

The Missiological Implications of an Epistemological Shift

by Paul G. Hiebert

The current epistemological crisis in science and philosophy has significant implications for western theology (Hiebert 1985). It also affects the integration of theology and science, and our understanding of the missionary task. How we contextualize theology, how we respond to the theological pluralism now emerging in non-western churches, and how we relate to non-Christian religions as systems of thought and to non-Christians as persons are all determined to a great extent by our epistemological premises. At the core, all of these raise the question of how we relate two or more different systems of knowledge.

Systems of Knowledge

When we talk of relationships between systems of knowledge, we must specify their level of abstraction (Figure 1. cf. Kuhn 1970, Schilling 1973, Laudin 1977, and Hofstadter 1980). For our purposes, we will differentiate three levels.

At the bottom are theories. These are limited, low level systems of explanation that seek to answer specific questions about a narrow range of reality, and do so by using preceptions, concepts, notions of causation and the like. Alternative theories may arise which give different answers to the same set of questions. Theories themselves may be on different levels of generality, and broader theories may subsume more limited ones.

Theories are imbedded in higher level systems of knowledge which Kuhn (1970) calls "paradigms," Laudin (1977) calls "research traditions," and I will refer to as "belief systems." In the sciences these would include physics, chemistry, biology and so on. In theology these would include systematic and biblical theology. Belief systems select a domain of reality to examine, determine the critical questions for investigation, provide methods for investigation and integrate one or more theories into a comprehensive system of beliefs. They also mediate between theories and the world view of the culture within which they emerge. In relationship to theories, they set the boundaries of inquiry and determine the legitimacy of problems to be examined. They also generate conceptual problems for theoretical investigation, and serve heuristic and justificatory roles (cf. Laudin 1977:78-120). In relationship to the world view in which they are located, they make explicit its largely implicit assumptions and work out the implications of these assumptions for beliefs and behavior. They also affect changes in the world view by introducing new theoretical constructs, and by mediating changes

forced by experiential input.

The specialists who work in a belief system form a community that sets the standards, defines "proofs," and checks their research and teaching. It also controls the training and entry of new candidates into the discipline (Barnes 1982:10).

Others apply the theories of a belief system to life. Thus we have applied physics, engineers and technologists who draw on theoretical physics. Furthermore, sections of the general public may accept the word of specialists as authority. Most Americans, for instance, are confident that physicists have a great deal of true knowledge about the real world because they see and use the technological fruits of their theories. The public is generally unaware of the theoretical debates taking place between specialists within a research tradition.

Finally, a number of research traditions and a great deal of common sense knowledge are loosely integrated in large "world views." These are the most fundamental and encompassing views of reality shared by a people in a culture, the largely implicit assumptions they have about the nature of things—about the "givens" of reality. To question these assumptions is to challenge the very foundations of their world. People resist such challenges with deep emotional reactions, for they threaten to destroy their understandings of reality. As Geertz points out (1979), there is no greater human fear than a loss of a sense of order and meaning. People are even willing to die for their beliefs if these make their deaths meaningful.

Relationships Between Systems of Knowledge

In considering relationships between different systems of knowledge, we must keep these levels in mind. Although it is important to examine in detail how systems on one level relate to those on another (e.g., how theories relate to paradigms, and paradigms to world views), we will not do so here. Rather, we will briefly examine how theories in a paradigm relate to each other, how paradigms within a world view relate to each other, and how world views relate to each other.

How we view the relationship between systems of knowledge on the same level is largely determined by our epistemological foundations (see Hiebert 1985: figure 1). Naive realists and idealists hold that true knowledge must be precise, objective and certain. Both basically hold to a one-to-one correspondence between human knowledge and reality, but for different reasons. The former see knowledge as a photograph or a mirror of reality (Gill 1981:34-36); the latter see it as creating reality. Consequently, both look for a single comprehensive system of knowledge that will encompass all

attack other views as false. (A summary of the characteristics of naive realism and idealism, and the ways in which they resemble and differ from other epistemological positions, is given in Figure Two.)

Critical realists and instrumentalists, on the other hand, recognize the finiteness of human knowledge and therefore are open to change, and to the reexamination of their existing beliefs. Conflicting theories force them to test their theories further against empirical and rational criteria. Moreover, critical realists and instrumentalists allow for diverse views of reality, but on different premises. Critical realists claim truth for their systems of knowledge, while instrumentalists do not. This leads them to relate different systems of knowledge in different ways.

Critical realists see theories and belief systems as maps or blueprints of reality. Each may give us some truth about reality. None of them shows us the whole. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of reality, we need many blueprints which complement one another. For example, to understand a house, a simple photograph will not do. We need the blueprints of its wiring, plumbing, structural beams and foundations, most of which remain unseen. Reality is far too complex for our minds to grasp in total. We need simplified maps by which we can comprehend it.

At the heart of the integration of theories and belief systems for realists is the theory of complementarity (Grunbaum 1957, MacKay 1958, 1974, Austin 1967, Holton 1970, and Kaiser 1973). Different views of reality can be accepted as complementary so long as they do not contradict one another in the areas of their overlap. If there is disagreement, the discrepancy must be resolved or one or the other must be rejected. We may see things in different ways, but ultimately there can only be one truth within which there is no inconsistency. For instance, if the blueprints show wiring in a wall that does not exist in the structural blueprints, one of them must be wrong.

A critical realist sees the various sciences as potentially complementary. Physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, sociology and anthropology can all contribute insights into the nature of reality which the others do not provide. Each, in a sense, provides a level of analysis not found in the others. Schilling points out that physicists have found

that the newly discovered strange phenomena and entities (those of the micro-world) differ so fundamentally and categorically from the more familiar ones (of the macro-world),

FIGURE 2
CHARACTERISTICS OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL POSITIONS

IDEALISM	<p>MENTALISM (reality is in the mind) —knowledge is itself the object of analysis —we know it with certainty.</p>	<p>DOGMATIC (closed to change) —knowledge is exact and cumulative. —declarative in stance. —ahistorical and adultural in nature. —authoritarian. —parent/child approach to others. —learning = memorizing. —teacher and message oriented. —at times arrogant and combative. —conversion is radical displacement.</p>	<p>ABSOLUTES (affirms that truth can be known) —can know in full.</p>	<p>CHOICE (humans reason and choose)</p>
NAIVE REALISM	<p>REALISM (reality is the world including the mind. Tests knowledge against experience and history) —knowledge is totally objective. —photograph view of knowledge. —knowledge is both subjective and objective. —map or model view of knowledge.</p>	<p>AFFIRMATIONAL (open to change) —testimonial and irenic in nature. —sees knowledge in cultural and historical contexts. —adult/adult approach. —concern for person and message. —learner oriented. —teach students to think. —more humble attitude. —conversion = a new gestalt.</p>	<p>—can know in full. —knowledge is totally objective.</p>	
CRITICAL REALISM			<p>—know only in part. —knowledge is both objective and subjective.</p>	
INSTRUMENTALISM	<p>—knowledge is totally subjective</p>		<p>RELATIVISM (denies that truth can be known) —pragmatism. —test is usefulness and does it work. —anti-conversion.</p>	
DETERMINISM				<p>DETERMINISTIC (no human reason or choice)</p>

known earlier, that no theory can possibly describe the newcomers adequately if its concepts and imagery are taken exclusively from the realm of the old. More than that, it became evident that theory in general could no longer be expected to describe reality pictorially, or in one-to-one correspondence to it (1973:78).

He goes on to develop the theory of complementarity between levels of scientific analysis, and suggests that to these can be added theological levels of analysis.

Because critical realists recognize the subjective dimensions of human knowledge, they are also aware that historical and socio-cultural contexts influence systems of knowledge. (Because at the deepest levels these context factors have to do with world views, we will examine them later.)

Instrumentalists, on the other hand, see systems of knowledge as problem solving devices. Because neither theories nor belief systems make truth claims, there is no need to integrate them into a single grand conceptual scheme. Nor is there need for complementarity. Mutually contradictory theories and belief systems can be used so long as they best "do the job." Thoroughgoing determinists, on the other hand, see all knowledge as epiphenomenal, as by-products of external forces. It is foolish, therefore, to speak of the integration of knowledge into single or complementary systems. Both of these views, obviously, are unacceptable to committed Christians because they deny any possibility of knowing the truth.

Integration of Theology and Science

Science and theology have emerged as different belief systems in a western world view. How do they relate to each other? Here again the epistemological question plays a key role in determining the nature of the relationship.

It is clear that no real integration can be achieved between an idealist theology and a realist science. The two are built on different foundations, and attempts to build a common structure upon them will inevitably lead to cracks. The two talk past each other, and in the end we will be forced to choose one or the other as our fundamental frame of reference.

It is possible to seek an integration based on different types of realism. Many social scientists take a naive or critical realist approach to their science and an instrumentalist approach to religion. They affirm the truth of their theories and belief systems, but see religion as a useful fiction created by human groups to hold themselves together. For Durkheim, Marx and others, religion is the symbol of a group's authority over the individual. God is merely a projection of the group's power and values on the cosmic screen. Some theologians turn the tables and claim truth for theology, but only practical utility for the sciences. In both cases, one party devalues the other by not taking it seriously.

As the record of the past hundred years shows, integration between a naive realist theology and science was difficult to achieve. Few problems arose in the areas of nuclear physics and chemistry in which theology made no claims. The greatest conflicts arose in areas where the two overlapped, such as in theories about the origin of the universe, about humans, about miracles (Brown 1984), and about the meaning and forces behind history. Each claimed to offer a grand unified theory and attacked the other on points of disagreement. It is not surprising, therefore, that in a naive realist framework, no integration was achieved.

With the collapse of naive realism, the picture has changed. There is a growing acceptance by critical realist and instrumentalist scientists and theologians of each other's disciplines. But the nature of integration differs greatly depending upon the epistemological foundation used.

Integration is unnecessary in an instrumentalist mode. Both science and theology are seen as pragmatic solutions to immediate problems; the only test is results. But instrumentalism undervalues both of them. Few scientists would agree that although astronomy may do a better job than astrology in solving problems, it is no closer to the truth than the latter. Most scientists are convinced that they are discovering truth about nature. Similarly, no evangelical would hold a relativistic view of theology which affirms that Christ

is not *the* truth, not even *a* truth, but only a useful way of looking at history.

What would integration look like in a critical realist mode? We must keep in mind that critical realism makes truth claims for its theories and belief systems. Therefore, it calls for a test to evaluate two or more theories formulated to answer a set of questions. For example, we can determine which of two road maps is more accurate and complete. But, as we have seen, critical realism allows for complementary theories that examine the same reality in *different ways*—there may be several types of maps of the same city.

It is possible, therefore, to look for complementarity between theology and science, as long as they share the same world view. This requires a theistic science that accepts the existence of God and seeks to examine the order in the universe he has created. We also need a realist theology that examines God's self-revelation in the history of that world. Both science and theology, then, are based on an examination of real events in history, but focus on different dimensions or levels of reality.

There is a second type of complementarity that we need to explore: that between synchronic and diachronic systems of knowledge. The former seek to understand the structures of reality, how these operate and the functions they serve. For example, a synchronic analysis of a human would include an analysis of the body, its various structures such as the circulatory, assimilative, digestive and reproductive systems, and the way it thinks and moves. It would also analyze the effects of various diseases upon the body.

Diachronic systems of knowledge, on the other hand, look at the history of specific realities. A diachronic analysis of a person would examine her or his life story. It would look at various events in the lives of one or more individuals, and the forces at play and their responses.

This distinction helps us understand the sciences. Most, such as physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, sociology and anthropology, are synchronic in character. They examine the structure of matter, life, persons, groups and cultures. History, and to some extent astronomy, are diachronic.

The distinction also helps us to understand theology. Systematic theology is synchronic. It examines the unchanging nature of God and the fundamental structures of creation. Biblical theology is diachronic. It looks at God's acts and revelation in specific cultural and historical settings. We need both synchronic and diachronic models. They complement each other. We begin with specific experiences in history, and from these we infer the basic structures of reality. And these structural models help us to understand and predict what is going on around us. Normally one is in focus, the other is subsidiary. Synchronic models show us the universal order of things. They do not look at specific events. Consequently, exceptional cases and miracles are out of focus. Diachronic models, on the other hand, look at unique events. Synchronic models help us to *understand* how things operate, but *meaning* ultimately seems to rest in diachronic models—in the story of the universe, of a specific people such as Israel, and of individuals.

Taken together, science and theology, diachronic and synchronic paradigms, provide us with a better understanding of reality (Figure 3). But complementarity does not assure us of integration. We can deal with different belief systems piece-meal, and end with what Clifford Geertz (Hammel and Simmons 1970:50) calls a "stratigraphic approach" to reality. For integration to take place, we need to examine the ways in which complementary belief systems relate to each other. When problems and contradictions arise, we need to examine again our theologies against the biblical data, and our sciences against observational data. The task of integrating the sciences and theology is not simple. But it is easier when we deal with complementarity than with grand conceptual schemes.

FIGURE 3
COMPLEMENTARY BELIEF SYSTEMS

	Diachronic Models	Synchronic Models
Theology	Biblical Theology:	Systematic Theology:
Science	Historical Sciences:	Natural and Social

Epistemology and Christian Missions

What implications do epistemological stances have for Christian missions? Six areas in which epistemology plays a particularly important part in missions thinking are: 1) the way in which the essence of the Gospel is defined, 2) the way in which the relationship of Gospel and culture are viewed, 3) the way in which Christians deal with the contextualization of theology and the resulting theological pluralism, 4) the way in which Christians view non-Christian religions, 5) the way in which Christians relate to non-Christian peoples, and 6) the way in which leadership is developed in younger churches. For lack of space, we can touch only on a few of these.

Cultural Differences and Contextualized Theologies One of the central problems facing all missionaries is how to deal with cultural pluralism. The fact is that people in other cultures put their world together in different ways.

We must recognize the greatness of the early missionaries, their commitment to the Gospel, and the great sacrifices they made. However, for the most part, they were naive realists and idealists. They were convinced that their belief systems were true, and they failed to differentiate the Gospel from their cultural ways. Writing about them, Juhnke (1979:10-11) says:

They were too confident of the wholesomeness and goodness of their own culture to see the pagan flaws in their own social and political structures. The mission was strongly influenced by nineteenth-century ideas of progress Missionaries believed themselves to be participating in a worldwide crusade of human advancement.

For them, too, there could be only one theology. They assumed that their own theology was wholly biblical, and that it was not biased by their cultural and historical contexts.

The consequences of these assumptions were damaging. First, they considered most local customs to be evil and sought to root them out. Little attention was given to the local culture and to the felt needs of the people. Consequently, the Gospel was unnecessarily foreign. In a sense the Gospel is foreign to every culture, for it is God's prophetic voice to sinners and the cultures they create. But to this was added the foreignness of western culture such as dress, buildings, pews, translated hymns, western leadership styles and imported technology. Those who became Christians were often seen as agents of the west.

Second, the missionaries sought to transmit their theologies unchanged to the national church leaders. The relationship was that of parent and child, in which the national leaders were expected to learn the missionary's theology by rote. Much was written about the three selves: self propagating, self supporting and self governing. But little was said about the fourth self: self theologizing. For the most part, national leaders were not encouraged to study the Scriptures for themselves and to develop their own theologies. Deviation from the missionary's theology was often branded as heresy. To young nationalistically minded leaders, this was theological colonialism.

Several forces have changed this picture. The first was the maturation of young churches. First generation national leaders were often simple tribal and village pastors. But the second and third generation . . . grew up in Christian settings and were seminary-trained theologians.

The second was the emergence of nationalism around the world. Young national leaders threw off the colonial rule and trappings of the west. Young churches demanded self-rule and the right to study the Scriptures for themselves. This was particularly evident in the independent churches that emerged in many societies.

The third was the rise of anthropological thought and the growing awareness among missionaries of the impact of cultural contexts on Bible translations and theology.

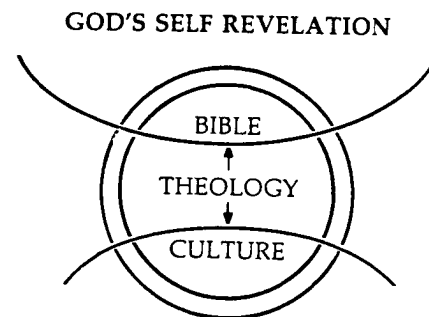
Naive realist approaches are becoming untenable in missions, not only because they are no longer intellectually credible, but also because they fail to resolve the problem of theological pluralism that has resulted from missions. Whether we like it or not, young theologians around the world are reading Scripture and interpreting it for their own cultures. To claim that the missionaries' theology is the only correct one can only lead to breaks in the relationships

between western missions and the churches they have planted around the world. It also denies the priesthood of all believers, and the work of the Holy Spirit in nonwestern Christians.

Idealist theologies face the same problems, for they, too, are essentially ahistorical and acultural in nature. Moreover, they face the fact that different cultures use different systems of rationality in justifying their beliefs (Luria 1976), so an appeal to universal human reason based on propositional logic is difficult, if not impossible to make.

How would critical realists deal with theological pluralism? First, as realists, they would take the historical and cultural contexts of theology seriously. They see all theology as human interpretations of the biblical revelation within specific contexts (Figure 4). Consequently, different theologies are bound to emerge because different cultures ask different questions, and because they view reality in different ways. For example, Indian Christians must ask what a Christian response to the caste system is, and whether they can use Indian terms such as *deva*, *Brahman*, *avatar* and *moksha* for God, incarnation and salvation. These terms are used in Hinduism and normally have Hindu world view connotations. On the other hand, to introduce western or Greek and Hebrew terms makes the Gospel unintelligible to the average Indian. Similarly, Latin American theologians must struggle with the biblical response to the oppression of peasants and the poor.

FIGURE 4
THEOLOGY IS AN UNDERSTANDING OF
SCRIPTURES IN A CULTURAL CONTEXT



Second, because critical realists affirm truth in theology, they must deal with these differences. They cannot accept mutually contradictory theological positions. Often different theologies are complementary, for they address different needs and situations. But where contradictions emerge, they would be resolved by examining the Scriptures.

But critical realists would also check for cultural biases. Just as we can more clearly see sin in the lives of others, so we can see how the cultural and historical settings of Christians in other lands affects their theology. Conversely, they see the cultural biases of our theology much more clearly than we. Therefore, we need to see the church as an international hermeneutical community, in which Christians and theologians from different lands check one another's cultural biases. In the process, there can emerge out of the current diversity a metacultural and metahistorical theology that is largely freed from the influences of specific human contexts. One benefit of this for western theology would be to free it from its cultural biases, and restore its prophetic voice in the face of modernity. As Linder and Pierard point out (1978), western Christianity is in danger of becoming a civil religion justifying western cultural systems.

All this affects the way critical realists view the training of national leaders. The first missionary task is to translate the Bible; the second is to train national leaders to read and interpret the Scriptures in their own cultural context. While the missionaries are deeply persuaded about their own theological understandings, they must accept the fact that the Holy Spirit also leads national leaders and that the message of the Gospel must be discerned within the community of believers and their leaders, and not by outside leaders alone.

Christianity and Non-Christian Religions How do epistemological positions affect our attitudes toward non-Christian religions? Idealists and naive realists are compelled by their epistemologies to reject other religions as totally wrong, but for different reasons. Both seek to construct grand conceptual schemes, brick by brick, by analyzing discernible parts (Gill 1981:20-25, Berger et. al. 1973).

Naive realists see these as empirical facts; for idealists they are propositional. Consequently, other religions and cultures must be radically displaced, not only in their configurational whole, but also in their parts. Old customs, beliefs, and rituals must be destroyed and replaced by new Christian ones. There is little room for reinterpreting them to fit Christianity. Christianity must, therefore, take a combative approach to other religions, and seek to discredit them. The battle must be won on the basis of facts and reason. Conversion, in this epistemological mode, requires a radical change in beliefs and behavior in all their details.

Instrumentalists, on the other hand, see all religions as culture bound, and as serving useful functions in their respective societies. Christianity may be shown to be the best of religions, but it is not unique. Consequently, Christian missionaries should not call for a radical displacement of the old. They should seek to help others better their old religions, and look for an evolutionary movement toward Christianity. Conversion is not central. Helping people to solve their life problems is.

Critical realists fall between these extremes of recognizing only absolutes or relativism. On the one hand they affirm the uniqueness of a Christianity that is faithful to biblical revelation. Consequently, they hold to truth and absolutes, and reject religious relativism. They call for radical conversion to Christ (cf. Kraemer 1938). On the other hand, they recognize that such conversions take place within cultural and historical settings. Young converts cannot totally change the way they see the world. They come with their old categories of thought, and old world view assumptions. These must be changed through careful instruction after conversion. Conversion itself is then not a change in propositional or factual knowledge, it is a change in the overall configuration or *gestalt* in which these are seen; it is a change in allegiance in which Christ is accepted as Lord and the center of their lives. On the synchronic level this means accepting Christ as Lord of all things, on the diachronic level as Lord of history and of the convert's everyday life. The implications of this for the new believer in terms of his or her beliefs, customs and behavior must be worked out daily as the new convert lives under the authority of the Scriptures. The process of sanctification cannot be divorced from that of justification.

Because people live in cultural contexts, the Gospel must be translated into forms and meanings the people understand. But this requires a deep knowledge of other cultures. Missionaries, therefore, must study other religions and dialogue with their leaders, not in order to create a new synthesis between Christianity and other religions, but in order to build bridges of understanding so that the people may hear the call of the Gospel in ways they comprehend without compromising the truth of the Gospel. Because critical realists are concerned deeply about truth, they are aware of the dangers of syncretism and a false Gospel.

Christians and Non-Christians How do epistemological positions influence our attitudes towards non-Christians as persons? Because idealists and naive realists claim certain truth, they often see evangelism as the proclamation of the truth and as an attack on the evils of other religions. This polemical stance often seems arrogant to non-Christians who resent the parent-child relationship implicit within it. Moreover, the emphasis idealists and naive realists place on objectivity and right systems of belief, and their combative approach to other belief systems, often leads to accusations that they are more interested in proving correct doctrine than on winning persons. In both of these positions, emotions, social interaction and other human factors are thought to contaminate reason and truth (Gill 1981:50-52).

Instrumentalists recognize the subjective dimension of human knowledge, and make no claims to truth. Consequently, they accept religious differences uncritically. Often for them, interpersonal relationships and open dialogue are more important than personal convictions.

Critical realists hold to objective truth, but recognize that it is

understood by humans in their contexts. There is, therefore, an element of faith, a personal commitment in the knowledge of truth (cf. Peirce 1955). There are several consequences in this. On the one hand, critical realists respect people of other beliefs as thinking adults, and show respect for their convictions. On the other, critical realists have deep convictions about the truth of their belief systems, and bear testimony to these. Missions to non-Christians then begins in witness—in declaring what God has done in their lives through Jesus Christ. They begin with "I believe . . ." and share with others the Good News they have personally experienced (cf. Acts 26:16, 2 Tim. 1:12). Once people have accepted the Gospel, the missionaries can proclaim its authority in their lives. E. Stanley Jones, one of the great missionary evangelists of our time, wrote (1925:141): "When I was called to the ministry, I had a vague notion that I was to be God's lawyer—I was to argue his case for him and put it up brilliantly." After describing his failure in this approach, he continues (1925:141-142):

This was the beginning of my ministry, I thought—a tragic failure. As I was about to leave the pulpit a Voice seemed to say to me, "Haven't I done anything for you?" "Yes," I replied, "You have done everything for me." "Well," answered the Voice, "couldn't you tell that?" "Yes, I suppose I could," I eagerly replied. So . . . [I] said, "Friends, I see I cannot preach, but I love Jesus Christ. You know what my life was in this community—that of a wild reckless young man—and you know what it now is. You know he has made life new for me, and though I cannot preach, I am determined to love and serve him." . . . The Lord let me down with a terrible thump, but I got the lesson never to be forgotten: in my ministry I was to be, not God's lawyer, but his witness. That would mean that there would have to be living communion with Christ so that there would always be something to pass on. Since that day I have tried to witness before high and low what Christ has been to an unworthy life.

It was on this basis that he later established his effective Round Table method for witnessing to Hindus and Muslims.

Conclusions

I realize that in some ways I have painted a caricature of various epistemological responses to the key missionary questions of our day. But even a caricature can help us to cut through surface impressions to see what lies beneath. Clearly, in a post-modern world we need to reexamine again our epistemological foundations, and to see how they affect our relationships to other people, culture,ologies and religions in a pluralistic world. I am convinced that critical realism is a biblical approach to knowledge (I Cor. 13:12). I am also convinced it is the approach we must take in a post-colonial era in missions in which we must deal with cultural, religious and theological pluralism with deep convictions about the truth, but without arrogance and paternalism.

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