

# **(Practical) Theology: A Story of Doubt and Imagination**

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## 1. Introduction:

One day I had to take my car to the garage for a service and was driven back in a courtesy car. With me in the car was another client. Both of us were taken to our workplaces. I was to be dropped first at the main gate of the University of Pretoria. When arriving at the gate of the University, the other person in the car asked me whether I was a lecturer? And then he wanted to know in which field. When I told him that I am in theology, he said to me: “And how are you doing with the God-problem?” I asked him what he meant and then he said: “The problem of how God is involved in the issues of this life”, At that point I had to get out of the car and that was the end of the conversation. But it gave me something to think about. What are we doing in Theology? Are we working on what he called the, “God-problem”, if not then what are we working on?

The God question is returning today with a new sense of urgency. One hears much talk about the “return of the religious” in contemporary world politics. Debates on the relations between the secular and the sacred are prevalent and arresting. Many speak of a “religious turn” in continental philosophy or, contrariwise, of an “antireligious turn” in a new wave of critical secularism (Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens). Vital disputes about theism and atheism have not disappeared as some expected

resulting from the Enlightenment and subsequent declarations of the death of God by Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud. The God question keeps returning again and again, compelling us to ask what we mean when we speak of God (cf Richard Kearney)?

The question is: How do we engage with these God questions?

The traditional position for a theologian is to take a knowledgeable position. As the word theologian suggests, we have knowledge of God (*Theos* and *logos*) and therefore are supposed to give God-answers. We have after all a Gods-eye view of the world.

But the world is changing and we are changing with it. Theology is changing and has been changing through the ages. As theologians, we are much more reluctant to give easy answers to life-questions. In order to identify and understand these changes we need to look at our current theological interpretation in the light of the historical development.

## 2. Where we are and where we come from?

The developments of western theology can only be understood in the light of and as part and parcel of cultural-philosophic developments in the West. In order to provide a quick overview of the paradigmatic changes that brought us to where we are today, we can have a quick look at three examples from the history of the painting of the human face (Kearney 1998: 7-14).

A medieval Icon of Christ (pre-modern imagination)

A Van Gogh self-portrait (Modern art)

Martin Sharp's Pop Poster of the Van Gogh self-portrait  
(postmodern)

The first is an anonymous icon of *Christ the Pantocrator*. These icons, of which this one is an example, were mostly the product of one of the Byzantine School of medieval iconography and were generally unsigned. The common practice of portraying the eyes of Christ as expressionless was a symbol of the main purpose of the icon, namely to invite the onlooker to travel through the vacant eyes into the transcendence of God, rather than linger on the surface level of purely human expression and sensation. Church authorities effectively discouraged experimentation with more expressive, realist or life-like modes of painting.

On the contrary, the self-portrait art form of the modern era, lays the primary stress on the image as a medium of human expression. "The sacramental prayer has turned into an existential cry." (Kearney 1998:10). These self-portraits (Rembrandt, Van Gogh and others) represent a turning away from the traditional modes of painting *resemblance* (a *mimesis* of nature or God) to an autonomous expression of humanity. Even long before Van Gogh's self-portrait, the paintings of the Italian Renaissance were pointing in this humanist direction. El Greco's version of St Maurice for instance, received the following rebuke from the Inquisitor of Toledo: "I like neither the angels you paint nor the saints. Instead of making people pray, they make them admire. Beauty inserts itself as an obstacle between our souls and God." (Kearney 1098:10)

In the Pop Poster of Martin Sharp the *theocentric* and the *anthropocentric* are replaced by the *ex-centric* paradigm of parody. It is “Ex-centric” in the sense that the self-conscious subject is ex-centric to itself and not functioning as a controlling origin of self-expression. Sharp’s image of Van Gogh’s self-portrait is confusing and paradoxical. One doesn’t know whether to regard it as art or pseudo-art, which is in itself, is an indication of its postmodern character. On the one hand there is a resemblance with medieval icon art with its impersonal and formal expression, on the other hand it is totally different in that it does not seek to direct the onlooker’s attention toward some transcendent being, but only to be a playful item of popular consumption. The artist becomes the *bricoleur*: “someone who plays around with fragments of meaning which he himself has not created... The artist becomes a ‘player’ in a game of signs, an ‘operator’ in an electronic media network.” (Kearney 1998: 13)

These images represent cultural-historic phases which can be referred to as paradigm shifts. In an effort to translate these into theological categories and explain the theological developments, we can make use of Lindbeck’s typologies.

George A. Lindbeck (1984)<sup>1</sup>, identifies three models in order to explain theological development up to the present:

- The *propositionalist* model.
- The *experiential-expressionist* model.
- The *cultural-linguistic* model.

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<sup>1</sup> I also make use of C.V. Gerkin’s (1997:106-110) usage of Lindbeck’s work for pastoral theology.

The *propositionalist* model is a label for all of traditional orthodoxy, as well as some forms of neo-orthodox theology. According to this model, the propositions of theology (the confessions and other formulations) are thought to correspond directly to what is real and true. They simply describe what is. For instance the proposition of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is not understood in a metaphorical sense, but as a description of who God is. Behind the eyes of the icon, there is a truth that can be captured with theological propositions. Therefore the real work of theology is the articulation of propositional truth, whether in preaching, pastoral counseling, or in any other field of ministry.

The *experiential-expressionist* model represents a significant shift. According to this understanding, theology is the expression of the common core of human experience. Theology becomes more dependent on art, poetry and aesthetics than on scientific statements. It characterises the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834), who is regarded as the father of Practical Theology. He grounded his theology on the common human experience of complete and utter dependence. In the words of Lindbeck (1984:22):

The structures of modernity press individuals to meet God first in the depths of their souls, and then, perhaps, if they find something personally congenial, to become part of tradition or join the church.

It is not difficult to understand that this leads the way to a dominant individualism of our time. There is also a clear link with the more modern theologian, Paul Tillich and his *correlation* model. Human

experience prompts the questions that theology seeks to answer. And where these theological answers are not convincing for the individual mind, the road is paved for secularisation.

The *cultural-linguistic* model. The following quote from Lindbeck(1984: 33) conveys something of this model, and hopefully you will also recognise something of it in the third image (The Pop Poster of Martin Scharp).

It is not primarily an array of beliefs about the true and the good (although it may involve these), or a symbolism expressive of basic attitudes, feelings, or sentiments (though these will be generated). Rather it is similar to an idiom that makes possible the description of realities, the formulations of beliefs, and the experiencing of inner attitudes, feelings, and sentiments. Like a culture or language, it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of these subjectivities.”

This new paradigm shift is usually referred to with the broad term of *postmodernism* and this poster image exhibits something of the parodic, paradoxical, multi-layered, and complex nature of this worldview. But in spite of all the complexities that are a part of the baggage of the term “postmodernism”, it is clearly an opposite, a response to, and a deconstruction of the certainties of the past. Both the propositional truths and the subjective expressions of the so-called core of human experience of the past are questioned and deconstructed, with parodic art as an important communication vehicle.

Theologically we can refer to the paradigm shift away from foundationalism to anti- or non-foundationalism.

Foundationalism takes as its point of departure that there is absolute truth and that it is available and can be accessed through thorough research. This truth represents the “God’s eye view.”

Anti- or non-foundationalism can be regarded as the opposite. Where the previous approach works with the ideal of a universal position that provides the answer to all problems, this approach takes it for granted that foundations or fundamentals don’t exist and that we only have a diversity of opinions (as expressed in the pop poster of Sharp):

The question is where are we now? The poster image of Sharp was produced in 1968 and Lindbeck’s publication with his description of theological models was in 1984. Are these descriptions and images still representative of our current cultural, philosophic and theological paradigm?

The answer is “yes” and “no”.

“Yes”, because this new era has only started and great paradigm shifts do not occur overnight. “No”, because the very nature of this new era is that it consists of ongoing, rapid transition. The power of globalisation is so strong and the current is moving so fast that we can not even oversee the transition taking place.

Theology, with its age-old foundational paradigm, is still trying to recover from the shockwaves of postmodernism. Theologians are so well-trained in the business of propositions, that the anti-

foundational or relativistic trends of postmodernism, remains a strange environment and we are struggling to adapt to it.

With this process of adapting to new times and ideas, one of the most exciting developments in philosophy and theology is what we can refer to as a Third Way, which is different from the foundational approach and different from the relativistic approach. This third way is known as the Postfoundational approach. It is an effort to move beyond the modernistic boundaries of practical theology as a very formal, rationalistic venture. On the other hand it is also an effort to avoid the relativism of anti-foundationalist theories.

In order to explain this (practical) theological paradigm, I found myself more attracted to the poster-image of Sharp (show image), but on the other hand, I was dissatisfied because it is not capturing the basic understanding and approach of Postfoundational Practical Theology.

One of the newer, emerging forms of art provides us with an enlightening metaphor. That is *Land Art and/or Installation* art and I want to share one or two images with you.

(show video clip of The Gates by Christo and Jeanne-Claude, NY Central Park – Land Art)

**The Gates** was a [site-specific](#) work of art by Bulgarian artist Christo Yavacheff and French artist Jeanne-Claude, known jointly as [Christo and Jeanne-Claude](#). The artists installed 7,503 vinyl "gates" along 23 miles (37 km) of pathways in [Central Park](#) in [New York City](#). From each gate hung a panel of [deep saffron-colored nylon](#) fabric. The exhibit ran from February 12, 2005 through February 27, 2005



(And image of Coloured prayers in Stellenbosch – Installation Art)

*Coloured praers* is the creation of Jacques Coetzer (2011). the inscription says:

A drive through the countryside is often meditative, with mountain, field, and sky drifting past. Occasionally a flash of colour will signal domestic life – washing hung out on a fence outside a homestead or labourers' cottages. Merely blown about strings of brightly hued clothing connect people and landscape, and so the very ordinary and intimate becomes public. Clothelines, like prayer flags, can be imagined to send out personal meditations on the wind.

These images provide a backdrop against which we can start to imagine the meaning of Postfoundational Practical Theology as Narrative Theology.

I would like to use the rest of this lecture to unpack my understanding of (practical) theology as a **story of doubt and imagination**, against the backdrop of these images.

### **Theology as story...**

One can ask the question: What is new about this? Story has always been a part of theology and the knowledge and insight about the role of stories in our Bible and in theological developments are not new. It is for any one to see that most of the Old Testament is a narrative/story account of the history of Israel. The same is true of

great sections of the New Testament and Jesus was a storyteller par excellence.

So, story is not new to theology. And yet, narrative theology, is something new and different. Let's take the images again and reflect on how story was perceived and used in theology.

- i. First image – As we have seen, this image represents, what Lindbeck called *propositionalistic theology*. Within this paradigm, story is probably frowned upon, except for the dominant story. Theology is about the truth. The One Story, God's story. Theology must only provide a view of God and must not be distracted by other images or stories. This story of God is of course carried by the dominant and powerful story of the church.
- ii. Second image – When looking at this image, we think of the *experiential-expressionist* theological paradigm. Where theology is understood to be the expression of the common core of human experience, and therefore becomes more dependent on story. Story as an expression of human experience becomes a valued object of study. We can refer to this as *Narratology* – the knowledge of narratives, as a way of theological understanding. The story is an object of study and interpretation.
- iii. The third image – the theology that goes with this image is Lindbeck's *cultural-linguistic* model. Here

we think of a collage of stories, all on the same level and each in its own right – The typical postmodern approach of “your story and my story”. In contrast to the One Story, the story of the truth, a multiplicity of stories, all equally relative to the truth, come to the fore. Story does no longer carry the objective truth, but becomes the expression of subjectivity. We can also refer to this as Constructivism, with language and story telling as major instruments.

- iv. Fourth image – Not about stories, but about storying. The important shift is away from stories as such to the process of storying. This is a discovery that the whole of reality is like constructing an installation and walking through the gates of the installation. We construct reality on an interactive and social basis. We refer to this as *Social Constructionism*. Stories are a social product, and they function socially.

Within this frame of thought, God is also discovered as the storied God. God is not above history, but has a history and God’s history is part of our history; while our history is part of God’s history. Our relationship with God is storied. As we walk through the installation of life, we story spirituality, religiously, and theologically.

These last two images capture the ideas of Postfoundational/Narrative Theology much better than the parodic and chaotic image of the pop poster.

In summary then: The word “story”/”narrative” when applied to theology, creates all kinds of misunderstanding and false claims. Story indeed features in theology through the ages and can be studied in and used in all sub-disciplines. Stories can be studied from a variety of epistemologies. You can be totally positivistic and structuralistic in your approach and be very interested in stories. In that case stories are phenomena, objects of study, which can be analysed and interpreted. But what we are talking about tonight is something different. This approach is not about using stories in order to find data or to understand the context, but about being storied, about being drawn into the *installation* of stories. It is not about us telling stories, but about stories telling us.

Narrative theology is about the realisation that stories are not only the means through which we give expression to our experiences, it is first and foremost the means through which we construct our experiences and our realities (Sclater 2003:317). Through the process of *linguaging* we form our stories, but in the same process we are formed by them. It is a never-ending process of storying and becoming; becoming and storying.

This knowledge has major implications for the way we understand and do practical theology. If we are no longer the objective experts who study our field, but if we are drawn into our research stories and

with our participants are constructing new realities, we are accountable on a different level. The criterion for good research is no longer objectivity, but rather subjective integrity. The question now is: How do we participate in this installation? How do we reflect on the clothes on the washing line?

Only if you understand that we are not talking about the study of stories, but about being storied, you will understand why the following concepts become so important:

- **Doubt** as a leading metaphor (not-knowing position)

Theologians are often perceived as the champions of certainty and belief. But the truth is that the more you dwell in the vicinity of the ultimate questions of life, which is per definition the task of the theologian, the more likely you are to become disoriented. Such disorientation, however, is a prerequisite for the reaching of re-orientation (Brueggemann). But this re-orientation is not the same as regaining old certainties. It is rather finding assurance in the creation of a new identity. This implies a new role for theologians at the interdisciplinary table – no longer as the guardian of religious tradition, but as the one that can formulate on the one hand the value of the traditions of interpretation, but at the same time express doubts about those interpretations.

- Embrace **paradoxes**

A few weeks ago, the internationally known South African theologian, Jimmie Loader, delivered a lecture here on campus about “Bipolar Theology”. In the lecture he showed that you can find in Wisdom Literature this inherent bipolar theology. On the one hand there is the wisdom of causality (if you do good, good things will happen to you; if you do bad, bad things will cross your path), but in the same breath or text you find a deconstruction of that very system of thinking.

So, this is a message from the core of theological thinking, and yet when entering the public domain and in conversation with others the theologian often finds it difficult to embrace this paradoxical position. We are more comfortable to carry with us the eye of certainty than to start a construction/installation with others.

The implication of inviting a paradox and doing theology with a paradox is to be confronted with messiness or chaos. Things no longer fit in neat little boxes. This is therefore the route of diversity. It brings us to a place where we do not only tolerate diversity, but indeed embrace it. The washing line (show image) provides us here with an even better metaphor than the very orderly Land Art of Christo’s Gates in Central Park.

I thought J.R. Daniel Kirk (New Testament theologian from Fuller) has a nice description of this washing line reality on his blog:

It is about suggestions and questions. It's about thoughts clanging around that haven't found a way to resolve in some sort of palatable harmony. Like real life, it's a mess of happenings and thoughts and interpretations and rightness and wrongness.

### **Embodied and local** theology

Storied Theology is always contextual, local and embodied. It doesn't make claims of generalisation. Its contribution is on the level of giving a voice for unheard and marginalised stories.

The postfoundationalist approach forces us to firstly listen to the stories of people in real life situations. It does not have the aim of merely describing a general context, but of confronting us with a specific and concrete situation. According to Van Huyssteen (2006a:10) "...embodied persons, and not abstract beliefs, should be seen as the locus of rationality. We, as rational agents, are thus always socially and contextually embedded."

This way of thinking is always concrete, local, and contextual, but at the same time reaches beyond local contexts to transdisciplinary concerns. It is contextual, but at the same time in acknowledgement of the way in which our epistemologies are shaped by tradition. Van Huyssteen (2006a:22) refers to the postfoundationalist notion as “a form of compelling knowledge”, which is a way of seeking a balance between “the way our beliefs are anchored in interpreted experience, and the broader networks of beliefs in which our rationally compelling experiences are already embedded.”

- Therefore the rise of **(auto)biographical theology**.

It is then clear that in Narrative Theology the emphasis shifts from the dominant stories to the small, even marginalised real life stories. But these stories can never be studied alone. They can only be understood in their relation to the meta-narratives of church and society.

I agree with Jacobs (2003:25) that narrative theology has the potential, but is also challenged, to create a bridge between the meta-narratives of church and theology on the one side, and individual life stories on the other side. On the one hand the corporative story provides the safety and space for the individual story to be embedded into a bigger context; on the other hand there is the danger of a discourse becoming so dominant that it



leaves no space for the development of personal stories. When the narrative integrity of a given single life is not accepted and respected, the space can become more fragile than safe. The problem, as seen by Jacobs, is that church theologians can be more concerned with “the narrative coherence (or incoherence) of whole traditions”, than with “what makes a human life coherent” (Jacobs 2003:25).

- **Interdisciplinary participation**

All of this leaves us as theologians in a paradoxical new equilibrium, where we feel **fragile, but also find a new safety**. The important point is that this equilibrium is only to be found when we participate in the *Installation Art* of Interdisciplinary research, but not on the basis of having a God’s-eye-view, but on the basis of being an equal partner, contributing to this installation.

The theologian has a contribution to make to these discussions where no one else can. The questions about God are asked everywhere; sometimes in obscure language. The recent discussion about the best name for the so-called Higgs-particle or Higgs-boson is an example. Although the title of Leon Ledermann’s publication, *The God Particle Universe Question*, was seemingly formulated to elicit a positive response from the USA Congress, it revealed something of the

underlying question about God and the Universe that surfaces often and in many ways in many disciplines. If theology can de-role from the task of defending God, or rather a theistic understanding of God, and ask real research questions with the other disciplines, it can participate in a meaningful way at the interdisciplinary table.

- **Relevance**

The paradox is that the more exposed, fragile and even wounded the theologian becomes in the interdisciplinary process, the more safety is experienced and the more relevant the theological contribution becomes.

I would now like to conclude this lecture by illustrating these ideas on a very concrete level. I can refer to many research projects carried out by myself and my students that have been conducted during the last twenty years. I can, for instance recall the HIV and Aids project and many other therapeutic-related projects. But in recent times I have become more and more interested in the application of the narrative approach in community life. Some reflection on a project conducted by myself and my colleague, Prof Cas Wepener, would help to illustrate the paradoxical fragile, but safe position for theologians in an interdisciplinary arena.

## An example

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of July, we (Cas Wepener and myself) read a paper at an Oxford International Conference on Forgiveness.

First, I would like to reflect on the conference and the context within which it took place, and then second on an aspect of the content of our research for the paper.

Oxford is the place where theology used to receive VIP-treatment. This is the place where theologians, when receiving a doctorate, would be called first to the podium. They would not only be awarded a degree like all the others, but also a blessing in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost.

That is the environment and backdrop against which we participated in an international interdisciplinary conference on forgiveness. Forgiveness is traditionally a theme for the theologian, but in this interdisciplinary conference we were just equal participants. Interestingly the traditional role of the theologian is to define and explain what a biblical concept like forgiveness might mean, was fulfilled by the others – philosophers, anthropologists, authors, psychologists, etc. They were struggling with definitions and analyses. Our contribution, on the other hand, was practical theological in nature. We just shared the story of the praxis of forgiveness on South African soil. We brought a poem by Antje Krog to the table and with that the story of the TRC. We even brought the very local story of a workshop on peace and reconciliation that was

held in the small little town of Ohrigstad. Amazingly, our paper was valued as a meaningful contribution.

The very fact that an interdisciplinary conference with no special place for theology was held at Oxford is in itself significant. Theology might still have the image of being very important, even at Oxford's graduation ritual, but in reality it has no longer any priority. But on the other hand, paradoxically, it has found a new place – fragile but safe – but this can only happen when theology is stripped of its power and when it can formulate doubt and questions about issues that once were specialised knowledge fields of theology.

If I compared this to the first time I participated in an interdisciplinary meeting, the difference is that at the beginning I thought it to be my obligation as a theologian to bring something (an interpretation) to the table. This time, we just brought the story with very little interpretation. Instead, we invited the participants to interpret with us. In line with the metaphor of Installation Art, we installed something and invited the others to participate. It was storied practical theology and storying practical theology. It left us fragile, but safe.

Second, I reflect on an aspect of the research

We made the following observation about the way the Confession of Belhar was perceived by members of the local congregation of Ohrigstad (quotation from our paper):

One of the most surprising moments occurred towards the end of the discussions (second session), when the participants were asked to share negative memories and to voice their frustrations and disappointments. In spite of the fact that at that stage of the discussions an open and trustful atmosphere had developed, the opportunity was not taken. The “speaking of the truth” part of the TRC, which the organisers of the discussions regarded as so important, a view which I as the facilitator shared with them, did not (could not?) occur.

Even when the DRC delegates put the issue of the little contact between the communities and the problems around the acceptance of the Belhar Confession<sup>2</sup> on the table, the response remained the same. Rev. Siphon emphatically stated that he is speaking on behalf of the majority of his people when he said that they feel Belhar is just a document and should not stand between us. According to him, what goes on in people’s hearts is more important than just to accepting or rejecting a “document”. The other black participants supported him in his position.

Like interdisciplinary work, intercultural, intergroup and inter-denominational discussions leave one fragile but safe. The words of Rev Siphon left us as participants of the conversation in Ohrigstad in silent surprise. Up to that point, and even presently, Belhar has been surrounded by strong opinions from both sides. It is as if the

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<sup>2</sup> Before the unification between the Mission Church (Coloured) and the Reformed Church in Africa (Black), the Mission Church declared a *Status Confessiones* and accepted the Belhar Confession. It is called Belhar after the venue where the synod meeting was held. Since then the Confession of Belhar has taken a central position on the agenda whenever there have been talks about unification. From URCSA’s side there is normally the expectation that the DRC should, by accepting Belhar, show its remorse and identify with those who had suffered under apartheid. From the DRC side, especially from the more conservative members, there used to be and still is a reaction of rejection. Belhar is seen by them as a political instrument.

theological paradigm within which it was written and received was one of truth (show first image and the second). Strong words were used. Words like *Status Confessiones*, and even heresy, the heresy of apartheid. It created strong opinions on both sides with accusations about ideology, politics, and more. In our workshop we expected a similar kind of reaction. In stead, Belhar was reframed, and an “installation” was put up (last images) and we were invited to join in the walk. Suddenly, in the words of an ordinary dominee of the URCSA, the Confession of Belhar was reframed to become a gate that invites us to participate, or a washing line (image) with all our clothes on it, while we all stood naked (fragile). Installation Art was the guiding metaphor instead of propositional confessional language. I am not saying that the strong and clear confessional language was wrong or that it didn't contribute to the transition of our society. I am also aware of the many complicating factors in an environment of inequality and power-based relations that could have contributed to this position taken by Rev Siphon. I am also aware of the north south-, and other dynamics within the URCSA,, which influence the members' view on Belhar. Nevertheless, we as participants of a low key workshop in a small rural town experienced something of the power of a narrative approach to theology, which indeed left us fragile, but safe in that specific context.

This story makes me wonder and imagine how different things can be if Belhar is not defended or attacked as if it is about the absolute truth or not; if it is not made powerless because of the idea that there are many perspectives and interpretations possible; but if all participants can be drawn into the creation of a new story. The

installation of a washingline and the bringing of our expectatios, our fears, our regrets, our shame – all our colourful prayers, or our washing to the public line. Imagine how different things can develop in such a storying process.

### **In conclusion**

Back to the question of the other passenger in the car:

The God-question was answered in different ways through history:

We can imagine a God-answer in each of the images (show first three again).

With the narrative understanding (4<sup>th</sup> image) the God-question is not answered, instead people are invited to take a walk in the park, or a walk under the washing line, which would hopefully facilitate meaningful questions about God.

I can imagine that when we do that

in participation with others

with humility

not-knowing instead of being experts

with subjective integrity

with doubt, but also imagining new possibilities

that we will always be fragile, but in a safe place at the interdisciplinary table, and on the campus of the University.

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