Religious Education and Secular Education

A dialogue

The religious conflicts of the past have left educational systems in the western world frozen into various attitudes, attitudes that seem incapable of accommodating the inescapable involvement of everyone in education with issues of right and wrong. That there is a necessary form of knowledge that is distinctively religious, though generally acknowledged by private individuals, is generally rejected in public educational practice. The present alternatives of indoctrination and near-total neglect are equally unacceptable; and yet the path between them is fraught with all manner of ancient anxieties and deep distrust. The participants in the dialogue that Donald Weeren has imagined nevertheless find their way gently a good distance along that path, stepping with delicacy, frankness, and a realistic understanding of the perils involved, towards the beginning of a solution that is surely long overdue.

The Scene: A waiting room at the airport of Forum. A man looks up from the book he is reading and studies a face opposite him. Their glances meet and become quizzical. They approach each other to resolve their doubts.

DANNY: If I'm not mistaken, you're Vivian.

VIVIAN: And you, Danny.

D: Our memories are in good form; it must be fifteen years since we were in Professor Strong's seminar together. What brings you here?

V: I live in Forum. We're expecting a visit from my parents. When I got to the airport I was told their flight is an hour late; so here I wait.

- D: I'm waiting too, for a connection to Meetington to attend a conference. I live in Temple; teach in the Faculty of Education there. Are you teaching?
- V: Yes. As a homemaker; individualized education for three children.
- D: That puts you in the front line of education reform. I often ask myself whether schools aren't overlooking the individualization available to children in their home, at least when there's a perceptive adult there with them.
- V: Is individualization one of your special interests?
- D: Not as such, but the idea of tailoring education to fit the diversity of human beings does apply to a special interest of mine giving a larger role to religious education in schools.
- V: You were interested in religious education when we were students, weren't you? I remember you made a seminar presentation; I can't recall any details, except that Professor Strong didn't see it your way: you ended the paper with a dream you had for the future of education, and his comment was, "Your dream, Danny, is my nightmare."
- D: Well, I'm still dreaming, but I hope there's more to my dream than fantasy. I think there must be ways of bringing religious education into closer partnership with secular education.

A skeptic on the Home and School

- V: Danny, you're looking at a skeptic. I'm on the Home and School Committee at my children's school, along with parents and teachers of other religious persuasions. We get along well, and I think we're a pretty effective group, but I doubt that we'd be able to agree on whether and how to give religious education a bigger role in the school. It's a subject better left alone.
- D: You believe in making the school more responsive to the needs of the community?
- V: Yes, but I think religious needs are a category apart. I'm reading a book called *About Schools* by Robert Stamp (my assignment for the next meeting of the Committee). The point he is making is that schools should reflect community needs much more than they do, but the needs he's talking about aren't religious needs.
- D: You're right, but he doesn't exclude them. Near the end of the book he makes a brief reference to religious schools Catholic and Protestant as two possible alternatives within a "disestablished" public education network. If you

want real support for treating religious needs as a category apart, read Dewey again, who is the best advocate I know for the integration of school and community.

- V: What does he say about religious education?
- D: Let me show you. I don't always carry Dewey around with me in my briefcase, but this relates to the paper I'm giving in Meetington. Here is what he wrote in a 1908 article in the *Hibbert Journal*:

We certainly cannot teach religion as an abstract essence. We have got to teach something as religion, and that means practically some religion. Which?

Our schools, in bringing together those of different nationalities, languages, traditions, and creeds, in assimilating them together upon the basis of what is common and public in endeavor and achievement, are performing an infinitely significant religious work. They are promoting the social unity out of which in the end genuine religious unity must grow. Shall we interfere with this work? Shall we run the risk of undoing it by introducing into education a subject which can be taught only by segregating pupils and turning them over at special hours to separate representatives of rival faiths? This would be deliberately to adopt a scheme which is predicated upon the maintenance of social divisions in just the matter, religion, which is empty and futile save as it expresses the basic unities of life.²

- V: A pretty persuasive argument, I would say.
- D: Yes, but one I would have to accept chiefly on Dewey's authority, because I don't see how it fits with the logic of his vision of the school as an embryonic community. Now listen to these passages from "My Pedagogic Creed."

I believe that the school must represent present life — life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground.

I believe that the school, as an institution, should simplify existing social life; should reduce it, as it were, to an embryonic form.³

And this is what he says in *The School and Society:*

These are the two great things in breaking down isolation, in getting connection — to have the child come to school with all the experience he has got outside the school, and to leave it with something to be immediately used in his everyday life.⁴

If school is to reflect life outside the school, on what grounds do you exclude religion? If, as Dewey says, the school should maintain two-way communication with home life, business and industry, agriculture, and science, why not also religion?

V: Perhaps there is an inconsistency, but isn't this a case where inconsistency is historically dictated?

- D: What do you mean?
- V: I mean that school systems have had to sustain lengthy conflicts generated by the question of religion in education. The battles have left them something less than they would have been. But now that we have achieved a *modus viven-di*, shouldn't we avoid tampering with what is potentially explosive?
- D: I agree that there have been wearing conflicts, but I don't think we have to live forever with the imperfect "solutions" to the problem that our predecessors managed to hammer out. Many of those solutions tended towards the separation of religious education and secular education, rather than cooperation.
- V: Well, is separation that bad?
- D: Historically it may have been the only way out. The close relationship between religious and secular education in the West, dating from the monastic era, wasn't able to stand up under the centrifugal forces of new sciences and technology, nationalism, and religious diversity in the nineteenth century. Or, more exactly, in the circumstances of the time our forebears were unable or unwilling to discern ways of maintaining the relationship. So they moved in the direction of separation.
- V: I think that's a good way to put it "in the direction of separation" because it was hardly a complete break. Come to think of it, in some places there wasn't really a break at all: in Quebec and Newfoundland, for instance, where the school systems remained closely identified with religious groups.
- D: Yes, but even in those cases a kind of separation may have occurred. Segregating religious groups for their schooling may help to insulate each of them, not only against the religious values of the others, but also against the secular values which the others have exhibited. For example, Catholic schools may have helped shield Catholics against the achievement orientations of Protestants; and Protestant schools may have helped shield Protestants against the joie de vivre of Catholics.
- V: You risk losing me in these speculations, Danny. I still haven't an answer to the question: Do you tamper with the old solutions? Can we do better than our forebears in shaping the relationship between religious and secular education?
- D: Whether we'd prefer to let well enough alone or not, I think we're forced to re-examine the solutions, because in practice, the solutions themselves are not static. There are pushes in the direction of more religion in the schools, and yet an overall drift towards a more secularized education.
- V: Is that drift such a bad thing? Shouldn't the school really concentrate on

secular learning, the kind accessible to human reason, and leave the churches to deal with religious knowledge?

Two kinds of knowledge?

- D: I think the distinction you're making can be questioned. Religious and secular knowledge are different in their focus, but not in their form. The focus of religious knowledge is the ultimate realities which give purpose and order to human activity; the focus of secular knowledge is human activity itself, its processes and its products, mental and material. In form, however, the two types of knowledge approximate each other.
- V: But surely knowing from authority is not the same as knowing from evidence?
- D: I would agree, but I wouldn't equate religious knowledge with the one and secular knowledge with the other. If I know that God exists, my knowledge is a synthesis of evidence personally acquired and of the claims of authorities whom I consider trustworthy. If I know, let us say, that my chances of health and long life are better if I keep my cholesterol-level down and avoid smoking, again my knowledge is a synthesis. Actually, in the second case the claims of authorities weigh more heavily, since I have less personally-examined evidence to go on.
- V: But the claims of authorities have a different basis in each case. The authorities on physiology can back up their statements with evidence in medical records physical, measurable phenomena observed and recorded but the authorities on the existence of God have to appeal to something as intangible as personal feeling or intuition.
- D: There is nothing intangible about houses, chimneys and fences.
- V: What do you mean?
- D: I mean that when these lines were written, their author was expressing an intuition of the action of a loving Creator, but an intuition fed by concrete experience.

How did I come to be?
I woke on a morning and saw
A large blue space
With houses, chimneys, fences there,
Like palace guards to wonder at,
While trees awhirr with leaves
And butterflies in dancing flight
Moved my eyes with fresh delight.

I never asked,
I never hoped,
I never dreamed,
Until Love woke me that morning.

- V: That speaks to me. There have been times when I sensed that God was at work in what would be considered very ordinary, everyday events in my life.
- D: And such intuitions are not left unexamined; they have to stand up under a continual testing process to which the mind subjects them. This pattern is not unique to religious knowledge. Scientific knowledge can also arise from an intuition triggered by some concrete evidence and then subjected to various tests demanded by the minds of researchers. The biographies of great scientists would probably bear out that pattern.
- V: And add more evidence to your intuition that religious knowledge and secular knowledge are not all that different in form.
- D: A gracious acknowledgement of my point.
- V: But not an admission that religious knowledge should have a larger place in the public school.
- D: No?
- V: The fact that religious education doesn't rely solely on the claims of authorities might make it a candidate for the public school curriculum, which it couldn't be if it were purely indoctrinative in character. But there are a great many subjects that could conceivably be part of the curriculum, and therefore the school has to be selective. Besides, how do we know that religious groups want the school to co-opt their portion of education?
- D: If they are not already aware of the benefit, I would hope they can be shown how religious education can be strengthened by situating it, at least in part, in the school. Religious education is concerned with developing understanding of, and responsiveness to, ultimate realities. But ultimate realities are accessible only with the aid of experiences of more immediate realities, the kind that secular education deals with.
- V: Danny, could you put that in terms of a concrete example?
- D: How do you convey to a child, or an adult for that matter, the concept of the loving fatherhood of God, if that person has not experienced love from a human father, personally or at least vicariously?

Fatherhood

- V: I see the point of your illustration, but I don't see how it applies to the school. You experience human fatherhood outside the school, not in it.
- D: True enough, but school experiences should be continuous with out-of-school experiences. So when the school, through its science curriculum, helps the learner perceive the diversity and the organization of the natural world, it is extending the foundation on which, with the help of the religion curriculum, he can build his concept of God's fatherhood. The same is true of a social studies curriculum which reveals the vastness of the human family, its variety and yet its cooperative ties.
- V: But combining secular and religious education can backfire too. If a history course reveals the way people have massacred each other, doesn't that cast doubt on God's fatherhood doesn't it suggest God is either capricious, or indifferent, or incompetent?
- D: Yes, but religious education cannot wish those difficulties away; it has to deal with them. The learner grows in religious understanding not just by affirmations, but also by challenges to his beliefs. The example you gave of wars requires religion teachers and learners to further develop their notion of God's fatherhood so that it incorporates the bestowal on man of the gift of freedom.
- V: Is the process reciprocal, though? Does secular education stand to gain anything from religious education?
- D: I believe so. Let me see if I can give an example.
- V: Please try.
- D: Let's take the religious concept of forgiveness, referred to in the "Our Father:" "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." If the religion curriculum helps the student perceive the possibility of a forgiving relationship among men, in imitation of a God who does not exact an eye for an eye, then the curriculum in health, human relations, or the like, is given the challenge of exploring, from a psychological point of view, the meaning and value of forgiving. The student will be expecting more than a "needs-fulfillment" approach to human relations, and if the secular curriculum can respond it will be the stronger for it.
- V: What if the teachers of secular subjects reject the challenge? Perhaps they would see the alleged religious insight as without foundation.
- D: That's where dialogue comes in. If teachers of religion and teachers of secular subjects develop dialogue, each group is likely to grow in understanding

and appreciation of what the other is teaching. The dialogue, by the way, is likely to be facilitated by the fact that teachers of secular subjects will in many cases themselves have a religious faith.

- V: But the most essential dialogue would be one between atheistic or agnostic teachers of secular subjects and religion teachers, and I see that as very unlikely. As far as the former are concerned, religion has at best only an incidental value for man; and to the extent that they regard it as inimical to human progress, they won't want it in the school at all.
- D: On reflection, however, they might have to concede that the school has no choice but to accept religion as part of the curriculum as long as the school is to remain a school.
- V: Do explain that to me.
- D: If schools were concerned only with teaching reading, writing, calculating, cooking, carpentering, and a few more discrete skills, everyone could approach them with the understanding that they were no more related to religion or irreligion than public transportation is to churchgoing or picnicking on a Sunday simply because churchgoers and picnickers are riding on the same bus. But schools are supposed to help people perceive meaning as well as acquire skill, and meaning without recourse to the learner's ultimate convictions has to remain incomplete, something *less* than meaning.
- V: But you would admit there is something beyond skill yet short of ultimate meaning, and many would be content to have the school operate at that level rather than expose it to the divisiveness of religion.

A hidden curriculum of first principles

- D: The school then would disavow its traditional claim to be concerned with the *full* development of the individual?
- V: I suppose that would follow from what I said.
- D: An unequivocal disavowal, and scrupulous adherence to it, would be necessary, I think. Otherwise, quite inadvertently perhaps, the school might transmit a kind of hidden curriculum of first principles which afforded, or seemed to afford, ultimate meaning without reference to the religious concepts that were officially excluded. For example, if the school were implicitly to relate its secular curriculum to ultimate values that were purely humanistic, many religious groups would object.
- V: You mean they would claim a place for God in the scheme of things.

D: Yes, while they would have much in common with the humanistic outlook, they would consider it incomplete and deceptive because it made man seem wholly self-sufficient, without need of God's help.

V: The more we talk, the more complicated the web becomes! If someone were listening to us in the hope of discovering whether religious education has a place in the public school, by now he would have decided to hold onto the *status quo* at all costs for fear of hopeless entanglement in the complexities of the subject.

D: Do you know what I would like to do?

V: What?

D: State my thesis again, but in more practical terms. If we ask how the dialogue of religious and secular education in public schools can be effected in practice, perhaps we'll get a clearer idea of the benefits and costs involved.

V: I think that that is a practical proposal.

D: Very well, but first allow me one more bit of theorizing, because I expect a general criterion for selecting strategies will be more useful than any particular strategy. Secular knowledge and religious knowledge, as long as they both exist in a society, are never totally separated from each other: there are contacts, either in the minds of individuals or in institutional forms. Sometimes the contact may be so close as to be injurious to both. Picture the letter "V," one stem representing religious knowledge, the other secular knowledge. At the top of the "V" they are widely separated, as in a society where the separation is such that communication is possible only by shouting across the chasm. Now shouting is characteristic of an altercation; it is also tiring to do, tiring to listen to. Communication under these circumstances is not easy, regular, or greatly enriching. At the bottom of the "V" religious and secular knowledge merge, and that is the same as two people talking at once, which again does not favor communication.

V: "V" is the peace sign.

D: Purely coincidental, but a happy coincidence. I learned recently that the Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, comes from the same root as *shalaym*, meaning "complete." Learning, education, is complete, whole, only when it encompasses both the religious and the secular. But where was I?

V: Sorry, I interrupted your train of thought. You were saying that the "V" represents extremes in the relationships between religious and secular knowledge.

- D: Oh, yes, and also an infinite number of possible relationships besides the two extremes. I think every society has developed its own unique relationship and has to start from there. It has to ask what possibilities are open to it for enhancing the dialogue between religious and secular knowledge in education. A practice which in a given society would lead to more confusion or confrontation than communication would have to be ruled out.
- V: I think I understand your general criterion, but now do give me some examples of its application.

English and Dutch examples

- D: Well, if we were speaking as Englishmen we would take as our starting point the fact that religion is a required subject in the curriculum of state schools. It is taught in accordance with an "agreed syllabus" drawn up for a particular area.⁵ In these circumstances, we would have to ask: How well does our religious education program interlock with the secular curriculum? Are teachers of religion taking note of the principal concepts being taught by other teachers? Are they helping students put their secular learning into religious perspective? If the math teacher is teaching students about computers and their widespread uses, is the religion teacher helping the students keep in view both facets of human nature: its finiteness, measurability, predictability, which make it amenable to the computer, and its enormous capacity for growth, its astonishing creativity, since God made man in his own image. And, looking at the other side of the partnership, we would have to ask whether the teachers of secular subjects inquire of their religious education colleagues what kinds of issues they are raising with the students. If a religious imperative regarding the distribution of the world's goods is being developed, does that lead the teacher of history or economics to explore with students the human record in the economics of distribution?
- V: I can see these possibilities being present in the English system. What happens in places where religion is not a required subject in the curriculum?
- D: Let's take the example of the Netherlands to start with. There the historical conflict of church and state in education resulted in an essentially tri-partite school system: Catholic, Protestant, and religiously "neutral," for want of a better term. Religious education had an established place in the first two sectors but only permissive status in the third. In the Netherlands, therefore, one would have to show educators and the community the advantages of using more extensively the existing opportunity for providing religious education in neutral schools. There is no legal bar, but indifference can be an equally effective one. In the early 1960s the Humanistic League was authorized to give optional courses at the request of parents in public secondary schools.⁶ Perhaps this has acted as a spur to the churches to expand their offerings in the schools.

V: What about places where there is a prohibition against religious education in public schools, the United States for instance?

The U.S. — religion as secular subject

D: Yes, I wanted to refer to the United States as a third example. Back in 1948 the Supreme Court prohibited the practice of religious instruction in public schools. The arrangement it ruled unconstitutional was one in Illinois whereby students whose parents requested it were enrolled in public school religion classes sponsored by a religious council. Since then the religious "neutrality" of public schools has been reaffirmed by rulings against non-denominational prayer and Bible reading without comment. The Court did indicate what it considered an appropriate religious component in public education. I have an excerpt from the majority opinion written by Justice Clark:

... one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistent with the First Amendment.

V: Then a social science or literary approach to religion is the path to follow in places where religious education as such is barred?

D: Certainly it is being followed with a great deal of interest in the United States these days, 10 but I'm not at all sure that it leads to the relationship between religious and secular education that we've been talking about. If religion is taught and learned only as a secular subject, it cannot exercise its specifically religious impact on the secular curriculum; nor can it respond in genuinely religious terms to the secular curriculum.

V: Please explain that further.

D: I've been referring to religion as one's awareness of, and commitment to, ultimate realities. Knowledge of religion without the commitment is like knowing the vocabulary and grammar of a second language but not being able or willing to converse in it. The criteria established by the Supreme Court don't allow teachers and students to "speak" their religion, only to "speak about it" as a human phenomenon. Under these conditions, why should the secular disciplines listen to religion any more than they listen to each other, and why should religion listen to itself? I mean that if in the public school the religion teacher has to relinquish any claim to being able to teach what is of ultimate value, why should he feel bound by any imperative to help students relate things in the secular order to ultimate realities?

- V: But surely the Supreme Court has not deprived religion teachers or students of their religious commitments?
- D: No, just the right to let those commitments play their part in shaping their teaching and learning.
- V: Do you mean the schools should teach commitment to religion?
- D: Not teach commitment to religion, but teach religion in a context of commitment. Teaching commitment to religion implies taking responsibility for leading the antagonistic or undecided person to adopt religious convictions. Teaching religion in a context of commitment means that when religion is taught the operative assumption of those involved is that it concerns what is of ultimate significance for man. That is what religion means, and for it to be taught in any other way is to denature it.
- V: But not everyone in a school would agree with your operative assumption.
- D: True enough, and the teachers of religion would have to show respect for the right to reject the assumption on the part of any individual in the school; and every individual in turn would have to show respect for the right of religion teachers and students to teach and learn in accordance with the assumption.
- V: Danny, I feel we've strayed into the realm of theory again. Let's get back to practical, level ground.
- D: If I can find my way back! How did I get into the question of religious commitment? Oh yes, it started off as a comment on a practical possibility available to educators in the United States, namely, teaching religion as a secular subject.
- V: And since you doubt that that is the way to achieve your aim, what other possibilities are there?
- D: One would hope that in time the rigor of the Supreme Court's position on religion in public education would diminish, perhaps under the influence of a better appreciation of community rights in education.
- V: And meanwhile?
- D: Meanwhile, religious educators have to practise the art of communicating from a distance. If they can't function in the public school and be in everyday contact with the teachers of secular subjects, they can develop other channels of communication. Perhaps Home and School associations could organize forums which bring together the two groups of educators who deal with the same set of

students — religion teachers from the churches and synagogues, and teachers of secular subjects from the school.

Dangers of division

- V: That brings our discussion full circle. Remember I said I doubted our Home and School Committee could maintain its unity if it were dealing with the question of religious education?
- D: Do you still doubt it?
- V: Let's say I have misgivings. I see the merit of your position, but I still hear the echo of that passage you read by Dewey, which sums up one's latent fears that religious education in public schools spells division. For me it's an echo, for others it could well be a roar.
- D: Yet if people will be good enough to turn down the emotional volume just for a while, they may come to understand that the danger of division is more imagined than real.
- V: Realistically, though, in our pluralistic society it's unlikely that you would have just one religion course sequence in which all or most families would want to enrol their young people.
- D: It's unlikely there would be one, but it's also unlikely there would be a dozen. There could conceivably be one course serving all those of theistic faiths, a course that pivoted on their common conviction that a personal God creates and sustains the universe. The content could take the form of a study of how various faiths Islam, Judaism, Christianity conceptualize the attributes of God.
- V: It might be difficult, though, to keep the key antitheses among these faiths at a distance in a course of that type.
- D: Yes, and also the religious communities to which the teachers and students belong might see a course of this type as peripheral to their concerns, perhaps as an unsettling influence. The Christian might say: "It's more important for the young to know their own faith than to occupy themselves with the views of Jews and Muslims; and I wouldn't want our young people to get the wrong idea, that Judaism and Islam are equally valid ways to God."
- V: There it is division the thing people fear will be the result of bringing religious education into the public school.

- D: The question is not whether or not religious education in the public school divides people, but to what extent or at what cost in comparison to the benefits we've been talking about. If students of different faiths are together for a large proportion of the time in connection with the secular subjects and extracurricular activities, is any serious harm done if they separate during part of school time to pursue religious education?
- V: It's not the separation I'd be worried about so much as what they do when they're separated.
- D: Again, you have to calculate the cost. If groups of students and teachers come together to study their respective faiths and the reasons why they represent the truest conception of reality, the best place for this to happen is the school best in the sense that there they are least likely to forget the bonds of respect and friendship that bind them to the people of another faith in the next room, people with whom they were learning or playing a short while ago and with whom they will do so again in a short while.
- V: Yes, I see an advantage there over a separate or parochial school system.
- D: We shouldn't even assume that separate or parochial schools widen the divisions among religious groups. A major sociological study of Catholic education in the United States came up with a verdict of "not guilty" or at least "not proven" on the charge of divisiveness. ¹¹ A Canadian study of the products of Anglican and United Church schools in Newfoundland also failed to reveal any divisiveness of such schools. ¹² If separate schools don't foster religious divisions, religious education in a public school setting is even less likely to.
- V: That is a telling argument.
- D: But don't misunderstand me, Vivian. I don't think religious divisions are something that can be passed off lightly. They are too easily merged with political or social antagonisms to be considered innocuous. And more serious from a religious point of view is the fact that they impose limits on the unity of mankind that religion aspires to; and the fact that they limit the effectiveness of communication between religion and the secular order. Teachers of secular subjects will find it more difficult to pursue a continuing dialogue with religion teachers representing a half dozen different faiths rather than one or two.
- V: So to give the religious-secular dialogue in the school the best chance of success, another dialogue should take place among the groups offering religious education.
- D: Yes, decidedly.

- V: Couldn't it even be argued that the religious groups should first bridge their differences and design a common educational program before coming to the school for a place in the curriculum?
- D: I'm not sure. The most effective way of getting them to develop a common program might be to invite and encourage them to sponsor public school courses, with the suggestion that facing the same pedagogical challenge together through a joint course would be easier than facing it separately. They're calling my flight, Vivian, and all we've done is talk about my pet subject.
- V: I've been a very willing listener.
- D: And a very keen questioner.
- V: Your approach to religious education has really captured my interest. You see it as a field worth developing not just for itself but for what it can do for the rest of the curriculum. You've given me a glimpse of a more complete and better-knit education than we have in our school now.
- D: I'm so glad you've found our conversation useful; certainly I have. You've helped me build my dream *and* stay awake to reality.
- V: Then you won't mind my saying that I still see real obstacles in the way of a partnership between religious and secular education: unfamiliarity between the partners, doubts about the need and feasibility of a partnership, and simply human inertia. Those are the things that need to be understood and countered before your dream can become a reality. So I wish we could continue our dialogue.
- D: Perhaps we can. Let's exchange addresses; I would welcome your reactions when I put my further thoughts down on paper.

NOTES

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