

Interculturalism as Prophetic Dialogue. An Ethnographic Action Research Study of the Missiology and Ecclesiology of a Migrant Church in Ireland.

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Abstract

This article makes the case that an intercultural spirituality is an imperative for churches in Ireland. The outcomes of research carried out at Dublin City Corps, a Salvationist church is summarised. The issue of *rootlessness* experienced amongst migrants in an Irish church is explored by an action research group.

This is followed by a theological enquiry into the concepts of Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, 'prophetic dialogue' and the image of 'entering someone else's garden'. By asserting that interculturalism and mutuality between cultures not only enriches the church but moves the church towards biblical ideals, prophetic dialogue as an intercultural spirituality is elucidated.

Interculturalism as Prophetic Dialogue

The story of Dublin City Corps, a Salvationist church in Ireland begins in 1888. Eight years previous, The Salvation Army 'opened fire' in Belfast, and established twenty corps in the northern province of Ulster, before sending its first officers to Dublin in the eastern province of Leinster. Within weeks two corps were established. Dublin I Corps (now Dublin South Corps) opened in Rathmines, an area in the south Dublin with a large Protestant population, followed by Dublin II Corps (now Dublin City Corps) in a large Catholic community in the north inner city.

Dublin II Corps attracted a considerable number of Irish people who became soldiers. By 1908, a total of eight corps existed in what is now the Republic of Ireland. This was short-lived. The Easter Rising in 1916, the Irish War of Independence from 1919-1921 and the emergence of the Irish Free State contributed to closures, leaving only three corps, two in Dublin and one in Cork. In

1980, Dublin Rathmines Corps and Dublin Abbey Street Corps amalgamated to become Dublin City Corps, then in 1983 Cork Corps closed. Dublin City Corps was for a time the only Salvation Army church left in Ireland. Dublin South Corps reopened in 2001. The corps declined numerically until 2012 when the corps building was sold, due to a lack of funds for necessary restorative works. A people now exiled, few members remaining, only a handful of migrants. Just like the Israelites exiled in Babylon, the question of Psalm 137:4 was being asked, “How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?”

Then they began to arrive—migrants from Africa, Asia, South America, North America, and Europe—seeking a community to belong to and a desire to share the gospel. Nine years later the transformation is remarkable. A vibrant, diverse and dynamic faith community has emerged and together is learning to sing the LORD’s song in Ireland. In this context questions emerged of whether the local church was helping migrants to flourish and sing the LORD’s song.

Action research was conducted in June 2019 with the members of Dublin City Corps in the form of a questionnaire to discern themes relating to migrant experiences and followed up by action research groups that theologically reflected on themes that emerged. The design, outcomes and learning of this research is explored in detail in the dissertation that shares the title of this article (Lennox 2020). That research was then used to inform a theological enquiry on interculturalism as a missiological and ecclesiological imperative for Irish churches. This enquiry used Catholic missiologists Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder as conversation partners.

This article will summarise the research and discussion of that dissertation. It will begin with a summary of the key findings from the research carried out. Then the theological reflection on interculturalism will be presented using the case of Dublin City Corps as an example of intercultural dialogue that can shape the church and its mission. The missiological works of Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, particularly the image of entering someone else’s garden and their missiological approach of prophetic dialogue, will be used to help elucidate the conversation.

Summarising the Research

The research project utilised a questionnaire with follow-up action research groups. The intention being to explore the experiences of Dublin City Corps members, both concerning migrating to Ireland and being part of the local corps.

The questionnaire was distributed to thirty-six adult members of the corps who were also migrants. Twenty-six completed responses were received, a response rate of 72.2%. The respondents revealed a diverse demography. Sixteen respondents (61.5%) were aged under 40, with only one respondent being of retirement age. Half of the respondents (50%) were Black African or Black African/European, eight respondents (30.8%) were South or South-East Asian, and five (19.2%) were White European or White North American. This demographic data would prove useful in identifying different themes that would inform later discussions.

Two open ended questions which asked about the benefits and challenges of being part of the corps provided information that directly informed the action research groups that followed. 50% of respondents indicated 'belonging to the fellowship' was a benefit, saying things like "it is like a family, they make you feel at home", "belong (you feel like one of them)" and feeling "right at home". The place of 'Spiritual Growth and Teaching' also scored highly with 42.3% of respondents recognising this benefit. "The word relates to my life", "reinvigorated my relationship with God", and "rooting my Christian faith in a culture that is hostile to evangelical faith" were some of the statements that reflect this.

The other high-rate response was concerning "Care and Support" as a benefit which denoted a more practical and emotional form of support than "Spiritual Growth and Teaching", which had ten respondents (38.5%) say as such. When breaking down the benefits by ethnicity, some interesting trends emerge. Every single White respondent indicated that "Belonging to a Fellowship" and "Spiritual Growth and Teaching" was a benefit to them. 38.5% (five of thirteen) Black respondents mentioned those two benefits; however, "Care and Support" (53.8%) was the most cited benefit of being part of the church.

Of the challenges that were stated, there were three that were referenced by six participants, 23.1% of all responses. These were “Demographics”, “Distance to Travel”, and “Lack of Building / Isolation”. The challenge of “Demographics” was twofold. First was the “struggle to grow an indigenous [Irish] congregation”, and second was the challenge “to embrace other cultures”. The lack of local Irish congregants while simultaneously integrating a variety of cultures was a challenge. Interesting to note is that one participant who said this was a challenge also went on to say, “Cultural diversity has become very important in my life”. Challenges are not always obstacles to participation, but often the means of growth. The “Distance to Travel” challenge can be understood considering participants residing in and travelling to the church from six different Irish counties.

The “Lack of Building / Isolation” challenge was insightful. Respondents stated, “the church changed many locations [in eight years]”, “not having our own space to be able to establish the church”, “isolation from the rest of the Salvation Army” and “we couldn’t grow much as a community” due to not having a home. There are parallels with what Walter Brueggemann (2002:4) said of the displaced Israelite community, “it is *rootlessness* [...] that characterizes the current crisis”.

Following the questionnaire, eight participants were selected to participate in the action research group. The group sessions utilised *Faith Based Facilitation* (The Salvation Army 2010) a means of theologically reflecting on the broad themes that emerged from the questionnaire. The hoped-for outcome is that the group reflecting together would experience a *kairos* moment, a shared revelatory experience, where the Spirit of God is speaking through the shared conversation (The Salvation Army 2010:9-10).

A purposive selection process was used to ensure that representation was as broad as possible (Morgan 2014:127). There was an even gender split with four female and four male participants. Three participants were Asian, three were Black, and two were White. The association with the church ranged from one year to ten years. Three action research sessions took place on consecutive Sundays in June 2019, following the Sunday service.

The first session focused on identifying which key theme from the questionnaire would be explored in more depth. As the conversation unfolded, different themes were identified. The first was the “geographic isolation, with The Salvation Army only having two corps in the Republic of Ireland.” The second was the corps having no building of its own, with one participant stating that having no spiritual home is negatively impacting the growth of the congregation, whilst another said this is “resulting in people drifting to other churches”. The third theme was the lack of Irish members in the corps with one participant saying “there’s a slight disconnect from the local setting” as a result. All agreed that these could be summarised under a single theme, isolation.

The second session delved deeper into the issue of isolation beginning with the accessibility of The Salvation Army in Dublin. The frustration was evident in participants as they were unanimous in their concern at the lack of visibility. One person said “people [in Ireland] just think [the Army] is a charitable organisation.” Another expressed, “it was a surprise because I know that the Salvation Army started from UK, so I expected many corps in Ireland.” Her reflection on this experience led to the realisation that The Salvation Army is viewed as “a secular community, not a Christian community” in Ireland, before adding “we can’t blame the people here that they don’t know about Salvation Army.” The researcher noted the sadness expressed during this exchange as participants shared of the public perception of their church.

The discussion transitioned to the isolation Dublin City Corps experiences from the wider Salvation Army family. The structure of the denomination means that regional conferences and gatherings are held in Belfast, UK. The whole group then laughed knowingly in agreement when asked if they needed a visa to travel to Belfast for Salvation Army events, “we should”. A moment of humour as participants understood the legal requirement to enter Northern Ireland, knowing most migrant’s resident in Ireland do not possess a UK visa due to the cost and difficulty of obtaining one.

The third and final session saw the group sharing scripture and seeking a sense of what God was saying. The Great Commission and the story of Joseph in Egypt were

important verses the group reflected on; however, it was during a period of reflection on Jeremiah 29:4-14, the word of the Lord to the Jewish exiles that the critical moment came. The question asked was in response to these verses, 'what is God saying to the corps?'. One person said "to share The Salvation Army to the world and here in Dublin. You, go out in the fields [...] The time is now." Adding to this, another responded, "obey God [...] then [do] not be afraid to do it". Someone else said overcoming fear would only make sense if people made themselves available to be more involved, urging the need to develop a community where people are committed. Then came the *kairos* moment, as one of the participants simply stated, "it is time to rebuild". There was silence for a few moments as the group became aware, God is speaking to us.

The group proceed to setting priorities. There was a long pause as participants weighed up the reflection and formed their responses. The group conveyed the need for increased visibility that focussed on the faith and principles of the church, expressing that invitation and hospitality should be prioritised. Some urged that the priority should be to establish new expressions of ministry in other places such as Wexford and Drogheda. Finally, despite concerns that The Salvation Army is perceived as a charity rather than a church, some noted the corps should support the Dublin-based homeless shelters. This ended the action research group, with the reflections being continued outside of the research within the local corps council.

The research revealed that the corps situation reflected the experience of *rootlessness* that many members of the corps experience as migrants. This *rootlessness* was evident in the corps at the time of the research; having no building, experiencing isolation from the wider Salvation Army family, and being disconnected Irish culture were perceived as significant constraints.

The highlighting of this gap can itself help develop the praxis of reflection. As Ballard and Pritchard (2006:87) state, a tool is limited in that it cannot account for the intricate nature of interpersonal relationships and the nuance of group dynamics. It is necessary to allow the group to develop its shared understanding of the process, and to utilise the tool as needed, so that in exploring and reflecting together, a new revelation, a *kairos* moment emerges.

Significantly, the participants experienced *kairos* moments, perceiving that God was giving revelation. These *kairos* moments occurred because of the sincerity and faith of the participants, not because the process produced these moments. The issues of isolation as a corps and the lack of a building can be understood as *rootlessness*, with the need for roots also being the “primary concern of Israel and a central promise of God to his people” (Brueggemann 2002:4). This *rootlessness* also correlates with the challenge of connecting with Irish people, whose land is “freighted with social meanings derived from historical experience” (Brueggemann 2002:2).

Prophetic Dialogue as Spirituality for Intercultural Churches

The changing nature of church communities through immigration can enrich Irish churches with significant theological resources if the churches can develop intercultural modes of being. Bevans and Schroeder (2011:72) define intercultural as “a mutual multidirectional movement between cultures”. Peter Phan (2018:159-60) asserts that “theology is inevitably a culture-dependent and culture-bound intellectual production”, so that cross-cultural encounters have always been between a “culture-laden gospel” in another cultural or multicultural setting.

A church is diverse or multicultural purely on the basis that multiple cultures are co-existing within the body. This does not imply either integration, dialogue, or relationships that cross the cultural divide. In contrast, the formation of an intercultural church, such as Dublin City Corps, necessitates something more than the co-existence of multiple cultures. It is proposed that the ethos of prophetic dialogue is formed in such a setting. This ethos may not be conscious or even articulated. However, it is embodied in the practice of the church. It is evident by what Cathy Ross (2016:140) calls attentiveness, which is to be fully present and aware of one another. Ross further clarifies this ethos in terms of hospitality.

‘Hospitality is in itself a prophetic practice as it crosses boundaries, welcomes all and involves taking risks. It is also dialogical as it requires listening and learning. It practices attentiveness and encourages

spaciousness. Hospitality cannot be practised as a monologue. It requires relationship, receiving, community and change' (Ross 2015:67-68).

Importantly, within a truly intercultural church, such hospitality is not premised on one culture being guest, and the other host. Instead, all cultures are both guest and host, each culture required to engage in dialogue, to practice attentiveness, and create space for the other.

Roger Schroeder credits the "initial impetus and inspiration" of the dialogical approach to mission as arising from missionaries in Asia, and the prophetic approach as emerging from missionaries in Latin America. He and Bevans proposed "prophetic dialogue" as a way to synthesise these seemingly opposite approaches to mission (Schroeder 2013:51-52).

Prophetic dialogue is rooted in the Trinity, and the mission of God. "God's *inner nature* of dialogue and communion is the same as God's *outer movement* of acting in dialogue and calling to communion" (Bevans and Schroeder 2011:26). Likewise, mission is prophetic because God is prophetic in his holiness, and "God is prophetic in dealing with creation" (Bevans and Schroeder 2011:41). The Triune community is both dialogical and prophetic. Prophetic dialogue then, being rooted in the person of God, is also rooted in *missio Dei*. Schroeder (2008:126) helpfully frames the spirituality of dialogue as "discovering how the Reign of God is already present" in the world, recognising God is already active in other cultures. Similarly, the spirituality of prophecy is discerning where God and his reign is not recognised, affirming within culture what is good and true, while denouncing that which is contrary to the Lordship of Christ.

In this sense, "prophetic dialogue functions much more as a *spirituality* than as a *strategy*" (Bevans and Schroeder 2011:2). It is as Kritzinger (2013:36) says, "the *ethos* of mission". This ethos was seen throughout the action research, as the participants engaged both dialogically and prophetically, with attentive listening, and honest conversation. As Juliet Kiplin (2016:208) affirms, "truth is ambiguous and not always easy to discern, but space for truth-telling is nurtured through dialogue." The truth-telling that emerged revealed the story of a community that may not be

conscious of this ethos. However, the ethos is evidenced in its interculturalization of the gospel. The significant benefits of belonging to a family, and the support and care that participants identified in the questionnaire demonstrate the crossing of cultures and healthy dialogue within the body. The yearning and cry, “we need a place” from the action research, as opposed to the *rootlessness* experienced, and the being “empowered by *anticipation* of it” (Brueggemann 2002:15), is the prophetic spirit of an intercultural church.

The question is thus posed. “Is prophetic dialogue more a creative tension than a synthesis?” (Bevans and Schroeder 2011:3). David Bosch clarifies the tension between dialogue and prophecy, as, at their extremes, dialogue presumes God is active in the world, and the role of the church is to point to what he is doing. In contrast, prophecy perceives the church as “the sole bearer of the message of salvation” with a crucial role in converting people (Bosch 1991:381).

In his analysis of the relationship between Christian faith and culture, Niebuhr (1951:129) describes that when a Christian views Christ, or the gospel of Christ, as transcending culture then “a remarkable practical synthesis” emerges. The Christian can reconcile the gospel and culture, even when “full of tensions and dynamic movements and subject to strains”, because faith in Christ is neither entirely accommodating nor wholly rejecting of culture, but rather transcending of it (Niebuhr 1951:120-129). Bringing this understanding into the context of an intercultural church such as Dublin City Corps, a mutuality is formed between persons. No one culture is better or worse than another, they are merely different, yet it is the same Christ that is Lord of all.

To use a metaphor, the necessary creative tension required to shape and cultivate an intercultural church is like the pressure required to form a diamond. Within Dublin City Corps, there are inevitably assumptions that need to be dismantled, biases to be discovered through reflexivity, faux pas to overcome, a mutual listening to one another and critical truth-telling required. The creative imagination and dialogue needed to work through these are forming a beautiful, multifaceted community that like a diamond, shines even brighter when all facets are in the light of Christ.

Bevans and Schroeder (2011:33) apply to their understanding of mission the image of, 'Entering into Someone Else's Garden', and develop it into a powerful metaphor for understanding the nature of intercultural ministry. The image of entering the garden of another refers to the movement of multicultural relationships that require "peaceful co-existence and minimal cooperation for the sake of attaining a common goal", towards "mutually enriching and challenging [intercultural] relationship[s] of understanding, acceptance, and care" (Bevans and Schroeder 2011:72). The theme of mutuality is a significant value for intercultural missiology, as opposed to "cultural imperialism and ethnocentrism" that has often marked mission in the past (Bevans and Schroeder 2011:75).

Bevans and Schroeder opt to use inculturation as their missiological approach, employing prophetic dialogue as the hermeneutic for understanding the method. In their work *Constants in Context*, they describe the "primary task of the person who would inculturate the gospel is to be done in *dialogue* with the context in which the gospel is to be preached", and "to *listen* and *discern* how best to connect the unchanging aspects of Christian faith" with the culture (Bevans and Schroeder 2004:387).

The focus of inculturation is based on someone of Christian faith, the guest culture, going to those without Christian faith, the host culture. The act of inculturation is the contextualising of the gospel to the host culture (dialogue) that the message would shape and change the host culture in some way (prophetic). Michael Jagessar (2015:260) offers a criticism of inculturation in that the culture always shapes the presented gospel; it "lends itself to leave un-interrogated the linking of "civilized and purity" with notions of Whiteness and normativity." This criticism is echoed by Pears and Cloke (2016:11-12), who expose the "struggle to make a complete break with the colonial spatial imagination", concluding the image "conveys a sense of binary difference between the missionary [...] and the foreign recipient".

Inculturation undermines the mutuality that is proposed as crucial in the image of the garden. Far better is to view the image through a hermeneutic of interculturalisation. This results in two or more cultures engaging in a dialogue of mutuality, discovering where God is present in all cultures, guest and host. Further, the reflexive prophetic

approach recognises that each culture has characteristics that are affirmed by the Reign of God, and qualities that are divergent to the values of the Kingdom of God. It is “a more dynamic recognition of interaction, mutual influence and interconnectedness” (Jagessar 2015:260).

Interculturation recognises the task of contextualising the gospel through prophetic dialogue will inevitably influence both cultures, whether rooted in Christian faith or not. An example of interculturation in the Bible is the encounters of the first missionaries of the early church, who being culturally Jewish, presumed the gospel demanded Gentile converts should take on Jewish practices such as circumcision (Acts 15:1), an act of inculturation. Yet successive intercultural encounters that led to an Ethiopian eunuch being baptised (Acts 8:36-38), a Roman centurion wanting to hear the gospel (Acts 10:30-33), and uncircumcised Gentiles receiving the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-45). These resulted in a gathering of Jewish Christian leaders changing their understanding of the gospel (Acts 15:21-22). Stan Chu Ilu (2017:47) affirms that “diversity and interculturality” developed organically from the growth of dispersal of the early Christians into Africa, Asia and Europe. He later proposes that interculturality requires “an attitude of radical openness, receptivity and sensitivity to other voices” (Ilu 2017:53).

In the context of Dublin City Corps, inculturation would be an inept approach to both ecclesiology and missiology. First, the church itself is formed of many cultures, each with distinct values, expressions of belief and practice. Second, the city is a microcosm of globalisation whereby many people would regularly engage and often be immersed in more than one culture. Third, Irish culture itself is complex, nuanced, and pluralistic.

The research raised both challenges and benefits that members of the church experienced with respect to integrating into a multicultural Ireland. The argument is that an intercultural approach would provide the best foundation for the church to flourish and to engage in the *missio Dei*. This intercultural approach would evolve the image of mission as ‘entering someone else’s garden’ to ‘cultivating a shared garden’. Jagessar (2015:269) asserts that “becoming intercultural renders all of us ethnic,” moving people “*beyond* dialogue and inclusion to justice”.

This shared garden would emerge and be sustained through prophetic dialogue. Through a dialogue of mutuality, all cultures would contribute to the shaping of this shared garden, discovering that God is present in the creative tension required to engage with this dialogical approach. The garden is itself prophetic as the alternative intercultural community is a critique of understandings that segregate and emphasise differences and otherness between people (Brueggemann 2001:117). It is also prophetic, as the shared garden is a sign of the eschatological community that is formed by God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. “A great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9).

Now in the context of Ireland, there is a necessity to develop an intercultural theology within the churches. Das and Hamoud (2017:53) stress that God cares for migrants simply because “all people are created to belong to specific places, to have a home, and to belong”. Bevans (2008:90) is accurate in affirming “mission is among migrants”, migrants are involved in mission, and “Christian migrants themselves have precious gifts to give to the church itself – to form it more fully into the body of Christ in the world”. All of this points to the prophetic statement by Guerra (2008:243) “that migrants represent a major sign of the presence of God within our contemporary history”.

Migration as a theological matter should be of importance to Irish churches because at the heart of *missio Dei*, is the migratory activity of the Father sending the Son into the world; the Father and the Son sending the Spirit into the world; and the Father, Son and Spirit sending the church into the world (Bosch 1991:390). Peter Phan (2016:848) also emphasises that without migration, there would not be a worldwide church, and consequently, no Irish church. Phan (2016:864) also elucidates the migrant nature of the church, always on the move towards the eschatological hope of the Kingdom of God. This should form within the church, an extraordinary compassion and desire to welcome and include migrants.

In her pioneering research into the dynamics of religious faith and practice, Gladys Ganiel, through surveys and interviews, presents a comprehensive and piercing

analysis of the changing condition of faith in Ireland. She summarises, “the overall picture seems to be one in which faith communities struggle to negotiate diversity, and to promote reconciliation or ecumenism” (Ganiel 2016:55). However, those churches, non-traditional denominations, that practice what she terms as extra-institutional religion, are better suited at negotiating diversity, and have “the potential to contribute to reconciliation, more so than other expressions of religion such as traditional denominations” (Ganiel 2016:231). Many migrants will come to Ireland with theological resources, experiences and perspectives, that if allowed to contribute to the Irish dialogue around sectarianism and faith, can provide energy and creativity to aid the task of reconciliation.

For any person living in a culture that is not their own, they experience the *rootlessness* that comes from being displaced. Migrants are marginalised by their lack of connection to the land and culture in which they now reside. They are in a liminal place, struggling between what they knew and what they do not know yet—learning new languages, new values, forging a new identity. The “possibility or impossibility of developing roots in the new land, [is] a dynamic that varies between interaction and exclusion” (Guerra 2008:248).

The why of interculturalism in Ireland is precisely because migrants need the church in Ireland, and the Irish church needs migrants. Inculturation inevitably heightens the otherness of different cultures, and at its worse actively alienates and discriminates those who need embrace and a sense of place. In contrast, interculturalism, when practised with an underlying spirituality of prophetic dialogue allows the creation of new spaces, where the native and the migrant can still be themselves. There, cultural distinctiveness is celebrated, while simultaneously all forge a new shared identity, no longer the migrant and the native, but a sister and a brother in Christ.

Dublin City Corps have experienced the blessing of being an intercultural church. Participants acknowledged the challenges it presents yet affirmed the richness it brings. The process of interculturalism is a constant one, never finished. The process is part of the mission of the church, which reflects the diversity and unity of the Triune God.

Conclusion

Using the case of Dublin City Corps, I have argued that Irish churches must develop an intercultural approach to missiology and ecclesiology.

The summary of research carried out, through a questionnaire and action research group showed that it was a sense of *rootlessness*, both in the disconnect from Irish culture, the wider Salvation Army and the church being without a home that presented the main challenge to the corps. Coincidentally, this *rootlessness* may also have been the dynamic that allowed a diverse group of migrants to gather together in community. The critical exploration by the research participants led to a *kairos* moment, with the clear call, “it is time to rebuild”. Priorities were set, to increase the visibility of the corps, establish new ministries in Ireland, and serve in the homeless shelters.

The subsequent theological enquiry in dialogue with Bevans and Schroeder built on the research amongst members of Dublin City corps, exploring the importance of an intercultural approach to ecclesiology and missiology. Prophetic dialogue was examined as a spirituality for intercultural churches, grounding the approach in *missio Dei*, and highlighting creative tension as an essential element of the relationship between prophecy and dialogue. The image of ‘entering someone else’s garden’ and inculturation was critiqued and developed into ‘creating a shared garden’, an image grounded in inculturation. Finally, the argument that Irish churches should adopt intercultural approaches was made. This was developed by presenting migration as a theological issue, relating concepts of God and the church as migrants. The analysis by Ganiel, on the importance of diversity in Irish churches, supported the argument. For churches that do embrace interculturalism, new possibilities and a shared identity will emerge.

To conclude the story, let us return to Dublin City Corps. One year on from the research, new actions emerged from the priorities. The corps found a home and had a big celebration. There are some Irish people now attending the services. The corps is serving in two homeless shelters, and an intercultural leadership team has

been established. And yes, the corps is still singing the LORD's song in Ireland, and each new voice only makes it sound more beautiful.

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