Revival and problems of traditional Christian Churches

Revival and problems of traditional churches: How have they handled the benefits and challenges of their newly privileged positions, their past of collaboration, new social realities, and religious pluralism? How have believers reacted?

Notwithstanding country-by-country differences Eastern Europe experiences a religious growth and an upgrading of the churches. There seems to be a religious increase in some respect, opposite to West-European tendencies. This development is, though, not without contradictions. The present turn to religion includes very different motives and constituents, among others the search for cultural identity, social regeneration and the fulfilment of spiritual needs. The upgrading of the churches is similarly ambiguous. Available data allow different interpretations depending from the fact whether communism is accepted as a fairly well functioning social system, or rather as an artificial corset producing and leaving behind social anomy.

Religious revival – facts and uncertainties

Sociologists and the media recurrently assert a religious revival in Eastern Europe. Cross-cultural surveys offer data for such a suppositionⁱ. Other observers, notably both ideologically biased critics of religion and representatives of churches deny sometimes a substantial religious growth. The founder of one of Western charity institutions helping East European churches was recently asked about religious life in Eastern Europe. His evaluation was temperate. "It is not much different from the West. A big religious renaissance, as expected after 1990, did not come off. Secularisation is gaining terrain in the East too." (Moser 2002:9)

Religion is a big issue in contemporary social reconstruction in Eastern Europe. It is a controversial topic. Remnants of anti-religious old elites clash with believers striving for better social positions. Churches gained a new position in emerging community life, cultural debates and political structures of post-communist societies. This position is impressive especially in contrast to ideology and practice of secularist communism. Religion is neither dead, nor a force including everybody and determining everything in post-communist societies. It is not easy to identify its weight, influence and the tendencies of its development. Clarifications need unequivocal terms and the determination of the basis of comparison. What meant with "religion" which is supposedly reviving? Which indicators of it are used and which countries or which historical periods are taken as a basis of reference, when assessing an increase or decrease?

Background criteria of experts very often can't be uncovered subsequently. Judgements in public opinion can be analysed more easily. There is another reason to start at that point. Social majorities in several post-communist countriesⁱⁱ perceive a religious revival and expect a further religious growth (Table 1.). East European societies are optimistic and expectant concerning the role and future of religion, in sharp contrast to peoples in Western Europe. This public feeling and supposition is a social fact in itself, which has to be taken seriously. It is, though, not necessarily a valid rating of all kinds of religious developments. Socio-cultural as political changes include transformations of the social and political system, of culture and of individual convictions and behaviour. In all of them the position of religion had to be redefined after 1990. The different dimensions have to be studied separately, accordingly.

Previously hidden religion became visible in Eastern Europe after 1990. Marxist ideology prophesying the decay of religion lost its credibility together with communist power. Communist party-states attempted to reduce and control the visibility of religious life. This control perished. Religion and churches came into the limelight. The restitution of possessions of the churches and the restart of denominational establishments in education, health care and charity work offer material for debates in politics and the media. Churches became important public institutions again. These are important changes on the level of the social system and in culture. They may influence the state of religiosity but are by no means identical with it.

The conditions and expressions of religiosity underwent a fundamental change in the final period or after the breakdown of communism. There is sufficient cross-cultural statistical evidence to prove changes of percentages of people, who identify themselves as religious. Their number is mostly decreasing in Western and increasing in Eastern Europe in last decade. (Table 2.).

People not only imagine an increase of religiosity in their milieus, but quite often announce their own religious conversion. Previous studies reported the overwhelming presence of old "babushkas" in East European churches. The lack of youth was a generally observed phenomenon. Now the picture is changing. People over 45 years of age are often suspicious of religion and the churches. On the other hand much people below 40-45 say that they believe now in God, though they didn't used to before. In countries like Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Eastern Germany, Latvia, Russia and Slovakia the category of converts amounts 15-30 per cent of the age group between 18-45 years, respectively 25-50 per cent of all believers in the same group. Data of a single country (Slovenia) deviate from the overall tendency. The ratio of converts among young adults is substantially higher in Eastern than in Western Europe (Table 2.). The percentage of converts in Eastern Europe and the difference in this respect between West- and East-European countries is the bigger, the younger the age group is.

There is no convincing proof, according which the segment of believers in society would be generally bigger in Eastern than in Western Europe. The congruence of the faith of believers and the percentage of church-goers is on the contrary rather higher in Western countries than in relatively modernized part of Eastern Europe. General socio-cultural differences and the variety of specific cases in both parts of Europe cause further problems for an East-West-comparison of religiosity. It is no surprise, that analysts, using specific criteria, arrive at different conclusions. In one respect, though, there is not much space for dissimilar interpretations. If compared with communist times and if speaking about publicly expressed religion, post-communist years brought a distinctly higher level of religiosity. This present degree of religiosity in Eastern Europe may be higher or lower than in Western Europe. It is in any case, maybe with few exceptions like Germany-East and the Czech Republic, within individual countries higher than it was before 1990. This experience and its reflections in public thinking contribute to the feeling of a religious revival.

Uncertainties stem among others from ambiguities concerning the meaning of religiosity in public consciousness. Who is entitled to call himself/herself a Christian? If somebody would ask, as a survey did, what is absolutely necessary for being a true Christian, almost everybody would mention the belief in Godⁱⁱⁱ. Surprising is the lack of further agreement. Among "indispensable requirements for being a committed Christian" only 78,4% of East Europeans say that the Ten Commandments should be followed. The third most often accepted demand is to care for the elderly. 64,6% of the people held it an indispensable part of genuine Christian existence. Private and public forms of religious practice range on place four and five on the list of social prescriptions for a dedicated Christ. In average 59 per cent of East Europeans, but less than half of Czechs, East-Germans and Lithuanians say that regular prayer belong under any circumstances to faithful Christianity. Sunday observation is expected even less. 45 per cent of East Europeans, but merely a third of Czechs and Lithuanians and only one quarter of East-Germans consider the participation on a Sunday service to be a vital demand for a committed Christian. 28,8% oft East Europeans, though just each fourth Lithuanians, 15,9 per cent of Poles and 13,1 per cent of Slovaks insists on an active cooperation of true believers in the local religious community. Specific rules concerning party preference, sexual morality, missionary activity and public behaviour of Christians are anticipated merely by small minorities.

It is not our topic to define the ideal Christian. It has yet to be pointed out, that morality and social responsibility range higher than religious practice among expectations from a faithful Christian. The second finding is the diversity of ideas, the variety between individual countries and between believers and non-believers in the question of expected attributes of a genuine Christian. There is a general perception of a religious revival. It is, however, no detailed consensus about its meaning.

In any case absolute or relative social majorities consider religion as 'important for the future of the world' in Romania (65,3%), Lithuania (63,2%), Croatia (61,8%), Poland (54,5%), the Ukraine (41,7%) and Hungary (44,1%)^{iv}. In three out of ten countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia and Slovenia) about one third of the population agrees, another third disagrees with the above statement and the third third is undecided. Merely in one country (Germany-East) opposed the relative majority (40,8%), that religion would be important for the future of the world. In this country only 25,2% of the population agreed with this sentence.

Religious developments are perceived with different emotions in various countries. ISSP proposed the statement, that "This country would be a better country, if religion had less influence". Disagreements did not outnumber approvals in Great Britain and in Ireland, but they did in other West-European countries, proving the sympathy of majorities for the churches. This sympathy is in Easter Europe even more unanimous. In Latvia, Hungary, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic the opposition against the quoted sentence was stronger, than in most Western countries. In East Germany and in Russia the opposition against the above statement was only a little more general than the acceptance of the statement. The tendency changed in one single country. The majority of Slovenes said, that "Slovenia would be a better country, if religion had less influence."

Relations to the church

West European ideological developments are characterized by some not as de-Christianisation, but as de-institutionalisation, as a growing distance to the churches (Davie 2000). Similar phenomena are present in Eastern Europe as well, mixed with old secularist hostilities against religion and with the egoism of new elites alarmed by the competition of churches in public domain. Approving and disapproving feelings in contemporary Eastern Europe are not the fruits of longer historical processes but consequences of changes in immediate past. Churches transmuted from hidden actors of socio-political scene into formally accepted ones. They were as much surprised by this switch as their adversaries were.

Church representatives are inexperienced in politics and in the rivalries between institutions, nevertheless they insist on their right of the church to be present in public sphere. Secular elites use individual, though not exceptional failures of clerics to dispute the right of the churches for a public presence. They are inclined to regard the churches nothing else than ideologically based institutions without keeping in mind their social character and the size of their members and supporters. A survey asked the evaluation of the following statement: "To strengthen democracy it is important to ensure a role for the churches in it." One quarter to one third of the respondents were undecided. Among the

remaining part visible majorities opted in some countries (Croatia, Lithuania, Romania, Hungary) for the ensuring of a role for the churches. In some other countries (Slovenia, Slovakia, Czech Republic, Germany-East and the Ukraine) majorities were not inclined to accept that the ensuring of a role for the churches would be a condition of democratic development.

Another survey demonstrates differences inside Eastern Europe. In all West European populations people, who say, that "Churches have too much power" outnumber the contrary position, according which "Churches have too little power". Some East European societies (Germany East, Slovenia, Slovakia) are inclined to accept the first opinion. In others (Russia, Latvia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Bulgaria) majorities say that "Churches have too little power" (Tomka 2001). Results reflect not only sympathy or antipathy to the churches but the evaluation of the social situation and history of individual states too.

Beyond specific survey results East-European societies seem to sympathise with churches as big social institutions. Evidences include opinions about the socially supposed competence of churches, the trust in church, as well as social expectations concerning public role and statements of churches.

60 per cent of people in Western and about 70 per cent in Eastern countries suppose, that churches give adequate answers to people's spiritual needs (Table 3.). The same conclusion can be drawn in some other fields of private life, concerning the moral problems and needs of the individual, or problems of family life. The ratio of those, who count on adequate answers of the churches to social problems facing one's own country today is smaller, less than one third of the population. This proportion is the same in East and West. Irrespective of this last East-West-similarity, in Eastern Europe more people expect that the churches can give answers to some relevant questions than in Western Europe. The result is the same if hesitant and undecided people too are taken into account. If respondents saying that churches can't give adequate answers are marked with '0', undecided with '1' and the those saying that churches can give adequate answers are marked with '2' the scores are higher in the East than in the West.

There are a few countries in the East where social groups expecting an answer of the churches are not higher than in some Western countries. And groups believing in the competence of the churches to give adequate answers are in a few Western countries as big as in most Eastern countries. These variety does not relativize the fact, that in Eastern Europe there are more countries than in the West, in which the social majority counts on the answers of the churches. Eastern Europe assign a competence to the churches more generally than Western Europe.

Trust in church can be indicated in comparison to trust in other social institutions vii. Once again there is a clear East-West-difference. In most Western countries the average trust in (profane) public institutions is higher than the trust in the church viii. Trust in church is more common than trust in other public institutions in most countries in Eastern Europe (Table 4.). One could guess, whether East-West-differences reflect different socio-political heritages or rather different levels of economic development and modernisation. This is however a question of interpretation. Beyond this the fact remains, that in respect of social confidence and trust the church has an eminent position among other social institutions in a big number of East European countries with big populations.

The logical consequence of the supposition of the competence of church and of the trust in church is the expectation of their participation in public life, at least on a principal level. As a matter of fact, large groups demand the voice of the churches in different issues. The expression of the opinion of the Catholic Church on several topics is requested by one quarter to two thirds of the populations of ten countries in Eastern Europe (Table 5.) In most countries, though not in Lithuania, Romania and the Ukraine, the strongest call for the opinion of the churches is not in individual (sexual) morality, but in the field of social differentiation and social problems. The interference of the churches in politics is wanted only by smaller groups.

The majority of the new Christian, syncretic and definitely not Christian religious and quasi religious movements, which mean alternatives to the plural theology, the civil movements within the church and the traditional Christianity, entered the country incidentally and through very narrow channels. Not only the religious globalization was obstructed but also the religious localization, which was strongly limited by the political power and which flourished in illegality and semi-illegality.

At the change of the system, globalization and localization appears simultaneously in the national religious field. It is an opportunity to look out and see, to connect the national part to the whole covering the world. On the other hand, the religious world flocks in through the open gates along with its missionaries, campaigns, aids and goods. The destruction of the iron curtain creates different opportunities, motives and experiences for the different churches, religions, denominations and religious communities. For some, it meant a restart, for others regeneration or reversal. It affected in different ways the deeply committed, practicing believers and those connected to their community with looser ties.

1989 in the history of the Hungarian religiousness

1989 is not a turning point, only a milestone. However limited the religious practices and however reduced the institutions of the churches were during the

dictatorship, the major churches formed such an organic net that horizontally (i.e. geographically) and vertically (i.e. bridging the class-divisions) unified the people of the country. The churches (even the minor ones) offered a stage for the common men that were displaced of power. Besides the remnants of the local society and besides the only party, the local church(es) provided a formation in which the voluntariness of participation ant the autonomy of the organization subsisted.

The trends of the religious life after the changing of the system

While in the West, with few exceptions (for example the Neopentecostal charismatic movement that interested P. Berger¹) the new religious movements created in the sixties start to decline at the end of the seventies (especially in the United States) and people start to quit with religions, in our country – as Miklós Tomka² says – liberalization is not present even in traces in ideological issues. In spite of the fact that the discrimination of religious people continues, a religious boom starts. This trend is parallel to the rebirth of the civil and local society: the second economy, the second publicity, self-organized cultural and artistic movements, town beautifying associations and in some cases they are connected (mostly loosely rather than tightly) to the political opposition. This religious awakening draws on national sources mainly but this does not mean the revival of the old traditions. As Tomka demonstrated, a double process in taking place: the decay of the traditions and the appearance of new religious tendencies.

While between 1985 and 1988 the confidence in the social and political institutions was decreasing quickly, the confidence in the churches outpaced the confidence in any other social institutions in 1989. This positive attitude had decreased by the mid-90s. One reason for this is the exaggerated (unrealistic) expectations. The traditional churches weakened in their institutions and intellectual capacities were unable to do a wonder that the people demanded from them³. Another reason was the right-wing, Christian democratic commitment of the so called historical churches. The third reason was the inappropriate relationship between the historical churches and the society surrounding them. These churches often drew on outdated models, they did not realize their importance and role in civil life, they did not take their proper role in the structure of civil life, they did not deal with the most acute social problems, they did not respond sensibly to the signs of the times and they were often unable to dialogize in an appropriate language. In some sense it is true that

¹ BERGER, P., "A globális kultúra négy arca" In 2000 (July-August 1998. p. 16-20)

² TOMKA, M., Csak Katolikusoknak (Corvinus, Budapest, 1995) p. 39-41.

³ This may be a reason that in many places the number of students attending RE decreased considerably. Many parents who were not religious or were connected to the churches with loose ties made their children go to RE hoping that a kind of wonder would happen to their ill-mannered children.

the groups, communities and movements belonging to the new religious streams conquered the areas unoccupied or neglected by the historical churches, attempted to solve the unsolved problems, offered (very often imposingly simple) answers to the unanswered questions and addressed the groups unaddressed (or addressed in an improper way or language) by the historical churches.

The need for transcendence, the requirement for receptive and affirmative communities frequently meets the need for self-realization, enhancement of achievements, enrichment in emotions, interesting and cathartic experiences, plain and practical answers to the great questions and the need for a suggestive charismatic leader (substituting the missing father and educator). Among the young, urban and educated people, more and more lead pragmatic, rational, self-assertive and enterprising lives. Nevertheless, some of their religious needs remained, they are willing to devote some time to eliminate the harm and deficiencies caused by their lifestyle, or to revive the remaining homo religious within. For these purposes the most suitable religious trends or quasi trends are those that don't require deep commitment, too much time, with which they can establish a voidable client-relationship instead of a membership.

Post-communist ideological developments surprize observers in and outside Eastern Europe. There is much evidence of a general religious revival (Albert, Oeldemann 2000, Borowik 1999, Borowik, Babinski 1997, Greeley 1994, Pollack, Borowik, Jagodzinski 1998, Zulehner 1994). People in former communist countries experienced an increase of religiosity in the past decade and they expect a similar growth in coming years (Tomka, Zulehner 1999). This rise of religiosity is in connection with the re-emergence of social identity and national consciousness. It is yet not just has the recovery of traditional religion. The ideological scene is increasingly dominated, besides institutionalized and church-controlled religion, by a heterogeneous variety of individual faith. The social center of religiosity is shifting from the supporters of tradition to young and educated strata. Ahead of interpretations of these tendencies the sociohistorical setting has to be made clear.

Interpretations

Basic facts are explored. They allow though several readings as alternatives or as complementary dimensions of a complex change. It is an eminent task to establish possible interpretations. Future research may look for further empirical evidence.

Religious revival? At a first impression the term suggests a growth in faith or the increase of the number of believers. Data permit, however, at least three different understandings. (1) The disappearance of communist 'sacred canopy' left a cultural vacuum behind. A turn to religion can be the expression of a

search for cultural identity, where the outcome is for the present uncertain. In this case 'religion' is simply a cultural point of reference, with or without transcendental connections. (2) Communist society perpetuated anomy by destroying networks of civil society and of all kinds of belonging. Religion and the churches remained among the few sources producing and maintaining social bonds and community. This function may fascinate people who look for human belonging and company. In this case 'religion' is in the first instance a pattern generating social relations in which specific ideological features may or may not have a role. (3) Communism hindered people to discover and accept religious views. Post-communist societies opened a free market of ideas, religious ones included. Old and new churches try to spread their messages, maybe with some success. Only time can decide about the seriousness and the individual and social relevance of 'religious' conversions.

De-secularisation? The use of this term presupposes secularisation in communism. There may be doubts about that. Secularisation means growing relativity of a formerly dominant socio-cultural integrating role because of functional differentiation. Functional differentiation as promoted by economy was yet counteracted in communism by the coercive character of the authoritarian system. This system persecuted religion and made it to the basic institution of cultural memory and of opposition. Communism did not diminish, but increased the function of religion. This previously latent function became manifest and visible after 1990. The change has possibly nothing to do with secularisation or de-secularisation but with attempts of the regeneration of not yet secularised societies. Secularisation is rather a future challenge for most countries in Eastern Europe.

Closeness to the church? (1) Churches have much social support in Eastern Europe. This fact can be interpreted as an institution-oriented style of religiosity. It is yet not the full picture. (2) Anti-church feelings, even if often only in small influential groups, are stronger than ever in most East European countries. The new visibility and power of churches polarises East European societies. (3) The rapid increase of the prestige of churches in late eighties and some decline of this prestige since the mid-nineties suggests a further explanation. People may use churches as ersatz for lacking civil society and for not functioning social institutions. This hypothesis stresses the temporary and dependent nature of the high numbers of committed church-members.

Return to old state-church-system? (1) The supposed overall competence of the churches and the wish for their interference into public issues may be understood as a revitalization of age-old state-church system. It may be held for the victory of the clergy over the autonomy of worldly affaires. Further on it may be considered as the defeat of pluralism and democracy. People, who think that communism was a well-functioning social system may be inclined to adopt this judgement. Observers, who discovered the inner weakness of communist

social organization and realise the systemic needs after its break-down, may come to other conclusions. (2) Religion may be regarded, both by politicians and by social scientists, as a useful tool of social regeneration, which has to be adopted according to political requirements. The contribution to social rebirth may motivate church officials as well. Such a coalition, certainly, does not match contemporary Western political standards, but, as its proponents argue, neither do the social conditions of most East European countries. It is impossible to create pluralist democracy from above, simply by the introduction of an institutional order. Its growth from below requires peaceful conditions and access to cultural resources. The instrumental utility for social regeneration of a close Church-State-cooperation may provisionally justify shortcomings in pluralism, especially if pluralism was neither in communism, nor before better developed in countries of Eastern Europe. (3) A third position represents trust in social differentiation and pluralisation. It regards the close Church-Statecooperation of most post-communist countries, whether critically or appreciatively, merely as a short-living arrangement in the transition from a defunct artificial social order to an emerging autonomous one.

Do we have sufficient information for a prognosis of religious development in Eastern Europe? Historical development is discontinuous in Eastern Europe. It is impossible to say how strong pre-communist or communist conditions determine contemporary and future developments. Moments of breaks may be great occasions but even less apt for forecasts. Instead of a linear reasoning and instead of exploring tendencies in a not existing continuous social process, prognoses have to refer on the one hand to general concepts of social sciences and on the other to present observations. Sociological thinking and experience suggests that social differentiation and due to it pluralisation and democratisation can not be prevented indefinitely. This genuine necessity gets a support in expectations and socio-political pressure of European unification and more general of globalisation. Convergence in social developments seems to be inevitable. Among the partners which have to adapt to each other Eastern Europe is presumably the less potent one.

Finally, one fact should not be forgotten. Their social instrumentality and present weight make it possible or even probable, that in near future religion and the churches will preserve in Eastern Europe a relevance, which is bigger than hoped for by communist and liberal elites in post-communist countries and bigger than religion and churches have in secularised Western Europe.

Distributions vary from country to country (Table 1.). In some societies (in Hungary, Slovakia and in Russia) there is a polar distribution of believers on the one hand, and non-believers and agnostics on the other. Hesitation and an unidentified "belief in something" are less wide-spread. In other countries (like Slovenia, Latvia, and somewhat less in Bulgaria, the Ukraine, Lithuania and Czechia) the belief in a personal God is only slightly more common than the

belief in an impersonal Higher Power. The wide acceptance of a vague (pagan? New Age? or simply not institutionalized?) idea of God, instead of the God of Christianity, suggests the weak influence of the church in these countries.

The comparison of the yes- or no-statements and of a multi-choice question about the belief in God brings new insights. It is not surprising, that a high percentage of the "believers" (i.e. the previous yes-sayers) states a belief in a personal God and vice versa, the majority of "non-believers" (the previous nosayers) repeats its non-believing or agnostic position in a more differentiated context as well. More interesting are people, who were not capable or not willing to classify themselves without reservations as either believing or non-believing in God. Besides the subgroups which, after a more thorough reflection, decides for or against belief, and besides those who repeat that they are undecided or hesitant, a substantial part of this group approves the existence not of "God" (a term having presumably dominantly Christian connotations in Europe), but of some sort of spirit, life force, or Higher Power.

On the basis of urbanization, the relative weight of agriculture, industry and the tertiary sector, cultural consumption and demographic variables Eastern respectively Eastern Central Europe can be split into two categories. Germany-East, Czechia, Hungary and Slovenia can be separated from all other East European countries. These four countries constitute the first type, that of the "relatively modernized" societies, as against the "relatively traditional" ones.

¹ The present article will draw evidence besides national surveys particularly from the three waves of European Value Study, EVS (in 1981, 1990 and 1999), their complement, the World Value Study, WVS (1995-1997), the Religion Modules of the International Social Survey Programme, ISSP (in 1991 and 1998) and the "New Departures/Aufbruch" (1998), which base on representative national samples of dozens of countries. The data if these studies allow cross-cultural comparison and a cautious assessment of developments immediately preceding and following the collapse of communism. As they are sufficiently documented elsewhere (Abramson, Inglehart 1995, Denz 2001, Ester, Halman, de Moor 1994, Inglehart 1997, Halman 2001, Tomka, Zulehner 1999, 2000, Zulehner, Denz 1993 etc.) methodological explanations can be limited here to a minimum. The present study draws though its data less from publications than more from original data files of the respective surveys.

ⁱⁱ The study "Aufbruch / New Departures" investigated ten East-European countries with a substantial Catholic population. 'Germany' includes in this study only the territory and population of previous German Democratic Republic. In Romania only Transylvania was investigated, where the majority of Catholics live. Samples of 1000 person were representative for the 18-65 years old population (Tomka, Zulehner 2000).

iii Unweighted average of data from ten countries as surveyed in "Aufbruch/New Departures".

iv According to "Aufbruch/New Departures" survey.

v "Aufbruch/New Departures"

vi ISSP 1991 and 1999 data.

vii The European Value Study asked trust in the church; the armed forces; the education system; the press; trade unions; the police; parliament; civil service; the social security system; the social security system; and the legal system; the European Union; and the UN. (For translation only: L'église; L'armée; Le syst ème d'enseignement; Les lois; La presse; Les syndicats; La police; Le Parlement; L'administration; Le syst ème de sécurité sociale; L'Union Européenne; L'ONU) The present study compares trust in the church and average trust in all domestic social institutions i.e. without the European Union and the United Nations.

viii EVS 1999 data. The offered marks in the questionnaire and the subsequently attributed values were: 'not at all' = 0; 'not very much' = 1; 'quite a lot' = 2; 'a great deal' = 3. (For translation only: 'Pas confiance du tout' = 0; 'Peu de confiance' = 1; 'Certaine confiance' = 2; 'Grande confiance' = 3.)

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