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The Protestant Reformation: Origins, Impact and Heritage



Summary

By the end of the 16th century the different branches of the Reformation had created their own churches, or denominations, in the Carpathian basin. Over half the total population of Hungary and Transylvania were Calvinist, about a quarter were Lutheran, while the remainder were Unitarian, Catholic, and Orthodox believers. Therefore nearly 90% of the population were Protestants. The first part of this study discusses the beginning of the Reformation in Hungary and the way it spread. In the second part I analyse the heritage of this spiritual movement in relation to four different fields.

Keywords: Reformation, Protestantism, Luther, Calvin, reformers, religion, The Church, Word of God, Christianity, Lutheranism, Calvinism, education, culture, politics, economics

INTRODUCTION

In this short essay I start by giving a historical summary of the origins of the Reformation in Hungary. I then explore how the heritage of the Reformation has had an enriching impact on four fields of life.¹

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: THE MAIN EUROPEAN CONNECTIONS

We are celebrating the 500th anniversary of the start of the Reformation this year, not only in Hungary but throughout Europe and the world. The Church needs renewal, as is clear from its history and also from our personal lives. The desire for renewal has

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always been part of the life of the Christian community, as we can see from the lives of St Francis of Assisi, John Wycliffe, John Huss and many others.

Of all the movements of religious renewal in the last 2000 years, the movement we call the Reformation was perhaps the most influential. It was not only a theological movement: what happened 500 years ago also led to a new beginning in politics, law, culture, education, and economics, and has even had an impact on modern science. Spreading initially through Europe, and then beyond, the forces of Protestantism have changed the entire world.

The jubilee of the Reformation being celebrated this year offers an excellent opportunity to gain a better understanding of the true legacy of this movement, and to see the relevance and validity of its message to our lives in the 21st century.

Reviewing the start of the Reformation is a worthwhile task for Christians and non-Christians alike. The Protestant community is the second largest Christian family:² of the worldwide total of 2.2 billion Christians, nearly 50% are Catholic and just under 40% are Protestant. The majority of these 800 million Protestants live in northern Europe, particularly the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, and of course the Carpathian Basin. There are also considerable numbers in North America, Australia, New Zealand and Oceania; there are also large Lutheran and Calvinist groups in Africa, and the “mega-churches” in South Korea should not be forgotten.

When and where did all this start? The key date is 31st October, 1517. On that day, Martin Luther, a monk and professor of the University of Wittenberg, posted on the door of the Castle church his ninety-five theses (Bitskey, 1988, p. 10) One of Luther’s main criticisms of the Church was the selling of indulgencies, the idea that absolution from sin could be bought with money. “As soon as a coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs” was a common saying of the time. Luther also criticised the fact that obedience to clerical rules was regarded as more important than obedience to the word of God and the will of God.

From Luther’s initiative the spirit of the Reformation, and its practice, spread all over Europe. This took place for several reasons, not just theological ones.

In a few decades, this evangelical movement was affecting all aspects of life, especially in northern and central Europe (Troeltsch, 1912). As the distinguished lawyer and church historian Rudolf Sohm has said, the transformation of the church led to a transformation of the world (Sohm, 1922, p. 176).

However it is important to bear in mind that these “faith-innovators” did not want a new religion, but the old one, the original one. Luther himself was devoted to the universal Catholic Church. Their main goal was to rediscover and revitalise Catholic Christianity and return to the beliefs and practice of the original followers of Christ. (Although Protestantism began in 1517, Protestants naturally acknowledge the history of the Church from its very beginnings.)

The reformers wanted to go back to the beginning, to Christ himself, to that spiritual life which is based on the good news and on mercy; the life which obeys the word of God and is based on the Scripture and its central *kerugma* (message) – that Christ, the Son of God, our Saviour, can be attained through faith.³

In this whole process of renewal, an important part was played not only by the reformers and theologians, but by several other factors. The rediscovery of ancient texts, the rapidly changing world at the start of the 16th century and its tensions, the powerful development of the world economy and of the sciences, the discoveries of the great explorers, and the rise of the bourgeoisie were all contributors. In addition, there were the Islamic invasions, the dynastic wars taking place all over Europe, and the impact of epidemics.

We must also not forget an important point made by Owen Chadwick, that in many places political changes had an impact on religion, not the other way round. Political developments encouraged the spread of the evangelical movement, sometimes throughout whole regions such as England (Chadwick, 1990).

I have already mentioned Luther's role at the very start of the Reformation. We also need to consider the origins of our Calvinist brothers and sisters and bear in mind that the Reformation was an international event. In order to do so, we must travel to Switzerland. A theologian and priest called Huldrych Zwingli, admired by Erasmus of Rotterdam, had already in 1518 begun his work, initially near Zurich, later in the city itself. The spirit in which he wrote was evangelical: this was the term applied at that time to anyone who wanted spiritual or religious change. He derived his reforms from the Bible; the most important of them are the primacy of the good news, the inclusion of both bread and wine in the Lord's Supper, and the destruction of pictures and statues within churches. In 1523 these reforms were accepted by the whole town and its leaders.

Now we must go further west, to Geneva. Jehan Cauvin (John Calvin) was the leader of the Swiss Reformation in Geneva between 1536 and 1564 (except the years 1538-1541 when he was in Strasbourg). In 1536 his *Institutio Christianae Religionis*, or Institutes of the Christian Religion, was published in Basel, and in 1541 he wrote his famous *Ecclesiastical Ordinances of Geneva*, to which Hungarian scholars still refer as a basis of constitutions. The latter work was republished at least ten times during Calvin's stay in Geneva.

Calvin was first and foremost a teacher of Holy Scripture. What mattered most to him was the Good News and the way it was preached. He attached great importance to the structure and order of the church, and he was also interested in ecclesiastical law insofar as it helped the main goal of the Church.

Besides being a pastor and a teacher, Calvin showed himself, as the governor of the Church of Geneva, to be a great organiser. For him, the local church was the basis on which he could build parallel hierarchies of the ecclesiastical authorities (i.e. pastors and ministers) on the one hand, and of the secular authorities on the other. In Geneva the consistory was absolutely enormous. This was the opposite of the Lutheran model, in which secular rulers and city councils exercised patronal rights and controlled the local churches and their pastors. This "Lutheran reality", according to Sohm, was the unavoidable result of actual circumstances, not the product of Lutheran theology.

The *Consensus Tigurinus*, or Zurich Declaration, was a crucial event for the Swiss Reformed Church. In 1549 Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger signed a joint declaration

on Eucharist and Baptism, a concordat between the local churches of Geneva and Zurich, later joined by the churches of Bern and other Swiss towns. This declaration was a starting-point, an important basis for the later confessions of the Reformed Church movement (Faggyas and Korányi, 2015, p. 41).

THE START OF REFORMATION IN HUNGARY

In Hungary, both Luther's writings and his actions had an almost immediate effect (Bucsay, 1985, pp. 17-18; Sólyom, 1990, pp. 7-8). By 1518 there is evidence of the Lutheran reformation in several Hungarian cities; it had also appeared in the royal court at Buda. By 1522, Luther himself already had numerous students from the Carpathian Basin. In 1523, as church historians well know, a reforming Franciscan monk preached Luther's teachings and message in Sopron.

Between 1523 and 1525 the Hungarian Diet accepted many decrees against the Lutherans, partly influenced by anti-German feeling. One of the Acts of the Diet (Act 4, of 1524) condemned the followers of Luther to be burnt. Executions were carried out on the authority of this Act, but there was no mass persecution, mainly because of the lack of central secular power, and also because of the threat of Ottoman invasion.

In addition, over a decade later, in 1534, King Ferdinand I implemented penal actions against the followers of Zwingli; this shows that by the mid-1530s the Swiss Reformation had reached the Hungarians in Hungary.

We now need to consider what factors helped the spread of the Reformation in Hungary. In the section below I discuss five points: some of these are spiritual, others have a more secular or political dimension.

1. The Ottoman occupation following the battle of Mohács in 1526 caused considerable damage to the structure of both church and state. For example, the state was unable to carry out the Acts of the Diet against the Lutherans.

2. Initially, the Turkish authorities gave precedence to Protestant communities, sometimes for theological reasons, but often for the political motive of weakening the influence of the Catholic Habsburgs.

3. Many Hungarians, and people of other nationalities living in the Kingdom of Hungary, studied in Wittenberg. There were also commercial connections between Germany and Hungary.

4. During the times of hardship, especially after 1526, there was a real spiritual need to hear the Good News. In my view this was the most important factor. The new faith could also give a historical theological answer to the new political situation: for example, instead of putting one's trust in the saints and Mary, one had to trust in God and return to Jesus Christ. See the teachings of Mátyás Dévai Bíró, the "Hungarian Luther".

5. In relation to the previous point, the sheer strength of the evangelical movement, with its emphasis on repentance and conversion, caused it to spread.

SPREAD OF THE NEW FAITH

The new Lutheran faith spread mainly throughout the territory controlled by the Habsburgs, i.e. western Transdanubia, north-western Hungary and *Felvidék* (the latter region was also called “Upper Hungary” and is now part of Slovakia). This was partly because of the tolerant policies of Ferdinand I, and later Maximilian II.

Initially, the faith was also to be found in the central, occupied part of the country: the Great Plain, the Partium and Transylvania. But here, only a decade and a half later, Calvinism took over as the majority Protestant religion.⁴ This process is indicated by the various Synods held in these areas from 1540 onwards, the earlier of which had Lutheran direction, the later ones a strong Calvinist influence (Sólyom, 1990, pp. 14-19). One of the most important Synods was held at Erdőd in 1545. This accepted the Lutheran teachings as written by Mátyás Dévai Bíró. Later, the assembly granted the right of free practice of faith to the Saxon communities in Transylvania.

In the 1550s Swiss Protestantism was spreading in Ottoman Hungary, Partium and the north-east, while in the 1560s Unitarianist teaching started to appear both in Partium and Transylvania. A major role was played here by Ferenc Dávid. (After studying in Wittenberg, Ferenc Dávid began preaching the gospel and became a follower of Luther. He was made a Lutheran bishop and later a Calvinist bishop; he was also *rector* in Kolozsvár. Towards the end of his life he became a Unitarian and with the help of János Zsigmond he published many anti-trinitarian essays. He influenced the famous Edict of Torda, too. After the death of János Zsigmond a less tolerant ruler gained power in Transylvania, and Ferenc Dávid was imprisoned and eventually died in Déva.)

Finally, in 1568, the Edict of Torda declared the right to practise all religions freely, whether Catholic, Lutheran, Calvinist or Unitarian. This was the first time that communities and individuals in Europe had been given the freedom to choose their own religion and preacher.

In passing, one may note that the Protestant faith provided a rallying call which encouraged revolt against the rule of the Catholic Habsburgs. Our freedom fights and uprisings, notably the one led by István Bocskai, subsequent Prince of Transylvania were struggles for religious freedom, as well as political freedom.

HEROES OF THE REFORMATION

The best-known personalities of the first period (up to 1540-1541) were Mátyás Dévai Bíró⁵, Mihály Sztárai (the “singing reformer”), Gál Huszár, Gáspár Heltai, Imre Ozorai and István Gálszécsi. During this period of “reception”, many students returning from the University of Wittenberg, as well as former Catholic priests, converted to the new faith, and immediately started to preach Luther’s teachings. The most influential preacher was Philip Melanchthon, a colleague of Luther, whose classes and lectures were packed with students. Another highly influential figure was Péter Bornemisza, who became a Lutheran bishop and was the most prolific writer in Hungary in the 16th century before his death in 1548.⁶

The Swiss Reformation also had its heroes. The first reformer to follow the ideas and teaching of Zwingli was Márton Kálmáncsehi Sánta, who had been the Canon of town Gyulafehérvár before he became a Protestant preacher. He wholeheartedly adopted Zwingli's teachings on the Eucharist, as well as on the issue of altars and paintings: he moved these completely from many churches especially those in the so-called Transtisza region.

His work was followed in subsequent decades by numerous pastors who had joined the Swiss Reformation. The most outstanding of these was the internationally known István Szegedi Kis, a great theologian and organiser. Another talented and hardworking organiser was Péter Méliusz Juhász, who established the Reformed Church in the Transtisza region during the second half of the 1560s.

In 1567, at the Synod of Debrecen, the Second Helvetic Confession was adopted. This was when the two families of the Reformation, the Lutheran and the Calvinist, were separated from each other. In Transdanubia, however, this did not become a reality until the end of the 16th century, after the so-called Csepregi Colloquium.

To summarise, the different branches of the Reformation had created their own churches by the end of the 16th century. Over half the total population of Hungary and Transylvania were Calvinist, about a quarter were Lutheran, while the remainder were Unitarian, Catholic, and Orthodox believers. Therefore nearly 90% of the population were Protestants. This changed a good deal during the Counter-Reformation of the 17th century, when a Catholic majority was formed in the west and the north, i.e. in the territories under Habsburg rule. At the same time, however, a new flourishing period of Calvinism began in Transylvania, Partium and north-east Hungary with the Bocskai rebellion of 1604-1606: this period lasted until the end of the 17th century (Bucsay, 1985, p. 23; Faggyas and Korányi, 2015, p. 53).

These were the most important stages and personalities during the 16th century. Although, owing to limited space, it is not the aim of this essay to examine subsequent centuries, it is important to mention two further episodes which made a vital contribution to the development of Protestantism in Hungary.

The first is the "Decade of Sorrow", in the years between 1671 and 1681. Protestant priests and teachers were brought to court and attempts were made to coerce them into converting.⁷ Some were imprisoned, many abandoned their profession or were forced into exile. Forty men were sold as galley slaves; some of these were liberated by the Dutch Admiral Michiel de Ruyter on 11th February 1676.

Secondly, there was the "Articular" period between 1681 and 1781, during which Protestant services were only allowed to be held at two or three places in each county. Frequently Protestants had to start their journey on Saturday evening to arrive in time for the service on Sunday. In some places the service would be in three languages: for example at Nemescsó in Vas county (western Hungary today), the Word of God was preached in Slovenian, German and Hungarian to the exhausted people. The strength of these communities can be seen from the fact that, very soon after the Edict of Toleration of October 1781, many hundreds of them re-established themselves. These communities survived the century without pastors, partly owing to the important role played by the presbyters.⁸

In the above account I have not had space to discuss topics such as social stratification, the backgrounds of the reformers, and the differences between the various branches and nationalities of the Reformation. In the following section I shall examine the aspects of the Reformation which I believe to be the most important both from a Hungarian point of view and on a European level.

LEGACY OF THE REFORMATION

There is no dimension of life which has not been affected by the Reformation. I shall discuss four dimensions.

Religion

Through Luther first and foremost, the Reformation rediscovered God the Merciful. The so-called *five solas* are the most important teaching of Protestantism. Among these is the question of salvation. The teaching that salvation is in Christ, by faith and mercy, has a strong effect on a believer's life: the individual can now step forward, out from under the rule of Law, to the free world of the Gospel, and God makes him or her act righteously. This requires the exercise of one's conscience. This had a vital impact on both religious and secular life.

Politics

The influence of the Reformation is seen both in practical politics and in political thinking; I shall focus only on the latter, in particular Luther's "two kingdom" theory of government, and Calvin's views on the constitution and political decision-making.⁹

The first of these still gives valuable guidance to Protestant communities as to how they should relate to the secular authority. In Luther's view, God rules the world in two different modes: on the one hand the secular mode, which uses the power of the Sword and the Law to coerce, and on the other the Word of God. This idea is very important to Lutheran communities in their attitude to the relation of State to Church.

Calvinism also had an undoubted effect on ideas about the constitution. Calvin's original *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, which had been accepted initially by members of the Calvinist Church, was later used as a basis for the political constitution, even by the greatest thinkers of the Enlightenment (Köbel, 2016, p. 305). The views of the monarchomachs, for example Francis Hotman, are also relevant to the impact of Protestantism on politics (Birkás, 2011).¹⁰ Protestantism also had an effect on communal decision-making, mainly thanks to the reformers' anthropological and theological teachings.

In other areas of public life the influence of Protestantism can be seen. Protestants have a strong sense of group identity; they are open to discussion and debate; and they have often been ready to take part in freedom struggles.

Education and culture

These are the areas of secular life in which the influence of Protestantism can probably be seen most strongly. A few simple facts serve to illustrate this. For example, most Hungarian books published at the beginning of the 16th century were connected with Protestantism; and all the famous printers, from Gál Huszár to Gáspár Heltai, were Protestants.

Through its new secondary schools or *kollegiumok*, Protestantism exercised a major influence on education. Nearly all the outstanding writers and poets from the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries were educated at these colleges. It might be said that the history of Hungarian literature was born within their walls. The minds of their students were formed under the constant influence of the Scripture and of the sermons delivered in the Hungarian language. In addition, the Protestant institutions were extremely modern in terms of methodology: they devised new educational methods (see Johannes Amos Comenius in town Sárospatak) and formed networks of colleges.

Protestantism also had a liberating effect on the natural sciences, as has been clearly demonstrated by the analyses of Max Weber and Alister McGrath. Research in natural science was greatly stimulated by Protestantism, both for theological reasons and for exegetical ones. In the last 200 years, the number of Protestants working in various fields of natural science has exceeded the denominational share in society as a whole, particularly in France and Germany.

Economics

Luther regarded work as vocation. As Weber shows in his book *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Luther's translation of the Biblical "Beruf" as "vocation" is to be taken in the modern sense of the word. Later this was adopted by the secular language of all Protestant nations. To understand this, we may have recourse to some linguistic analysis. The German "Beruf" ("profession" or "occupation") also has the connotations of "rufen" ("calling") and "Berufung" ("vocation"). That is, man doing his work performs a mission given by God: this is how work becomes vocation and action glorifying and serving God. Work is "holy behaviour", which gives it an ethical, religious and moral dimension (Chadwick, 1990, p. 175).¹¹

Luther opposed the contemporary idea that only clerical or ecclesiastical work was holy. Furthermore he decidedly rejected the monastic way of life. He emphasised that one must not live isolated from the world: it is in the world that one must pursue the vocation one has been given.

Luther rejected all forms of usury. (It should be noted that in his time, and even more previously, interest and usury were not distinguished; as the Roman church considered interest unacceptable as well, so its measure, its character of plain interest or usury, was inessential in the sense of principle.)

One of his most famous sayings relates to the infamous Fuggers: "Both the Fuggers and societies of the same mould should actually be restrained in this context. How

could it be a divine and rightful thing to lay up so many princely treasures during the life of one man? I am no good at calculation. But I cannot comprehend how one can acquire twenty forints with a hundred in a year, what is more, with one forint another; and all this not from agriculture or poultry farming because riches are not a result of human wittiness but of God's blessing. I leave this to wise men of the world. I as a theologian cannot castigate anything else, only the evil, scandalous outside appearances about which Paul says: 'Avoid every kind of evil (Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, Chapter 5, verse 22)'" (Luther, 2004, p. 148).

Just as he condemned the Medieval Church, so Luther condemned collecting interest for theoretically vicious usury, pointing out the sterile character of money: "nummus nummum non parit". However, he considered a moderate interest acceptable in certain cases, especially when paying the arising damages.¹²

Calvin thought that it was allowable to make a profit through interest. The 17th century form of Calvinism which is called Puritanism considered unceasing money-making, the fruits of which cannot be used but must be reinvested in enterprises serving others, to be service to God and one's fellow humans.

The medieval Catholic Church had taught the sterile character of money: reproduction of money is unnatural. Calvin did not agree with this concept. From a theological point of view, he criticised the references to the prohibiting of charging interest which can be found in the Bible. In terms of human psychology, he emphasised that it is not interest itself that is unacceptable, but the greed and despotism which accompany interest-collection that are irreconcilable with a Christian disposition.

Formulating and assessing Calvin's views, we must keep in mind that these ideas originated in the city of Geneva. Capitalist Geneva influenced both Calvin's political views and his concept of economy. Calvin analysed the nature of credit and its function with regard to his time and the economic life of his city. As a result, he considered acceptable the so-called "productive credit", i.e. credit received for an enterprise-producing profit, whereas he concurred with Luther on the question of consumer credit: no interest can be charged for it. If lands, means of production, goods or a rented house can yield a profit, it is incomprehensible why the same right should be denied to money. Calvin came to the conclusion that many forms of credit are acceptable, e.g. granting credit to the needy free of interest; however if somebody offers financial means to a profitable enterprise, in this case it is natural as well if the creditor wants to have a share in the fruits of the enterprise, yielding a profit (just like in the case of leased land) (see Orosz, 2010, pp. 97-98).¹³

At the same time, it is essential that Calvin does not give a free hand to granting of credit. Keeping the law of fairness and love in view, the reformer set up different rules connected with the granting of credit. The most important are: no interest may be collected from those who are in a grave financial situation, creditors should also take the common good into consideration, besides their private profit; and it is forbidden to overstep the rate allowed by the law of the given country (the latter was usually about between 4 and 6 per cent in contemporary Europe). The main law in all is love.

CONCLUSION

The Christian Church needs constant renewal. This renewal becomes reality sometimes through a community, sometimes by the work of an excellent theologian or other personalities. Among these renewal processes the Protestant Reformation is probably the most important one in the history of the Christian Church. This process started with the distinguished persons, among them Luther and his spiritual need, by Grace – Luther searched for a merciful God.

The influence of Luther and Calvin, and the other reformers and the members of modern Protestantism, is unquestionable. Their influence related to church, society, the whole history is important: they influenced all aspects of life.

But the Reformation is not only a memory: it is living with us. It had a strong influence on the Roman Catholic Church, too. The renewal processes became stronger. Luther and the *solas*, and the spreading of the evangelical movement forced the Roman Catholic Church to be renewed, to formulate its own theological teachings. There would have been no Council of Trent without Luther and the Reformation. There is no Tridentine Mass without Luther and the Reformation. From an ecumenical point of view, it might be said that the Reformation was a start, which aimed to show anew the Catholic (universal) truths: the importance of Grace, the importance of the Scripture and the understanding of it. I myself as a Protestant focus on these values, commemorating the 500 years of the Reformation.

NOTES

- ¹ I am grateful to Mr Stephen Terry M.A. (Cantab) for his help in checking the English.
- ² Of today's world population of 7.3 billion, just over 30% are Christians.
- ³ All Protestant denominations have these teachings in common: *sola fide* (by faith alone), *sola gratia* (by Grace alone), *sola scriptura* (by Scripture alone), *solus Christus* (Christ alone). Also, in the Reformed/Calvinist tradition, *soli Deo gloria* (glory to God alone).
- ⁴ Heinrich Bullinger had an important role in this process. Bullinger, who was a priest in Zurich between 1531 and 1575, wrote many letters to Hungarian priests, theologians and rectors. They were collected and re-published in Hungarian in 1967, more than 55 pages altogether. They dealt with all the major theological questions and caused a large number of Hungarian priests to become Calvinist.
- ⁵ Mátyás Dévai Bíró visited Wittenberg many times and was also a guest of Luther. He preached the gospel and was imprisoned twice because of his faith. His Catechisms and book on Hungarian Grammar are influential works.
- ⁶ Bornemisza himself believed that in his own lifetime God showed the power of his Word more than at any other time except that of the Apostles. See Sólyom, 1990, p. 21.
- ⁷ Fear was put into both the pastors and the secular leaders of the Protestant churches and communities, who in turn frightened their congregations into converting.
- ⁸ It was not until 1848 that freedom of religion was granted to everyone.
- ⁹ But other areas could be mentioned, too: the rule of Law, its impact on governments, the parity, synods-system etc.
- ¹⁰ Francis Hotman was a well-known lawyer, teacher and a theologian in his time. He visited Geneva and after meeting Calvin became one of his followers. He had an important role in formulating the right of resistance. Like his lawyer colleague, he was opposed to absolute power.

- ¹¹ All this had a major effect on prosperity.
- ¹² His decided viewpoint is unambiguously outlined in his debate with professor of theology Johannes Eck. Eck considered a fixed interest of 5 per cent acceptable, whereas Luther regarded interest as unambiguous stealing. Luther taught: "If you loan money you should not expect it to be returned; if the grantee wants to repay it all the same, you may only accept as much as he originally loaned." See also his writing on business deals and usury.
- ¹³ Realistically surveying the contemporary circumstances, "overwriting" the earlier Bible interpretation and ancient views, Calvin gave strong stimulation to the development of economy with his original views connected with interest, even more, however, similarly to Luther, with emphasizing ethics of vocation.

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