

The Dilemma of the Pastor in a Post-Modern Society¹

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Abstract

To what extent can the Bible, the Christian message, and especially the ministers, as their public representatives, have an impact upon our post-modern society? As public role models of God's pathos, some leading biblical prophets demonstrated a strong conviction nourished by the basic texts of Israel's heritage. Consequently, they stood firm for the authentic practice of God's Torah with a stress on genuine *tsedaqa* or *righteousness* as the fundamental principle of social justice. Pastors, who see themselves as God's servants, should therefore consult anew their own heritage, i.e. the roots of the faith of Jesus of Nazareth and of early Judeo-Christians. Their sympathy with God's pathos for humanity will make them understand that the main point in religion is ethics, which need to be given priority above worship and dogmatism. It will help them to become effective debaters and strong partners of culture and therefore increasingly relevant public pastors.

After a millennium of gradual change in the western world we have gone through a period of rapid transformation in the last 200 years. From romanticism through to modernism, we now find ourselves in a post-modernist society. Although we have not yet recovered from the initial shock it created in the 1980s and early 1990s, we find ourselves now on the threshold of what is beyond post-modernism. Should one speak of meta-modernism, pseudo-modernism, post-postmodernism or new-modernism?² Not being an expert in this area of research, and belonging to a modernist 1968 generation, I will

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² I.e. a return to traditional concepts, theoretical premises, and authorial practices.

make but a few observations, which do not stem from a thorough study of this phenomena, and add some personal impressions.

1. **The Bible, Christians and their Pastors in a Secular and Post-Modern Society**

According to cultural anthropologist J. Tennekes, a growing proportion of society has withdrawn from the sphere of influence of religious representations and argumentations and of the power or striving for power of religious institutions and religious groupings (Tennekes 1992, 72)³. Could one state that quite a few Christians feel alienated within post-modern society? Do they suffer loss? Certainly, in the Western world the answer appears in the affirmative as seen in the following:

- the many empty pews in almost empty churches;
- the decline of confessing church members;
- the number of those who obey the call to the ministry is greatly decreasing;
- the reduced supply of Christian broadcasting and television programmes;
- the sporadic religious reporting in newspapers and reviews;
- and the increasing disappearance of the adjective “Christian” by numerous organizations.

So the question arises to what extent the Bible, the Christian message, and the minister as their representative, are having an impact upon society and upon the individual in particular? Is the fact that these hardly get any voice when it comes to ethical questions like abortion, euthanasia, gay and lesbian marriages, cloning and genetic manipulated food (or GM food) symptomatic of the decreased impact of Christianity? In times when Christianity was still fashionable, Christians and their ministers referred to God as an all-determining supreme being from ‘up there.’ In the biblical worldview, God had his place in the heavens (Keel 1984, 29–39). Besides life on earth and the presence of Sheol, heaven represented the third realm where the real decisions were made. Since Copernicus and Galileo, numerous changes have occurred. The Deity became a God from ‘out there,’ from beyond the solar system (van der Hoeven 1966, 105–138). Suddenly he appeared to be a lot more distant, and it

³ English: *The Unknown Dimension: On Culture, Cultural Differences, and Power.*

gave the impression that he had much less of a grip on people who became independent of God. Consequently, God became more irrelevant in their lives.

When Isaac Newton, as theologian and physicist, proved to be capable of explaining a number of miracles in the Bible, and Charles Darwin presented his theory of evolution, man's role increased at the cost of the God of the book of Exodus and the God of the book of Genesis (Richardson 1966, 39–43). The latter became more and more discredited and his religious advocates were heading for the collapse of their authority and reputation.

After Einstein demonstrated with the aid of his relativity theory an expanding universe with innumerable solar systems, the Anglican Bishop John A. T. Robinson in the sixties advanced the idea that the time had dawned to proclaim the 'death of God.' With his books such as *Honest to God* (Robinson 1963), and *But That I Can't Believe* (Robinson 1967) he said farewell to traditional Christian belief and he made a call to change course completely. And while the Presbyterian bishop Lesslie Newbigin admitted that for secularized man faith in God was no longer part of his spiritual substance (Newbigin 1968, 82), some 40 years later another Episcopalian bishop, John Shelby Spong, made the passionate statement *Why Christianity must Change or Die* as his book title (Spong 1998). Others, like the Roman-Catholic theology and philosophy professor Thierry-Dominique Humbrecht, lecture on topics like "La fin de la chrétienté" [English: The end of Christianity] and the German Catholic theologian and religious didactician Hubertus Halbfas wrote a book *Glaubensverlust: Warum sich das Christentum neu erfinden muss* [English: The loss of faith: Why Christianity should reinvent itself] (Halbfas 2011). In the Dutch documentary "The Last Supper" three communication students⁴ sketched in 2011 a gloomy future for the church in The Netherlands. According to them, their country appears to be the worldwide leader when it comes to secularization. This country would even be "the experiment for the obliteration of Christianity." Of course, a caricature but nevertheless ... On top of all this come the shock of the Auschwitz catastrophe of the last century and the immense drama of 9/11. One could also mention the child sex scandals that have rocked the church, the Roman church in particular, in recent times. These do not help at all! Since then quite a few Christians indeed wonder whether there is still a God and, if he exists, whether he even cares. Moreover, we have good reason

⁴ Robert-Jan Zwart, Thijs Driessen, and Esther Raaijmakers.

to believe that as a result of some natural disasters, such as the Indian Ocean tsunami, which killed many thousands and affected many countries, many lost faith in God at the time.

Therefore, some legitimate questions do arise. Is Christianity indeed in its final hours? Do Christians accept a secular society that is trying to convince them that all new things man has achieved in the area of science, philosophy and culture are making the Bible, Christianity and their spokesmen superfluous? Or is there for them a point in fighting for the conservation of their own identity and can they still contribute to a renewed and reinvigorated Christianity, based on the Jewish-Christian Bible, by drawing some lessons from its history in order to generate some new impulses?

Naturally, one can sketch the syndrome, search for an explanation, but however it appears, it is essential to look for any possible remedy or therapy. Obviously, secularization is a global social phenomenon and an inevitable process with its positive and negative powers. Easy solutions are not self-evident.

However, in our society in which eastern religions, new age, and views concerning a new world order are taking root, influencing our thoughts and our knowledge, the awareness should grow that through the Bible, the Christian philosophy of life and through their pastoral representatives, we can definitely hold our own. After all, Christianity has held out over a period of 2,000 years despite the fact that it has survived all kinds of circumstances and influences. Christianity can still attract. The Bible continues to give evidence of an unprecedented depth: ethically, historically, philosophically and theologically. Could it be that a growing number of Christians do not realize *that* anymore, nor have any knowledge of their own rich heritage?

Within this socio-religious problematic situation, pastors and ministers find themselves in the frontline and in the middle of a dilemma. As paragons for their ecclesiastical communities, should they put up a stubborn resistance or give up with a resigned attitude? What kind of antidote can help them escape a fatalistic attitude? Can they withstand the ongoing pressure of a society that focusses on consumptive enjoyment, a complex digital highway, mass media and many other secularized items?

The experiences of some leading biblical figures, in quite problematical situations and in different centuries, could probably provide a background for a thought provoking reflection and discussion about the dilemma of pastors in a post-modern society and possibly also beyond.

2. The Prophet as a Role Model

The prophet Amos, a Judean citizen, was commissioned by YHWH to go to the Northern Kingdom Israel. This nation found itself in a splendid situation of success on almost all levels. The two world empires Egypt and Assyria did not show any urge to expand or interfere, which allowed Israel's king Jeroboam to enlarge Israel's territory. His conquests ensured that important caravan and trade routes passed through his country. Commerce and industries flourished, money and products poured into the country. Jeroboam added lustre to this comfortable position by the construction of palaces and city reinforcements. It became Israel's golden age! In next to no time a general euphoria prevailed in the sense of 'no harm can come to us' and 'God is with us!' Progression, peace and welfare conveyed the impression that they had an excellent relationship with their God YHWH. At least, that is what they mistakenly deduced from the blessings that were enumerated in Moses' discourse in Deut. 28.

Amos, at his appearance in Israel, confronted this mentality of arrogance, pride and confident attitude of the powers. His clash with Amaziah, the main priest of the national temple in Bethel, is exemplary. The latter forbade him to proclaim YHWH's word in what he named the royal sanctuary. He ordered Amos to leave and to do his work in his own home country Judah. Amos however replied energetically that he wasn't a professional prophet but a shepherd and a cultivator whom YHWH ordered to go and prophesy to his people Israel (Amos 7:14–15).

Thereupon he rebuked not only this militant priest as an exponent of Israel's clergy, who transgressed Moses' prescriptions, but also as a defender of king Jeroboam's dynasty. The royal influence on the religious institutions and their forms of worship appeared to be extremely forceful and opposite to the role of the king prescribed by Moses' Torah. Besides the fact that in each of the main temples in Dan and Bethel a bull calf was being worshiped, Aramaic and Assyrian gods were also being honoured in Israel. Amos however did not limit his rebukes on Israel's failure to serve its God YHWH in the prescribed way, but he turned his arrows on the practices of the leading classes of society.

As a matter of fact, Jeroboam's military successes and excessive temple services hid deplorable social situations. The ever-expanding economy was the immediate cause that merchants, large land and cattle owners, noblemen and military officers became increasingly powerful and wealthy. Their house con-

structions and country residences, their lavish furniture and luxurious lifestyles proved this in an abundant way. The numerous occasions to earn big money grew considerably, thanks to counterfeit balances, exorbitant charges of interest, flagrant usurious prices, distortion of judicial processes, promotions of debt slavery, bribes during judicial conflicts and extortions. Additionally, violence was used against vulnerable ordinary people who were being exploited not only materially, but also socially, sexually and morally! They were trodden underfoot and downgraded to the status of serfs. YHWH refused to continue to stand by and watch this any longer. For this reason, he called Amos in order to expose these awful practices. Amos addressed the leading classes in magnificent literary style, proclaiming that it does not pay to worship YHWH in Israel's sanctuaries while they continued to behave in an unjust manner. On behalf of YHWH he cried out:

⁴⁻⁷Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beer-Sheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing. Seek YHWH and live, or he will break out against the house of Joseph like fire, and it will devour Bethel, with no one to quench it. Ah, you that turn justice to wormwood, and bring righteousness to the ground!

¹¹⁻¹²Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine. For I know how many are your transgressions, and how great are your sins-- you who afflict the righteous, who take a bribe, and push aside the needy in the gate.

¹⁴⁻¹⁵Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so YHWH, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said. Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that YHWH, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:4-7,11-12, 14-15 NRS)

This is an example of God's pathos. The "basic feature and primary concern of the prophet's consciousness is" – as Abraham Joshua calls it – "divine attentiveness and concern." Whatever message he appropriates, it reflects that awareness ... in which the prophet shares and which he tries to convey. And

it is God's concern for man that is the root of the prophet's work to save the people." (Heschel 1962, 263; cf. also the Dutch edition: 2013, 605)

Amos harked back to the past, to Israel's heritage and debated publicly with arguments. The poor were being oppressed just as if they still lived in Egypt! YHWH however stood model as the one who cared for the powerless in society. He was anxious about widows, orphans and strangers and paid heed to hungry and thirsty people (Deut. 10:12–20; Ps. 107:8–9). He expected and required that Israelites would follow his example and prove themselves to be acting as his images.

In order to concretize this ideal Moses gave them on behalf of YHWH practical guidelines. He stipulated: "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land ..." and motivated it by: "Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and YHWH your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today" and concluded: "and the YHWH your God will bless you in all that you do" (Deut. 15:11,15,18 NRS).

Amos was the first prophet who expressed his theology in writing, and in so doing, he inspired later generations of prophets. His fight for *mishpat* and *tsedaqa*, right and righteousness, was adopted by prophets like for example Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In other circumstances and in different societies they fought on the barricades for the lower classes. Jeremiah did this while his people was in Jerusalem under siege of the Babylonians. He also claimed that they should not put their hope in the presence of YHWH's temple. In a totally different situation, in the company of the deportees in Babylon, Ezekiel stressed the absolute necessity of ethical behaviour in harmony with Moses' guidelines.

Just like Amos, they referred with a strong conviction to Israel's heritage. They called upon its Mosaic traditions and had a firm knowledge of them. They derived their authority from them. One cannot but agree with the late French theologian and philosopher André Néher, who wrote: "A firm knowledge is a must. The prophets drew this certainty from their knowledge, from the presence in them of an absolute reality. This presence made them share the experience." (Néher 1983, 100)

According to Heschel the ultimate category of prophetic theology is: "involvement (in the sense of justice and compassion), attentiveness and concern. It should be defined not as what man does with his ultimate concern, but rather what man does with God's concern." (Heschel 1962, 264)

In this respect, and in again a different society – a society under foreign occupation – Jesus gave the indisputable demonstration of his strong conviction. He stood firm for what he esteemed to be of the greatest importance: the authentic practice of God’s Torah with a stress on genuine *tsedaqa* or *righteousness*.

3. Energetically Facing the Dilemma

Since postmodernism is advocating that truth is relative and everything under consideration is open to interpretation, and that interpretation deserves to be considered legitimate, it creates among Christians in general and pastors in particular feelings of uncertainty, loss of trust in the institutional churches, and a lack of faith. Quite often it leaves them powerless “to seek alternatives.” They are left with the idea that Christianity (including doctrine) is no longer providing the ultimate answers people seek. It pushes them to a position where they feel like exiles in a society that used to be their own and in which the churches have made themselves irrelevant by not meeting human aspirations and needs as well as being out of step with current thinking. Consequently, people feel alienated, unsafe and desperate in search of a renewed solid ground on which to rebuild their faith. All of this makes the task and the role of pastors extremely difficult and sometimes even awkward. How can they relieve people’s feelings and respond to their needs, while they themselves are subject to the same situation?

Of course, Christians and their ministers could blame postmodernism for being a culture of relativism and try to convince themselves or even hope that in the end all relativism will annul itself. They could even imagine that postmodernism in attempting to do away with the traditional grand narratives will eventually undo all previous steps of humankind and will finally become itself irrelevant. Allow me to quote Christian philosopher William Lane Craig who has noted:

People are not relativistic when it comes to matters of science, engineering, and technology; rather they are relativistic and pluralistic in matters of religion and ethics. (quoted in: Dorsey and Collier 2018, 219)

And also the American philosopher, writer, and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett who declared:

Postmodernism, the school of 'thought' that proclaimed 'There are no truths, only interpretations' has largely played itself out in absurdity, but it has left behind a generation of academics in the humanities disabled by their distrust of the very idea of truth and their disrespect for evidence, settling for 'conversations' in which nobody is wrong and nothing can be confirmed, only asserted with whatever style you can muster. (Dennett 2013)

For Christians and their pastors, rather than bemoaning this awkward post-modern malaise, it is more useful to find ways to generate a renaissance and a revitalization of their religious convictions without simply repeating or revamping traditional beliefs. These will absolutely not suffice. Much more is needed.

3.1 A Challenge for any Pastor

To avoid a definite loss of their identity and to avoid being swallowed up by postmodern society, Christians and their ministers should remember the biblical lessons of the past. Did not the Ba'al Sjem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, teach: "Forgetfulness leads to exile while remembrance is the secret of redemption." Memory must function, as it does in the Bible, as a positive force. Being pastors mainly by hanging on to a Christian culture or to its church community does not represent a sufficient reason. Their own roots should never be forgotten and this requires from pastors that they go back to the basis of Christianity, its initial sources, the original Scriptures. Is such an effort a valuable way forward or a too simplistic remedy for Christians and their ministers who feel pushed into a position of exile?

All four prophets – Amos, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Jesus – demonstrated a strong conviction nourished by their knowledge of the basic texts of Israel's heritage. As public figures, they drew from them their prophetic critical arguments and stood consistently on the barricades for those who were in need of YHWH. Single-mindedly they opposed the views on God, man and the world of the societies of their time and became role models for their contemporaries and later generations. They remained in tune with God's pathos and shared it without restraint with their contemporaries.

The shepherd and trader Amos, the unauthorized priest Jeremiah and the authorized priest Ezekiel and the carpenter rabbi Jesus were indeed public figures. Not only because of their profession but especially because of their speaking in the open, in society. They not only shared their insights but gave

themselves completely, passionately in their mediating role between God and his people.

Pastors who see themselves as God's servants should therefore primarily go public. There are quite a few among them who no longer have this vision of pastoral ministry as such. This is possibly because they have been influenced and even misled by postmodern society. Depending on the size of their congregation, they think they should instead be organizers, administrators and counsellors.

Those four great men were able to contextualize God's Word and help people to think theologically. In other words, to teach them to look at their society and at all aspects of their own lives, with the eyes and the heart of God. What these public figures had in common was their participation in God's pathos, or namely his love for people, his sense of justice, and his willingness to forgive. In other words: "his concern about the ethical, political, religious situation of his people," as Heschel puts it (Heschel 1962, 265).

Shouldn't that be the goal of any pastor and shouldn't he or she be a pastor theologian? Shouldn't such a pastor expose society to their church members in the light of God's Word? To help them bridge the immeasurable distance between the world of the Bible in the then and there, and postmodern society in the here and now? In so doing he or she will be able to lead church members towards wisdom, happiness and love which God wishes them to attain.

In the spirit of the aforementioned great spokesmen of God who gave the best of themselves and their lives in their respective periods and contexts, the vision of the pastoral ministry in our postmodern society lost by contemporary pastors could be regained. A pastor, therefore, should first and foremost be a public theologian. As Kevin Vanhoozer and Owen Strachan put it in three steps:

First, pastors are and always have been theologians. Secondly, every theologian is in a way a public theologian, a strange kind of intellectual, a certain type of generalist ... Third, the purpose of the pastor-theologian being a public intellectual is to serve the people of God by building them up in 'the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.' (Vanhoozer and Strachan 2015, 15–16)

This pastor theologian faces the challenge of shifting the paradigm with regard to his or her idea of what a preacher is called to be and to do: a positive alternative image inspired by, among others, the abovementioned prophets. Each of them represents a role model especially for the pastor theologian. To some extent he or she can also become a prophet if he or she endeavours to

meet God in a very personal way. It does not have to be in the same way as those four have experienced it. The personal encounter between the pastor and God can become a reality through meditation, certainly, but – if you allow me to stress – not without a thorough and meticulous study of his Word being maximized with the help of its original languages. Then and then alone will the pastor be on the same wavelength and get in tune with the revelation of God’s Word. His preaching, teaching and sharing will then have a maximal impact on his hearers. Those who subscribe to this approach will see that the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Testament are first of all about ethics, secondly about worship and then and only then about doctrine, which anyhow does not get any credit in our postmodern society.

3.2 *A Challenge for Pastors in a Time of Exile*

The pattern that underlies the lives of the prophets cannot be transposed directly into our postmodern society. It is out of the question that it represents a straightforward remedy, but it can inspire pastors to think of survival strategies. Would it not be an idea for those who live in a world in which man has been alienated to an increasing extent from the Bible (Heschel 1995, 57) to consult anew their own heritage? Back to the roots of the Judeo-Christian faith? Back to Jesus of Nazareth and his community of followers with their Hebrew Bible? Beyond the Reformation and the Council of Trent? Beyond the mystics and the scholastics? Beyond Augustine and Chrysostom? Leading to his teachings and his life and through them to the Torah of Moses and the Prophets? Following this route, the pastor theologian will be able to help Christians to understand Jesus’ programme, to discover their own Christian identity and enable Christianity to make sense in their situation. It’s about another method that does not romanticize Jesus, but seeks to do justice to his message and teachings.

This means that the pastor theologian might rather go for Hans Küng’s understanding of Jesus (Küng 2012) than for Joseph Ratzinger’s presentation (Ratzinger 2007; 2011; 2012). Rather for *Jesus, the Central Jew* of André LaCocque (LaCocque 2015) than for the Nicean Christ of Riemer Roukema (Roukema 2010).

Instead of sticking to a traditional dogmatic of doctrinal Christianity, the pastor theologian could seek the adventure of trying out a *Christianity in the manner of Jesus*. Why not have the nerve to learn to read the Bible with Jewish eyes and in so doing see the Gospels in a more dynamic way, than to stand on the Greco-

Roman conceptualization of the New Testament as the bulk of Christian churches do?

Earlier I mentioned Bishop John Shelby Spong as making a plea for “discovering anew the Jesus of the New Testament” and to learn from him where the human and the divine meet each other, to find a new basis for Christian ethics and to interpret anew liturgical signs. This learning process will, according to him, bring secular man closer to Jesus and help Christians in the postmodern time to read him and the God he worshiped more effectively (Spong 1998; and further Spong 1996).

4. Conclusion

The above suggestions intend to help pastors in their role in our postmodern – or in an almost post-postmodern/meta-modern – society which requires effective debater’s abilities. They need to become strong partners of culture, being well informed about and educated in their own Judeo-Christian heritage. Sharing the critical perspectives based on the teachings of prophets like Amos, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel and above all of Jesus, who demonstrated publicly their strong convictions by upholding and enriching Moses’ Torah. Their lives proved that they were authentic role models in their respective societies and that is what pastor theologians nowadays need to be for their Christian fellow believers and in the sight of all secular people. Their sympathy with God’s pathos for humanity will make them understand that the main point in religion is ethics which need to be given priority above any formal worship and any dogmatism.

Perhaps the demand for “the active priesthood for all believers” should be complemented by a demand for “the prophethood of all pastors.” Then together they will be able to create communities where people meet who are in need of God providing them with emotional, social and intellectual guidance. This is why public pastors should change or ... become increasingly irrelevant.

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Zusammenfassung

Inwieweit können die Bibel, die christliche Botschaft und vor allem die Pastoren als ihre öffentlichen Vertreter einen Einfluss auf unsere post-moderne Gesellschaft haben? Als öffentliche Vorbilder für Gottes Pathos zeigten einige führende biblische Propheten eine starke Überzeugung, die aus den grundlegenden Texten des Erbes von Israel resultiert. Folglich standen sie fest ein für das authentische Praktizieren von Gottes Thora mit Betonung der echten *tsedaqa* oder *Gerechtigkeit* als Grundprinzip der sozialen Gerechtigkeit. Pastoren, die sich selbst als Diener Gottes sehen, sollten daher ihr eigenes Erbe, d. h. die Wurzeln des Glaubens Jesu von Nazareth und der frühen Judenchristen, erneut konsultieren. Weil sie mit Gottes Pathos für die Menschheit sympathisieren, verstehen sie, dass die Hauptsache in der Religion die Ethik ist, der Vorrang vor Gottesdienst und Dogmatismus gegeben werden muss. Das wird ihnen helfen, wirksam zu diskutieren und starke Partner innerhalb der Kultur und damit zunehmend relevante öffentliche Pastoren zu werden.

Résumé

Dans quelle mesure la Bible, le message chrétien et surtout les pasteurs, en tant que leurs représentants publics, peuvent-ils avoir un impact sur notre société post-moderne ? En tant que modèles de rôle public du pathos de Dieu, certains prophètes bibliques de premier plan ont démontré une forte conviction nourrie par les textes fondateurs de l'héritage d'Israël. Par conséquent, ils ont défendu la pratique authentique de la Torah de Dieu en insistant sur la véritable *tsedaqa* ou la justice comme principes fondamentaux de la justice sociale. Les pasteurs qui se considèrent comme les serviteurs de Dieu devraient donc consulter à nouveau leur propre héritage, c'est-à-dire les racines de la foi de Jésus de Nazareth et des premiers judéo-chrétiens. Leur sympathie pour le pathos de Dieu pour l'humanité leur fera comprendre que le point principal de la religion est l'éthique, qui doit avoir la priorité sur le culte et le dogmatisme. Cela les aidera à devenir des débatteurs efficaces et des partenaires solides de la culture et donc des pasteurs publics de plus en plus pertinents.

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