived on the basis of the formula

change in population *less* (births minus deaths) = net migration.

1. The choice of headings in Table 1 has been dictated by the way in which the Census returns are tabulated: the “other” category under “other religious denominations” includes many Christian groups (Lutheran, Friends, etc.) as well as various non-Christian religions.

TABLE 1: Republic of Ireland: Religious distribution of population at each census, 1946-71

	Roman Catholic	Other religious denominations										Total population	
		Total	Main Protestant denominations					Jewish	Other	No religion	No statement		
			Total	Church of Ireland	Presbyterian	Methodist	Baptist						
Numbers ('000)													
1946	2,786.0	*	157.6	124.8	23.9	8.4	0.5	3.9	*	*	7.6	*	2,955.1
1961	2,673.5	138.3	130.2	104.0	19.0	6.7	0.5	3.3	4.8	1.1	5.6		2,818.3
1971	2,795.6	128.3	120.0	97.7	16.1	5.6	0.6	2.6	5.7	7.6	46.7		2,978.2
Percentages													
1946	94.3	*	5.3	4.2	0.8	0.3	—	0.1	*	*	0.3	*	100
1961	94.9	4.9	4.6	3.7	0.7	0.2	—	0.1	0.2	—	0.2		100
1971	93.9	4.3	4.0	3.3	0.5	0.2	—	0.1	0.2	0.3	1.6		100

*Cannot be calculated because the 1946 Census gives no details of the "other (including no statement)" respondents.
 — = less than 0.1 per cent.

To take an example (age specific): 3,686 males aged 15-19 were returned in the 1961 Census as "Church of Ireland". Using the Life Tables, we may calculate that 36 of these would die in the ten-year period 1961-71. Thus, in the absence of "migration" (that is, movement into or out of the State, or a change in the religious denomination returned) we expect to find 3,650 males aged 25-29 returned as "Church of Ireland" in 1971. The number actually recorded was only 2,925. We thus conclude that there was a net loss of 725 Church of Ireland males aged 15-19 in 1961 either through emigration from the State or through switching of the denomination returned in the 1971 Census. It is on the basis of this methodology that the estimates presented in Table 2 were derived.

These calculations show, first of all, that the net emigration rate among the Church of Ireland group is less than one-half the national average and only about one-third the Roman Catholic rate. High emigration rates are, however, recorded among the other two major Protestant denominations, the Presbyterians and the Methodists. As our concept of an "emigration" rate includes changes in the denomination returned in the Census, I thought it worth grouping the three major Protestant denominations to see whether cancelling the effect of any switching of adherence between these three groups would alter the picture. The emigration rate obtained for the three groups taken as a unit is about 50 per cent below the Roman Catholic rate. The conclusion may be drawn that the migration experience of the Protestant community has been much more favourable than that of the Roman Catholic community during the 1960s. This is consistent with the evidence for the period 1946-61, presented in my previous study. Although we are not concerned here with the pre-war period, it is of interest to mention that estimates for earlier years show that between 1926 and 1946 the Protestant emigration rate was significantly higher than the Roman Catholic (see Kennedy, 1973, Chapter VI).

The overall "Protestant" figure, however, conceals quite substantial differences between the Church of Ireland and the other two major denominations—the Presbyterians and the Methodists. The emigration for the latter is very high, and in fact their numbers have dwindled at a more rapid rate than those of the Church of Ireland, by about one-third compared with a quarter since 1946.

The differences in net emigration rates between Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist may well be due mostly to differences in the occupational distribution of these groups. The only denominations for whom occupational details are given in the 1961 Census are, Roman Catholics, Church of Ireland and Presbyterian. If we look at the proportion of the gainfully occupied males in each of these groups who were in the small (under 50 acres) farmer, agricultural labourer, and other labourer and unskilled worker occupations, the following picture emerges: Roman Catholic, 28.8 per cent; Church of Ireland, 14.6 per cent; Presbyterian, 22.6 per cent. This rough measure of occupational distribution shows the relatively favourable position of the Church of Ireland population, not only by comparison with Roman Catholics, but also compared with Presbyterians. These differentials are similar to the pattern of emigration rates for these denominations.

The most striking of all the net migration rates recorded in Table 2 is that for "other denominations, including no religion and no statement". This group experienced a net *in-flow* equal to over 10 per cent a year between 1961-71. This *in-flow* may in part be due to an immigration of people from outside the State, but much of it must be due to the switching of labels or affiliation of Irish people between the 1961 and 1971 Censuses.

The uniformly high death rate among the Protestant groups is due to their unfavourable age structure. The following are the percentages of the main groups aged 65 or over in 1971:

Roman Catholic	10.8
Church of Ireland	18.0
Presbyterian	17.2
Methodist	17.9
Jewish	14.9
All Others	10.5

The very old structure of the Protestant population is due to the sharp fall in their numbers over the years and their low birth rate.

TABLE 2: *Annual average birth, death and migration rate per 1,000 population intercensal period 1961-71*

<i>Column:</i>	<i>Birth rate</i>	<i>Death rate</i>	<i>Rate of natural increase</i>	<i>Actual rate of population change</i>	<i>Estimated net migration rate</i>
	(1)	(2)	(3) = (1) - (2)	(4)	(5) = (4) - (3)
Roman Catholic	22.2	11.2	11.0	+4.5	-6.5
Church of Ireland	13.6	17.3	-3.7	-6.2	-2.5
Presbyterian	14.3	17.0	-2.7	-16.6	-13.9
Methodist	13.8	17.1	-3.3	-16.7	-13.4
Three major Protestant denominations	13.7	17.2	-3.5	-8.2	-4.7
Jewish	14.3	13.7	0.6	-21.1	-21.7
Other denominations	22.5	4.8	17.7	+134.0	+116.3
+ No religion and no statement					
<i>Total population</i>	21.8	11.4	10.4	+5.5	-4.9

Notes: The rates are expressed per 1,000 of the average of the 1961 and 1971 populations.

The proportion of elderly people in the Church of Ireland population suggests that we should take a closer look at the emigration rates because emigration is overwhelmingly a phenomenon of young adulthood. The low emigration rate we drew attention to in Table 2 could in part be due to the low proportion of young adults in the Church of Ireland population. Table 3 summarises the age-specific rates for the main religious groups.

The rates for many of the Protestant groups (especially in the very young and old age groups) are based on very small numbers and may be unduly influenced by unique factors (e.g. the location of a boarding school, the retirement of former emigrants to Ireland). It is clear from this Table that when we concentrate on the age group in which most emigration occurs (15-44) the gap between the Church of Ireland and the Roman Catholic rates is much smaller than suggested by Table 2: instead of being only a third of the Roman Catholic rate, in this age group the Church of Ireland rate is more than half as high as that for the Roman Catholic population.

The very high "in-flow" rate for "others" (including "no statement") is remarkably consistent across age and sex groups, and not confined (as might have been anticipated) to younger people. The very high emigration rate among the Jews, at all ages, is also striking.

The birth rates in Table 2 call for comment. The Roman Catholic rate is over 50 per cent higher than that of the Protestant and Jewish population.² The most

TABLE 3: Age-specific net emigration by religious group, 1961-71 (annual average rate per 1,000 population)

Age	Roman Catholic	Church of Ireland	Presbyterian	Methodist	Jewish	Others (including no statement)
<i>Males</i>						
0-14	+1.0	+2.2	-4.5	+0.3	-14.5	+87.4
15-44	-16.1	-9.6	-24.7	-22.6	-31.6	+128.5
45-64	-2.7	+0.6	-9.6	-9.6	-15.5	+122.6
65+	+0.2	+0.7	-8.1	-7.6	-34.3	+120.7
<i>Females</i>						
0-14	+1.0	+5.8	-3.6	-19.6	-13.9	+89.8
15-44	-15.8	-8.4	-24.2	-20.4	-24.2	+134.7
45-64	-5.1	-0.8	-12.1	-9.7	-20.9	+119.8
65+	+1.4	+1.4	-9.0	-5.7	-15.2	+121.1

+ = net in-flow.

2. Interestingly, the "other" group's birth rate is very similar to the Roman Catholic, and the age structure of the two groups is similar. This suggests that the main in-flow to the "other" group is from Roman Catholics.

obvious reasons for this might be (a) the higher proportion of the Roman Catholic population that is married and of reproductive age, and (b) the larger family size characteristic of the Roman Catholic population. That the first possibility is not relevant may be seen from the fact that in 1971 almost exactly the same proportions of the Roman Catholic and Church of Ireland population were married women of childbearing age: the more favourable age structure of the Roman Catholic population is offset by the lower proportion married (a point to which we return below).

The second possibility (larger families among Roman Catholics) is substantiated by the fertility of marriage data available from the 1961 Census. These data show that the average number of children born per 100 families was 361 for Roman Catholics, 233 for all others—thus the Roman Catholic family size is, on these figures, 55 per cent higher than that of the rest of the population. This is very similar to the differential in birth rates recorded in Table 2.

The net outcome of the low birth rate and the high death rate among the Protestant community is a *negative* "natural increase". This implies that even if there were no emigration from this group, their numbers would decline by 0.36 per cent a year. This is in sharp contrast with the demographic strength of the Roman Catholic population, which, in the absence of emigration, would grow by 1.09 per cent annually.

The Marriage Rate and the Question of "Mixed Marriages"

In my previous paper I drew attention to some statistical evidence on the importance of the phenomenon of mixed marriages. This part of the paper provoked some controversy, including the call for further research. The only fully satisfactory method of measuring the phenomenon is from the relevant records of the ecclesiastical authorities. In this paper I base my findings exclusively on the Census and marriage registration data.

One of the tabulations for marriages published by the Registrar General gives details of the "mode of celebration". This refers to whether the marriage was "celebrated in accordance with the rites and ceremonies" of the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, etc. There is also a figure for the number of "civil marriages" registered. These figures relate, therefore, to the type of marriage ceremony and provide no direct information on the religion of the marriage partners. Each year a table is published converting these marriages to "Rates per 1,000 corresponding population". Invariably, this table shows a significantly higher marriage rate among Roman Catholics than among all others. In Table 4 the marriage rates for all the religious denominations are presented for males and females, 1961 and 1971.

The marriage rate for Roman Catholics of both sexes was higher than the corresponding rates for any other denomination at both dates (the only exception being the Jewish rates for 1961). However, the gap between the Roman Catholic rate and the others was much wider in 1961 than in 1971. The rise in the Protestant marriage rate over the decade was proportionately higher than that in the Roman

TABLE 4: *Marriage rates per 1,000 unmarried population, aged 15 and over, 1961 and 1971*

Form of ceremony	Males		Females	
	1961	1971	1961	1971
Roman Catholic	30.3	44.6	31.1	44.9
Church of Ireland	20.6	36.1	16.6	30.1
Presbyterian	24.6	36.8	25.8	38.3
Methodist	29.1	36.5	21.1	27.2
Jewish	33.2	16.3	36.1	15.0
Other denominations plus civil marriages	16.1	15.8	18.2	17.9

Catholic rate: the former rose by about 70 per cent, compared with under 50 per cent for the latter.

Before basing any conclusions on these figures, some more detailed findings need to be considered. In Table 5 age-specific marriage rates are set out for the three largest denominations and the most important age groups (even restricting the analysis to these categories does not avoid the problem of very small numbers in some numerators—there were fewer than ten Presbyterian brides or grooms in the age group 35–44 in both years). From this Table it is clear that the Roman Catholic rate is higher at virtually every age than the Church of Ireland rate, although the gap narrowed significantly at most ages in 1971. The Presbyterian rate is generally higher than the Church of Ireland rate and in some cases higher than the Roman Catholic rate. Nonetheless, this more detailed picture does not contradict the general impression conveyed by Table 4.

If one group has a consistently higher marriage rate than another, it is to be expected that a higher proportion of that group will be married. The census of population provides the evidence on the proportions married in each religious denomination. This evidence is summarised in Table 6.

The fact that the proportion married at all ages in 1961, and at most ages in 1971, was higher among the Church of Ireland than the Roman Catholic population calls for careful study. Looking at Tables 5 and 6 we may see that this pattern would not have been expected on the basis of the marriage rates recorded there. In 1961, the Roman Catholic marriage rate was consistently higher than that for the Church of Ireland. By 1971, as we noted, the gap had narrowed, but was still there. These marriage rate differentials, persisting over at least a decade, cause us to expect a *lower* proportion married among the Church of Ireland than the Roman Catholic population. But in neither 1961 nor 1971 does the Census confirm this expectation.

What are the possible explanations for this divergence between the two data sources? One possibility is a migration differential between the religions; a person marrying in Ireland and then emigrating would be recorded for the purposes of

TABLE 5: Age-specific marriage rates per 1,000 unmarried population, 1961 and 1971

Age	1961			1971		
	Roman Catholic	Church of Ireland	Presbyterian	Roman Catholic	Church of Ireland	Presbyterian
<i>Males</i>						
15-19	2.2	1.6	—	5.9	2.9	11.6
20-24	50.2	29.3	55.9	96.9	73.2	62.3
25-29	102.2	72.2	98.6	178.9	133.4	156.4
30-34	76.9	60.7	59.3	103.8	70.2	127.7
35-39	51.5	47.9	12.1	49.7	46.9	38.2
40-44	30.4	15.8	12.9	26.8	23.1	7.4
<i>Females</i>						
15-19	10.5	7.0	16.0	20.9	12.4	26.6
20-24	101.3	85.2	103.3	160.6	139.6	149.3
25-29	131.3	92.7	131.4	193.5	187.6	201.6
30-34	82.8	56.9	72.7	99.2	52.5	54.8
35-39	42.2	33.8	25.6	48.6	48.3	114.8
40-44	16.6	16.6	14.9	20.3	21.9	12.7

calculating the marriage rate, but might not appear as a married person at the time of the Census. Fortunately, at the registration of a marriage a question is asked about "intended future permanent residence". Table 7 summarises the answers to this question for 1961 and 1971, by form of marriage ceremony. The striking fact is the relatively high proportion of marriages other than Roman Catholic for which the intended residence is "outside the State". It is also remarkable how consistent the pattern is at both dates: although the proportions intending to emigrate fell among all religions, the relative importance of emigration after marriage remained very similar: Roman Catholics were the least likely to intend emigrating (except for Jews in 1961), Presbyterians the most. The Presbyterian tendency to move to Northern Ireland is probably a reflection of their concentration in border areas. The 20 per cent of Presbyterian marriages with intended future residence in Northern Ireland may well be offset by a similar number of marriages registered in Northern Ireland with intended future residence in the Republic. This type of offsetting flow appears most likely in the case of moves to Northern Ireland. It may be seen that the proportion of Presbyterians intending to reside outside Ireland (32 counties) is actually lower than that for the Church of Ireland.

The point that is most relevant to our discussion of Tables 5 and 6 is that Table 7 does not suggest that we can attribute the discrepancy to the higher emigration of Roman Catholics after marriage: if anything, the non-Roman Catholic marriage rate is overstated because a higher proportion of these brides

TABLE 6: Ever-married as proportion of each age and sex group, by religion, 1961 and 1971

Age	1961						1971					
	Roman Catholic	Church of Ireland	Presbyterian	Methodist	Jewish	Other	Roman Catholic	Church of Ireland	Presbyterian	Methodist	Jewish	Other
<i>Males</i>												
15-19	0.2	0.1	—	—	—	1.2	0.5	0.1	0.2	0.6	—	1.0
20-24	7.6	6.3	4.4	5.2	3.8	8.3	15.4	14.2	8.4	12.4	14.0	18.9
25-29	32.8	33.8	27.1	33.7	45.6	33.6	50.7	50.6	46.5	48.9	64.6	54.4
30-34	50.5	55.1	50.9	66.3	76.0	55.6	67.7	68.9	64.9	70.1	84.2	69.7
35-39	60.9	65.9	58.9	75.5	75.0	67.6	70.9	74.4	68.4	78.3	91.4	72.2
40-44	66.2	69.2	62.4	79.1	76.6	71.0	70.9	76.5	70.7	85.7	82.8	67.4
<i>Females</i>												
15-19	1.1	0.9	2.0	0.4	—	3.9	2.1	2.0	2.8	0.5	7.8	4.1
20-24	21.7	23.7	20.3	29.5	43.4	29.0	30.9	32.5	29.4	32.4	54.7	36.7
25-29	54.6	61.1	60.9	65.0	88.5	56.5	68.7	72.6	70.1	70.0	86.4	69.0
30-34	70.2	74.6	78.4	77.5	92.3	68.3	80.5	84.2	81.3	83.3	94.6	79.0
35-39	76.3	80.0	79.3	82.1	85.8	73.0	82.8	85.5	86.1	85.8	92.9	80.4
40-44	77.9	79.9	79.5	81.1	86.7	73.2	82.1	86.0	84.5	87.3	93.7	80.2

TABLE 7: *Distribution of marriages by intended future permanent residence, 1961 and 1971, by form of ceremony*

	Roman Catholic	Church of Ireland	Presbyterian	Methodist	Jewish	Other	Total marriages
1961							
Republic of Ireland	85.8	72.3	60.9	62.1	88.2	65.9	85.2
Outside the State	14.2	27.7	39.1	37.9	11.8	34.1	14.8
Northern Ireland	1.1	7.5	18.5	13.8	—	2.3	1.4
England and Wales	11.3	15.7	14.1	10.3	5.9	25.0	11.4
Scotland	0.4	0.8	3.3	10.3	—	—	0.5
Europe (remainder)	0.2	1.1	2.2	—	—	2.3	0.2
All other destinations	1.2	2.7	1.1	3.4	5.9	4.5	1.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
1971							
Republic of Ireland	91.1	76.3	64.0	76.7	83.3	86.3	90.5
Outside the State	8.9	23.7	36.0	23.3	16.7	13.7	9.5
Northern Ireland	1.0	6.7	21.6	3.3	—	1.1	12.9
England and Wales	5.8	12.5	9.0	20.0	—	2.7	5.9
Scotland	0.2	0.5	0.9	—	—	1.6	0.2
Europe (remainder)	0.5	0.5	0.9	—	—	2.2	0.5
All other destinations	1.4	3.4	3.6	—	16.7	6.0	1.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

and grooms plan on leaving Ireland after marriage (some of them may, in fact, live outside Ireland and come here specially for the ceremony). To illustrate the importance of this point, we can calculate a "marriage, stay at home" rate by subtracting those cases where the intended future residence was "outside the State". The effect of this adjustment is to widen the gap between Roman Catholic and Church of Ireland marriage rates very considerably (Table 8).

The only remaining possible explanation is that there is a significant number of marriages in which one of the partners is a non-Roman Catholic, but where the ceremony is according to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church. A Protestant bride, for example, who marries in a Roman Catholic ceremony would not show up in the marriage rate statistics, but would be recorded as a married Protestant woman at the Census time (provided, of course, she has not emigrated or changed her religion in the interim).

The evidence of Tables 4 through 8 establishes, fairly conclusively in my opinion, that mixed marriages have been an important phenomenon for the non-Roman Catholic population of the Republic between 1961 and 1971, and probably also at earlier dates. It seems that the Church of Ireland in particular has been seriously affected by this phenomenon.

TABLE 8: *Marriages "stay at home" per 1,000 unmarried population aged 15 and over*

	<i>Roman Catholic Church of Ireland</i>	
	1961	
Males	26.0	14.9
Females	26.7	14.0
	1971	
Males	40.6	27.5
Females	40.9	23.0

Effect of Mixed Marriages on the Birth Rate

In my earlier study I presented similar, although less detailed, evidence on mixed marriages for 1961. On the basis of this evidence, I inferred that this phenomenon had an impact on the Protestant birth rate because the offspring of mixed marriages would tend to be raised as Roman Catholics. I am less convinced now that there is any *statistical* evidence to warrant this inference. Certainly, mixed marriages appear to be very important among members of the Church of Ireland, but we may see from the birth rates presented in Table 2 that the figure for the Church of Ireland is only fractionally below that for Presbyterians, for whom mixed marriages are a much less important phenomenon. The slightly higher birth rate among the Presbyterians compared with the Church of Ireland is fully expected in the light of their slightly higher average family size, as revealed in the Census reports. Thus, we cannot conclude on the basis of the available evidence, that the phenomenon of mixed marriages has had a serious impact on the Church of Ireland birth rate.

Clearly, the whole question of mixed marriages is worthy of further research, perhaps including a sample survey designed to measure (a) the proportion of each group that marries a partner of another religion, (b) the effect of this on the religious affiliation of the children and (c) the extent to which one partner in a mixed marriage is likely to change his or her religion to that of the other partner.

Conclusions

We may summarise our main findings very briefly.

1. The Roman Catholic population, alone among the main religious denominations in the Republic, increased in numbers between 1961 and 1971.
2. The proportion giving "no religion" and "no statement" as a response to the religious enquiry grew from 0.2 per cent in 1961 to 1.9 per cent in 1971.

3. The decline in the numbers of Protestants since 1961 has been due to two main factors:
 - (a) A high death rate—the result of an abnormally aged population as a consequence of long-term population decline.
 - (b) A low birth rate—also due in part to the abnormal age structure, but partly to a relatively small average family size.
4. The emigration rate among members of the Church of Ireland is significantly lower (at all ages) than that among Roman Catholics. It is also lower than that among other Protestant groups, notably the Presbyterians.
5. There is evidence that mixed marriages have been an important factor for the Protestant population over the years 1961–71. The evidence suggests in particular that a significant proportion of Church of Ireland members marry in Roman Catholic ceremonies.

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