The Re-Invention of Work in Religious Communities of Men

The history of religious institutes of men demonstrates an amazing array of pastoral services. We have built universities and orphanages, leper colonies and AIDS hospices. We have founded monasteries and hermitages, built roads for the pilgrims and bridges for the exiled. We have cooked jellies in our vats and made wines from our vineyards. We have been preachers and beggars, astronomers and geneticists, contemplatives and lawyers. We are bishops and mechanics, pastors and poets. And through it all, we are the passionate prophets of a kingdom already here but not yet fully realized in its gospel of love.

But, this panoply of pastoral services is severely threatened. Religious life is dying (Wittberg, 1991:82). Unable to stall losses in membership now in the range of 40 to 60 percent (and growing) and facing the real possibility of irreversible institutional decline, religious orders of men have been searching for a rationale and a strategy to reverse this catastrophic attrition (Nygren and Ukeritis, 1993). Researchers have studied the internal dynamics of this decline. Gerald Arbuckle investigates the distortion of founding identity mythologies in the cultures of religious provinces (Arbuckle, 1988). W. Gordon Lawrence points to the confusion, denial, anger, and fear that have gripped religious communities and formed political, psychological, and spiritual splits that endure to this day (Lawrence, 1994). Patricia Wittberg looks at the competing forms of commitment in religious communities and how these influence communication, lifestyle, and decision-making patterns (Wittberg, 1991).

These studies build on the premise that religious congregations are experiencing the effects of a chronic identity confusion that shows little sign of amelioration. However, there is another line of research slowly emerging—one that investigates what religious do and how they work. It is one that scrutinizes the changing social patterns of work in religious congregations. For example, Paul Hennessy recently explored the “parochialization” of all church life and its impact on religious life. This recent pull toward reorganizing religious communities around parish life as the nearly exclusive center of worship and ministry, he says, has contributed to the confusion about identity and the reduction of internal solidarity in local religious communities (Hennessy, 1997).
This article builds on this new line of research by investigating how work is being reinvented in religious communities of men. I will expose their new structures of service as well as the terminological drift that dogs this renewal. Finally, I will study the psychological dynamics attending this reorganization. I will suggest ways that provinces that have relied too heavily on identity analysis for their strategic planning efforts can now refocus on task without losing important insights about their “founding” myths.

WORK IN AMERICAN SOCIETY

Religious men are working differently because American society is reorganizing its cultural and economic contracts (Drucker, 1993). The old order of employment is quickly coming to an end. A culture that once promised its workers security, stability, and continuity for their obedience, diligence, and loyalty is now demanding increasing self-reliance, creativity, risk, and uncertainty. The hierarchical relationship of superiors and subordinates is giving way to new horizontal configurations of authority that rely less on status and more on expertise and influence.

In this move from a “relational culture” to a global “work culture,” the factory is giving way to the information superhighway. Ideas have become our product and knowledge workers our most important corporate and cultural resource. Ours is a global world where we learn about economic, religious, cultural, gender and sexual differences first hand for the first time. We confront daily not only the reality but also the immediacy of differences. Unparalleled visual and technical mobility affords us opportunities to access worlds of unfathomable diversity. And in this multi-centered world, our mediators are no longer hierarchical figures who stand with an unambiguous tradition as gatekeepers between us and the foreign. We desperately (and sometimes dangerously) search for metaphors and images that might help us make sense of these differences. We struggle to keep our social boundaries thick enough to protect the cohesion of our communities but thin enough to allow a generous response to new worlds of service.

We work in situations that would have been unthinkable a generation or two ago. Doing “what’s best for the organization” has been replaced by customer service. The top-down pyramid of responsibilities on the old organizational chart has given way to cross-functional teams, partnerships, joint ventures, and strategic alliances. The employee culture of entitlement, where workers believed they were due benefits, promotion, status, and respect in return for their unswerving loyalty to company policy, is dead in the water. Loyalty now rests with oneself. Companies no longer guarantee their workers protection, only
opportunities. It is up to the individual worker to learn for herself what she is to make of herself. It is a new world of temporary services, outsourcing, and consultancy. This is a time of exacting creativity and perilous organizational ethics and the situation into which religious communities of men are thrust.

THE REINVENTION OF WORK IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Few communities of men now work according to the pre-industrial rhythms of just a generation ago. Gone is the choreographed precision of our semi-monastic existence with assigned tasks, precise hierarchical divisions, and rituals where processions and posture were liturgically regulated (Couturier, 1997). Work regulated by sacred, not secular, time and moving according to liturgical and sacramental energies is no longer the norm. Instead, ours is a faster paced world of computers and fax machines, cell phones, and modems. In fact, we hardly speak of labor at all. Ours has become the world of “ministry.” And while the range of our service continues to be as generous and courageous as that of any generation preceding us, we conduct and interpret our ministries largely in the modern context of competitive capitalism that puts a priority on interiority, innovation, influence, expertise, and the disposability of resources (Cousins, 1992, 1–14). Religious communities of men are now in the process of reinventing our work in several ways.

From Institutions of Single Interest to Institutions of Multiple Interests

From the 1850s until the 1950s, the Church in America was organized around the concerns of an immigrant population. Catholics who came to these shores faced incredible poverty and severe discrimination. They came with a powerful will to prosper but were often met with religious hostility. The response of Catholic religious communities was an astoundingly clear strategy to provide institutions that would ensure a defense of the faith and the means by which Catholics could move up and out of disadvantage. And so we built and staffed, with amazing speed, resolve, and ingenuity, the largest and most successful private-school and health-care systems the world has ever known.

These religious institutions were clearly focused. They were “single interest” operations, mobilized around a limited set of priorities. With some notable exceptions, congregations made their reputations on particular corporate works whether it be teaching schools, staffing hospitals, conducting retreats, working with minority groups, or preaching missions. Resources were limited but easily dispersed since members shared an understanding of their particular service to the Church. In these institutions of single or nearly-single interest, religious superiors had a relatively easy time making corporate decisions.
Because the priorities of the province were clear and commonly held, the task of provincials was to survey the relatively stable landscape of pastoral service and assign the appropriate people to the tasks at hand. They were like generals in a war room with battle plan in hand, ready to assign their men in the defense of the faith (Couturier, 1997b).

The situation in provinces is vastly different today. Communities have multiple interests. It is not uncommon for congregations once composed almost exclusively of educators now to have large numbers working as pastoral associates in parishes. Neat divisions between clerics who served in parishes and lay members who worked in the fields or mechanic shops have broken down. More and more brothers in mixed congregations serve in parish and diocesan centers. It is not uncommon for priests in religious congregations to binate between sacramental ministries on the weekend and social (or other kind of) work during the week.

Provinces have recognized that there is a difference between its ministries and its mission. A mission can be served by various forms of religious work. And so, many communities have hammered out mission statements that take stock of multiple ministries but also recognize the underlying vision that motivates members to serve. However, one wonders whether we are at a point where it would be more accurate to say that some congregations have more than one mission.

More provinces could now be considered “institutions of multiple interests.” Diverse missions, varied systems of ministries, and competing cultures of service indicate a fundamental shift in the kind of work that religious now provide. In this environment, setting priorities and managing limited resources become infinitely more complex as a shared agreement about our complicated work lives diminishes. Competition inevitably increases at all levels of community life. It is not just that religious work in different ministries but that they work in vastly different organizational cultures.

We have known for some time that all institutions have particular and complex cultures (Dubinskas, 1992). These different work cultures regulate the beliefs, emotions, rituals, and tools of our service. Each particular “culture of service” has its own unique complex of formal and informal roles, as well as distinct overt and covert rules of behavior. Provinces can have a single organizational culture (education) with numerous ministries clustered within it. Beyond that, they can have members working in vastly different organizational cultures (medical, parochial, educational) within the very same province or house. It is helpful to know that organizational cultures are powerful and enduring, extremely subtle and resistant to change. A province composed of competing cultures of service will find attempts at structural renewal very difficult to manage.
To complicate matters further, individual religious may find themselves expected to move from one organizational culture (educational) to another (parochial) and to do so expertly and gracefully. Provincial, for their part, must be adept at understanding the different kinds of work their members are engaged in. They must also now be fluent in the multiple languages, customs, and rituals of these varied organizational worlds. Personnel assignments, interventions, and supervision can no longer be conducted using only one ministerial frame of reference.

Religious communities experience this clash of cultures whenever they hold general assemblies, open chapters or convocations. The timing of these events becomes an immediate problem. Ordained religious who minister from their parochial culture want meetings held Monday through Friday so as not to interrupt the sacramental schedule of the weekend. Religious in non-parochial settings (e.g., universities) would prefer meetings on weekends. And those working (in shifts) in the medical field complain that community meetings require that they forfeit valuable vacation time to attend, a condition of membership that parochial ministers are often unwilling to absorb.

Assigning religious is made more difficult as these work cultures become part of our complex system of labor. Skills developed in one pastoral culture are not easily transferred to another. Systems of supervision, accountability, and continuing education can be radically different from one culture of service to the next. How a province manages its resources depends upon its understanding of these structural differentiations.

Religious leaders are regularly called upon to referee the competing interests for resources. And yet, strategic planning can no longer be realistically conducted as if all work in a province were on a level playing field. Even the process of negotiating provincial priorities becomes difficult as members uncritically apply the principles of decision-making that they acquire in their work culture, inattentive to alternative ways of approaching these concerns. For example, a diocesan model of accountability with its view of the laity as non-deliberative “advisors” to the priest may strike religious men engaged in an academic or medical culture as procedurally and systemically unjust. We have not yet acquired a basic agreement about the principles of organizational justice that apply across the striated arenas of our service.

**The New Boundaries of Religious Communities**

A generation ago, the primary ministerial partners of religious were other religious. A young religious, just out of initial formation, could expect to work alongside other religious of the same order and, of course, the same gender. That is highly unlikely today. A religious
priest’s primary partner in ministry, for example, is more than likely to be a lay woman (LaCugna, 1992). We have new partners in ministry with sets of interest and needs different from our own. Our partners are husbands with wives and children. They are women who act in the world with a different epistemology of knowledge and cooperation that we only partially recognize and appreciate (Goldberger et al., 1996). And if gender is a dimly appreciated aspect in the work lives of religious men, it is eclipsed by our racial confusion and ignorance. Racial conflict remains a largely untreated, because unrecognized, dimension of our changing religious work context (Massingale, 1996). Studies by the National Catholic Conference for Interracial Justice show how pervasive the problem of “white invisibility” is in Catholic ministerial settings. In one study of employment practices at the highest levels of the Church, the NCCIJ found that blacks and Hispanics remain largely underrepresented and underemployed at our diocesan centers (NCCIJ, 1992). In this atmosphere, the increasing trend toward the “diocesanization” of church service could affect the positive strides that some of our own institutions have made toward racial integrity.

Religious communities of men are beginning to think of themselves outside the traditional categories of “provincial structures.” The notion of a province with clear geographical parameters, a single ministerial focus, and members in relative proximity to other members is being challenged by a boundary-less notion of religious institution. As a network of interdependent communities, religious men are moving from structural expressions of ethnicity to those of multi-cultural diversity and from a commitment to a single province vision to a corporate worldwide vision.

Religious provinces within the same congregation are working to construct collaborative alliances among themselves for either short-term or long-term initiatives. Provinces, once strongly independent entities, now regularly consult, cooperate, and collaborate with each other around specific concerns. These relationships cross once impermeable provincial boundaries. Communities share the gifts of their members, whatever their provincial loyalties. These initiatives, while recognizing critical issues of authority, are opening the way for further and more complex collaborative ventures on shared concerns. These efforts are beginning to recognize not only a diversity of concerns within a set relationship but the possibility that we can develop different structural relationships around a single concern.

Another powerful example of the new boundary-less religious institution is the experience of congregational mergers. In these situations, provinces and congregations are pooling their histories and resources by forming a new religious entity. Rituals are used to help
members with the transitional dynamics in moving from one congre-
gational culture to another.

These structural realignments are not contained within the param-
ters of the Church alone. Some religious orders are developing new partnerships with non-Catholic, private, and sometimes for-profit institutions. They are creating these structural relationships to sustain (in a new form) the mission of the congregation during a time of severe vocational shortage. Discussions about ministry and work are no longer private conversations among vowed members who share a charism and a religious bond. Partners participate in the conversation who may not share even a common faith. Clearly, religious orders of men are at the cusp of a new mutation in spiritual consciousness. There is a shift underway from an individual, self-reflective, inward, critical, and technical consciousness to one that is global, outward, and complex (Cousins, 1992). Religious men engage in structural relationships that are no longer enclosed within provincial boundaries but which are openly diversified by gender, culture, orientation, class, and religious expression.

THREE WORLDS OF SERVICE

As many readers may have already suspected, I have been trying to dance gingerly through a theological minefield of pastoral terminol-
gy. Do religious men work or do they have ministries? What is the proper category for a consecrated religious: a theology of work or a theology of ministry? The history of this theological debate is as volu-
minous as it is contentious (Collins, 1990). It is a debate I cannot re-
solve here. I can only hope to demonstrate the confusion, outline the organizational dynamics involved, and suggest questions for further research.

The root of the debate lies in contradictory analyses of scriptural and patristic sources around the term, diakonia (Collins, 1990). These have yet to find a convergence of opinion among theologians. Recent attempts to clarify the proper distinctions between ordained and lay ministry have been met with increased confusion and little forward movement. What remains clear amid this terminological drift is that religious men inhabit three distinct worlds of pastoral service: the world of priesthood, ministry, and work. While these worlds overlap at the edges, they provide religious communities with three distinct experiences of task, role, and authority.

In the world of priesthood, the primary service analogue is ordination. A man is called forth from the people of God to imitate Christ the high priest and lead the community in worship and service. He serves because he has been chosen from the people to stand in persona Christi. His service is different in kind and degree from the love, worship, and
justice expected of all Christians (including himself). He is brother, friend, counselor, judge, servant, and pastor in the sacramental world of signs and grace. Ordained into a college of presbyters, he leads and teaches under the direction of his bishop and his religious ordinary, if he is a religious. Ecclesial authority is located exclusively in the sphere of the ordained who have jurisdiction over the faithful. While all Christians are called to service, the clerical role is defined as ontologically distinct from the service roles of other Christians.

While pastoral responsibility can be shared through councils, these bodies must be advisory not deliberative, if they are to function according to the logic of supernatural signs. The organizational dynamics of priesthood require all Christians to play their proper role in the hierarchy of service. Efforts are made to expand the competency of the laity in their proper spheres of influence, i.e., the sanctification of the world. But, their service in the Church is of a different order. The organizational dynamics of priesthood demand vigilance against an improper intrusion into the rights and responsibilities of those called to judge matters of the faith. According to these dynamics, democracy is an impossible goal for evangelical discernment in matters of the Church. But, religious men have another perspective.

In the world of ministry, the central theological concept is baptism. All Christians are baptized to evangelize. Some minister as ordained members; others as lay men and women. The ministries are as diverse as the needs for evangelization. Some teach and others heal. Some preach and others baptize. The roster of church ministries is expansive: eucharistic ministers, religious education teachers, ministers of hospitality, and parish counselors. Ministry is understood as any Christian service commissioned by proper authority for the building up of the Body.

In this world all Christians (properly commissioned) share equal, if distinct, responsibility for the good of the whole. The ordained minister is one of many ministers needed for the oversight of evangelization. As such, the organizational dynamics of ministry require a discernment process and principles that enhance the shared insights, perspectives, and contributions of all who have roles of service. Because a ministry team shares in the development of the works of the Church, the organization of those works calls for consistent collaboration, cooperation, and mutual accountability.

I have worked with several pastoral teams who have found themselves caught on the horns of the dilemma between the organizational dynamics that favor priesthood and those that enhance ministry. These teams publicly proclaimed values of collaboration only to find some of their members bargaining for clerical privilege when it served their individual purpose. Recently, a likeable and quite competent religious
pastor, one of the most vocal and successful advocates of collaborative ministry, suddenly resigned. When asked at several staff meetings to describe the climate of work on his team, he responded that he was genuinely happy to be part of a productive and hardworking team of committed ministers. His resignation shocked the parish and, even more so, his own staff. He resigned without consulting or even alerting his colleagues of his ministerial intentions. He negotiated his transfer with his religious superior, announcing it only after receiving permission to move. He was confronted at the last staff meeting by his colleagues who complained that the principles of collaboration were followed only up until the point that they started to interfere with the political, psychological, or social prerogatives of the clerical members of the team. The dynamics of ministry and priesthood were on a collision course. Within a year, four of the six members of this team would be replaced.

Some prefer that the term “ministry” refer only to those roles which directly coordinate the services of Christians within the church itself, e.g., eucharistic ministers and lectors. The issue becomes murkier when the term is applied to any service that religiously-motivated individuals conduct. A religious sister’s work as a data-entry specialist in a Catholic hospital, for example, is considered by her community to be her ministry, whereas the work of the Catholic mother of two beside her would be considered her “job.” Some might suggest that the difference is that a religious is doing her service under vow and by designation from a legitimate religious authority. And yet, if religious consecration is an intensification of the baptism we share with other Christians, by what logic do we call what we as religious do a ministry and what other Christians do as their work? Once again, is a Franciscan who practices law for the poor doing ministry or working?

Some have suggested alternative possibilities. First, all Christians who consciously designate their work for the sake of the kingdom can rightly claim that they are doing ministry. The critical issue is intentionality. Others have suggested that religious men and women minister because their service emerges out of their approved consecration. Here the critical issue is one of commissioning. However, if that is what qualifies a service as ministry, is the profession of vows an automatic commissioning service? Or is the assignment process a de facto commission to ministry as well? Do all activities approved by a superior qualify for the designation of ministry? Is the brother who plows the fields or the religious priest who finds teenage runaways a permanent home doing ministry or working for the kingdom of God? Is the Catholic neurosurgeon who refers to her baptismal commitment while at work ministering while the unintentioned but skilled Catholic doctor beside her only doing his job?
In a world of work, all Christians share as co-creators with the Father, co-redeemers with the Son, and co-saintifiers with the Spirit in the labor they perform. This is the positive dignity of work that John Paul II spells out in his social encyclicals (Vac̆ek, 1987). According to this logic, Christians do not need to perform ministries in order to live out their baptismal call. Work, although always influenced by the long history of sin, is the arena in which Christians fulfill their lives and bring the creative and saving work of God to fruition. A Capuchin who practices law or the Jesuit who practices medicine does not need the category of ministry to explain or justify his service. His work already illuminates the gracious outpouring of spiritual gifts in the Church. While religious communities can ask religious men to shape their work according to the charism of the community, this does not change the fact these men are indeed working for the kingdom. According to this model, all religious work for the kingdom; some have ministries and still others have ordained ministries. All are expressions of the fundamental charism of the community.

We have religious who labor in three distinct worlds of service: priesthood, ministry, and work. Each has an internal organizational logic unto itself. While we wait for greater theological clarity, perhaps we can become more sensitive to the contrasting and competing organizational dynamics of these different worlds.

THE DISMANTLING OF THE CORPORATE WORK

Communities have found it increasingly difficult to hold onto a system of corporate works. Provinces have put members on notice that they will no longer accept corporate commitments because leadership can no longer promise a steady supply of qualified or energetic ministers. This dismantling of the corporate work has been met with a mixture of regret and relief. Some point to an increased freedom from institutions. Some apostolic congregations now claim “community” as their charism. However, one must quickly point out that the dismantling of the corporate work has not meant the deinstitutionalization of religious work. In some cases, religious have simply replaced commitment to their own institutions with an uncritical loyalty to diocesan or parochial institutions. This diocesan conformity has the potential of distorting the unique tradition of religious life and replacing it, uncritically, with a dominant diocesan model of church life. This reversion of religious life to diocesan structures, clearly a safe and convenient haven for increasing numbers of elderly religious, could in the long run make religious life even more invisible and thereby institutionally irrelevant in the Church.

One factor feeding this trend is the severe economic vulnerability of religious communities. More and more religious are finding it difficult
to gain employment. With expectations that they earn income well into their seventies, they are one of the most vulnerable and frightened segments of the Church. With worse than zero-growth, exorbitant health care liabilities, and unable to convince members to retrain themselves to compete effectively in a precarious ministerial/work world, some religious provinces are taking the short road to diocesan service.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF WORK IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

The new psychology of religious communities must revolve around the work of the community and not just its identity. All organizations have difficult work to do and religious institutions in the next century will face some of the most difficult. New structural relationships, diverse ministerial partnerships, multiple missions and varied cultures of service necessitate a more robust understanding of the psychodynamics of religious institutions. Some of the elements are reviewed here.

First, the work of religious communities is difficult to accomplish, with tasks that are increasingly complex and with results that are unsure. Inevitably this work causes anxiety in the group as a whole. This anxiety is often the root of distorted relationships and miscommunication in a religious group because it is a shared but never fully conscious dynamic of the group.

Second, every religious community must manage this task-related anxiety. They do this by developing various “social defenses”—group-sanctioned behaviors and rituals that help religious groups avoid their primary task and mission. These unconscious social defenses help the province develop unrealistic pictures of its situation as well as sanction procedures that protect the status quo. There are usually three types of social defenses that communities use to avoid facing the painful challenges of mission: dependency, fight/flight, and organizational rituals.

The dependency social defense emerges when the group suddenly and mysteriously becomes incapable of focusing its attention, understanding its challenges and coming to a successful resolution of its issues. The group is “dumbing downwards” as intelligent men act as if their problems should be solved by some miraculous intervention or outside agent. They stare blankly at one another or at the flip chart as if hoping to be led without effort into the future.

The fight/flight social defense is used by groups when they begin to flee from the task at hand or engage in unproductive arguments that repeat but do not advance discussion. When in defensive flight, the assembly calls for more meetings, another study, or engages an abstract discussion of high theory instead of solid action. When in a defensive fight, the group uses its disagreements as a cover for the hard work facing them. The arguments appear designed to distract or entertain
members while the issue sits motionless on the table. What is fascinating about these defenses is how willing every member of the group is to collude with them.

Organizational rituals are a third social defense. These are policies and procedures that are adopted to keep the group from facing its fear of new challenges. Recently I heard of a community that had a formation advisory council made up of twenty-five members. This group meets several times a year across the country for days on end. Their agenda is packed and their projects complex. Curiously, there are more members on the advisory board of directors than there are members in formation. Their strict procedures, voluminous handbooks, and exhausting preparations for complicated meetings serve to assuage the group’s fear and guilt that their programs (and their jobs) are becoming increasingly irrelevant.

Social defenses usually serve to relieve the group of its anxiety about having to get difficult tasks done with limited resources. Groups will sometimes use rather primitive processes of scapegoating and projection in order to contain their anxiety. For example, a group of educators gathered recently to set a direction for the future. The meeting stalled as they crafted directional statements that appeared to the consultants to be idealistic but unreal given the circumstances of the community. Arguments and boredom set in as they went through the ritual of creating a text which they joked would soon be shelved alongside others like it. The group seemed on automatic pilot. The consultants applied a challenge: asking them to describe their students.

A flood of dismissive and painful characterization of students emerged. They were described as inferior students, irreverent, unmotivated, and undisciplined, unlike those of a generation ago. Apparently, they were not the kind of students these religious wanted to teach. What was going on? These were some of the most prayerful, generous, and loving religious I had met. They seemed, however, for the moment frightened by their own situation. It became clear to the consultants that the scapegoating of their students was a projection of their own insecurity in teaching students who were indeed very different from themselves—culturally, religiously, and ethnically.

The boredom and anger were ritualized behaviors the religious used as a social defense against the underlying challenge that overwhelmed them—coming face to face with their feelings of powerlessness and revulsion. They had to swallow their pride and disgust in order to make any headway toward their vision. They had to face up to the regressive pull inside the group to avoid their mission. They had to come to an agreement that it was their (not the students’) primary task to evangelize youth. Over time they had avoided their primary task and placed the responsibility for education on their students—as
if it were the students’ character and ethnicity and not the skilled relationship between teacher and student that made education possible. They had to first engage their own feelings of minority and powerlessness (with all its anger) if they were to recommit to their primary task of education and evangelization. This group not only did reengage their mission but also invited the laity to help in the task.

CONCLUSION

Religious men are working differently because they are responding to social and ecclesial forces that are challenging traditional boundaries of task, role, and authority. They are recreating the structures of religious service by developing partnerships that transcend traditional provincial beliefs, emotions, rituals, and procedures. The situation is complicated by the diversity and ambiguity of these new structures of service and the confusing language we use to define religious work.

The work of religious is difficult and should always be a “dangerous memory” in the Church. Because their service is changing so dramatically and rapidly, religious men must pay attention to the organizational dynamics of their work. The real development of a religious group happens when, in faith and with prayer, members face their work, refuse to use others to manage their anxiety, meet their challenges, and serve with all the love that motivates their call.

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