

# FORUM LETTER

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## The poison of sin



“[The Advocate, the Holy Spirit] shall convict the world of sin.’ [John 16.8] . . . Apart from the conviction of sin by the Spirit using the word proclaimed by disciples, the world has scarcely a notion of what sin is, its inwardness, its universality, the awfulness of it as a fact affecting man’s whole being and all his relations to God. All these conceptions are especially the product of Christian truth. Without it, what does the world know of the poison of sin? . . . A Christianity which is not based on the conviction of sin is an impotent Christianity, and will be of very little use to [those] who profess it. . . . If I do not feel as the Bible would have me feel, that I am a sinful man, I shall think differently of Jesus Christ and of my need of Him and of what He is to me. Christianity may be to me a system of beautiful ethics, a guide for life, a revelation of much precious truth, but it will not be the redemptive power without which I am lost.”

— Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture* (1894).

## Election year ruminations



Christians, Jesus tells us, are to be “wise as serpents and gentle as doves.” Unfortunately, as we all know, some Christians are neither. This was brought home to me again when a parishioner forwarded an e-mail she had received, originating with Loren and Celeste Davis, “missionaries” of unknown origin (well, unknown to me; their mailing address is in Oklahoma, and they seem to be some kind of crusade evangelists) who work in Kenya. The e-mail was a lengthy rant about Sen. Barack Obama and the danger he poses to America.

This was frightening stuff. According to the Davises, Obama is a Muslim who is part of a *jihad* conspiracy to take over the United States. He is closely related to radicals in Kenya who have been responsible for the murder of thousands — indeed, he talks to their leader, his cousin, on a daily basis. His ultimate goal is to provoke a race war in America. No wonder my parishioner was alarmed.

## Utter looniness

Of course this is all fantasy. This e-mail has earned an examination by Snopes.com, that pursuer of internet rumors and other urban legends, and has been shown to be entirely false. If one had any doubt about the utter looniness of these Davis people, a visit to their website would make it clear. There you can read articles like “A World Government Is Coming,” “The Roman Church Dis-

putes with the Bible,” and “Global Warming Related to Bible Prophecy.” (I did find one title intriguing: “The Purpose-Driven Life Is Unscriptural.” Not intriguing enough to read it, though.) These are people who give the “religious right” a really bad name.

And yet this stuff floats around in cyberspace, and undiscerning people – Christian people – are taken in. After all, it comes from “missionaries.” There must be something to it, don’t you think, pastor?

No doubt there are, or will be, similarly scurrilous tales told about Sen. McCain – though one wonders how they could even approach the destructive venom of this “missionary” e-mail. My point is not which candidate is being demonized.

### Lutheran equilibrium

The issue, it seems to me, is how Christians maintain their equilibrium in the midst of a season of slander. I think our Lutheran heritage has a couple of tools to help.

The first is a healthy dose of two-kingdoms realism. We know God works through both kingdoms, and we know confusing the two is dangerous. That should make us think very hard about how we approach politics, especially in what is likely to be a very lively election year.

A few decades back, in my youthful naïveté, I was utterly convinced God was backing a particular political candidate, and real Christians would surely vote for him. I prayed mightily and passionately for the candidate’s victory. That’s the American way, after all, and nothing new. It was Teddy Roosevelt who crowed “we stand at Armageddon and we battle for the Lord.” What he meant was, “Vote for me.” Of course he lost that election. The world did not end.

My guy also lost, and again the world did not end. I eventually came to realize God’s good and gracious will is done, even without my asking, and my primary concern should be for God’s will to be done in me. It took a while for me to get this.

That’s not to say that I’m no longer passionate about politics; I am. But I’ve come to believe that who gets elected to public office is pretty low on God’s list of concerns. It is certainly low enough that we should not identify our political opinions with the will of God.

### Catechism dynamite

The other tool we Lutherans have is the dynamite contained in the *Small Catechism*. This is something with which I’ve really struggled – especially the explanations to the fourth and eighth commandments. Luther says we are to “respect, obey, love and serve” not just our literal parents, but “others in authority.” In our particular form of government, those “in authority” are often elected officials. We are to “respect, obey, love and serve” them. No exceptions made for partisan differences there. No escape clause concerning someone in authority whom we think is a moral slug or a saber-rattling wacko.

For me, that has meant a resolve to pray for political leaders (whether I agree with them or not). It has meant a deliberate (and certainly not always easy) attempt to mind my tongue. That’s where it hooks into the eighth commandment. In an election year particularly, it’s easy to make cleverly nasty or sarcastic remarks about the opposition – not just easy, but fun. Entertaining, even. Surely Luther doesn’t mean we are to “explain that idiot’s actions in the kindest way” (you fill in the blank with your favorite idiot)?

Ah, but he does mean just that. Luther didn’t always manage it himself, of course. He was perfectly capable of letting fly with some choice invective against this prince or that Zwinglian or Romanist. But it was the old Adam in him, as I’m sure he would have admitted, if pushed.

As I’ve said before, I’m not a fan of the current president. Yet I cringe at some of the things I hear said about him. Sometimes I cringe at the things I hear myself saying. Somehow we think it is safer, less odious, to make outrageously vicious remarks about politicians than about our next door neighbor. I’m not sure Jesus would see the distinction.

Wise as serpents, gentle as doves. We Christians would be well advised, as this campaign proceeds and as it often generates more heat than light, to hold those similes in balance. We ought to be wise enough not to believe the slander that will inevitably be spread about various candidates, and certainly not to spread it ourselves. And we should be gentle enough to speak softly, look for the good in everyone, and cultivate an attitude of respect and honor.

– by Richard O. Johnson, editor

## Ecumenism on the ground

by Ken Kimball



For four of the nearly seven years I served Our Saviour's Lutheran in Ackley, Iowa (1987-1994), I was president of the local ministerial association (the Roman Catholic priest serving as secretary). In addition to our solitary Lutheran and Roman Catholic parishes, there were four Presbyterian congregations (two each of Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and Presbyterian Church in America); one Reformed Church in America and two Christian Reformed congregations; two large United Church of Christ congregations (both originally Evangelical and Reformed); and one United Methodist church.

One day when Father So-and-So was absent, it so happened that the subject of Protestant/Catholic marriages and joint weddings came up—and it swiftly became a springboard to criticize the Mass with its idolatrous belief in “the real presence.”

### Stunned silence

I brought the group to stunned silence when I said, “Well, we Lutherans believe we receive the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion.”

The PCUSA pastor looked appalled: “You believe in the real presence?”

“We do, and I do,” I answered.

“But how can you?” he persisted.

“Because Jesus said ‘This is my body’ and ‘This is my blood,’” I answered. I proceeded to quote the Greek and offered to show it to them in my Nestle-Aland Greek testament. They conceded the textual point but continued to dispute the meaning and interpretation of the literal words.

At this point, a dear and lovely elderly Christian Reformed pastor pulled out his wallet and showed me a picture of him with his wife, children, and grandchildren. “This is my family,” he said. “Well, it's not really my family, but it is a true picture of them.”

“And that's what you think Holy Communion is?” I asked. “A picture or representation of Jesus?”

“Yes,” he answered, and everyone around the table nodded with the exception of the big UCC

country church pastor. With some amusement, he said, “Well, my roots and views go back to Zwingli.”

### On to safer business

I simply reiterated that the Lutheran doctrine of Holy Communion was tied to the actual words of Scripture and that we pointedly rejected symbolic and representational language, as well as any attempt to reduce “real presence” to a “spiritual presence.” And I made the point that the language of the Eucharist is not metaphor or simile or parable, and that *estis* means “is,” a statement of fact or reality, not merely a sign.

The conversation lapsed into silence and then we picked up the safer ministerial business having to do with the food bank and the local school district's “At Risk” program.

These were good friends and colleagues. With the possible exception of the UCC and UMC pastors (who delighted in remaining ambiguous about their theological convictions, though always clear about their social justice convictions), they were staunchly and forthrightly orthodox in terms of their Trinitarianism, Christology, soteriology, moral praxis and teaching.

### No engagement wanted

Nonetheless, that conversation remained clearly in my mind when the *Formula of Agreement* came before the ELCA back in 1996 and 1997. By that time I was in a new call (where I am still serving). My PCUSA and UCC colleagues in this new community didn't really want to engage me in discussion of the *Formula of Agreement*.

Nor did they care to disclose or explain their understanding of Holy Communion, beyond my UCC colleague's statement that his primary and favorite text for understanding Holy Communion was the “Emmaus text” from Luke 24, that “they recognized Jesus in the fellowship of the breaking of the bread.” It was also obvious from my discussions with my PCUSA and UCC colleagues that they had received little or no information regarding this agreement with the ELCA from their denomina-

tional offices.

### A categorical mistake

With all this in mind, I opposed the *Formula of Agreement*, seeing it as far worse than the *Concordat* or *Called to Common Mission*. I still, fifteen years later, regard it as a categorical mistake entered into in haste and (based on my first-hand observations of those with whom we were supposedly entering into “full communion”) utterly lacking in confessional integrity. I have the same fears about our inevitable

full communion agreement with the United Methodists (coming for approval next year).

Such are the views of one ELCA pastor from Iowa, parochial and limited as they may be in comparison with the broad ecumenical understandings of those from more cosmopolitan locales.

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## Book review: *On Christian Hope*



*On Christian Hope* by Pope Benedict XVI (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007). Reviewed by Peter C. Garrison.

While reading a papal encyclical with Lutheran eyes, one may behold such beauty and wonderment that vertigo is the likely result. So it is with *On Christian Hope (Spe Salvi)*, the latest vision offered by Benedict XVI.

*On Christian Hope* is a typical “Benedictine” epistle: scholarly, a bit jumbled, a nod (read “headbutt”) to Luther, a challenge to the present post-modern paganism, and a tacked-on tribute to Mary. Three points will be of special interest to Lutheran readers. The first is a seemingly willful misunderstanding of Luther’s concept of faith and hope. The second is a charming argument for purgatory. The third is a Marian interruption, the boldness of which I have not seen since the wedding in Cana.

### Misunderstanding Luther

Benedict quotes Hebrews 11.1, “Faith is the substance (*hypostasis*) of things hoped for, the proof of things not seen.” He then observes, “To Luther, who was not particularly fond of the *Letter to the Hebrews*, the concept of ‘substance,’ in the context of his view of faith, meant nothing. For this reason he understood the term *hypostasis/substance* not in the objective sense (of a reality present within us), but in the subjective sense, as an expression of an interior attitude, and so, naturally, he also had to understand the term *argumentum* (proof) as a disposition of the subject.”

*Au contraire mon saint frere.* In the *Apology of*

*the Augsburg Confession*, Article IV, the evangelicals note, “Someone may quibble that if it is faith that wishes for what the promise offers, then the dispositions of faith and hope seem to be confused, since it is hope that expects what is promised. To this we answer that these feelings cannot be divided in fact the way they are in idle scholastic speculations.” (Tappert, 155.312)

The evangelicals have clearly stated here — contrary to the Pope’s comment — that hope may well be defined as a subjective feeling, but this hope is a present reality which looks forward to future fulfillment, and such hope cannot be separated from faith which deals with a reality present both now and in the future: God’s salvation in Christ alone. I would venture that the “*hypostasis/substance*” of hope meant everything to the evangelicals through faith which is the present substance of things hoped for.

Benedict then sharpens his dull argument in his next paragraph where, quoting an antique source from 1972, he calls the “Protestant understanding . . . untenable.” Yet Benedict may as well be channeling Luther while stating his Catholic position: “Faith is not merely a personal reaching out towards things to come that are still totally absent; it gives something. It gives us even now something of the reality we are waiting for, and this present reality constitutes for us a ‘proof’ of the things that are still unseen. Faith draws the future into the present, so that it is no longer simply a ‘not yet.’”

Did the reader not just note in the *Apology* above that “faith deals with both future and present things and receives in the present the forgiveness of

sins that the promise offers?" To put a finer point on it: Luther is engaged in this very same argument as he states, "If someone wants a distinction anyway, we say that the object of hope is properly a future event, while faith deals with both future and present things and receives in the present the forgiveness of sins that the promise offers."

*Sola fide* includes hope as its subjective reaction. But hope does not exist without faith first bestowed. To argue otherwise is to ride a 500-year-old hobby horse with a squeak. The Holy Father and Luther (with St. Paul) are making the same argument: *sola fide*.

### An ecstasy of blubbers and smiles

When I visit our family burial ground, I have two emotions infusing me, an ecstasy of blubbers and smiles. Both emotions I can feel independently, and combined: loss and remorse (I wish I had been a better son), and thankfulness for their lives and love.

The Holy Father's reflection on purgatory describes these two emotions — remorse and thankfulness — as he imagines the deceased sinner, standing before the judgment seat, at once pained by shame and comforted by forgiveness with Christ as the sinner's Judge and Savior. Here, I imagine, Benedict is confronting the temptation to cheapen grace as a bestowal of forensic justification regardless of good works.

He begins with Plato expressing "a premonition of just judgment that in many respects remains true and salutary for Christians too." Within the phrase "just judgment," Benedict's effort here is to ask, "What is the use of grace in God's love if there is no justice?" The bad must be punished and the good rewarded.

Benedict mentions the early Jewish idea of "an intermediate state [which] includes the view that these souls are not simply in a sort of temporary custody but, as the parable of the rich man [Luke 16.19-31] illustrates, are already being punished or are experiencing a provisional form of bliss." The next step is that of Western Christianity taking up these concepts into the doctrine of purgatory. Benedict focuses on 1 Corinthians 3: 12-15, which concludes, "If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire."

It is from this sentence in Scripture that Benedict reflects the same emotions of grief, shame, despair and thankful joy which I experience at my parent's graves: "the fire which both burns and saves is Christ himself, the Judge and the Savior. . . . In the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and the sickness of our lives become evident to us, there lies salvation. His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation as through fire. . . . But it is a blessed pain."

In Benedict's teaching on purgatory, our hope is kept alive in the assurance of a final justice in Christ who is both Judge and Savior. It is a grown-up, responsible concept of the hereafter — bracing and comforting with a holy dread. There is no room for, "Well, I guess we're all on a different road to the same God"; no room for, "Thank God I've never done a good work in my life — I'm sure to be saved by grace alone." I personally find a comfort in this "tough love" of Jesus as Judge and Savior. I fear sometimes the ELCA has found false comfort in "erring on the side of grace," to the point of not-so-gracefully sliding down the slippery slope of good intentions towards a sticky antinomianism. Benedict's purgatory would indeed comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable much as did Dante's *Purgatorio*. I would like to believe in it — and I admit I sometimes do.

### Prayers for the dead

Benedict then leaps to the question of intercessory prayer for those in purgatory, by using poetic terms. He asks rhetorically, "How can a third person intervene?" His answer (alluding to John Donne): "When we ask such a question, we should recall that no man is an island, entire of itself. . . . No one lives alone. No one sins alone. No one is saved alone."

Then things devolve into a creatively dreamy *non sequitur*: "In the interconnectedness of Being, my gratitude to the other — my prayer for him — can play a small part in his purification." I understand prayers for the dead — I pray for my friends and relatives in heaven. But I don't think I can help Christ's salvific work for them, purgatory or no.

Benedict does come down to earth again as he concludes, "In this way we further clarify an important element of the Christian concept of hope. Our hope is always essentially also hope for others;

only thus is it truly hope for me too. As Christians we should never limit ourselves to asking: how can I save myself? We should also ask: what can I do in order that others may be saved and that for them, too, the star of hope may rise?" It is charming that His Holiness uses the first-person singular in this last page of his encyclical. He too, is a man of faith, looking "through a glass darkly."

### An ode to Mary

The mention of Mary at this point is as clumsy as Mary's interrupting the wedding party in Cana—a human *faux pas* stumbling into an important Christological point. But this ode to Mary—not unusual in Benedict's writings—is sung in order to focus Roman Catholic piety on one thing: Christian hope in Christ alone.

In this encyclical, there is no appeal directly to Mary for help, intercession or intervention. She is addressed as "our Mother," but as a nurturing mother of faith. I call this significant because Benedict focuses on Christ alone as the basis of our hope and faith. No Marian devotion is heard outright. One may interpret Benedict's address to Mary as a "type" of human endeavor in God's will. Her history

of obedience, trust, love, suffering, sacrifice and faith is held out as an historical example for us to follow. She is among those "people who shine with his light and so guide us along the way." An appeal is made to Mary only with words which may be interpreted as poetic: "teach us . . . show us . . . shine upon us and guide us on our way!"

I think this papal avoidance of classic Marian personal petitions such as "pray for us, intercede for us, save us" is a significant and not-so-subtle change which bodes well for continued ecumenical dialogue with Lutherans who see the Virgin Mother more as type and exemplar than as co-redemptrix or intercessor.

Pope Benedict XVI writes, as he always does, with a sense of scholarly good will, personal good humor and loving intentions for "the bishops, priests, deacons, men and women religious and all the lay faithful on Christian hope." It is his prayer, and that of us Lutherans, that all might find their hope of salvation fulfilled through faith alone in Christ alone.

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## Ex libra forum



Just in time for your midsummer reading, here are some suggestions from your editor's bookshelf. Not a lot of theology here, I'll admit, but hey, it's for summer:

■ *Four Hats in the Ring: The 1912 Election and the Birth of Modern American Politics*, by Lewis L. Gould (University Press of Kansas, 2008). For as long as I can remember, I've made it a point during a presidential election year to read an historical account of some earlier election—just to get a little perspective, you know. The 1912 race is particularly fascinating, and has intriguing parallels to the current year's. Gould's subtitle is no exaggeration; the 1912 election where New Jersey Governor Woodrow Wilson defeated President William Howard Taft, former President Theodore Roosevelt, and Socialist candidate Eugene Debs was a watershed campaign in many ways. Gould clarifies the sometimes arcane issues, sketches the personalities in living color, and

enlightens the process by which Americans elect a president.

■ *Mr. Adams's Last Crusade*, by Joseph Wheelan (Public Affairs, 2008). The recent HBO series sparked a new interest in John Adams, one of the "forgotten" founding fathers. Equally interesting and perhaps even more significant was the second President Adams, who very often gets lost there in between the Virginia dynasty and Andrew Jackson. Wheelan admits Adams' presidency was not really very successful, but his "post-presidency" was a remarkable one indeed (way more impressive than, say, Jimmy Carter's). After his defeat, Adams was elected to the House of Representatives, where he was a tireless opponent of the infamous "gag rule" that kept Congress from dealing with slavery. By Wheelan's lights, JQA was indeed an extraordinary figure. Well worth the read.

■ *“Always Wear Clean Underwear!” and Other Ways Parents Say “I Love You,”* by Marc Gellman (Morrow Junior Books, 1997). This has been a favorite of mine for years now. Gellman takes commonly repeated parental phrases and gives them a deeper meaning. The one in the title, for instance, turns out to be how important it is to be ethical on the inside, where no one can see, as well as on the outside. While not an explicitly “Christian” book, it is very much consonant with Christian values. I’ve used this for children’s sermons, and nearly every time some parent or grandparent has asked for the publication information.

■ *The Known World*, by Edward P. Jones (HarperCollins, 2003). I bought this well-reviewed novel some time ago, but only now got around to it. It is a moving and fascinating story focused on a little-known reality in antebellum America: free blacks who owned slaves, often their own family members. Jones weaves a tale with complex characters, both black and white, and leaves one with a strong sense of the ambiguities of that world that is no more. It’s available as an audiobook, which is how I actually tackled it—a good method because of the sometimes challenging colloquial dialogue.

■ *My Grandfather’s Son: A Memoir*, by Clarence Thomas (HarperCollins, 2007). This book was as controversial as Thomas himself, and it is perhaps inevitable that readers will respond to the justice’s memoir from the context of their own opinion of him. Whatever you think of him as a justice—and however you regard the confirmation controversy with Anita Hill—this is the moving story of a boy who rose from stark poverty and segregation to become one of the most influential people in the United States. If you believe the continuing dialogue about race in contemporary America is an important one, Thomas’s voice is one to which you should listen—not the only one, of course, but one whose perspective is quite different from what we often hear.

■ *Boom! Voices of the Sixties*, by Tom Brokaw (Random House, 2007). This was a Christmas gift from my family, who figured it would resonate with a baby-boomer like myself. It wasn’t quite what I expected, but I enjoyed it nonetheless. Brokaw intersperses his own reflections on the era with interviews of a wide variety of others—not just old hippies and radicals, but a spectrum ranging from Pat Buchanan to Joan Baez. For me it was a fascinating study of the manifold ways an era can shape and be shaped by its youth.

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## Omnium gatherum



**Embarrassing typo** • My son Luke, working this year as a copy editor at the *China Daily* in Beijing, had an embarrassing experience early in his tenure there when he let a typographical error in a headline slip through. They don’t take kindly to this at the *China Daily*, and the next day he found the paper posted on a bulletin board with the error circled in red. They also hit him with a fine, which, all things considered, is better than prison. I’m glad we don’t do that here, especially since the May issue had a front page headline which should have read *Veni, Sancte Spiritus* but somehow came out *Veni, Sancti Spiritus*. I want to know how all my sharp-eyed and well-educated proofreaders missed that one (especially the one married to a Latin teacher), and also thank the sharp-eyed and well-educated reader who pointed

out the error. Maybe we’d better stick to English?

**Catching up** • My Canadian Lutheran friends tell me that the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is some five years behind the ELCA in the march toward the ordination of gays and lesbians in “committed relationships.” Right about on schedule, then, the folks involved in Lutherans Concerned/North America and its various offshoots (and see, it really is “North America,” not just the U.S.) have announced the ordination, set for May 16, of one Lionel Ketola, who has been called to serve a congregation in the Toronto area. Both the synod bishop and the national bishop have said they support the move, but feel constrained to exercise disciplinary procedures against the congregation because what they are doing is not kosher according to pre-

sent rules. We'll see how long that lasts.

**Lutherans Love** • Meanwhile, action on the same-sex marriage front has moved to California, where the Supreme Court has overturned, at least for the time being, a law that restricts marriage to persons of opposite genders. Lutherans Concerned/Los Angeles didn't waste any time. On their website ([www.lutheranslove.com](http://www.lutheranslove.com)) you can find all the latest information about the legal status of same-sex marriage in the state, as well as a list of ELCA parishes whose pastors are willing, even eager, to perform such marriages.

**Faithful giving** • You just never know. A couple weeks ago a very sweet elderly lady in my congregation came up to me after church. "Pastor," said she, "I was cleaning out some drawers this week and I found a letter from you. I've kept it for years—it was so inspiring." She couldn't quite say what it was about, but she said she'd bring it to me. The next week she did so. "I can almost recite it word for word," she said. "It's such a beautiful letter." Come to find out, it was a letter enclosed with a quarterly giving report a few years back—sort of a throwaway thing, you know, that I'd completely forgotten. But maybe if it touched her so deeply, it could be useful to someone else. Feel free to crib it:

I write this on February 2, known as "Groundhog Day." That was also the title of a popular movie a few years back, one that still has quite a following. In the movie, a man keeps reliving the

same day (which happens to be Groundhog Day), over and over. At first it seems like a dreadful sentence, but finally it becomes clear that he is being given another chance to do things right—to treat people with compassion, to live responsibly and generously. He eventually learns how to live—or at least he makes some progress.

If only we had the chance to do things over and over until we do them right! But then perhaps we do. Week by week, we come to church, acknowledging our sins, our failings in the past week, receiving God's mercy, hearing God's Word, welcoming Christ—and then being sent out for another week. It will be different from last week, to be sure; but in many ways, it will be similar, for we will face the same challenges to be compassionate, loving, faithful, generous.

Each Saturday night I sit down and write a check for the offering the next day. It is a repetitious task. I know many people only do it once a month, or even less frequently. For me, that weekly repetition is important because it helps me consider, every week, where my priorities in life lie. It helps me learn to be generous, learn to be faithful. I kind of enjoy writing those checks, truth be told. They represent my resolve to try again to be the person Christ wants me to be.

Thank you for your faithful giving—for what it means for our congregation, for the wider church, and for God's mission in the world; but also for what it means for you, for your own growth in faith and love. Truly God loves a cheerful giver—and that is something that is true day after day.

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