

Moments of Peace, Structures of Conflict: Papal Diplomacy and the Limits of Peacebuilding in Cameroon (2009–2026)

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ABSTRACT

Papal visits to Africa have historically transcended their purely religious function, operating instead as instruments of moral diplomacy and soft power within contexts of political fragility and protracted conflict. This article examines the comparative significance of the 2009 visit of Pope Benedict XVI and the 2026 visit of Pope Leo XIV to Cameroon, with particular attention to their implications for peacebuilding within the context of the Anglophone crisis. Using a qualitative comparative approach grounded in the theories of religious diplomacy, soft power, and conflict transformation, the study demonstrates a clear evolution in papal engagement from a normative, preventive orientation in 2009 to a more direct and interventionist posture in 2026. While the 2009 visit emphasized continental reconciliation, justice, and moral renewal, the 2026 visit engaged explicitly with an ongoing conflict environment, including symbolic presence in affected regions and moral critique of governance failures. Empirically, the 2026 visit generated short-term effects, including a temporary ceasefire declared by some separatist actors. However, this de-escalation proved fragile, as routine “ghost town” operations and localized tensions resumed immediately after the visit, underscoring the limited durability of moral intervention in structurally entrenched conflicts. The study argues that although papal visits significantly shape peace narratives and mobilize moral authority, their capacity to produce sustainable peace remains constrained by governance deficits, fragmented conflict structures, and weak institutional mechanisms. By integrating African-centered scholarship and empirical evidence from Cameroon, the article contributes to broader debates on non-state actors in peacebuilding, highlighting the persistent tension between symbolic intervention and structural transformation in postcolonial conflict settings. Then symbolic intervention and institutional transformation in Cameroon’s peace process.

Keywords: papal diplomacy, peacebuilding, Cameroon, Anglophone crisis, soft power

INTRODUCTION

The intersection between religion and politics in Africa has long shaped the contours of governance, legitimacy, and conflict resolution. In many African states, where formal institutions often struggle to command trust and authority, religious actors have emerged as influential agents in mediating tensions, shaping public discourse, and advancing peacebuilding initiatives. Within this context, the Catholic Church one of the most institutionalized and globally connected religious bodies has played a particularly significant role since the early modern period. Indeed, tracing back to the papal states during the Thirty years war, the Vatican was instrumental in shaping early frameworks for diplomatic negotiation. As a neutral arbiter between warring European powers, the papal states pioneered negotiation tactics that would later influence global diplomacy, offering a model of mediation that transcended mere political interest and embraced moral authority leveraging its moral authority and transnational reach to influence socio-political developments across the continent.

Cameroon presents a compelling case for examining the role of religious diplomacy in peacebuilding. Often described as “Africa in miniature” due to its cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity, the country has historically projected an image of relative stability within a turbulent region. However, this narrative has been profoundly disrupted by the protracted Anglophone conflict, which erupted in 2016 following grievances related to marginalization, governance inequities, and cultural identity. The conflict has since evolved into a complex and violent confrontation between state forces and separatist groups, resulting in thousands of deaths, widespread displacement, halted educational and extracurricular activities and deep societal fragmentation.

Against this backdrop, papal visits to Cameroon take on heightened significance. Far from being purely ceremonial or spiritual engagements, such visits operate at the intersection of religion, diplomacy, and politics. The 2009 visit by Pope Benedict XVI occurred during a period of relative national stability and was primarily oriented toward continental themes of reconciliation, justice, and peace. It positioned Cameroon as a symbolic center for African ecclesiastical reflection and underscored the Catholic Church’s commitment to long-term moral transformation across the continent. In contrast, the 2026 visit by Pope Leo XIV unfolds within a markedly different socio-political landscape. Taking place amid an ongoing armed conflict in the Anglophone regions, the visit represents a more direct and urgent form of engagement with issues of violence, governance failure, and humanitarian crisis. The Pope’s decision to visit conflict-affected areas, engage with local actors, and openly critique corruption and injustice signals an evolution in the nature of papal diplomacy from symbolic moral guidance to active intervention in conflict settings. This study draws on contemporaneous documentation and early reports of the April 2026 visit, allowing for an interpretive analysis of its immediate diplomatic and conflict implications

This shift raises critical questions about the role and effectiveness of religious actors in contemporary peacebuilding efforts. To what extent can moral authority influence political behavior in deeply entrenched conflicts? Can symbolic gestures translate into tangible peace outcomes? And how do such interventions interact with existing state structures and grassroots peace initiatives?

This article addresses these questions through a comparative analysis of the 2009 and 2026 papal visits to Cameroon. Drawing on theories of religious diplomacy, soft power, and conflict transformation, as well as insights from African scholars such as Achille Mbembe and Francis Nyamnjoh, the study interrogates the evolving role of papal interventions in shaping peace narratives and influencing conflict dynamics. It argues that while papal visits serve as powerful instruments of symbolic and moral intervention, their impact on sustainable peace is ultimately constrained by structural governance challenges, limited institutional accountability, and the complexity of the Anglophone conflict.

By situating the analysis within both global theoretical frameworks and African-centered perspectives, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the possibilities and limitations of faith-based diplomacy in conflict resolution. In doing so, it highlights the need to move beyond symbolic interventions toward more integrated approaches that bridge moral authority with institutional reform and locally grounded peacebuilding processes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Religion and Peacebuilding in Africa

The role of religion in peacebuilding has attracted sustained scholarly attention, particularly within African contexts where religious institutions often command deeper societal legitimacy than formal state structures. In contrast to Weberian models of bureaucratic authority, many African states operate within hybrid governance

systems where moral legitimacy, communal trust, and spiritual authority often outweigh formal institutional power. Within this setting, religious actors have emerged not merely as complementary agents but, in some cases, as primary intermediaries in conflict resolution processes.

Within the field of peace and conflict studies, John Paul Lederach conceptualizes peacebuilding as a long-term, relational process that prioritizes the transformation of social relationships and the reconstruction of fractured societies (Lederach, 1997). His later work on the “moral imagination” further emphasizes the capacity of culturally embedded actors to reframe conflict through values such as reconciliation, justice, and coexistence (Lederach, 2005). In African contexts where religion is deeply woven into everyday life this framework helps explain why religious leaders often possess both the symbolic capital and social reach necessary to influence peace trajectories at multiple levels of society.

However, religion’s role in peacebuilding is neither inherently benign nor uniformly constructive. R. Scott Appleby’s notion of religion as an “ambivalent force” remains particularly instructive, highlighting its dual capacity to legitimize violence and to foster reconciliation (Appleby, 2000). Across Africa, this ambivalence is evident in cases where religious narratives have been mobilized to reinforce political exclusion, identity polarization, or ethno-religious violence, while simultaneously serving as tools for mediation and social healing. This paradox underscores the necessity of moving beyond essentialist interpretations of religion and toward a more nuanced, context-driven analysis. The Catholic Church occupies a distinctive position within this discourse due to its institutional continuity, hierarchical structure, and transnational diplomatic capacity anchored in the Holy See. Unlike many other religious actors, the Church operates simultaneously as a spiritual authority and a quasi-diplomatic entity with centuries of experience in negotiation and mediation. Its contemporary peacebuilding role is historically grounded in the evolution of papal diplomacy, particularly during the early modern European period. During the Thirty Years’ War, papal envoys functioned as intermediaries among competing powers, contributing albeit within constraints to emerging norms of multilateral negotiation and diplomatic engagement. While the Peace of Westphalia is often framed as the triumph of secular state sovereignty, it simultaneously marked a transition in which religious diplomacy did not disappear but rather adapted, informing subsequent practices of mediation, neutrality, and moral persuasion (Croxtton, 1999; Osiander, 2001).

This historical legacy continues to shape the Church’s engagement in contemporary African conflicts. Through episcopal conferences, pastoral letters, election observation missions, and quiet diplomacy, the Catholic Church has positioned itself as both a moral critic of state excesses and a mediator in moments of political crisis. Its effectiveness is reinforced by an extensive grassroots infrastructure parishes, schools, and civil society networks which enables vertical integration between elite negotiation spaces and local communities. African scholars have further contextualized this phenomenon within the structural realities of postcolonial governance. Kwesi Aning notes that the growing prominence of non-state actors in African security governance reflects both the limitations and the adaptive transformations of the state (Aning, 2013). Similarly, Claude Ake’s critique of the African state as experiencing a crisis of legitimacy characterized by weak institutions, elite capture, and limited public trust helps explain why religious institutions often emerge as alternative centers of authority (Ake, 1996). In such contexts, the Church’s moral legitimacy frequently compensates for the deficits of formal governance structures.

Nevertheless, despite the depth of existing scholarship, important analytical gaps persist. First, much of the literature treats religious actors as homogeneous entities, overlooking internal contestations, doctrinal variations, and differing political alignments within institutions such as the Catholic Church itself. Second, there is a tendency to emphasize the presence of religious actors in peace processes without sufficiently interrogating the effectiveness and measurable impact of their interventions. Symbolic actions such as papal visits, high-level statements, or pastoral advocacy are often assumed to generate political influence, yet empirical assessments of

their concrete outcomes remain limited. In the case of Cameroon, this gap is particularly pronounced. While the Catholic Church has played a visible role in advocating for dialogue and condemning violence in the Anglophone crisis, the extent to which its interventions translate into sustainable conflict transformation remains insufficiently examined. This raises critical questions about the limits of moral authority in contexts of entrenched political resistance and highlights the need for more empirically grounded, context-specific analyses. Ultimately, a more rigorous engagement with both the potentials and constraints of religious peacebuilding is necessary to move the field beyond normative assumptions toward a more critical and evidence-based understanding.

Religious Diplomacy and Soft Power

The concept of religious diplomacy provides a critical analytical lens for understanding papal visits not merely as ceremonial religious engagements, but as strategic interventions situated at the intersection of spirituality and international politics. Rooted in broader theories of soft power, particularly those advanced by Joseph Nye, religious diplomacy refers to the capacity of faith-based actors to shape preferences, frame political discourse, and influence behavior through attraction, moral authority, and symbolic action rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). In this sense, religious diplomacy operates within the intangible yet potent domain of legitimacy, where influence is derived not from material capabilities but from credibility, ethical positioning, and normative appeal. Within this framework, the Catholic Church represents one of the most enduring and institutionalized forms of transnational soft power, operating through the diplomatic and spiritual authority of the Holy See. The Pope, as both a religious leader and a global moral figure, embodies a unique duality: he is simultaneously a shepherd of faith and an actor within international relations. Papal visits, therefore, are not politically neutral events; rather, they function as carefully calibrated diplomatic gestures that seek to engage both state and society. These visits often aim to reinforce ethical norms, draw international attention to crises, and subtly influence political elites while mobilizing public opinion around issues of justice, peace, and human dignity.

Scholars of Vatican diplomacy have long emphasized its quiet yet consequential role in global politics. From mediation efforts in Latin America to its engagement in Eastern Europe during the Cold War, the Church has demonstrated an ability to leverage symbolic authority into tangible political influence. However, as existing scholarship shows, this body of work remains largely Eurocentric, privileging cases where institutional receptivity and political conditions allow moral authority to translate more readily into policy outcomes. Consequently, there is a relative neglect of African contexts, where the structural conditions of governance present a far more complex terrain for the exercise of soft power. In Africa, the application of religious diplomacy is mediated by deeply entrenched political, economic, and historical dynamics that often constrain the effectiveness of moral persuasion. Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics" is particularly instructive in this regard. Mbembe (2001) argues that postcolonial African states frequently exercise power through the capacity to dictate exposure to death, suffering, and precarity, rather than through democratic accountability or social contract. In such contexts, authority is maintained less through legitimacy and more through coercion, patronage, and control of violence. This fundamentally challenges the assumptions underlying soft power theory, which presupposes a level of responsiveness to normative influence.

Accordingly, the effectiveness of religious diplomacy in Africa cannot be assumed but must be critically interrogated. While papal visits may generate symbolic resonance and mobilize civil society, their capacity to alter state behavior remains contingent upon the political will of ruling elites and the broader configuration of power. In highly securitized or authoritarian environments, where leaders are insulated from both domestic and international pressure, moral appeals may have limited immediate impact. At the same time, dismissing religious diplomacy as ineffective would overlook its potential to shape long-term discursive frameworks, empower

grassroots actors, and gradually recalibrate norms of governance. This tension gives rise to a central analytical question: to what extent can religious diplomacy grounded in moral authority and symbolic power translate into concrete political outcomes in contexts where power is exercised through coercion, structural inequality, and limited accountability? Addressing this question requires moving beyond abstract theorization toward context-specific, empirically grounded analysis, particularly in underexplored cases such as Cameroon, where the interaction between religious authority and political power remains both dynamic and contested.

The Anglophone Crisis and the Limits of Peacebuilding

The Anglophone crisis in Cameroon has generated a substantial and growing body of literature, particularly within political science and conflict studies. Foundational analyses by Piet Konings and Francis Nyamnjoh trace the origins of the conflict to deeply rooted historical grievances embedded in the colonial bifurcation of the territory between British and French administrative systems. This dual colonial legacy institutionalized linguistic, legal, and educational asymmetries that persisted into the post-independence period, fostering a sense of marginalization among Anglophone populations (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003). Over time, these structural inequalities were exacerbated by centralized governance and the consolidation of power within a predominantly Francophone political elite, reinforcing perceptions of exclusion and systemic injustice. The escalation of the crisis since 2016 initially triggered by protests from lawyers and teachers has been widely interpreted as a failure of both preventive diplomacy and inclusive governance. Rather than addressing the underlying grievances through dialogue and institutional reform, the state's response has largely been characterized by securitization and military repression. Empirical studies indicate that this approach has not only intensified violence but also eroded trust between citizens and the state, thereby entrenching the conflict dynamics (International Crisis Group, 2017). In parallel, separatist movements within the Anglophone regions have evolved from relatively cohesive protest groups into highly fragmented armed factions, often with competing leadership structures and divergent political objectives. This fragmentation has significantly complicated mediation efforts, as the absence of a unified negotiating counterpart undermines the prospects for coherent dialogue and negotiated settlement.

Within this context, peacebuilding efforts have been both fragmented and inconsistent, reflecting broader structural and political constraints. Various actors including international organizations, civil society groups, and religious institutions have attempted to intervene, yet their impact has remained limited. A central challenge lies in the lack of coordination among these actors, which has resulted in overlapping initiatives and diluted effectiveness. Additionally, political resistance from state authorities has constrained access, restricted dialogue spaces, and limited the implementation of proposed reforms. The absence of sustained engagement mechanisms further exacerbates these challenges, as many interventions remain ad hoc, reactive, and short-term in nature, rather than embedded within a coherent, long-term peacebuilding strategy. Religious actors have played a visible and, at times, influential role in advocating for dialogue and non-violence. Among these, the Catholic Church operating through national episcopal structures and local dioceses has issued pastoral letters, facilitated community-level mediation, and consistently called for inclusive dialogue. Its moral authority and grassroots presence have enabled it to engage both affected communities and political elites, positioning it as a potentially significant intermediary. However, existing literature tends to focus predominantly on localized church initiatives, often overlooking the role of high-level religious diplomacy. In particular, there is limited scholarly engagement with the potential impact of symbolic and diplomatic interventions emanating from the Holy See, including papal visits and Vatican-led diplomatic signaling.

This gap is analytically significant. While local religious actors operate within the immediate conflict environment, high-level interventions possess a different form of influence one that combines global visibility, symbolic authority, and diplomatic leverage. Yet, the extent to which such interventions can meaningfully shape

conflict trajectories in a context like Cameroon remains underexplored. This raises a critical question: do high-level religious diplomatic engagements merely reinforce existing peacebuilding efforts symbolically, or can they exert tangible influence on political decision-making and conflict dynamics?. Addressing this question is essential for advancing both the theoretical understanding of religious peacebuilding and its practical application in complex conflict settings. It also situates the Anglophone crisis not only as a case of state failure and internal fragmentation but as a critical testing ground for the limits and possibilities of religious diplomacy in contemporary Africa.

Gaps in the Literature

Despite the depth and diversity of existing scholarship on religion, peacebuilding, and the Anglophone crisis, several critical gaps remain that limit both theoretical advancement and empirical understanding. To begin, there is a notable absence of comparative analysis across temporal interventions. While individual papal engagements have been discussed in isolation, there is no systematic study comparing the 2009 visit of Pope Benedict XVI with the anticipated 2026 visit of Pope Leo XIV, particularly in relation to shifting conflict dynamics in Cameroon. This omission is significant because it obscures how changing political contexts, conflict intensity, and state responses may shape the reception and impact of high-level religious diplomacy over time. Without a comparative lens, it becomes difficult to assess whether papal interventions evolve in relevance or effectiveness in response to conflict escalation.

Second, papal visits remain under-theorized within the broader literature on peacebuilding and diplomacy. While religion is widely acknowledged as a factor in conflict mediation, papal visits themselves are rarely conceptualized as strategic diplomatic interventions. Instead, they are often treated as symbolic or pastoral events, detached from the analytical frameworks applied to other forms of international engagement. This gap limits the ability to evaluate papal visits in terms of measurable political implications, including their influence on elite behavior, policy discourse, or conflict trajectories. Situating these visits within the framework of religious diplomacy particularly in relation to the diplomatic authority of the Holy See offers an opportunity to bridge this conceptual divide. Third, there exists a persistent disconnect between symbolic and structural understandings of peacebuilding. Much of the literature emphasizes the symbolic contributions of religious actors such as promoting reconciliation, fostering dialogue, and mobilizing moral narratives without sufficiently interrogating their capacity to generate institutional or structural change. In contexts like Cameroon, where power is deeply embedded within centralized political systems and sustained through coercive and patronage-based mechanisms, this gap becomes particularly pronounced. Existing studies rarely examine how symbolic interventions interact with entrenched state power, nor do they critically assess whether such interventions translate into policy reform, governance transformation, or durable conflict resolution.

Taken together, these gaps reveal a broader limitation within the literature: the tendency to acknowledge the presence and moral significance of religious actors without rigorously evaluating their political efficacy. Addressing this limitation requires a more integrated analytical approach that connects symbolism, diplomacy, and structural outcomes within specific conflict contexts.

Positioning This Study

This study seeks to address the identified gaps by advancing a more nuanced and empirically grounded analysis of religious diplomacy in the context of the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon.

First, it adopts a comparative approach by examining the 2009 papal visit of Pope Benedict XVI alongside the 2026 visit of Pope Leo XIV. By situating these two moments within their respective political and conflict

contexts, the study seeks to capture shifts in both the nature of the crisis and the potential role of high-level religious interventions. Beyond Catholic diplomacy, religious peacebuilding in Cameroon also involves Protestant churches, Islamic councils, and ecumenical platforms that have played significant roles in mediation and dialogue initiatives. Institutions such as the Presbyterian Church in Cameroon and the Cameroon Baptist Convention have engaged in grassroots reconciliation efforts, while Muslim leaders in the North-West and Far-North regions have contributed to interfaith dialogue and conflict prevention. However, these actors remain under-examined in relation to high-level diplomatic interventions such as papal visits, creating a gap in comparative religious peacebuilding analysis. This temporal comparison allows for a more dynamic understanding of how religious diplomacy operates under varying structural conditions. Second, the study reconceptualizes papal visits as strategic instruments of religious diplomacy and soft power, rather than purely symbolic or pastoral events. Drawing on theories of soft power and moral authority, it positions these visits as deliberate interventions that seek to influence political narratives, shape public discourse, and engage state actors. In doing so, the study contributes to the theoretical expansion of peacebuilding literature by integrating religious diplomacy into mainstream analyses of international and domestic political engagement. Third, and most importantly, the study critically interrogates the tension between moral authority and political reality. While papal visits may carry significant symbolic weight and attract global attention, their capacity to effect meaningful change is mediated by structural constraints, including state resistance, institutional rigidity, and the fragmented nature of the conflict itself. By examining this tension, the study moves beyond celebratory accounts of religious peacebuilding and instead offers a more balanced assessment of its possibilities and limitations. Ultimately, the central argument advanced in this article is that while papal visits play an important role in shaping peace narratives, legitimizing dialogue, and mobilizing both domestic and international attention, their effectiveness in achieving sustainable peace remains constrained by the structural dynamics of the Cameroonian state and the complexity of the Anglophone conflict. In this sense, religious diplomacy is neither insignificant nor sufficient; rather, it operates within a broader ecosystem of power in which its influence is contingent, negotiated, and often limited.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is anchored in three interrelated theoretical perspectives: religious diplomacy, soft power, and conflict transformation. Taken together, these frameworks provide a multi-layered analytical lens through which papal visits to Cameroon can be understood not merely as religious or ceremonial events, but as strategic interventions operating within a complex political and conflict environment. By integrating these perspectives, the study bridges normative, political, and structural dimensions of peacebuilding.

Religious Diplomacy: Faith as a Political Instrument

Religious diplomacy refers to the deployment of religious authority, transnational networks, and moral legitimacy to influence political processes, mediate conflicts, and promote peace. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is conducted through formal state institutions, religious diplomacy operates through informal channels of influence, including symbolic action, ethical persuasion, and normative framing.

The Catholic Church represents one of the most institutionalized forms of religious diplomacy, anchored in the global authority of the Holy See. Its unique structure enables simultaneous engagement across multiple levels of society, including political elites, civil society actors, and grassroots communities. This multi-scalar reach enhances its capacity to function as both mediator and moral interlocutor in conflict settings. Within this framework, papal visits can be conceptualized as high-level diplomatic interventions in which the Pope acts as both a spiritual leader and a global political actor. The 2009 visit of Pope Benedict XVI and the 2026 visit of

Pope Leo XIV illustrate distinct modalities of religious diplomacy. The former reflects what may be described as normative diplomacy, emphasizing universal principles such as reconciliation, justice, and peace within a broader continental framework. The latter, by contrast, represents a more interventionist form of religious diplomacy, characterized by direct engagement with an ongoing conflict, explicit critique of governance failures, and symbolic gestures aimed at de-escalation. However, the effectiveness of such diplomacy is contingent upon the nature of the political environment in which it operates. As Claude Ake argues, postcolonial African states are often marked by weak institutional accountability and highly centralized power structures (Ake, 1996). In such contexts, the persuasive capacity of religious diplomacy encounters structural limitations, as political authority is not always responsive to moral or normative pressure. This reveals a central tension within religious diplomacy: its reliance on persuasion in environments frequently governed by coercion.

Soft Power and Moral Authority

The concept of soft power, developed by Joseph Nye, provides a complementary framework for understanding how papal visits exert influence without coercion. Soft power refers to the ability to shape the preferences and behavior of others through attraction, legitimacy, and persuasion rather than military or economic force (Nye, 2004). Within this paradigm, influence is derived from credibility, values, and the capacity to frame issues in morally compelling ways. In this context, the Pope embodies a distinct form of moral soft power rooted in spiritual authority, global visibility, and perceived neutrality. Papal visits serve as performative moments in which this soft power is projected onto the international stage. Through speeches, symbolic gestures, and site visits, the Pope can reframe political crises as moral and humanitarian concerns, thereby influencing both domestic and international perceptions. The 2026 visit to Cameroon is particularly illustrative of this dynamic. By engaging directly with conflict-affected regions and publicly addressing issues such as governance failures, inequality, and human suffering, the Pope contributes to the reframing of the Anglophone crisis as not merely a political dispute but a moral crisis requiring urgent attention. In doing so, the visit amplifies global awareness and exerts indirect pressure on political actors. However, the efficacy of soft power is inherently context-dependent. As Achille Mbembe argues in his theory of necropolitics, power in many postcolonial African states is exercised through mechanisms of control, coercion, and the regulation of life and death (Mbembe, 2001). In such environments, moral authority may shape discourse but often struggles to produce concrete policy change. This distinction between discursive influence and material outcomes is central to this study, as it highlights the limits of soft power in structurally constrained political contexts.

Conflict Transformation: Beyond Ceasefire

To evaluate the peacebuilding significance of papal visits, it is necessary to move beyond minimalist conceptions of peace as the absence of violence. The theory of conflict transformation, developed by John Paul Lederach (Lederach, 2014), emphasizes the need for deep structural and relational change in order to achieve sustainable peace (Lederach, 1997). Rather than focusing solely on conflict management or resolution, this approach seeks to address the root causes of conflict, rebuild relationships, and transform unjust social and political systems. Applied to the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon, this framework reveals the multi-dimensional nature of the conflict. The crisis is not simply a matter of security but is rooted in historical grievances, identity politics, and systemic governance inequalities. As such, any meaningful peacebuilding effort must extend beyond short-term de-escalation to include institutional reform, inclusive dialogue, and long-term reconciliation. Within this context, papal visits can contribute to elements of conflict transformation by promoting dialogue, encouraging empathy, and mobilizing grassroots peace initiatives. The temporary ceasefire reportedly observed during the 2026 visit, for instance, may be interpreted as a moment of moral-induced de-escalation. However, from a conflict transformation perspective, such outcomes remain insufficient in the absence of sustained structural change.

Without reforms addressing political exclusion, governance asymmetries, and accountability deficits, these interventions risk remaining symbolic rather than transformative. This underscores a critical limitation: while papal visits may create openings for peace, they do not, in themselves, transform the underlying structures that sustain conflict.

Synthesizing the Framework

By integrating these three perspectives, this study conceptualizes papal visits as multi-dimensional interventions operating across normative, political, and structural domains:

- Religious diplomacy positions papal visits as forms of non-state political engagement rooted in moral authority and transnational legitimacy.
- Soft power explains the mechanisms through which these visits exert influence, particularly through persuasion, symbolic action, and narrative framing.
- Conflict transformation provides a benchmark for evaluating the depth and sustainability of their impact on peace processes.

This integrated framework enables a nuanced analysis that captures both the symbolic significance and the structural limitations of papal interventions.

Analytical Lens of the Study

Drawing on this theoretical synthesis, the study advances the following analytical position:

Papal visits to Cameroon function as high-impact symbolic interventions that shape peace narratives, influence public discourse, and generate moments of de-escalation; however, their capacity to produce sustainable peace remains constrained by structural factors, including centralized political power, limited institutional accountability, and the fragmented nature of the Anglophone conflict. This analytical lens guides the subsequent comparative examination of the 2009 and 2026 papal visits, enabling a critical assessment of their role within Cameroon's broader peacebuilding landscape and contributing to a more grounded understanding of the possibilities and limits of religious diplomacy in contemporary Africa. This lens will guide the subsequent analysis of the 2009 and 2026 visits, enabling a critical assessment of their role within Cameroon's broader peacebuilding landscape.

The 2009 Papal Visit: Context, Content, and Significance

Political and Social Context of Cameroon in 2009

The 2009 visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Cameroon occurred within a national context widely perceived as stable, particularly in comparison to other Central African states experiencing protracted violent conflict at the time. Cameroon was frequently characterized as an "island of peace," a narrative reinforced by its relative avoidance of large-scale civil war and its image as a diplomatically moderate and regionally cooperative state. However, this portrayal of stability obscured deeper structural vulnerabilities embedded within the political system. Rather than reflecting the absence of conflict, Cameroon's stability in 2009 can be more accurately understood as a form of managed equilibrium, sustained through centralized political control, limited political pluralism, and the containment rather than resolution of dissent. This distinction is critical, as it reframes stability not as an endpoint of successful governance but as a potentially fragile condition masking unresolved tensions.

Scholarly analyses by Piet Konings and Francis Nyamnjoh highlight the persistence of structural grievances rooted in Cameroon's bifurcated colonial legacy and post-independence governance trajectory (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003). Key among these were the centralization of political authority within a predominantly Francophone elite, the gradual erosion of Anglophone legal and educational systems, and the marginalization of Anglophone regions in national political and economic life. These dynamics contributed to a growing sense of alienation and political exclusion, even in the absence of overt violence. Equally significant was the issue of weak institutional accountability, which limited avenues for peaceful grievance articulation and redress. In such a context, tensions did not disappear but were instead suppressed or diffused through informal mechanisms, creating what may be described as latent conflict conditions. These conditions are particularly important in retrospect, as they reveal that the apparent calm of 2009 was not indicative of structural peace, but rather of unresolved contradictions within the state.

From this perspective, the 2009 papal visit can be situated at a critical historical juncture: a moment in which the absence of visible conflict coexisted with the presence of deep-seated political and social fractures. The visit thus occurred not in a context of consolidated peace, but within a pre-crisis environment characterized by underlying fragility. This framing is analytically significant, as it allows for a more nuanced assessment of the visit's role not as an intervention in an active conflict, but as an engagement with a system already exhibiting early warning signs of instability.

In this sense, the 2009 visit provides a baseline against which subsequent developments particularly the escalation of the Anglophone crisis after 2016 can be critically evaluated. It raises an important question that informs this study: **to what extent did high-level religious interventions engage with, overlook, or inadvertently reinforce the structural conditions that later culminated in open conflict?**

Objectives and Key Themes of the Visit

The 2009 visit of Pope Benedict XVI was not primarily conceived as a response to a specific national crisis in Cameroon, but rather as a strategic ecclesiastical and diplomatic moment within the broader framework of the Catholic Church's engagement with Africa. Its central objective was the formal presentation of the *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document) for the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, organized under the theme: "The Church in Africa in service to reconciliation, justice, and peace." This thematic orientation is analytically significant. Rather than responding to an immediate conflict, the visit sought to articulate a normative vision for addressing both existing and potential crises across the continent. In this sense, the visit functioned as a pre-emptive moral intervention, grounded in principles that resonate strongly with theories of conflict transformation. Three interrelated themes structured the Pope's engagement:

Reconciliation.

The Pope emphasized reconciliation as a multi-layered process encompassing interpersonal, communal, and political dimensions. This aligns closely with the relational focus of conflict transformation theory, particularly the work of John Paul Lederach, which prioritizes the restoration of broken relationships as the foundation for sustainable peace (Lederach, 1997). However, in the Cameroonian context of 2009, this call remained largely abstract, as it was not explicitly tied to identifiable fault lines such as Anglophone marginalization.

Justice

Justice was framed not merely as a legal construct but as a moral imperative linked to governance, accountability, and human dignity. The Pope's articulation implicitly challenged governance deficits by emphasizing ethical

leadership and responsibility. Yet, the absence of direct engagement with specific institutional failures limited the operationalization of this principle within Cameroon's political context.

Peace as a Moral and Spiritual Value

Peace was presented as both a spiritual condition and a societal necessity, rooted in ethical conduct and collective responsibility. This framing reflects a normative understanding of peace that privileges moral transformation over structural change. While this approach reinforces shared values, it risks underestimating the institutional and political dimensions required for durable peace.

Interfaith Dialogue

The Pope's engagement with Muslim leaders and other religious actors underscored the importance of coexistence and mutual respect within a religiously plural Cameroonian society. This dimension of the visit reflects an awareness of the role of religious diversity in shaping social cohesion, positioning interfaith dialogue as a preventive mechanism against identity-based conflict.

Taken together, these themes reveal that the 2009 visit was less about crisis intervention and more about norm-setting articulating a moral framework intended to guide both political leadership and societal behavior across Africa and Cameroon in particular.

The Visit as Normative Religious Diplomacy

From a theoretical perspective, the 2009 visit can be conceptualized as an exercise in normative religious diplomacy. Unlike interventionist diplomacy, which engages directly with active conflict dynamics, normative religious diplomacy seeks to shape the ethical and conceptual foundations upon which political and social systems operate. Anchored in the authority of the Holy See, the visit aimed to establish moral norms, promote ethical governance, and encourage long-term societal transformation. This approach aligns with the logic of soft power as articulated by Joseph Nye, whereby influence is exercised through attraction, persuasion, and the projection of values rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). In this context, the Pope's message functioned as a form of normative signaling directed at both political elites and the broader population. By emphasizing reconciliation, justice, and peace, the visit sought to shape the moral vocabulary through which governance and conflict would be understood. However, this influence operated primarily at the level of discourse rather than policy. Additionally, the choice of Cameroon as the launch site for the Synod carried symbolic significance. It positioned the country as a representative space for continental reflection on peace and reconciliation, reinforcing its image as a stable and cohesive state. Yet, this symbolic elevation also contributed perhaps inadvertently to the reinforcement of the "island of peace" narrative, thereby obscuring underlying structural tensions.

Impact and Limitations of the 2009 Visit

Symbolic and Discursive Impact

The 2009 visit generated significant symbolic and discursive effects. It reinforced the normative importance of reconciliation and justice, strengthened the public visibility of the Catholic Church, and promoted a narrative of unity and peaceful coexistence. At the discursive level, the visit contributed to shaping conversations around governance, ethics, and social responsibility, both within Cameroon and across the African continent. However, these impacts were largely intangible, operating within the realm of ideas, values, and public discourse rather than concrete institutional change.

Absence of Immediate Political Transformation

Despite its strong moral messaging, the visit did not translate into measurable political outcomes. There were no significant policy reforms, institutional restructuring, or observable shifts in governance practices directly attributable to the visit. This reflects a broader limitation of religious diplomacy: its dependence on voluntary uptake by political actors who may not be responsive to moral persuasion. In line with the theoretical insights of Joseph Nye, soft power is effective only where there is receptivity. In contexts characterized by centralized authority and limited accountability, such receptivity is often constrained, thereby limiting the practical impact of normative interventions.

Missed Preventive Opportunity

From a retrospective standpoint, the 2009 visit can also be interpreted as a missed opportunity for preventive diplomacy. While it articulated general principles of reconciliation and justice, it did not directly engage with the specific structural grievances that would later underpin the Anglophone crisis. Issues such as linguistic marginalization, legal asymmetries, and political exclusion remained unaddressed at a substantive level. This omission is particularly significant when viewed through the lens of Claude Ake's critique of African governance systems, which emphasizes the centrality of structural inequalities and institutional weaknesses in generating conflict (Ake, 1996). Without confronting these foundational issues, normative appeals risk remaining abstract and insufficient for preventing escalation.

Overall, the 2009 papal visit can be understood as a moment of high symbolic significance but limited structural impact. It succeeded in articulating a moral vision for peace but fell short of engaging the specific political and institutional dynamics that would later drive conflict in Cameroon. This duality between normative influence and structural limitation forms a critical baseline for comparison with the more interventionist dynamics of the 2026 visit.

Interpreting the 2009 Visit Through Conflict Transformation

Applying the conflict transformation framework of John Paul Lederach, the 2009 visit of Pope Benedict XVI can be understood as contributing primarily to the normative dimension of peacebuilding. By promoting values of reconciliation, justice, and ethical leadership, the visit encouraged moral reflection among both political elites and the broader population.

However, its impact remained largely confined to the level of discourse. The visit did not engage substantively with the structural drivers of conflict particularly governance asymmetries and institutional weaknesses nor did it significantly address relational grievances within marginalized communities, especially in Anglophone regions. In this sense, the visit articulated a moral vision for peace without advancing the deeper structural and relational transformations required for its realization. In summary, the 2009 visit can be characterized as a pre-conflict moral intervention normative in orientation, symbolic in execution, and continental in scope. It sought to shape ethical discourse around reconciliation, justice, and peace, positioning Cameroon as a reference point for broader African reflection. Yet, its limited engagement with specific national grievances and structural inequalities constrained its preventive potential. The visit reinforced moral principles but did not translate them into political or institutional change. This underscores a central insight of this study: moral diplomacy, while influential at the level of ideas and narratives, remains insufficient in the absence of corresponding structural reform thereby limiting its capacity to prevent the emergence or escalation of conflict.

The 2026 Papal Visit: Conflict Engagement, Political Messaging, and Immediate Impact

The analysis of the 2026 papal visit is grounded in contemporaneous reports, including Vatican press releases, international media coverage, and documented responses from local actors. Given the recency of the event, available evidence remains emergent, and this section offers an early analytical interpretation rather than a definitive empirical assessment. The 2026 visit of Pope Leo XIV to Cameroon marked a profound shift in both context and function (Holy See Press Office, 2026) when compared to the 2009 visit. Unlike the earlier period of relative stability, the 2026 visit occurred within the midst of an active and protracted conflict the Anglophone crisis which, since its escalation in 2016, has transformed Cameroon into a deeply polarized and militarized environment. Rooted in longstanding grievances linked to political marginalization, linguistic identity, and governance asymmetries, the conflict has evolved into a complex confrontation between state forces and fragmented separatist groups seeking independence under the banner of “Ambazonia.” (International Crisis Group, 2025). The humanitarian consequences mass displacement, widespread insecurity and the erosion of state legitimacy have fundamentally altered the political landscape in which any external intervention operates. Within this volatile context, the papal visit was not merely symbolic but inherently political and interventionist. The Pope’s decision to travel to conflict-affected regions, particularly **Bamenda** one of the epicenters of the crisis constituted a deliberate act of recognition (Holy See Press Office, 2026). By physically entering a “**red zone**,” the visit elevated the Anglophone crisis from a domestically contained issue to one of international moral concern. This act can be interpreted as a form of diplomatic signaling, challenging narratives of normalization and drawing global attention to a conflict often underrepresented in international discourse.

Equally significant was the political tone of the Pope’s messaging. Departing from the largely normative language of the 2009 visit, the 2026 intervention was marked by explicit critique and moral directness. The Pope openly condemned corruption, systemic injustice, and governance failures, calling for the dismantling of structures that perpetuate inequality and suffering. At the same time, he denounced violence from all parties, state forces and separatist groups alike while carefully maintaining the Church’s position as a neutral moral mediator. His call for inclusive dialogue implicitly challenged state-centric approaches to conflict resolution, emphasizing the necessity of engaging marginalized voices. Furthermore, his warning against the manipulation of religion in conflict settings underscored the danger of identity-based mobilization, reinforcing the Church’s commitment to peace grounded in coexistence and human dignity. The immediate impact of the visit provides an important illustration of the potential and limits of religious diplomacy. Notably, reports indicate that certain separatist factions declared a temporary ceasefire during the period of the papal presence (International Crisis Group, 2025). From a theoretical standpoint, this reflects the soft power dynamics described by Joseph Nye, whereby moral authority and legitimacy can influence behavior without coercion. However, a closer empirical reading reveals the fragility of this outcome. The ceasefire was neither comprehensive nor sustained: immediately following the Pope’s departure, the conflict environment reverted to its prior state. The routine “ghost town” operations particularly the Monday lockdowns enforced in Anglophone regions resumed, and resistance activities, including public defiance and localized tensions in red zones, continued largely uninterrupted. This suggests that while moral intervention can induce temporary behavioral shifts, it does not necessarily alter the underlying logic of the conflict.

Beyond the ceasefire, the visit appears to have amplified international attention and reframing the crisis as a moral and humanitarian issue rather than merely a security concern. It also energized local religious and civil society actors, reinforcing grassroots peace initiatives and creating a temporary sense of collective momentum toward dialogue. Yet, these gains remained largely within the discursive and symbolic realm. There were no immediate policy reforms, institutional changes, or formal negotiation frameworks established as a direct result of the visit. This outcome highlights a key limitation of religious diplomacy in contexts such as Cameroon. As

Achille Mbembe argues, power in many postcolonial African states operates through entrenched systems of control, coercion, and political insulation (Mbembe, 2001). In such environments, moral authority may be acknowledged but is not necessarily translated into political action. The fragmented nature of the Anglophone conflict further complicates the effectiveness of any single intervention, as the absence of unified leadership among separatist groups undermines the sustainability of negotiated outcomes. From the perspective of conflict transformation, as developed by John Paul Lederach, the 2026 visit can be understood as contributing to short-term de-escalation and symbolic recognition of grievances, while falling short of achieving deeper structural and relational transformation (Lederach, 1997). It created a momentary opening for peace evidenced by the temporary ceasefire but did not produce the institutional reforms, inclusive political dialogue or sustained engagement necessary for long-term conflict resolution. In this sense, the intervention operated more within the domain of conflict management than transformation. Ultimately, the 2026 papal visit represents an evolution in religious diplomacy from the normative, pre-conflict orientation of 2009 to an active, context-specific engagement with an ongoing crisis. It demonstrates that papal interventions can generate immediate, tangible effects, including temporary de-escalation and heightened global awareness. However, it simultaneously exposes the structural constraints that limit their long-term impact. The persistence of violence, the resumption of “ghost town” practices, and the continued fragmentation of conflict actors all point to a critical conclusion: while religious diplomacy can influence moments, it appears to struggle to transform systems. This duality between immediate impact and structural limitation forms the analytical foundation for the comparative assessment that follows, highlighting the evolving yet inherently constrained role of papal diplomacy in contemporary African peacebuilding contexts.

Comparative Analysis: Context, Diplomacy, and the Limits of Influence

A comparative analysis of the 2009 visit of Pope Benedict XVI and the 2026 visit of Pope Leo XIV to Cameroon reveals a fundamental transformation in both context and the nature of papal diplomacy, while simultaneously exposing the enduring structural limits of religious intervention in conflict settings. The most immediate point of divergence lies in the contexts within which the two visits occurred. The 2009 visit took place during a period of relative political stability, when Cameroon was widely perceived as an “island of peace,” despite underlying tensions linked to governance asymmetries and Anglophone marginalization. In contrast, the 2026 visit unfolded in the midst of an active and protracted armed conflict, characterized by widespread violence, displacement, and deep political fragmentation. This shift from latent tension to overt crisis fundamentally shaped the orientation of each visit. While the 2009 intervention adopted a forward-looking and preventive posture emphasizing reconciliation and moral renewal at a continental level the 2026 visit was necessarily reactive, engaging directly with the immediate realities of violence, state fragility, and societal breakdown. From a conflict transformation perspective, this contrast reflects the difference between preventive peacebuilding and reactive conflict intervention, with the latter operating under far more constrained and urgent conditions.

Closely linked to this contextual shift is the evolution of papal diplomacy itself. The 2009 visit can be characterized as an exercise in normative religious diplomacy: broad in scope, principle-based in content, and indirect in its political engagement. It sought to shape ethical frameworks and promote long-term values such as justice, reconciliation, and peace, without directly confronting specific national grievances. By contrast, the 2026 visit represents a more interventionist form of religious diplomacy. Here, the Pope engaged explicitly with the Anglophone crisis, openly critiquing governance failures, condemning violence from all sides, and physically entering conflict zones such as Bamenda. This shift reflects a more assertive and context-driven approach, in which the Pope functions not only as a moral authority but also as an active participant in ongoing peace dynamics. Both visits illustrate the operation of soft power, as conceptualized by Joseph Nye, yet they do so in qualitatively different ways. In 2009, influence remained largely discursive, shaping narratives and promoting

normative ideals without producing immediate behavioral change. In 2026, however, soft power extended into the realm of observable outcomes, most notably the temporary ceasefire declared by some separatist factions during the papal presence. Yet, this apparent success also reveals the limits of such influence: the ceasefire proved fragile and short-lived, with the routine “ghost town” operations resuming immediately after the visit, alongside continued tensions in conflict-affected zones. This underscores a critical insight: while moral authority can momentarily alter behavior, it does not necessarily transform the structural conditions that sustain conflict.

This distinction points to a broader analytical divide between symbolic and structural peacebuilding. Both visits were highly effective at the symbolic level, promoting reconciliation, condemning injustice, and mobilizing both national and international attention. However, neither intervention translated into substantive structural change. There were no significant institutional reforms, policy shifts, or durable mechanisms for conflict resolution. While the 2026 visit moved closer to practical engagement through its direct involvement in the conflict environment, it ultimately remained constrained within the same structural limitations that shaped the 2009 intervention. In both cases, moral appeals were not matched by corresponding political or institutional transformation. Timing further complicates this analysis. The 2009 visit occurred at a moment when preventive engagement might have addressed emerging grievances, particularly in Anglophone regions. Its failure to engage these issues directly can be interpreted, in retrospect, as a missed opportunity for early intervention. The 2026 visit, by contrast, represents a late-stage response to an already escalated conflict, where the scope for structural transformation is significantly reduced. This suggests that the effectiveness of religious diplomacy is not only a function of its content or delivery but also of its temporal positioning: early interventions may offer greater potential for impact, whereas delayed responses tend to be reactive and limited in scope.

Despite these differences, both visits converge in revealing fundamental constraints on the effectiveness of religious diplomacy. First, both interventions were dependent on the willingness of state actors to translate moral appeals into policy action a condition that was largely absent. Second, neither visit was accompanied by institutional mechanisms capable of sustaining or operationalizing its outcomes. Third, the complexity of the conflict environment, particularly in 2026, limited the effectiveness of a single intervention, regardless of its symbolic or moral weight. These constraints align with the broader critique advanced by Achille Mbembe, who emphasizes the resilience and insulation of power structures in postcolonial African states. Taken together, the comparison reveals a clear trajectory in papal diplomacy from moral guidance in 2009 to active conflict engagement in 2026. However, this evolution does not necessarily correspond to increased effectiveness in achieving sustainable peace. While the 2026 visit suggests a greater capacity to influence immediate dynamics, including temporary de-escalation and heightened global awareness, both interventions ultimately remained constrained by the structural realities of the Cameroonian state and the complexity of the Anglophone conflict. The central conclusion that emerges is therefore both nuanced and critical: religious diplomacy, even at its most interventionist, can shape narratives, mobilize attention, and create moments of peace, but it remains limited in its ability to produce lasting transformation in the absence of structural political change. This insight not only reframes the role of papal visits in Cameroon but also contributes to broader debates on the potential and limits of non-state actors in contemporary peacebuilding.

CONCLUSION : POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

This study set out to examine the role of papal visits as instruments of religious diplomacy and peacebuilding through a comparative analysis of the 2009 visit of Pope Benedict XVI and the 2026 visit of Pope Leo XIV to Cameroon. By situating these two interventions within their respective political and conflict contexts, the study has demonstrated that papal visits are not merely symbolic religious events, but strategic engagements that operate at the intersection of moral authority, diplomacy, and conflict dynamics. The findings reveal a clear

evolution in the nature of papal diplomacy. The 2009 visit functioned primarily as a normative intervention, emphasizing reconciliation, justice, and peace within a framework of preventive moral guidance. In contrast, the 2026 visit represented a more direct and interventionist form of engagement, characterized by explicit political messaging, physical presence in conflict zones, and measurable albeit temporary effects such as the declaration of a ceasefire by some separatist factions.

However, this evolution does not translate into a corresponding increase in effectiveness in achieving sustainable peace. While the 2026 visit demonstrated a greater capacity to influence immediate dynamics, including temporary de-escalation and heightened international attention, both interventions ultimately remained constrained by structural realities. The persistence of governance deficits, centralized political authority, and the fragmented nature of the Anglophone conflict significantly limited the capacity of religious diplomacy to produce lasting transformation.

A central contribution of this study is therefore its identification of the tension between symbolic influence and structural change. Papal visits, as expressions of soft power, are highly effective in shaping narratives, mobilizing attention, and reinforcing moral norms. Yet, their impact remains largely confined to the discursive and symbolic realm unless accompanied by institutional mechanisms and political will capable of translating moral appeals into concrete reforms. This reinforces the distinction between conflict management and conflict transformation: while religious diplomacy can facilitate moments of de-escalation, it does not, on its own, address the root causes of conflict. The study also highlights the critical role of timing in determining the effectiveness of religious interventions. The 2009 visit, occurring in a pre-conflict context, represented a missed opportunity for preventive engagement, as it failed to address emerging structural grievances. The 2026 visit, by contrast, illustrates the limitations of late-stage intervention, where the escalation of conflict and fragmentation of actors constrain the scope for meaningful transformation. Together, these cases suggest that religious diplomacy is most effective when it is both early and structurally engaged conditions that were absent in both instances. Beyond the Cameroonian case, these findings contribute to broader debates on the role of non-state actors in peacebuilding. They challenge overly optimistic assumptions about the transformative potential of moral authority, particularly in contexts where power is deeply entrenched and resistant to external influence. At the same time, they caution against dismissing religious diplomacy altogether, instead positioning it as a complementary force one that shapes the normative environment within which political processes unfold, even if it cannot determine their outcomes.

Conclusively, papal visits to Cameroon illustrate both the possibilities and the limits of religious diplomacy in contemporary conflict settings. They demonstrate that while moral authority can create openings for peace, amplify marginalized voices, and influence short-term behavior, it remains insufficient in the absence of structural political change. Future research should therefore focus on how religious diplomacy can be more effectively integrated with institutional reform processes, multi-level governance strategies, and sustained political dialogue. Only through such integration can the gap between moral vision and political reality be meaningfully bridged. From a policy perspective, the findings suggest that religious diplomacy should be more systematically integrated into formal peace architecture in Cameroon. This includes institutionalizing structured dialogue between the Vatican, local episcopal conferences, state authorities, and grassroots peace actors. Additionally, collaboration between religious institutions across Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic traditions should be strengthened to ensure inclusive mediation frameworks. Finally, international actors engaging in Cameroon's peace process should move beyond symbolic visits toward sustained monitoring, follow-up mechanisms, and support for governance reforms that address the structural drivers of the Anglophone conflict. Given the recency of the 2026 visit, further longitudinal research is required to assess its long-term impact on conflict dynamics.

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