

Developments and Challenges in the Use and Interpretation of Scripture in the Study and Teaching of Christian Moral Life

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Abstract: This paper deals with three different stages/periods in the progressively evolving use and interpretation of the Judeo-Christian Scripture in moral theology. The first stage refers to some moral theologians' gradual move away from the rigid and juridical nature of the manuals-based moral theology toward an emphasis on the grounding of the Christian moral life in the person of Jesus. The second stage shows the need to adopt various Biblical interpretative approaches because making Jesus as the norm and source of inspiration in doing moral theology necessitates a better approach to the study of Scripture. In making the meaning of Scriptural accounts relevant to the changing context of people, moral theologians further moved to the third stage wherein human experience, through various secular disciplines, is paid a better respect for its autonomy and taken to serve scriptural interpretations for today. Thus, theologians also gained better theological insights with their use of the secular sciences to critically understand various moral issues including those that were historically non-existent in the Scripture. Such developments thereby brought valuable challenges to the ways the Christian moral life is taught in religious education courses.

Keywords: Christian Moral Life • Interpretation of Scripture • Human Experience • Renewal in Moral Theology • Religious Education

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Introduction

Before Vatican II, the manuals or textbooks used in moral theology were the authoritative sources in understanding the Catholic Christian moral life. These manuals were designed to prepare seminarians for the penitents' confessions. These were also used as bases in the teaching of Christian moral life.¹ The use of the manuals made moral theology uninspiring and apparently ineffective because it transformed the Christian moral life into a rule-based practice which focused on the evaluation of sin and application of moral laws.² The practice became very rigid and departed from a moral life understood as an imitation of the life of Jesus. It eventually led toward calls for change and renewal to address this juridical way of moral instruction.³

The renewal in moral theology characterized a way of teaching the Christian moral life that is more inspiring and effective through the use and study of Scripture. Vatican II's *Optatam totius* (Decree on Priestly Formation), insists that moral theology's "scientific exposition, [must be] nourished more on the teaching of the Bible."⁴ The careful study of human actions and decisions in moral theology must be grounded richly in the study of

¹ See Todd A. Salzman, *What Are They Saying About Catholic Ethical Method?* (New York: Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2003), 3.

² See Vitaliano R. Gorospe, "Moral Theology After Vatican II," *Philippine Studies* vol. 15/3 (July 1967): 439.

³ See, James Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (New York: Continuum, 2010); John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (London: Clarendon, 1987).

⁴ Austin Flannery, ed., "Decree on the Training of Priests: *Optatam totius*," in *The Basic Sixteen Documents Vatican II Constitutions Decrees Declarations*, para. 16 (Dublin, Ireland: Dominican Publications, 1996).

the written word of God. This is because as the soul of sacred theology, the Scripture provides the specific Christian character of moral theology and it is also the primary source which can shed light on the calling of the faithful in Christ to bear fruit in charity for the life of the world.⁵

Over the years, there have been key efforts in the task of nourishing the teaching of Christian moral life with Scripture. These endeavors affect not its place in moral theology but also in religious education. Religious education is a discipline that presents the Christian faith in the school setting.⁶ It teaches the Christian moral life to help students become more critical in understanding the faith as they strive to become committed followers of Jesus.

The following discussion will lay out a summary of developments in nourishing moral theology with the use and interpretation of Scripture. This will be followed by a presentation of the developments' implications for the teaching of Christian moral life in religious education.

The grounding stage: Rooting moral theology in the Scripture

One of the significant and probably the most influential responses to Vatican II's call for a scripturally enriched moral theology was the publication of Bernard Häring's *The Law of Christ*. This three-volume work was released around the period of the Second Vatican Council gathering. In this work, Häring grounds Christian moral living in the person of Jesus who has been under-emphasized in the manuals-based moral theology. Häring deviated from the sin and law-oriented approach

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ See Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Pasay City, Philippines: Paulines Publishing House, 1998), para. 71.

of the pre-Vatican II moral theology which primarily focused on the observance of rules and moral obligations deduced from what was then considered as natural law. His moral theology focused on the study and understanding of the meaning of the life and teachings of Jesus who provides the ultimate foundation and inspiration of moral living. He insists that the norm, center, and goal of Christian moral theology is Christ. “The law of the Christian is Christ Himself in person. He alone is our Lord, our Savior. In Him we have life and therefore also the law of our life.”⁷ Häring would later on release a new work with a title that greatly departs from the “Law...”: *Free and Faithful in Christ*.⁸ A similar work around the “Law...” period was Rudolf Schnackenburg’s book, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament*. Like Häring, Schnackenburg argues Jesus’ centrality in the study and teaching of Christian moral life. He emphasized that the Christian moral life is the human beings’ response to the saving word and work of God in Jesus Christ.⁹ Both Häring and Schnackenburg grounded their moral theological study in light of Jesus’ good news of the Reign of God.

The recognition of Jesus’ centrality in the teaching of Christian moral life, in effect, emphasized the significance of the Scripture in moral theology. Scripture accounts, especially those that contain the Jesus events, were read and studied in developing Christian moral teachings. This is different from the manuals-based moral theology which only used scripture texts to support

⁷ Bernard Häring, *The Law of Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity, Volume I: General Moral Theology*, trans. Edwin G. Kaiser (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1961), vii.

⁸ Bernard Häring *Free and Faithful in Christ 3 Vols.* (New York, Seabury Press, 1978-1981).

⁹ See Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1965), 13–53.

the moral teachings that were already established through philosophical insights, reason/natural law. In his later work, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, Häring noted that it is “an unfortunate custom to refer to Scripture only after having presented one’s own system, and to do so particularly in order to present proof-texts for the norms already established once and forever.”¹⁰ Through the study of scripture texts, the Christian moral life is presented as a response to God’s compassionate love and calling. God’s divine love and calling is seen and understood throughout the Scripture’s stories, teachings, prayers and other contents but most especially and definitively in the life and teachings of Jesus who inspires and calls people, “Come, follow me.” The Scripture-based moral theology has led moral theologians to recognize more seriously the central place of the written word of God as the primary source of the Church’s moral teachings.

The renewal stage: The use of biblical interpretative approaches

The grounding of moral theology in Scripture necessitates a renewal in the way moral theology is taught. Biblical interpretative approaches, which were not given much attention in the pre-Vatican II moral theology began to be used in developing Christian moral teachings. Some biblical interpretative approaches are worth citing.

The *historical-critical approach*. This approach takes as its starting point the view that scripture texts must be understood in their original historical context. It claims that God could have hidden in the words of the human

¹⁰ Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity*, vol. 1 (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), 7.

authors a message which remains concealed to the human author but which would be discovered at a later time.¹¹ This message is used as a source in identifying moral precepts that give direction to human actions. In this approach, theologians develop their moral teachings from the meaning that comes from the Scripture's human authors, the world in which they lived, and the contexts that formed and influenced their writing. The historical-critical approach is helpful in dealing with the problematic use of Scripture where scripture texts are merely quoted and used as proof texts. Bieringer and Pollefeyt mention that this practice can be seen in citing "isolated verses in support of our own views ("Does not the Bible say that?")."¹² The historical-critical approach, which uses a variety of methods such as textual, literal, source and form criticism helps the reader and interpreter of the Scripture to discover the original meaning of the sacred texts and prevents them from simply using these texts to defend or prove their own personal moral opinions.

The *narrative approach*. Other theologians focus on the use of biblical narratives in the teaching of Christian moral life.¹³ Moral theologians who use this approach recognize the Scripture's capacity to communicate God's word through God's deeds presented in narrative

¹¹ See "*Sensus Plenior*" in Pontifical Biblical Commission, "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (1993); https://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/PBC_Interp-FullText.htm (accessed 12 May 2020).

¹² See Didier Pollefeyt and Reimund Bieringer, "Risks and Challenges in Teaching the Bible," in *Normativity of the Future: Reading Biblical and Other Authoritative Texts in An Eschatological Perspective*, eds. Reimund Bieringer and Mary Elsbernd (Leuven: Paris: Walpole: Peeters, 2010), 380.

¹³ See for example, Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); Norbert Rigali, "The Story of Christian Morality," *Chicago Studies* 27/2 (1998): 173-80; William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1999).

accounts. They use scripture stories, plots and characters from both the Old and New Testaments in inspiring people to answer God's loving call in Jesus Christ who summons people to repent and believe in the Gospel. The use of the narrative approach brings the relational dimension of Christian morality because of the capacity of scripture stories to evoke personal and interpersonal response to God who reveals oneself in the daily and ordinary events and experiences in people's lives. Scripture stories also provide key insights on the kind of people that God calls to live the values and virtues they need to develop in order to grow in their loving relationship with God and one another. It departs from the legal approach and looks at Biblical stories as sources of inspiration, instruction, vision, etc.

The *socio-historical approach*. In the attempt to draw out the values and virtues that people need to develop to respond to God's call for a loving relationship, other moral theologians use social, historical, and sociological investigations on the scripture texts. They try to examine how the early Christian community received the word of God as manifested in the kind of attitudes they lived out. This approach can be seen, for example, in the work of Lisa Sowle Cahill in her study on the virtues and practices of the early Christian communities that were formed through the preaching of Paul.¹⁴ Cahill's work advocates that the early Christian community's values and virtues must be recognized as the authoritative norm in the concrete living out of the meaning and message of the written word of God.

The use of the aforementioned scripture interpretative approaches has helped moral theologians in moving

¹⁴ See Lisa Sowle Cahill, "The Bible and Christian Moral Precepts," in *Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and James Childress (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1996), 3–17.

forward from the rigid and legalistic moral theology that is based on the manuals. Christian moral life is now presented as a response to God through committing themselves in Jesus. However, the said approaches are not without limitations.

The use of the historical-critical approach has the tendency to be fixed on the original meaning of the scripture texts and use this as the timeless moral guide for Christians. It must be noted that people in the biblical times and the community who wrote the scripture texts addressed faith and life issues from their particular and unique contexts. Imposing the original message of the texts to the faith and life of people today can be problematic because there are certain moral decisions and practices in the biblical times, such as slavery and the customary discriminatory treatment of women, which today are considered as dehumanizing and oppressive to people.

The drawback in the narrative approach is its limitation in scripture texts that are in the story-form. This approach is not effective in dealing with the equally rich source of moral wisdom in other literary forms of the Scripture such as prayers, epistles, and exhortations. Many of the Scripture narratives also contain experiences that could be unfamiliar or not easy to be understood by people coming from different contexts. For example, people who do not raise crops may not appreciate the depth of meaning of scripture narratives that tell stories about farming or those who work for human rights would not appreciate immediately why Abraham, who almost killed his son, is hailed as the father of faith.

The difficulty in the use of the socio-historical approach is similar with that of the historical-critical approach. Not all values and practices of the early Christians can be imposed on the life of people today. For

example, accentuating the hierarchy between women and men that is practiced by the early Christians in Corinth (1 Cor 1:3) cannot be an obligatory pattern for the life of Christians today who are already living in a different context.

One of the root causes of the said problems is the nature of the Scripture as an ancient text. The Scripture was written a long time ago and many of its stories, experiences, teachings, values and other contents are already “miles away” from the actual life and experiences of people today. There is a widening gap between the historical contexts of Scripture and today’s contemporary contexts. This is a problem that is challenging to the moral theologians in their work of using the Scripture in dealing with contemporary moral issues. Many of the moral concerns that must be tackled by moral theology today are unprecedented or absent in the Scriptures. This concern led to a new stage in the study and interpretation of the Scripture in moral theology.

The progressive stage: The Scripture in light of human experiences and the secular sciences

Even if there is a widening gap between the Scripture’s historical context and the changing life of people today, contemporary theologians exhibit that scripture texts can still acquire new meanings that is relevant to the current life and concerns of people. This is because while the definitive revelation of God has already happened in the life and teachings of Jesus, this revelation is by no means finished. The Christian believers continue to grow in their understanding of the meaning of the Scripture texts. The following discussion presents how theologians elicit new and relevant insights from the scripture texts.

The sensitivity to contemporary human experience.

Moral theologians start to start from the concrete day-to-day human experiences especially of those who suffer from poverty, marginalization, social inequality, gender discrimination and other forms of violence.¹⁵ These human experiences are taken into account in drawing out Christian moral teachings from the Scripture. Moral theologians who focus on feminist and liberation theology, for example, use this approach in reflecting on the message of scripture texts for today.

Take, for example, how Elizabeth Johnson uses the oppressive experiences of women in reading Lk 13:10-13.¹⁶ In this text, Jesus healed a crippled woman while he was teaching in one of the synagogues on a Sabbath day. Johnson stated that like the woman in the story who was already suffering for eighteen years, women in the world today shoulder many burdens, suffer abuses and yet are being neglected by many people even inside the church. Jesus' act of noticing the crippled woman, stopping mid-stream during his teaching, and attending to the woman show a scripture meaning that reveals "Jesus' love for women, his concern for their well-being, and his freeing act on their life."¹⁷ This attentive love of Jesus for the crippled woman in the scripture narrative has a normative claim in the life of Jesus' followers today. It invites them to protect and be mindful of the life of women especially to those who are oppressed and marginalized. The women's experiences that Johnson

¹⁵ The attention to human experience was exemplified in a 2015 meeting of moral theologians from Europe, Asia, Africa, Australia and America in Padua, Italy. They discussed how to do theological ethics in view of the different concerns and experiences of people from different places. See James Keenan, ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church*, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2008).

¹⁶ Elizabeth Johnson, "Jesus and Women: 'You Are Set Free'," in *Catholic Women Speak. Bringing Our Gifts to the Table*, ed. Catholic Women Speak Network (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2015), 19–22.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

brings into the reading of the Scripture shed further light on polysemic nature of the written word of God. This inchoate multiple meaning of the Scripture bridges the gap between the historical contexts of the Scripture and the contemporary life and moral concerns of present believers. It enables people to see that while the Scripture is an ancient text, the written word of God continuous to be relevant as it is life-giving in their struggle to understand and practice their Christian faith today.

Reading the Scripture in the light of human experiences is helpful in the interpretation of Christian moral teachings. The integration of human experiences in the interpretation of the Scripture makes the art and science of interpretation more grounded and philosophically tenable.¹⁸ Thus, the message of the scripture texts are more life-affirming especially for the neglected and oppressed because human life, its joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties, is taken into account.¹⁹ It also highlights and promotes the communitarian aspect of Christian faith which leads people to become inclusive and attentive especially to the suffering and marginalized.

The respect bestowed upon the autonomy of the secular sciences along with the interpretation of Scripture. Together with the sensitivity to human experiences in the interpretation of the Scripture, a growing number of theologians have paid attention to the valuable insights

¹⁸ The theory of interpretation (hermeneutics) could verify this statement; see Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, translated by Garrett Barden and John Cumming (London: Sheed and Ward, 1975; and Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas University Press, 1976).

¹⁹ Austin Flannery, ed., "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: Gaudium et spes," in *The Basic Sixteen Documents Vatican II: Constitutions Decrees Declarations* (Dublin, Ireland: Dominican Publications, 1996), para. 1.

that are provided by the different secular sciences. These sciences are “listened to and heard” along with the interpretation of Scripture to examine and reflect on the complexity of moral issues. Take, for example, the need to discuss the necessary Christian response to the Covid-19 pandemic that the world is currently facing. The use of Scripture alone is insufficient in understanding the socio-political, medical, cultural, and other relevant dimensions of this problem that have important bearing on the life and Christian decisions of people today. This is because most of these dimensions have not been dealt with or even understood yet by the biblical people and the communities who have written the Scripture. Many theologians demonstrate that a more relevant and holistic approach in dealing with the current world situations and issues entail the use of secular sciences such as anthropology,²⁰ environmental science,²¹ biology²² and other scientific disciplines. It can be seen that the Pope himself has integrated valuable insights from sociology and ecology in his discussion on the environmental problems that pleads for concrete and immediate Christian moral responses.²³

Nevertheless, the use of human sciences along with Scripture in teaching Christian morality has not been

²⁰ See, for example, Reynaldo D. Raluto, “The Anthropocentric Perspective of Western Christianity,” in *Poverty and Ecology at the Crossroad* (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2015), 40–44.

²¹ See, for example, Anne Marie Dalton and Henry C. Simmons, “Science and Ecology,” in *Ecotheology and the Practice of Hope* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2010), 71–88.

²² See, for example, Ferdinand D. Dagmang, “Amplifying *Laudato Si’* With the Science of Epigenetics,” *MST Review* 21/2 (2019): 1–20.

²³ Francis, “What Is Happening to Our Common Home,” in *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), paras. 16–71, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papafrancesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

warmly received by everyone. There is a concern that the use of insights from secular sciences would bring moral theology outside the Church's tradition which, along with Scripture, provides the foundational source of Christian moral life.²⁴ This concern claims that the use of secular sciences would make moral theology not sufficiently theological anymore.²⁵ Some others also see "social and human sciences... as having alternative views on human life that were incompatible with theological perspectives."²⁶

The use of secular sciences does not mean turning moral theology into a secular discipline that neglects meaningful theological reflection. The formation of the Christian faith remains the paramount task of moral theologians but teaching the faith necessarily entails the openness to the sciences which can help Christians to see that their faith does come from and have bearing on the ground. The understanding and living out of the faith in Jesus is never separated and must be necessarily grounded on the everyday, physical, mundane realities of human life which can be studied and analyzed within the domain of the secular sciences. A good example on how the teaching of Christian moral life is Scripturally-grounded but at the same time enhanced by the wisdom of secular sciences can be seen in the Catholic social teachings. Since the publication of *Rerum novarum*,²⁷ the

²⁴ See Tom Elits, "Has Moral Theology Left Catholic Tradition Behind?," *America: The Jesuit Review*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/02/08/has-moral-theology-left-catholic-tradition-behind>.

²⁵ See Charles C. Camosy, "The Crisis of Catholic Moral Theology," *Church Life Journal*, November 15, 2018, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-crisis-of-catholic-moral-theology/>.

²⁶ Philip Hughes, "'Alternative Facts' and the Tensions Between the Social Sciences and Theology," *Pointers* 27/1 (March 2017): 2.

²⁷ Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum: On Capital and Labor* (Vatican:

church has been proclaiming the faith that is rooted in Scripture but at the same time open to the secular sciences in order to better understand and address current moral and social issues. In the Catholic social teachings, insights from the social sciences have been recognized, adapted, and integrated to communicate the saving message and challenge of the faith which remains the ultimate goal of judging their authentic use.²⁸

Implications for the Teaching of Christian Moral Life in Religious Education

Vatican II's directive to nourish the teaching of moral theology with the study of Scripture is given directly to biblical and moral theologians but this is not limited to them. It is addressed to all involved in the ministry of the word including the religious educators who have to use and interpret Scripture in teaching. Religious educators have to question the very moralistic and sin-centered focus in teaching the Christian moral life and the lack of meaningful interpretation of the Scripture.²⁹ The developments in the use and interpretation of Scripture in moral theology have influenced on how Scripture must also be used and interpreted in the teaching of Christian moral life in religious education.

First, the directive on an enriched use of Scripture in moral theology has been a guiding principle in the teaching of faith. This means that religious educators

Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1891), http://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

²⁸ Roche, *Practical Catechesis: The Christian Faith as a Way of Life*, 50.

²⁹ Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, *National Catechetical Directory for the Philippines* (Manila, Philippines: Episcopal Commission for Catechesis and Catholic Education, 2007), paras. 270-72.

must also refer to Scripture in teaching fundamental moral principles such as compassion, solidarity, conscience, and freedom. Every good Christian morality lesson has to include the appropriate scripture texts and its parallel texts in explaining morality topics.

The Scripture's normative claim to the life of the Christian community must also be highlighted. This means that the Scripture must not be treated merely as story book that excites or arouses people in doing the good. Unintentionally, there are instances in religious education when the scripture texts are only used as a narrative to start a lesson. The teaching method no longer highlights the Christian message in the scripture texts that has moral implications for people's lives. In religious education, the Scripture must be used in enriching the whole process of understanding and teaching the faith. The Scripture's capacity to evaluate and critique moral situations, inform people's conscience and influence human decisions must be emphasized for the written word of God to deeply nourish the understanding and living out of the Christian moral life.

Second, the use and interpretation of Scripture in religious education should underline what God intends to communicate to the life of the present believers. There is a tendency to focus merely on the investigation and teaching of the original meaning of the scripture texts which becomes problematic and unattractive to many students. This is because many of the original meaning and message of the Scripture no longer relate with contemporary life.³⁰ The use and interpretation of the Scripture in religious education should go beyond the study of the original meaning of the scripture texts because the Scripture continuously reveal new and deeper insights about what God wants to communicate to

³⁰ Ibid., 117.

the life of people today. One way how this can be done is through the acknowledgment of the active presence of the Spirit in the scripture texts as well as in contemporary human experiences. The Spirit reaches out to the person's mind and heart by touching and inspiring the human senses, intuition and emotions through the Scripture's symbolic and metaphorical language. This reaching-in of the Spirit through the person's mind and heart empowers their human imagination "to understand, re-understand and apply the Scriptural word of God"³¹ in their life today.

Third, the interpretation of Scripture in religious education must also be complemented by the use of other sources in understanding the faith. Comparable to the moral theologians' concern on human experiences in the teaching of Christian moral life, religious educators should also pay attention to the experiences of their students. In religious education "human experience refers to what happens in the life of an individual or community,"³² including sufferings, misfortunes, and other dreadful experiences. The students' significant human experiences such as friendship, family life, self-giving actions in helping others, and experiences of loss and betrayal must be integral to the search for the

³¹ Joseph L. Roche and Leonardo Z. Legazpi, "Imagination and Integration in the NCDP and CFC," in *A Companion to CFC A Collection of Essays on the History, Features and Use of Our National Catechism* (Manila, Philippines: ECCCE and Word and Life Publication, 1998), 59–60.

³² Maria Lucia C. Natividad, *Teaching the Faith* (Quezon City: Claretians Communications, 2018), 75; for the place of experience in process of theologizing, see Lieven Boeve, "Experience According to Edward Schillebeeckx: The Driving Force of Faith and Theology," in Lieven Boeve and L. Hemming, eds. *Divinising Experience: Essays in the History of Religious Experience from Origen to Ricoeur-Studies in Philosophical Theology*, 23 (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 199–225.

message of Scripture. The secular sciences can be helpful in understanding and drawing out valuable insights from these experiences. These insights can be used in shedding light on a deeper and more inspiring meaning of God's presence today. These insights can also help religious educators in enabling people to appreciate the Scripture as a source in their development toward maturity in Christian faith as they deal with daily concerns and struggles in following Jesus.

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