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*ARTICLE*

# A CHRISTOLOGICAL CONTROVERSY OF THE TWELFTH CENTURY

[ROBERT of Melun (1095(?)–1167) succeeded Abelard as teacher of the Aristotelian Logic at Ste Geneviève when the latter withdrew from Paris in 1137. There Robert's fellow-countryman, John of Salisbury, was for some time his pupil and has left us in the *Metalogicon* a grateful appreciation of his merits as a teacher. In 1141 Robert left Paris for Melun where he soon abandoned logic for theology. At Melun (or possibly for the last few years at St Victor) he continued to teach theology until 1160, when on the advice of Becket, who was still Chancellor, Henry II recalled him to England, to become first Archdeacon of Oxford, and afterwards (1163–1167) Bishop of Hereford. The text of the Christological portion of the Second Part of Robert's *Summa* was for the first time published in 1927 by Dr F. Anders in the *Forschungen zur Christlichen Literatur- und Dogmengeschichte*, edited by Dr Ehrhard of Bonn and Dr Kirsch of Freiburg (Switzerland).]

MODERN theology is for the most part apologetic. That is, it takes the Christian faith as a whole and our human experience as a whole and attempts to show that the latter has its most satisfactory explanation in the framework of ideas and beliefs provided by the former. To this end it must always and first of all concentrate its attention upon the data of experience and upon the various attempts which have been actually made to include those data in a systematic whole of knowledge. Only when it can demonstrate clearly that no system of knowledge includes all those data so exhaustively and gives so satisfactory an account of their relations and connexions as that which is grounded in the Christian doctrine of God is its task accomplished. Now medieval theology, and especially medieval theology in its earlier stages, was hardly ever consciously apologetic in this sense. Even the *Summa Contra Gentiles* of Aquinas is an apologetic of a wholly different kind. For it is directed principally to the faith of Islam, i.e. to a faith which asserts the reality of God with as firm an assurance as does Christianity

itself. And therefore its sole purpose is to force the adherents of that faith into the admission that the Christian structure founded on the belief which is common to Christianity and Islam is at least reasonable and that it is reasonable through and through.

Medieval theology then is not apologetic in our sense because it is confronted with no rival truth-system. For it all truth is given in a Divine Revelation, and its sole business is to systematize that truth according to the processes of reason. But the reason which it requires for the performance of this task is not the speculative reason in the wider sense in which we understand it, but the logical or dialectical reason only. And at least the earlier Schoolmen were satisfied that all the mysteries of the Christian faith were amenable to this particular use of reason. The Schoolmen of the later thirteenth century and onwards were more reserved. St Thomas acknowledged that there were at least two mysteries, the Trinity and the Incarnation, which remained impenetrable to reason. They might be illustrated by remote analogies of the reason, but in the last resort they were pure affirmations of faith. The twelfth-century theologian, too, might often have to confess that he had reached a point where only a recognition and affirmation of the mystery were any longer possible. But he still believed that even the deepest mysteries were explicable, and he was resolved to use all the resources of his dialectical skill in trying to explain them. And it was just to the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation that he applied them most resolutely. We are apt to be repelled by what seems to us the abstract thinness of their logical subtleties. Such subtleties, we feel, do not help us to confess with any greater certitude the faith which we have inherited. Perhaps not. But they do at least reveal the difficulties which men who belonged to what are justly called the ages of faith had to overcome in order to feel that their faith was reasonable. And that ought not to be uninteresting to the Christian believer of any age.

All speculation, even of a dialectical kind, about the Person of Christ must start from some statement of the nature of the Incarnation which is accepted by all Christians as the only correct and sufficient statement of that mystery. Such a statement is that of the pseudo-Athanasian formula. It will be well,

therefore, to keep its terms clearly before us: 'Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man: God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and Man, of the substance of his Mother, born in the world: Perfect God and perfect Man of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting; equal to the Father as touching his Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching his Manhood. Who, although he be God and Man, yet he is not two, but one Christ; one not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of the Manhood into God; one altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of Person. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ.' It might seem as if it were impossible to define more clearly or more fully the Person of Christ as conceived by the universal Church at and ever since the Council of Chalcedon, or to hold more justly the balance between its apparently conflicting requirements. Yet it was just in the attempt to keep true to the various implications of this definition that during the twelfth century a series of controversies arose which called for the decision of at least three Councils—the Council of Sens in 1141, the Council of Rheims in 1148, and the Council of Tours in 1164.

The first question which arose for discussion—the first I mean in order of logical importance, not in order of time—was whether the Divine Substance was incarnate, i.e. had become flesh. This was as firmly denied by the Bishop of Poitiers, Gilbert de la Porrée, as it was asserted by Robert of Melun. Robert was, indeed, one of the theologians who procured the condemnation of Gilbert's opinion at the Council of Rheims. Now it is impossible to do justice to the assertion or the denial of a theological opinion unless and until we take as full and sympathetic account as possible of the motives which led to the one and the other. And these motives are never purely logical. Behind every logical process, before it can begin, there lie certain first principles which cannot possibly be proved, which must simply be accepted. But in the case of theological opinions there is often some obscure religious need which insists on being attended to even if it overrides the first principles of thought themselves. In the actual controversy which we have now to consider the positions of the contending parties were determined by the different stress laid by each on different religious require-

ments of exactly the same truth. That truth was what Friedrich von Hügel has accustomed us to call the 'otherness' of God. The Divine essence is so completely unique and different from every created essence that no created thought can compass the measure of that difference. In the Incarnation, therefore, one side asserted, that difference must remain, while the other asserted just as firmly that the Incarnation is not real if in it that difference has not been somehow overcome. The reasons alleged on each side are only the logical expression of what each felt to be most essential and intangible for the profoundest needs of religion.

Gilbert was able to rely on an authoritative pronouncement. The sixth Council of Toledo had declared that what is common to the Trinity was not incarnate. But the Divine Essence or Substance is the only thing which is common to the Trinity. Therefore it is not incarnate. But apart from authority there are sufficient grounds of reason for denying that the Divine Substance was incarnate. For how could the Divine Substance be incarnate unless by being made flesh? The Divine Substance must then have assumed flesh in the same way in which the Son of God assumed it. Therefore it ought to be called man for exactly the same reason that the Son of God is called man. Now the Son of God is and is called man because of the human nature which He united to Himself. If then the Divine Substance assumed human nature in the same way in which the Son of God assumed it, that Substance was made man and must be called man. That is to say, that Substance became visible, subject to suffering, and mortal. All these things we can say of the Son of God, for the Son of God was God and man, but no one dares to say them of the Divine Substance. How then can we say that the Divine Substance was incarnate?

Robert's reply to Gilbert's arguments is not very convincing for the purposes of his own definite and vigorous contention that the Divine Substance was incarnate. Yet it does quite clearly mark the exact sense in which he made the statement. He does not, he says, wish to deny the terms of the conciliar decision that nothing which is common to the three Persons of the Trinity was incarnate. For he does not affirm that the Divine Substance as it is common to the three Persons was incarnate, but only as it was in one of those Persons, *secundum*

*solius Filii proprietatem*, i.e. according to the special relationship within the Trinity which made Him a Person, viz. His eternal generation from the Father. The Divine Substance, he holds, was incarnate in the Son only, and yet did not thereby become flesh or become man. For that would mean that the Divine Substance was converted into the human substance, which is both false and impossible. What he does mean to assert is that, as it is the true faith of the Incarnation that the Son of God in His Divine Nature assumed human nature, without any confusion or mere mingling of the two natures, into the unity of His Person, it necessarily follows that the Divine Substance as it existed in the second Person of the Trinity assumed human nature. Nothing can be clearer or more logically cogent than this statement. Yet as a reply to Gilbert's contention it seems to lack real cogency. For to make a distinction between the Divine Essence as it is common to the three Persons of the Trinity and as it exists in one of those Persons seems to imply that the 'proprietas' which constitutes the Person involves some difference in the Substance, a position which is theologically untenable and which, it is clear from the positive arguments he adduces in support of his view that the Divine Substance was incarnate, Robert himself did not maintain. In his positive argument Robert relies first of all on the Apostle's statement that in Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. Quite evidently the Apostle here means to designate a unique and special mode of the Divine indwelling. It is of course in virtue of the Divine indwelling that the whole created order exists. But there are various modes of the Divine indwelling in creation. There is first of all what was later described as the Divine *concursus*, the indwelling of the Divine essence and power in every created thing from an angel to a stone, in virtue of which that thing is and remains what it is, without which it would immediately sink into the original nothingness. Then there is the indwelling of grace in virtue of which the beneficiary becomes fully aware of and responsive to the Divine presence in it. But beyond these is that unique mode of God's indwelling of the created order which we call the Incarnation. How can we represent this mode to ourselves otherwise than by saying that there the Divine Substance became incarnate, i.e. that it assumed created humanity into an actual, though ineffable,

union with itself? This is a very strong argument in favour of Robert's position in that it reminds us that the Incarnation is only a higher mode of the universal presence of the Divine Substance in the created order. If the integrity of the Divine Substance persists unimpaired by the pledging of itself to the created order, why should the highest and fullest fulfilment of that pledge necessarily involve a derogation from that integrity?

Robert next introduces two texts of Augustine, the first of which has a peculiar appropriateness in this connexion: 'When I read that the Word was made flesh, I understand by the Word the true Son of God and by flesh the true son of man, and both conjoined as at the same time God and man by the abundant working of an ineffable grace.' If the indwelling of the Divine grace always awakes in man the loving and desirous response to God, why should it be incredible that a fuller measure of that grace resulted in the ineffable union of man with God which the Incarnation affirms? The other text of Augustine runs: 'Christ was made less than himself, receiving the form of a servant. Yet he did not so receive the form of a servant as to lose the form of God in which He was equal to the Father, so that both in the form of God and in the form of a servant He remains the same only begotten of the Father because it was the form of God which received the form of a servant.' What Augustine means here must be determined by what he means by the word 'form'. That meaning he has clearly defined elsewhere: 'When you hear of Christ,' he says, 'that he was in the form of God, you must recognize and most firmly hold that by that word "form" is to be understood the plenitude of nature.' If, therefore, Robert concludes, by form is meant nature and if form received form, it necessarily follows that it was a nature which assumed a nature, that the Divine Nature assumed the human. But that the Divine Substance or Nature was incarnate, and that the Divine Substance or Nature assumed human nature and united it personally to itself, are expressions having an exactly identical meaning. For what was assumed by the Son and united by the Son to Himself in a personal identity, that same thing was assumed by the Divine Nature or Substance and united to the Divine Nature in the identity of a person.

A question still more hotly discussed in the twelfth century

and perhaps more actual for us to-day was that of the human nature of Christ. In what did the human nature assumed by the Word consist? Of three answers to that question decisively rejected by Robert one has its somewhat hesitating advocates to-day. There are some, says Robert, who declared rightly (*in hoc sane sentientes*) that the human nature which the Word of God assumed was man of a rational soul and human flesh subsisting, but added that the result of this assumption by the Word was a certain person consisting of man and the Word, which person was neither man nor the Word. This was the opinion of Abelard condemned at the Council of Sens in 1141, the year before his death. Abelard appears to have held that in order to provide for the reality of the Divine and human natures 'without confusion' it was necessary to conceive of them as existing side by side as parts of one person. The person was simply their co-existence. The only appropriate terms therefore in which to describe the Person of Christ were either 'Christ is God *and* man' or 'Christ is man *and* God'. The first meant 'Christ is the Word having man', the second 'Christ is man having the Word'. But the expressions 'Christ is God', 'Christ is man', 'The man is Christ', 'God is Christ', though they are sanctioned by the authorities and used in the Church and therefore must in some measure (*pro parte*) be conceded, yet ought not according to the strict use of language to be allowed. For they all four involve an illicit logical procedure by predicating either the part of that whole of which it is a part or conversely predicating the whole of the part. This alone makes it clear that Abelard and those who agreed with him, as for instance the author of the *St Florian Sentences*, regarded the Divine and human nature in Christ, or rather the Word and man, as parts of the Person of Christ. Robert does not even stay to consider this opinion or rather, as he adds with unwonted vehemence, this error and heresy which had died with its author.

The second opinion, however, which he rejects he examines at very considerable length. According to this view, which was that of Gilbert de la Porrée and the author of the *Divine Sentences*, the human nature which the Word assumed was neither a man nor a body and a soul, but the properties or peculiar qualities, spiritual and corporal, which together constitute man. In other

words the Divine Word assumed *humanity* and only by reason of this assumption was 'a man' and even 'a certain man'. To enter at once into the meaning of this twelfth-century statement it is only necessary to remember the distinction between form and matter. Every existent consists of these two things, an indeterminate substratum which is called matter and the form which determines that matter to be that particular existent. It is in virtue of its form therefore that anything is what it is. In virtue of its matter it might have been anything else, if another form had been impressed upon it. It is clear then that the form is the sum of those peculiar properties or qualities which make a thing what it is. A man is a man because he has the form of humanity, i.e. because he possesses just those qualities which are common to all men and which distinguish the being which you call a man from all other kinds of being. What then these theologians meant was that the best way of understanding the statement 'The Word was made man' was to understand it as asserting that the Word was informed by or took the form of humanity, i.e. assumed all the qualities which are peculiar to man. Robert refuted this form of asserting the human nature of Christ not by denying its obvious truth, but by exposing its radical insufficiency. To say that the Word assumed humanity or was informed by humanity is to leave undetermined the crux of the whole question, viz. what substance in the Incarnate Word received the form of humanity, its Divine Substance or its human. It is impossible for the Divine Substance to be man. Therefore it could not have received the form of humanity. Only the human substance in Christ and not the Divine Substance of the Word was or could be informed by humanity. And, therefore, it is erroneous to say that the Word was made man or was made of a human nature by itself participating in or being informed by humanity. It became man by uniting itself in closest personal union with a human substance already formed, with the actual human substance formed in the womb of the Virgin. The mystery of the Incarnation is the union of two distinct natures or substances in one Person. In virtue of the inconceivable closeness and intimacy of that personal union it is possible even to speak of the Divine Substance of the Word as being incarnate, as being man. But it is never possible to speak or think of the Word as substantially man, for that would imply

the mere conversion of the Divine Substance into the human. But that is exactly what it would be necessary to say, that is exactly what would be implied, if the Word itself had been informed by humanity. The Word is man *personaliter*, not *substantialiter*. The pseudo-Athanasian formula is as always both theologically and philosophically satisfying and exact: 'One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by the taking of manhood into God; one altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of Person.' But the manhood, the humanity, which the Word assumed into the unity of His Person, Robert insists, was no bare abstract form of man in general. It was the concrete individual man born of the Virgin, formed in her womb, 'man', as the formula has it, 'of the substance of his Mother, born in the world'.

But even yet Robert is not satisfied with his refutation of this theory of the human nature of Christ. Its upholders may object that they do not mean to assert that the Word was informed by humanity which would of course imply a confusion of substance, but that what was informed by it was one and the same subsistent composed of the created substance and the Word. How will that help them? If the creature and the Word are indeed parts of the identical subsistent which received the form of humanity, then it is clear that the form is received by both since they are now a composite being. It cannot be in the creature without being in the Word, nor can the creature be man by receiving that form without the Word being man also by receiving it. Now that which receives the form of humanity becomes thereby a human substance, but the Word being a Divine Substance cannot be a human substance. The supporters of this theory are again convicted of confusing the substances when they represent the human nature of Christ as meaning or implying that the Divine Word received the form of humanity. Again Robert insists that the only way of conceiving of the Incarnation which will avoid this confusion is that the single Person of the Divine Word took into the most intimate and ineffable union with itself, not the abstract form of humanity, but the actual concrete humanity of the Virgin's son.

But there was still another view of the human nature assumed by the Divine Word which had a wide vogue in the twelfth century. This view is so unfamiliar to us that there is difficulty

even in stating it without the danger of misrepresentation. It was really a kind of revived docetism, i.e. of the view long since condemned as heretical that the humanity of Christ was an appearance only, that the assumption of humanity by the Word made no difference to the Divine nature in Christ, that the Incarnation was simply the appearance in human form of what was and remained essentially God. I do not mean of course that any theologian of the twelfth century held or could have held a docetic view in anything like the crude form in which it had been originally condemned. But their actual statements certainly savoured of that heresy. What they actually said was that the human body and the human soul which the Word had united to itself in the Incarnation were, in virtue of that assumption, in the strictest sense a nothing (*nihil factum esse*). For if a something was formed from them it was either a substance or a non-substance. Now it could not be a non-substance, for a human body and a human soul are substances and from substances a non-substance cannot possibly issue. But if a substance was formed from them it must have been a human substance and therefore a certain human person. If therefore the human nature which the Word assumed was a person, Christ would be two persons, not two natures in one Person. But since the human soul and the human body which the Word united to itself were thus shown to be no substantial thing, the only way in which they could be conceived as united to it was as a kind of robe in which Divinity had clothed itself for its earthly manifestation. This was in fact the image which these Nihilianists, as they were called, invariably used to convey what they understood the humanity of Christ to mean. It was nothing more than the vesture which the Divinity wore to manifest itself to man. They relied especially upon the saying of St Paul: 'He was found in fashion as a man', *Habitu inventus ut homo*, and on Augustine's interpretation of it. 'One kind of change,' says St Augustine, 'is when one thing is added to another not by a change in its own nature but by taking another form and appearance, as a garment when it is taken off and laid aside has a different form from that which it has when being worn. Now this is the kind of change of which the Apostle is speaking here. For the Son of God emptied himself, not changing his own form but receiving the form of a servant, not converted or

changed into man, but found in fashion (*in habitu*) as a man, i.e. having a man, he was found as a man, not to himself but to those to whom he appeared in human guise. By the word *habitus* therefore the Apostle clearly signified that not by change into the nature of man but by putting on the garb of humanity (*cum indutus est hominem*) and so conforming it in a certain way to his own immortality and eternity was the Son of God made in the likeness of men.' The form of the Apostle's statement reinforced by the interpretation of the great Western doctor seemed to these theologians to make it sufficiently clear that the humanity assumed by the Word was just the earthly vesture of its Divinity.

In refuting the opinion of the Nihilianists Robert finds another opportunity of affirming more emphatically and clearly than ever his own contention that the humanity assumed by the Word was the concrete humanity of the man born of the Virgin. They had argued that the human soul and body which the Word assumed was either a composite substance or something non-substantial. If it was a substance, it was clearly a human substance, and in that case the Divine Substance of the Word in assuming it would be simply confused with it. Therefore the human soul and body assumed were non-substantial. They were no thing, but only the earthly garment of the Godhead, the mode of its earthly manifestation. Robert's reply is: The alternatives of substance and non-substance are not exhaustive. There is a third possibility which you have not considered. It is the mystery of the personal nature, of what we mean by a person. Let us look a little more closely at the mystery of the human person. There are there two quite distinct substances, body and soul. That is, they can as substances exist apart. No one will deny that the soul at least is a self-subsistent substance. And the actual human body existed too, and was actually formed, in the womb before it received or was fitted to receive a soul. But only when those two substances are joined in a mysterious union does what we call a man come to exist. In that man the two substances still remain in their distinctness. The soul is still a spiritual nature or substance, the body is still a corporeal substance or nature. But though distinct they are no longer separate. They are still *aliud* and *aliud*, one thing and another thing, but they are no longer *alius* and *alius* but

*unus homo*, the union of the two substances which is a man. Now this is an exact analogy of the personal existence of the one Christ. In that one Person of Christ the Divine Substance or Nature and the human substance or nature have entered into such an intimate union that they are no longer *alius* and *alius*, though they are still *aliud* and *aliud*. They there exist in the unity of a Person without any confusion of their essential natures. The orthodox formula has recognized and as it were consecrated the analogy, 'As the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ.'

But, it may be objected, the analogy is not complete. It breaks down at a crucial point. It is not merely, if the analogy is to hold good throughout, two distinct substances that are united in the Incarnate Word, but two distinct Persons, God and man. For the Word is a Person, and man, as you have just shewn, is essentially a person, the personal union of two distinct substances. Now two persons cannot possibly become one person, and besides we are both agreed that there is only one Person of the incarnate Christ, viz. the Person of the Divine Word which took into union with itself not another person but another substance. Robert is quite ready with his answer. The analogy, he holds, is still sufficient. For consider again what a human person is. A man, a human person, is not the mere composite of two substances but their intimate union. Now in order that there may be such a union, one of these substances must be endowed with as it were a person-forming capacity in virtue of which it can take another substance into itself so that together they will be a single person. And that is exactly the case with the human person. The soul is the person-forming element in man. Soul and body together form the person which is man, but the soul is, as Robert strongly puts it, as it were substantially and materially person (*quasi substantialiter et materialiter persona*) while the body shares in its personality by union with and a kind of assumption by it (*per unionem et quandam assumptionem*). So after all the analogy of the formula is found to be not only sufficient but exact. 'As the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ.' As the substantially personal soul by taking the body into union with itself constitutes the concrete human person, so the eternally substantial Person of the Word forms the one Christ by taking

not the mere form of humanity, but the concrete humanity formed in the Virgin's womb, into union with itself.

Yet the question persists. If man is essentially a person and if it was the concrete humanity of the Virgin's son that the Word assumed into union with itself, how can we help thinking of that union as a union of two persons? The answer is that the man assumed (the *homo assumptus*) was from the very moment of his conception a Divine Person, one identical person with the eternal Son of God. The son of the Virgin *was* the Son of God. That is to say, the one indivisible Person of Christ was the personal union of two natures, the Divine nature of the Word and the human nature of the Virgin's son. And yet it is possible and may be sometimes necessary to speak of the one Person of Christ now as a Divine person and again as a human person. *Possible* because the two natures exist in that one Person in different modes. The Divine Substance is the one Person which is Christ, not in virtue of its union with the human substance, but eternally and so to speak naturally, or as we might say nowadays, in its own right, whereas the man assumed is the person who is Christ only by union with the Word. And it may be *necessary* to speak expressly of the man assumed as a person because there are those who, in their anxiety to safeguard the unity of the Person which is Christ, would deny all personal value to the humanity assumed, the *homo assumptus*. Robert has evidently in mind the Master of the Sentences himself who laid it down that when a human soul and a human body were taken into the unity of the Person of the Word they made no difference to that Person. They were said to be *assumed* only to indicate that, though there was more than one nature in Christ, there was not more than one person. Why not say at once, Robert retorts, that the *homo assumptus* is no person? What he means is something like this: It is true that Christ is only one Person. It is true that that Person is identical with the Person of the Divine Word, but it is true also that in assuming manhood He has identified Himself with something that has a personal value of its own. That is to say, the Person of Christ is not simply the Person of the Word. It makes a difference that He has assumed a human nature into the identity of His Person which remains a human nature within that identity. It is that difference which is expressed by the statement of the

formula, 'Christ, the Son of God, is God *and* man.' Christ is God, because as the Word He is eternally one with God. He is God *unitate personae*. But He is also man because He became Christ when the Eternal Word assumed humanity into personal union with itself. The man assumed there is God *unione personae*. In Christ he is personally united to the Divinity of the Word, and now participates in that Divinity not substantially but only by the grace with which God assumed the human nature which continues to be human nature into personal union with Himself. That is the difference between a nominal and a real assumption of humanity into the one Person of Christ, the Incarnate Word.

These wire-drawn subtleties may seem very remote from any kind of thinking which can have value or even reality for us to-day. But if the actual mode of thought is so unfamiliar to us as to be almost repellent, at least we may learn from these masters of dialectic both the need and the value for any serious thinking, and especially in the field of theology, of exactness in the use of terms, of the logical arrangement of one's subject-matter, and above all of never confusing intellectual debate by any resort to mere pietistic sentiment. For the theologians of that age this last seems hardly to have been even a temptation, so cold and aloof is the steady process of their reasoning. We may learn, too, with what difficulty any belief in the humanity of Christ was then preserved from volatilization into a mere appearance. It is the distinction of Robert of Melun and of his fellow-countryman John of Cornwall that they perceived so clearly that here was a real danger-point for the Christian faith and laboured so successfully in helping the Church to round it. In no less than three Councils were the positions of Robert's opponents on various Christological issues rejected and condemned and his own affirmed. It was a great achievement, all the more wonderful perhaps in that it has remained so long unrecognized and unknown.

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