

Welfare, Religion and Gender

in Post-apartheid South Africa

Constructing a South-North dialogue

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Theology and the social welfare practice of the church

Exploring the relationship in the
Paarl context¹

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Introduction

This chapter explores the mutually influential relationship between theology and the practical social welfare engagement of the Christian church to ensure that the ideals of better theological reflection and better practical engagement are met through such interaction.

In seeking to discover the nature of this relationship, several questions may be asked: Is theology a motivator in the churches' involvement in social welfare? Does it have any significant influence on the forms of practical welfare work carried out by churches? And how relevant and congruent are official denominational confessional documents and statements in relation to grassroots theological paradigms?

This chapter, then, explores the possible role and importance of theological motivation in shaping welfare practice and the potentiality of such practice, in turn, to prompt the church's re-visitation of more relevant paradigms of theological engagement. This is done with the context of the Paarl case study in mind and based on an analysis of the interviews with clergy and laity from the various denominations as well as of selected confessional documents.

In the following discussion I will provide an explanation of my methodology, discuss a number of theological themes that could be identified in the light of the interviews undertaken for the Paarl case study and the selected ecclesial documentation and, finally, reflect on the meaning of those (emergent) themes in the light of the current social welfare practice of the churches in Paarl.

¹ This chapter was initially prepared for presentation at the Second Working Conference of the WRIGP project in Paarl, 11-14 March 2008, and was published afterwards in the special issue on "Churches, Welfare and Gender in Context" in *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 133 (March 2009):97-110. Permission was granted to have an adapted version of the article republished in this book.

Methodology from below

In mapping a theological perspective that truly reflects the contextual theological motivators and allows for theological themes to emerge, I felt it best to employ an *inductive* rather than deductive analysis. No theoretical framework is therefore used as, in this methodology, hypotheses are not developed prior to research; instead, an approach or form of analysis is followed whereby concepts, theories or models typically “emerge ... from the bottom up (rather than from the top down)”.² This allows for theological themes to emerge “from below” and be reflected upon within the broader context of poverty and vulnerability in South Africa.³

The findings for this chapter are based on the study of the four mainline denominations – Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA),⁴ Anglican Church of Southern Africa (ACSA) and Roman Catholic Church (RCC) – selected for the WRIGP research in the Paarl area. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with several clergy and lay leaders from each denominational grouping and a total of 28 interviews with individual persons were held.⁵ In addition to using the data from these interviews, selected confessional documentation stemming from these denominational structures was also collected and studied in the light of writing this chapter.⁶ This included the DRC’s confessional statement on Church and Society (Afrikaans: *Kerk en Samelewing*);⁷ the Confession of Belhar of the URC;⁸ the Southern African edition of the Prayer Book of the Anglican Church;⁹ and the RCC’s confessional

² Schurink 1998:282.

³ This is the hermeneutical tool used by the theology of liberation.

⁴ The former Dutch Reformed Mission Church (for coloured people) and the Dutch Reformed Church in Africa (for black people) came together to form the Uniting Reformed Church in the post-apartheid dispensation. They were part of the Dutch Reformed family of churches, which was divided along racial lines during the apartheid era. The Dutch Reformed Mission Church played a significant role in the struggle against apartheid and condemned apartheid as a heresy with a *status confessionis* in 1982. See also Chapter 11 by Johannes Erasmus in this book.

⁵ Erasmus & Mans 2008:10.

⁶ It is impossible to include all official documentation (whether national or international) from the four denominational groupings in this analysis and it was therefore decided to only use and refer to some of the most significant or prominent available documents dealing with poverty and welfare.

⁷ This document was first issued in 1986 as a response to the apartheid state and the DRC’s position in this context, but later revised and reissued in 1990 (see *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk* 1990). Although this document, unlike the Confession of Belhar, is not regarded as having equal standing alongside other reformed confessions, it is regarded as the official policy of the DRC. While Botman (2001:37-38) identifies the document as promoting a “watershed position within the DRC” as it made strong mention of issues such as social injustice and poverty, he comments that it still failed to pronounce apartheid a heresy.

⁸ The Confession of Belhar (1982) emanated from the then Dutch Reformed Mission Church (now the Uniting Reformed Church) in response to the apartheid policy of the day and is viewed by the URC as standing alongside other reformed confessions. The most prominent reference to the subject of poverty and injustice and the church’s response to them in terms of welfare/social development is the fourth article of the confession. The confession provides clear theological motivation for the denomination’s involvement and touches on several themes within article 4 (Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa n.d.).

⁹ Article 38 of the worldwide Anglican communion’s historical 39 articles states that “every man ought, of such things as he possesseth, liberally to give alms to the poor, according to his ability” (sic) (Anglicansonline n.d.). Anglicans find their confessions largely in their liturgy. It is evident, therefore, that the Anglican Church places a marked emphasis on social issues through its liturgy (see Anglican Church of Southern Africa 1989; Mark 2006).

statements *Gaudium et Spes* (“Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World”) and *Populorum Progressio* (“On the Development of Peoples”).¹⁰

In the following discussion the analysis of the interviews and documents focuses in particular on *theological* motivation and its value in engaging the churches in the social welfare sphere. To this end an attempt is made to identify which (emerging) themes are of particular significance in this motivation, including the differences that may exist between the respective church traditions in their theological emphases and the contradictions that these emphases reveal between the national and grassroots levels.

Theological themes

The findings indicate that all denominations, whether through official documentation or interviews, refer to scripture or provide a theological basis in terms of their motivation. In fact, few respondents did not refer to scripture when citing the reasons for church involvement. Accordingly, several theological themes motivating the church’s involvement in social welfare emerged, which are analysed against the background of the socio-historical context of South Africa. Congruencies and differences between national/international statements and documentation and grassroots interviews are also highlighted, wherever they are found to be significant.

The Golden Rule

Love of neighbour is surely the most commonly expressed theme by respondents interviewed across denominational lines and perhaps the best known scriptural allusion with regard to the Christian’s motivation for providing social welfare. Paragraphs 130-138 of the DRC’s document on Church and Society certainly devote significant attention to the issue of love of neighbour and, as this is viewed as flowing from the heart of God, there is a definite call for Christians to love their enemies “despite” their enmity.¹¹ Two DRC respondents also noted love of neighbour in particular, as did URC respondents.¹² Anglican respondents likewise stressed the importance of love of neighbour. This is reflected in comments such as “the main commandment is ‘Love one another as you love yourself’”. Love of neighbour is viewed as a calling or an expected part of being a Christian, based on a biblical imperative which must move the Christian to social action.¹³ Although Catholic social teaching expounds an ethic of sharing based on neighbourly love,¹⁴ none of the respondents from this church appeared to delve deeply into what this would entail.

¹⁰ The Catholic Church polity employs a hierarchical model of governance, which results in confessional statements and encyclicals regarding welfare and social development emanating largely from the Vatican. In this way confessional statements are largely centralised. The documentation employed stems largely from the second Vatican Council. Vatican II was a worldwide council convoked by Pope John XXIII in 1962 as a response to the challenges posed by modern society and had a “wide-ranging agenda” covering various themes. Stransky comments that “(w)ithout taking account of the debates and resolutions of Vatican II, it is impossible to understand the modern RCC” (Stransky 2002:1189).

¹¹ Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1990:19-21.

¹² URDR 2007.

¹³ URDR 2007.

¹⁴ Flannery 1975.

So what does love of neighbour, of the “other”, mean for the church in South Africa? In a South African context the “other” may be identified in terms of race, socio-economic status or both. The apartheid system generated fear of the other, leading to regarding the other as either lesser or greater in value than its own group. Love of neighbour in this context means finding and reconciling with the poor neighbour whom one might seek to assist. In a post-apartheid context of legalised affirmative action and lingering racial divisions in denominations, the agenda of reconciliation, which clearly has both political and economic dimensions, once again raises the complexities of neighbourliness. De Gruchy notes that “bridging the gap between the Christian vision of reconciliation and the realities that confront South Africans on the social and political stage ... is a challenge facing the Christian Church as God’s agent of reconciliation. This challenge takes us beyond discourse and speech to agency and embodiment”.¹⁵ It requires being *with* the poor in their context, not merely being “for” the poor. It requires stepping across boundaries of class and/or race. Love of neighbour, therefore, calls for more than *charity*, which is what many of the respondents are probably referring to when they talk about welfare.

Following Christ – an incarnational model

Jesus’ teachings and person are at the centre of most respondents’ motivations. This entails the conviction that to follow Christ or stand with Christ demands a concern for the poor and needy. Matthew 25 is mentioned in particular by most respondents and documents as an example of what Christ expects from the Christian in serving the poor. As Christ stood in solidarity with and cared for the poor and destitute, so too must his followers. As one respondent explained, “I think we as Christians, if we want to call ourselves Christians, that’s where Jesus found himself in his ministry: caring for the poor, the outcast, the disadvantaged, the people with no voice.”¹⁶ Several URC respondents in turn stressed the importance of following the example of Christ because the Bible mentions that wherever he went “he showed compassion”. Accordingly, the church should “play the role that Jesus played in the same way that makes *that* the standard of Jesus”.¹⁷

The second related theme perhaps goes deeper with regard to theological implications in that the “following of Christ” is defined by identification. This may be termed an *incarnational* approach,¹⁸ which challenges the church, in the way of Christ, to “shift in orientation from the condescension of distance to an assistance of the needy by becoming one with them”.¹⁹ Identification with the poor proposes an approach to the church’s social welfare that is “with” rather than “for” the poor and demands a “kenotic” self-emptying of those involved in welfare.²⁰ Catholic social teaching, for example, places a clear emphasis on the need for the church to express the incarnational and “kenotic” nature of Christ in

¹⁵ De Gruchy 2002.

¹⁶ URDR 2007.

¹⁷ URDR 2007.

¹⁸ Billings 2004:187.

¹⁹ Billings 2004:188.

²⁰ Richard 1997:179-194.

service to humanity.²¹ But although this theme is perhaps most prominently embodied by the Catholic Church, the interviews and documentation studied also indicate an identification of this theme by the other denominations.

Diakonia

Diakonia, translated from the Greek as “service”, is identified by several theologians as being part of the central task of the church witnessing to God’s intention for the world – to be reconciled with him, each other, themselves and all creation.²² The kerygmatic proclamation element has often been predominant in the history of the church. Relegated for too long to the margins of church life, the model of the New Testament church with regard to service to society has once again been emphasised by the church. And it is in this regard that compassionate service to the poor and the marginalised is identified by both the DRC respondents and its document as the church’s “task and calling” and therefore as integral to the church’s mission.²³ Christians are called to service (*diakonia*) in the way of Christ by moving beyond their own “comfort zones” and in that way also build bridges between them and their neighbours.²⁴

The interviewees from the Catholic Church also emphasised “service” as an ethos, which is evidenced by the range of its social involvement in Mbekweni.²⁵ Despite the DRC devoting attention in its documentation to issues of social justice, service still appears to be the key theme, which is echoed in the interviews.²⁶ Perhaps one could infer that the DRC appears to emphasise what may be viewed as a less politicised mode of identification of their role than those chosen by the URC or Anglican Church, both of whose motivations are shaped by motifs from the theology of liberation.

Sharing and redistribution

The *ethic of sharing and redistribution* has both deep theological and socio-historical significance for the South African context. In a post-apartheid context South Africa’s inequality ratio remains one of the highest in the world, with income distribution still largely skewed along racial lines.²⁷ It is not insignificant, therefore, that “sharing” is mentioned by the DRC, URC, Anglican and Catholic Church. It is interesting to note that the DRC document identifies “privileged Christians” in particular as needing to reach out to those in physical need,²⁸ but that the DRC respondents interviewed make no mention of economic sharing. Both the URC and Anglican Church documentation frame sharing

²¹ Flannery 1975:931.

²² Aarflot 1988:93.

²³ URDR 2007.

²⁴ This may be an indirect call for DRC members to reach out to those of other race groups, many of whom, by virtue of apartheid policies, were amongst the poor and needy (Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1990:29, paragraphs 154-156).

²⁵ Erasmus & Mans 2008:32; URDR 2007.

²⁶ URDR 2007.

²⁷ Adalzadeh 2003:72.

²⁸ Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk 1990:21, paragraph 138.

and redistribution within a social justice discourse and respondents also echo the view that sharing is at the heart of Christian social action.²⁹ One URC respondent notes:

If I think of it from the Bible's perspective, then even if you have how little, you must also be able to give. This is not just about what you can give to the church people, you must also give to the community.³⁰

Anglican prayers for the oppressed and unemployed focus largely on issues of equity through social justice; the Anglican Prayer Book states that "everyone ... may receive a due share in the riches of this land" and "may all find employment and receive just payment for their labour".³¹ The sharing of possessions or "riches" by the wealthy with the poor is also noted by both the Catholic respondents and in the documentation. The Catholic response is not surprising in the light of the Catholic Church's history of work and identification with the poor through its monastic orders and its espousal of an incarnational motivation.³²

An ethic of sharing and redistribution must be based on an understanding of biblical justice that addresses unjust structural relationships and power dynamics.³³ Sider notes that, although there is no simplistic inference to be drawn from biblical examples of equality, the "biblical social vision" demands equality before the Mosaic Law. This furthermore implies sharing with, and even restitution for, those who are oppressed.³⁴

God of the poor

Similar to the theology of liberation,³⁵ the preferential "option for the poor" is clearly espoused by the Confession of Belhar.³⁶ The focus in this confession is clearly solidarity with the poor, which is again linked with the issue of injustice. This is not surprising with regard to a confession that must be read against the background of socio-economic inequality brought about by the apartheid system and the theological responses of the time in the country. The church is firstly identified with Christ and is therefore required to stand in solidarity with the "destitute, poor and wronged".³⁷ Botman comments that this means that "the Church is called, in these actions, to follow God, standing by people in any form of suffering and need, which means, among other things, that the church shall witness and strive against any form of injustice".³⁸ The church as God's representative is called to stand with the poor against injustice, which is the root cause of poverty. There

²⁹ URDR 2007; Anglican Church of Southern Africa 1989:88; Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa n.d.

³⁰ URDR 2007.

³¹ Anglican Church of Southern Africa 1989:88.

³² Flannery 1975:23; URDR 2007.

³³ Bragg 1987.

³⁴ Sider 1989:168.

³⁵ See Christian 2002:47; Gutierrez 1996:146.

³⁶ Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa n.d.

³⁷ Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa n.d.

³⁸ Botman 2001:39.

is an ecclesiological dimension found here that specifically locates the church as God's agent of societal care and transformation.

Although the URC's Belhar Confession clearly espouses this view, it is not evident in any of the interviews with the representatives of this church that the theme of the preferential option for the poor remains an explicit theological motivator. However, both Anglican respondents and documentation appear to refer to this theme. Matthew 25 is alluded to and the "least of these" are identified as the "beggars" in their own community who need to be treated as if they were Christ himself. The church is to care for those who are suffering and view itself as part of the community or "with the community".³⁹ In the words of one of the respondents:

[O]ne can never fully be human unless you are able to look beyond yourself, and start caring for the people in that world. So you're not really your own little island by yourself, but you live in a world of needs and problems.⁴⁰

It is surely significant that the only two denominations that make mention of this particular theme, the URC and the Anglican Church, both have church leaders who were significantly involved in opposing apartheid and promoting a theology of liberation.

Imago Dei

Myers notes that the "identity of the poor is marred on the inside" by the powerlessness and vulnerability that they often experience,⁴¹ while Christian notes that "identity becomes the cause and target of all poverty-creating efforts and relationships".⁴² Poverty, and the powerlessness it engenders, often translates into an attack on the human dignity and the self-image of the poor, the vulnerable and the oppressed. Yet, only the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church identify this as a significant theological theme.

Catholic social teaching addresses the issue of vocation and, therefore, that of the *Imago Dei*: "In the design of God every man (sic) is called upon to develop and fulfil himself, for every life is a vocation."⁴³ In turn one Anglican respondent viewed spirituality as the antidote to the hopelessness experienced by communities and referred to the importance of the idea of the *Imago Dei*. According to this respondent, the fact that we are all made in the image of God and are "sons and daughters of God" affirms our worth, no matter who we are, in the face of oppression, marginalisation and the other devastating assaults of poverty on our "humanness".⁴⁴ Accordingly, when human beings begin to understand that they are made in the image of God and are of worth and gifted with creative agency, they have a restored sense of self-esteem and vocation.

³⁹ Anglican Church of Southern Africa 1989; URDR 2007.

⁴⁰ URDR 2007.

⁴¹ Myers 2004:84.

⁴² Christian 2002:139.

⁴³ Flannery 1975:12-14.

⁴⁴ URDR 2007.

This theological theme may also have particular significance in relation to the issue of gender, as it affirms the dignity of women and the equality of women and men in terms of status before God.

The theological themes in relation to current church welfare practice

It should be emphasised that there can be no analysis of theological motivation with regard to the church's current involvement in social welfare at local or national level without reference to South Africa's apartheid past and the consequent lingering effects in terms of the church's discourse and practices with regard to poverty. Economic inequality remains skewed along racial lines and therefore the identification of redistribution and sharing across socio-economic and racial divides remains a challenge for the churches in today's context.

White, black and coloured neighbours in areas such as Paarl remain fairly isolated both geographically and socio-economically. Although some congregations are partners with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in welfare, most church leaders interviewed also appear to have only a few partnership initiatives with other churches.⁴⁵ The partnership of the URC and DRC in the creation of a joint NGO (BADISA) to address social needs together is a positive symbol in recognition of this. However, it appears that this partnership initiative is not evident on a local congregational level in Paarl, particularly not across denominational lines.⁴⁶

It follows that the "twinning" or partnering of wealthier congregations with poorer congregations in an area such as Paarl could greatly contribute towards enabling the aforementioned theological themes to be realised in practice. An inter-congregational model could be useful in some wealthier local congregations, where there may be a pool of voluntary professional expertise from which poorer congregations can draw for technical services.⁴⁷ Of course, such models also raise issues of power and paternalism. How such relationships will be defined and created by the churches in an area such as Paarl will be interesting to observe, if they should seek to implement such an initiative.

"Love of neighbour" remains a pertinent theme when read in the context of the socio-economic restoration and reconciliation that still needs to take place in South Africa. However, if this theological theme is merely used as the "simplest" or "easiest" scriptural reference to theological motivation in social welfare, it loses its potency and may simply mean (as previously implied) *charity* or *philanthropy* of a kind that may create dependence.⁴⁸ This is perhaps evidenced by the fact that the majority of welfare

⁴⁵ Some congregations partner with other congregations within their denomination, but seldom cooperate outside of this kind of relationship (Erasmus & Mans 2008:47).

⁴⁶ BADISA is a registered non-profit organisation formed by merging the diaconal work of the URC and DRC in the Western Cape.

⁴⁷ In this way, within an understanding of the church as the Body of Christ and the strategic and theological motivation for harnessing local congregations in particular, cross-pollination of skills and capacity building could also occur between local congregations (see Dudley 1996:95; Hammett 2000:204-205).

⁴⁸ Although well meant, this approach may often lead to paternalism, "where things are done for the people and not with them and which thus presupposes inequality". Often richer suburban congregations prefer to donate money and emergency food rather than become involved in holistic development that empowers the poor, as they "draw their sense of self-worth from the dependency of the needy upon them" (Jacobsen 2001:42).

work done by congregations in Paarl is largely relief work.⁴⁹ Soup kitchens, food parcels and the distribution of food and clothing – these actions might all be relevant in their contexts, but they *still* focus more on the symptoms than the causes of poverty and other social problems.

A closer study of the report emanating from the Paarl case study⁵⁰ suggests that the theological theme of “God of the poor” does not appear to be appreciated by current church leadership within any of the interviews. This raises the question as to the continued relevance of a liberationist theology in a post-apartheid context. Accordingly, the fact that one of the only themes with a strong social justice impetus (which is closely linked to the role of the church in public debate) may not have been significantly addressed is interesting in the light of all respondents’ belief that the church should be involved in public debate, but appears to be silent on such issues.⁵¹

During the apartheid period many churches were involved in the struggle against the injustices of apartheid, but now they tend by and large to remain silent. This may indicate either the effect that a changing context can have on confessional relevance, or the need for new theological themes that give motivation and support to actions for social justice.

When considering the findings of the Paarl case study report with regard to the involvement of the various denominations in social welfare, it is clear that, with the exception of the URC, the other denominations in Paarl have largely “professionalised” their social welfare ministries. Both the Catholic Church and DRC’s welfare work is predominantly done by their institutions (orphanages, community centres, old age homes), rather than by the local congregations. On the other hand, the report suggests that many local congregants act as individual volunteers, but that congregations as a whole are less active.⁵² This may suggest that social service (*diakonia*) is not recognised in most cases as a central (missional) task of the congregation.

I would also like to argue that the themes of “*Imago Dei*” and “following of Christ” are not sufficiently developed by the churches in their welfare involvement. Emphasising that people are made in the image of God and have worth as human beings is the basis (at least from a Christian faith perspective) for transformed identity and living. This is a key message that local congregations, as religious communities, can proclaim. The aforementioned report notes that welfare providers feel the key role that the church can play is promoting sound moral values.⁵³ Programmes for the vulnerable in society (such as women, youth, farm workers, HIV and Aids sufferers) that are based on an affirmation of human dignity and stem from a *theological* understanding that all humans are made in the image of God, are one of the ways this may be actualised.

⁴⁹ Erasmus & Mans 2008:35; see also Chapters 10 (Green), 13 (Gouws) and 14 (Swart) in this book.

⁵⁰ Erasmus & Mans 2008.

⁵¹ Erasmus & Mans 2008:37-38.

⁵² Erasmus & Mans 2008:23-33.

⁵³ Erasmus & Mans 2008:56.

According to the report, there is clearly a need for family education programmes that will teach good parenting and promote such values.⁵⁴ Furthermore, the report suggests that educational programmes which empower vulnerable groups through identity affirmation and practical support, such as life skills programmes for youths, advocacy/support for exploited farm workers and support for abused women,⁵⁵ are particular avenues that could be explored by the church sector in Paarl.

The incarnational model, as identified above, is significant when one considers that it is in some ways congruent with the popularised notion of the “people first” approach in the field of development.⁵⁶ The poor and vulnerable feel powerless and are often further disempowered by welfare strategies that do not include them and work for them rather than with them. In the context of endemic poverty and HIV and Aids this is surely one of the profoundest models for the church in caring and coming alongside those infected and affected. Not least, an *incarnational ethic* of social service also goes hand in hand with a feminist ethic of care as emphasised by Amanda Gouws in this book, albeit with different emphases on empowerment and gender consciousness.⁵⁷

Conclusion

So what is the nature of the relationship between theology and the social welfare practice of the church, in the local town of Paarl but also more broadly speaking? Are they mutually supportive or exclusive of each other? At times it appears as if they merely exist and function side by side. Official confessional statements and policies are often far removed from grassroots theological motivation (as in the case of the Confession of Belhar) and yet often relevant to the present context (as in the case of much of Catholic social teaching). Still, as has been argued, theology has a significant impact on the *way* the church engages with poverty and vulnerable groups both for better and for worse. In terms of the possibility of influencing and supporting each other, the social welfare practice of the church has the potential to become more effective as it engages *with* theologies that challenge the church to be more *incarnational* and address issues of self-worth and vocation; and in turn the same practice may challenge biblical and theological motivation that hinders the church in exercising the kind of engagement that moves beyond charity and the boundaries of its own community or congregation.

It has been noted by the Paarl case study report that many of the respondents interviewed believe the church is already operating at grassroots level and is in touch with the needs on the ground, although there are also those who appear to mistrust the church or have less confidence in it.⁵⁸ While this may be so, and whatever the dynamic, it is clear

⁵⁴ Erasmus & Mans 2008:37, 57.

⁵⁵ Erasmus & Mans 2008:37.

⁵⁶ In this approach people and not programmes are the focus of development, and the principle of self-reliance is highly valued. See Burkey (1993:27-29) for a discussion of the “people first” approach.

⁵⁷ See Chapters 4 and 13.

⁵⁸ Erasmus & Mans 2008:32-61.

above all that the church's involvement with social welfare – in Paarl and elsewhere – should be shaped by humility and incarnational service.

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