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**THE SINS OF OMISSION AND COMMISSION IN
NIGERIAN RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE: DOPAMU'S
HERMENEUTICS AS AN ALTERNATIVE**

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I. Introduction

The absence of religious understanding, sensitivity and sympathy by religious adherents creates enabling suspicion that translates to overt and covert religious brutality and schism. Sincerely, this religious prejudice or unfair preference through omission or commission remotely obstructs national cohesion, stability and development. Thus, religion as a value and tool for peace all over the world overcomes sins of mutual bias, prejudice and acrimony for the purpose of common interest, benefit of human kind, and corporate malfeasance on the one hand and long-lasting peaceful co-existence with no fear of syncretism and compromise on the other hand. In Nigeria, religion rather than promoting peace makes killings and maiming a status. Worthy of note is the fact that the government which perhaps seems neutral in religious matters has been variously blamed by Muslims and Christians for sins of omission and commission respectively. As a rule, the government does not adopt any religion as a state religion as enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Therefore, this sin of aiding and abetting within the government makes Dopamu to note emphatically that the government and some political anarchists as well as agitators should imbibe the spirit of an impartial, neutral and tolerant umpire that never for once aids any religion. He also

reminds the various religious adherents that the basic and adequate knowledge of other belief systems should afford them the opportunity of appreciating and acknowledging those beliefs without syncretism. This certainly would detach individuals from his/her religion so as to be sympathetic and charitable towards other beliefs. Sympathy and charity towards other faiths are necessary spices for wise and fair attitude towards one another. This sprouts peaceful co-existence and harmony. It is in the light of the foregoing that this paper shall therefore attempt to take a critical look at the causes of sins of omission and commission; and the relevance of Dopamu's alternative would be subsequently discussed.

II. Sins of Omission and Commission

Sin is 'an act, thought or way of behaving that goes against the law or teachings of a religion, especially when the person who commits it is aware of this.'¹ In the same vein, sin is also seen as 'the action of breaking a religious or moral law.'²

In another development also, omission connotes 'action of omitting or leaving out something or somebody, i.e. not doing things that should be done.'³ Better still, *Encarta Dictionary* sees it as 'something that has been deliberately or accidentally left out or not done.'⁴ While commission depicts 'the authority or an instruction to do something or a talk given to a person or a group especially an order to produce a particular...piece of work.'⁵ Indeed, it also means 'a group of important officials chosen for a particular responsibility.'⁶ Therefore, sins of omission and commission connote an act of breaking religious law by an agent; a person or group of persons officially instructed to carry out a certain duty or a particular responsibility with the tendency of excluding something or somebody to the detriment of others.

The above meanings and descriptions permeate the position of Muslims and Christians as regards the position of government in religious matters. In the period of religious crises for instance, the faithful of Islam and Christianity blame the government for taking side with one religion at the detriment of the other instead of blaming their enemies. In fact, the Muslims during crises blame the government of the sin of omission because they believe that the government has already declared the Nigerian nation an irreligious society by virtue of her 'secularity'. This points to the fact that the Muslims blame the government for having omitted and cleverly left out something of utmost importance in her constitution. This does not go down well with the Muslims in contemporary Nigeria. In

another development, the Christians during religious violence blame the government for aiding the Muslims against them. They believe that the government has given the Muslims state permission or official recognition to fuel the amber of destruction.

With this understanding, both Muslims and Christians accuse the government of sins of omission and commission. In line with above Kukah writes:

With religious turmoil in Nigeria, the government has always taken the blame. Muslims, as their submissions show, consistently argue that these revolts are the government's sins of omission, while Christians and other Nigerians argue that they are the government's sins of commission. What exactly is the government supposed to do about, for, with religion?

Arising from the above, we must not fail to acknowledge the observation of Kukah, but the fact remains that government is not solely responsible for the various sins. In fact, some political anarchists and social agitators are also responsible for the various sins. By and large, the disquisition has obviously shown that both Muslims and Christians have misinterpreted the position of the government and the constitution. In this regard, the Muslims are wont to understand the position of the constitution as regards the Nigerian state. Perhaps, what we are confronted with here is the problem, meaning and the semantic of the term 'secular' and 'secularism'. On the part of the Nigerian Muslims, these two words mean the same to them. To this end, it will be puerile at this level of scholarship if we cannot understand the position of the government in the constitution vis-a-vis the meaning and difference(s) the two words represent. It is therefore germane to place things in their normal perspectives before apportioning blame to the government of sins of omission and commission.

Contrary to popular thought, the debate about the status of the Nigerian state is not a debate about religion, faith or morals, but it is about the position of the constitution on religion in all its ramifications. Clearly speaking, in the preamble of the Nigerian constitution of all times, Nigeria is regarded as a 'Sovereign nation under God'.⁶ This establishes the fact that Nigeria is a moral and religious nation void of godlessness. Beside, section 10 of 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria prohibits the adoption of a state religion, both at the federal and state levels and thereafter declares, "The government of the federation of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion" This expresses no doubt the fact that Nigerian government

should not favour or promote any particular religious group at the expense of others. This is designed to create a religious harmony. However, some Muslims explain this to mean a 'dubious clause of government not adopting a state religion.'⁹ In retrospect, the position of the government is very explicit in the constitution. As a result, the non-adoption of a state religion makes her a secular state or nation.

The notion of a secular state does not go down well with the theocrats. Nigeria as secular state has always attracted misgiving and a lot of concern as well as religious tension in the country. Gaiya explains that the status of the country as a secular state is meant to avoid the adoption of any one religion as a state religion. It is thus interpreted as referring to Nigeria as an irreligious state.¹⁰ He further stresses, "There is the competition by Muslims to assert that Nigeria is not what the constitution defines. Christians on the other hand understand the constitutional provision for what it stands for, and they seem to be comfortable with it for the sake of peaceful co-existence."¹¹

The term secular as defined by Dopamu means 'a state where no religion is officially imposed on the people or where there is no state religion...and where there is freedom of worship.'¹² This definition is explicit in the sense that the government does not impose on people a state religion and so, there is the freedom of worship and the freedom to change one's belief. Recognizing this does not make theocrats to massage their egos in the popular parlance that Nigeria is a godless and irreligious state.

This truth makes the Christians to see Nigeria as a secular state where no one religion imposes its rules on the citizens. Muslims on the other hand vehemently reject the usage of the term in reference to the country. This is due to the ambiguity or different understanding of the term secular, best still what a secular state stands for.¹³ For the Christians, a secular state is one which no particular religion is officially adopted for the country. Put differently, Nigeria as a pluralistic or multi-religious country should not adopt or recognize any particular religion at the peril of others. From the Muslim perspectives, secular state is worldly and irreligious. To speak of Nigeria as a secular state is the same as the secularization of the country which is conceived as the decline of religion and religious values- a position understood by the Muslims.¹⁴ From the above indications, Muslims and Christians blame the government for the sins of omission and commission.

Understanding the meaning of the term "secular" will help us a great deal to appreciate the meaning of secularism. In the words of Gbonigi

'Secularism as a concept is interpreted as the disengagement of society from religion'.¹⁵ Society no doubt in this context separates itself from the religious understanding which has previously informed it in order to constitute itself as an autonomous reality and consequently to reduce religion to the level of private life. Gaiya sees secularism as meaning conformity with the world.¹⁶ Our understanding therefore of 'secular' and secularism will illuminate the mind of the different meanings in this context. The duo does not mean one and the same. Even the understanding of secularization as the transposition of beliefs and pattern of religious life into the secular life does not portend secular state. Secularism as the Muslims would set out to resist and perhaps ultimately undermine existing religions as an ideology claims to be beyond religion.

To this end, Gaiya extends a note of caution to those who misrepresent facts and issues on the sins of omission and commission as well as 'secular and secularism'. According to him,

When talking of the secular status of Nigeria, the term secularism should be dropped entirely, because it is neither good to Muslims nor Christians. The word is swollen with overtones and implications, especially those with indifference or hostility to religion. This problem has given rise to fundamentalism.¹⁷

Apart from the foregoing reasons, sins of omission and commission are also evident in the government's religious activities. Dopamu supports the fact that the Nigerian government trades with religion. He puts it thus: "Although this is true of Nigeria, we cannot say she does not give official recognition to religion, neither can we say that the government is neutral in religious matters. Indeed, the government of Nigeria is interested in religion as demonstrated."¹⁸

Dopamu buttresses further the establishment of pilgrims boards; building of places of worship in Abuja, the creation of Nigeria inter-religious council, declaration of public holidays, the organization of national prayers, the aversion of religious crises and the official recognition accorded the two religions and the way they are created.¹⁹ He contends that President of Nigeria once declared that government has decided to use religion as a potent weapon of social mobilization.²⁰ Dopamu's submission has certainly justified the government's sins of omission and commission. Tacitly therefore, the government's sins of commission is most evident here because a multi-religious community such as Nigeria is no longer seen as a

secular state. To this end, there is the tendency of the state to deny members of some 'minority' religious communities their entitlements as citizens to exist. This is a clear description of one of the sins of commission that leads to violence in the Nigerian religious experience between Christians and Muslims. In the meantime, the sins of omission if de-regulated and accepted as such would become compulsorily a theocratic state or multi-religious state.

A theocratic state according to Gaiya is a structure which legitimizes violence precisely because it privileges those who belong to the state religion and marginalizes those of other faiths.²¹ In a multi-religious state, if one religion is declared as the official religion, it has a substantial potential to become a source of violence, because it tends to identify itself with the policies of the state. Again, if one of the religions practiced in a multi-religious state, particularly the majority religion, tends to perceive the state as its state then there is also the very possibility of the majority religion becoming an agent of violence.²²

Onaiyekan also expresses the same fear in a permitted multi-religious nation of Nigeria that 'I cannot see how this can be done without being, or appearing to be unfair to some, and even outright unjust to others'.²³ Arising from the above, it is obvious that the sin of omission is committed when official or state religion is not recognized and the sin of commission is thus committed when a theocratic or multi-religious state is accepted. One is therefore compelled to join Kukah to ask 'what exactly is the government supposed to do about, for, with religion?'²⁴ now that she has been variously blamed for the sins of omission and commission by Muslims and Christians respectively.

III. The Causes of the Sins of Omission and Commission

Religion is the heartbeat of the society. Religion is literally life because it does not only give order to a just and peaceful society, but offers meaning to life and relations to human beings. Religion instead of sustaining its genie suddenly collapsed to assume a dangerous trend after the independence till date. There is no gainsaying the fact that Nigeria is a country of diverse cultures, traditions and faiths. But of all the diverse elements, religion has proved to be the most sensitive and the one that has often led to hatred and divisions.²⁵ Dopamu did not mince words when he said that "it is human factors that have turned religions into a two-edged sword – cohesion and division".²⁶ In realistic terms, religion teaches values, peace and co-existence to its adherents and not violence. The fact remains that religion in

its wake did not engage in crises with one another, rather, religion has been mixed up with politics and illegality to unleash terrorism in the society. Kukah supports this when he says that "the reality of course is that what we call religious problem in Nigeria is a product of the contradictions that have produced injustice in Nigeria. We can therefore not discuss the issues of violence in Nigeria as it pertains to religion while not addressing the clear case of injustice in the distribution of resources of our country and the process of power sharing".²⁷

The foregoing reveals that religion does not court problem or the various crises, rather the unresolved injustice, unredressed issues, and marginalization in the name of politics stoke the various uprisings as religion becomes a scapegoat. But, this is true as Dopamu posits,

The question of personal gain, political ambition, selfish ends, egocentricity, power for domination, ethnicity and the question of the perversion of an entirely human and reasonable process, may enter into the enthusiasm one throws in one's propaganda activity. This is fatal for religion since people will be suspicious of its value and intention.²⁸

As far as these problems remain unaddressed and unredressed, religious violence remains the only avenue of expressing these displeasure and discomfort, thereby locking horns in senseless killings and murderous activities.

Gaiya takes the advantage of the mixture of religion and politics to establish that the historicity of bringing together independent nations through the incursion of Islam and Christianity with distinct cultures, religious observances and traditions to form the Nigerian state are in themselves a source of violence.²⁹ The imperial colonizers and missionaries with different nations as background brought together to make up one country inhabited by people with indigenous history and religion. Therefore, it becomes necessary and easy ride to convert them to Christianity in large numbers, void of violence. "But that wasn't the case with Islam which had made its entrance and conversion through violence-Jihad."³⁰

It must be emphasized here that the religious structures or institutions that held the people together into various communities went through a lot of changes and drastic transitional experience. Thus, the advent of Islam and Christianity created this experience. It was an experience that created tension and mutual suspicion among multi-ethnic and religious bodies that

make up the country. Consequently, the Nigerian religious experience all the years has been marked unfortunately by a great deal of violence.³¹ Violence that has claimed thousands of lives and property worth millions of dollars in the almost three decades.

What also caused sins of omission and commission is superiority and absolutism. Apparently, "Christianity and Islam claim to have absolute superiority and exclusive right of attaining God's salvation. In making the claim to the monopoly of religious truth and salvation, they even exclude each other".³² However, Ayandele has rightly noted that "Christians have been more guilty than Islam and African Religion (AR) by being the most articulated in denigrating the others, adopting a negative and therefore unrewarding attitudes towards the other religious communities, religions they little understand unto the day".³³ Truly speaking, this finds expression in their "outside the church, no salvation" "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*". The Muslims on the other hand cannot be spared both because "shirk" unbelief is not associated with them and partner with Allah. There is the clear understanding by the Muslims that the doctrine of the Trinity in Christianity makes it polytheistic religion contrary to its claim which they frown at. Therefore, such claims of superiority and monopoly of salvation subsequently lead to hot debate, ill-feeling and open confrontation, which become frightened and then in the anxiety to strike first before anything is done to them, have done irreparable harm to both parties.

Religious particularity is also one of the causes of the sins of omission and commission. Religious particularity "is the belief that one's religion is THE only religion that is ordained by and acceptable to God to the total exclusion of others".³⁴ Osasona therefore argues that the claim to particularity of a religion is for selfish interest of those promoting the course not for the defence of God.³⁵ This historical particularity promotes open hostility, mutual suspicion, mistrust or fear of surprise attack.

Fanaticism cannot be ignored in this regard. It is a common knowledge that adherents of the different faiths especially Islam and Christianity in Nigeria have absolutely condemned and sought to destroy other religions as a result of their own culture and historical background. This attempt is regarded as fundamentalism and fanaticism which Babs Mala describes as a "naughty child of a difficult mother".³⁶ It is sad to note that from the Nigerian experience, fanaticism has often led to hatred, anarchy, lawlessness, senseless killings and anti-religious activities in the name of religion and in the defence of God. It is certain that there is no parameter or calculus to gauge or measure the best religion.

Evidently, sheer sentiment, passion and emotion attached to religion

make Islam and Christianity to be a prey in the hand of religious fundamentalists and political anarchists bearing in mind the fact that the exclusivist, particularistic, absolute, monopolistic and superior interests can protect only their bigoted position which result in wanton destructions of lives and properties.³⁷ This monster called religious violence started off late 1970 of which Kano has assumed a symbol and norm of religious fundamentalism capable of tearing the nation apart if not curbed.³⁸ Hardly does a year pass by without some zealots unleashing religious mayhem and terror in Kano. Because of this assumed position, Obasanjo comments, "Kano has rapidly acquired a reputation for intolerance, murder, violence and political rascality."³⁹

Close observance of the arson and bestial killings in the name of religion since late 1970 has revealed the level of irreligious activities. They include the Maistatsine disturbance in Kano (1977, 1979, 1980)⁴⁰, Zaria 1981, Maiduguri 1982, Kaduna 1982, Kano 1982, Yola and Gombe 1984.⁴¹ Shaki and Ilorin 1986, Kaduna and Kano 1987, Kaduna 1988, Bauchi 1999, Kaduna 2001, Jos 2001.⁴² Kano and Abuja 2003. Sagamu 1996, Lagos 1999, Owerri 1996, Shagamu 2001, Aba 2001, Wase 2002, Yeldam and Shendam 2002,⁴³ which till date is the most commanding bloodbath in recent times.⁴⁴ Jos 2008, Bauchi 2009. The Boko Haram religious crisis of July 2009 is the most recent one. This latest Boko Haram of 26th July, 2009 means much to the eye. Boko Haram means 'western education is an abomination or a sin.' This crisis started in Bauchi and subsequently extended to Yobe and Borno states.⁴⁵ Eventually, Mohammed Yusuf, the leader of the sect was arrested and killed. In all, 700 people were sent to their unprecedented graves and 230 women and children were kidnapped and rescued in Abuja.⁴⁶

Going by the indices of the various crises, they pick on the mixture of ethnicity and political grievances to interpret such disagreements as the genie of religious violence. However, Dopamu has solutions to these besetting sins of omission and commission.

IV. Dopamu's Alternative

Ade P. Dopamu was a Professor of African and Comparative Religion in the Department of Religions, University of Ilorin, Nigeria. Dopamu has understudied the nature of religions in Nigeria in particular and the globe in general. He also understands the sensitivity of religion to the Nigerian state. No doubt, he uses his religious understanding to postulate the way forward from the various religious crises so far experienced in Nigeria. He combines his genuine critical acumen with his real sense of sympathy and large-

heartedness for other faiths as a result of his African communal background. His descriptive, historical and hermeneutical approach to the study of religions has even earned him 'natural leader' in the understanding of religion.⁴⁷

He advocated a hermeneutical approach to the study of religions. This religious hermeneutic advanced by him depicts a religious interpretation that includes a multifarious approach to religion, which although they may disagree among themselves, are united by a common interest in religions as systems of symbols or kinds of languages which impart meaning that must be interpreted. Sequel to the above, Dopamu employed this hermeneutical approach to understudy the various religions and thus detaches himself from his religion in order to be sympathetic and charitable towards other religions. Sympathy and charity towards other faiths are necessary spices for the scientific study of religions. This scientific and objective approach has consistently helped him in the display of wise and fair attitude towards religions other than his.⁴⁸

In his farewell lecture, he warns sternly that Nigeria should not be called a multi-religious Nigeria as some scholars have advocated. He sees this as portending dangers to Nigerian nation. According to him, the problem with this is that "there is the tendency to officially recognize some religions to the detriment of others."⁴⁹ However, it is in pursuance of multi-religiosity of Nigeria that has caused violence in the name of religion. This tendency alone has caused Muslims and Christians to blame government of sins of omission and commission. To this end, Dopamu advocates that Nigeria should be seen and described as a pluralistic and state. In this sense of secularity, tolerance, peaceful co-existence and harmony can be attained. Nigeria "should not only be seen as a society where different religions are practiced, but also where varieties of a particular religion peacefully co-exist"⁵⁰

Again, Dopamu asserts that culture cannot be divorced from religion. The imported religions of Islam and Christianity actually met African Religion and it accommodates these religions as a result of its worldview. Thus, African worldview includes cultures of tolerance, hospitality, communality, togetherness and we-feelings. Consequently, Dopamu believes that African humanism is not individualistic; rather it is a communal humanism. In this perspective, Africans live, relate, show concern for one another, help one another, protect one another, share common burden and often do things together. This usually explicates their corporate existence and makes them real human beings.

Afrel has maintained a long history of co-operative interaction with Christianity and Islam in Africa. In the face of ever-troublesome and discouraging history of contact between Afrel and the imported religions, Afrel was able to exercise itself in the style of activity for which it has existed from time immemorial.³¹

This is understandable in view of the fact that Africans perhaps Nigerians love sanctity of life, sanity, orderliness and communality, which cater for the total-well-being of the Nigerian people in the society. This same sense of purpose makes Nigerians to embrace Islam and Christianity bearing in mind that all the religions are not exclusive in themselves. It is this goodwill that makes Africans perhaps Nigerians to believe Islam and Christianity are brothers, and sisters, sons and daughters to African Religion hence the embrace. Dopamu therefore expects Islam and Christianity to embrace Afrel on the one hand and their practitioners on the other hand. This will totally remove the sins of omission and commission and not to have the government blamed at all.

It is a known fact that African Religion, Islam and Christianity are central to God, humanity and the society. These religions are channelled towards God, respect humanity and as well protect their society. The practitioners' dignity to God and religion is seen in human kind, with sanity, and orderliness in their environment. Dopamu therefore believes that religious co-existence and tolerance should be the bench-mark for the adherents of all religions. He emphasizes that God in his infinite wisdom would have made or created human beings to look alike, do things the same way, and to practice the same religion, but he did not do so, which means He enjoys varieties.³² He appeals to Acts 10:34ff, "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" as a support. In addition, Dopamu uses the Qu'ran to espouse that Prophet Mohammad (SAW) also knew that the religions of the world before Islam contained great truth about God, and he thus enjoined Muslims to believe not only in Islam but in all other prophets of the books before him,

Say ye, we believe in God, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, and the tribes and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) prophets for the lord; we make no difference between one and another of them; and we bow to God: (Sura 2:136)

According to him, the agreement from the above is that if God had wished the whole universe to worship Him the same way, he would have done so in his infinite wisdom. But He did not do so because He enjoys varieties.³³

He further buttresses that association with cultural practices have also brought interaction. Marriages, naming ceremonies, funeral ceremonies and the likes are attended by Muslims, Christians and Afrelists regardless of the religious beliefs of the celebrant. In other spheres of life, this interaction is also fostered especially in the area of politics, national interests, social interests and others, where religious differences are de-emphasized and ethnic loyalty is given little consideration in nation building, while brotherhood in the family of one God is given the dominant place for the survival of our great country.³⁴

It is not out of place to say that in line with section 10 of 1999 constitution that stipulates that "government of the federation of a state shall not adopt any religion as state religion", the federal government should de-emphasize various interests in religious matters especially the Nigerian inter-religious council (NIREC). Federal Government should stop funding this body and stop interfering in matters religious. First and foremost, the government has erred by not integrating Afrelists in the composition of this body. This makes it one-sided and bias. Dopamu opines that its membership should be revisited in order to address and incorporate representatives of Afrel to its composition.³⁵ Secondly, NIREC should be seen as independent body, free from government's composition and funding. As an independent body, members would be objective in constructing, advising, informing, and implementing its policies, and both the government and the public should be educated and carried along. This will enhance continuity and objectivity. With this, government would be left off the hook, as the Muslims and Christians would blame their common enemies—the political anarchists.

However, the solution of Dopamu may not appeal to religious fanatics because they believe strongly that complete commitment and emotion must be shown to one's religion. Therefore, it is not possible to romance and interact with the infidels. But Dopamu is of the view that religions have transcended the level of monopoly to truth. He demonstrates that there is plurality in the way of salvation. "The universality of religion is greatly in the interest of humanity. . . . I would even propound a theory that your religion will determine the guidelines that will be used by God to take you to heaven".³⁶ Even though, Dopamu was a practising Christian who might not have believed in plurality in the way of salvation, he was simply informed by his intellectual and comparative religious conviction and understanding.

On the basis of this, we should constantly understand religious values of other religions. The religious values of various religions are themes indicative of the modern and post-modern consciousness. This gives credence to the re-emergence of an appreciation not syncretism for things religious. NIREC as an independent body with constant dialogue and feedback would spawn new atmosphere that will inform open-mindedness, a just and peaceful society where no sins of omission and commission will be committed.

V. Conclusions

Having understudied the many sins of omission and commission, we discovered also their many causes, the result of which has been unpalatable and mind boggling considering enormous task of oneness and peace destroyed by incessant religious crises. Dopamu becomes blunt that religion in its ramification does not teach violence, and does not change its spot; rather the faithfuls have turned it to a two-edged sword of cohesion and division, of which the government is said to be responsible. To him, no religion is the best, because there is no parameter to arrive at the best religion. As an African, he strongly avers that the essence of social relations is co-existence. Therefore, he urges individuals to achieve these co-existence and interactions through religion. He cheerfully clamours for plethoric approaches to the worship of God as Africans cherish human diversity in an attempt to live as neighbours from the same source—God with only different religious backgrounds. The validity or reality of the above claim is that there is some truth for us yet to learn that will remove the scale off our eyes.

The realization of the pluralistic nature of Nigerian state as well as the understanding of God of variety will usher in a more cheerful, peaceful, onerous and courteous disposition that would make co-existence, understanding and interaction pleasant and plausible. With this genuine disposition towards openness combined with sympathy and charity, open hostility of long standing and strength of suspicion that often make the government to be at the receiving end will be terminated.

Endnotes

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