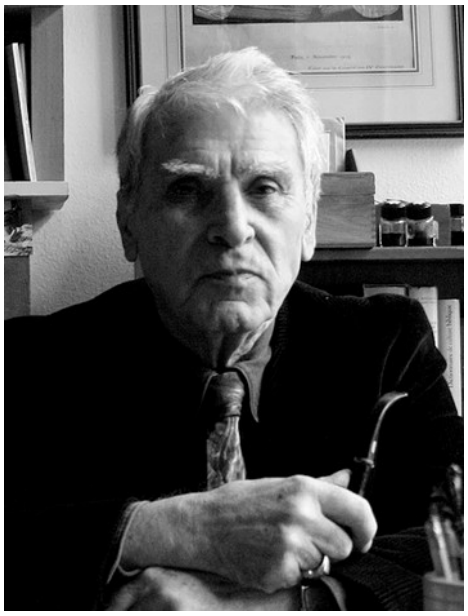
How to pray to a dead God

The modern world is disenchanted. God remains dead. But our need for transcendence lives on. How should we fulfil it?

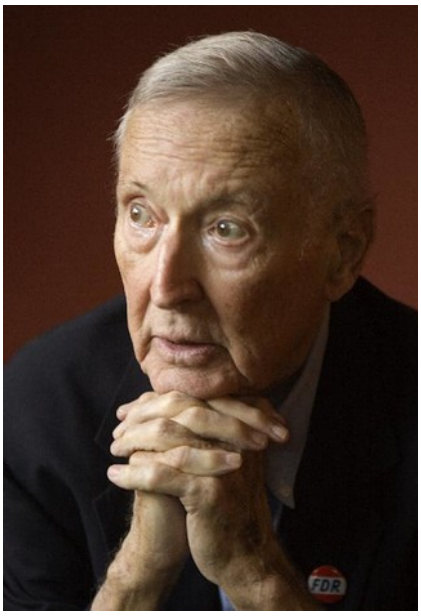
Ed Simon
2021-12-17

Sources and details about author at the end



Gabriel Vahanian

1927-2012

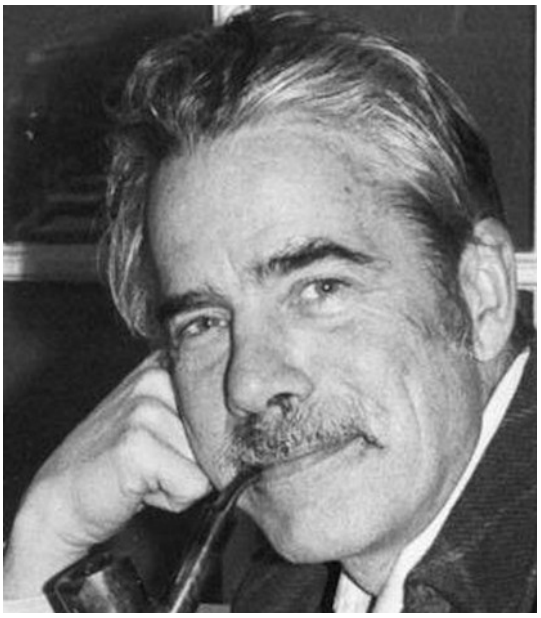


William Hamilton

1924-2012

Paul van Buren

1924-1998



Thomas J J Altizer

1927-2018

1. On an evening in 1851, a mutton-chopped 28-year-old English poet and critic looked out at the English Channel with his new bride. Walking along the white chalk cliffs of Dover, jagged and streaked black with flint as if the coast had just been ripped from the Continent, he would recall that:

The sea is calm to-night.
The tide is full, the moon lies fair
Upon the straits; on the French
coast, the light
Gleams, and is gone; the cliffs of
England stand,
Glimmering and vast, out in the
tranquil bay.

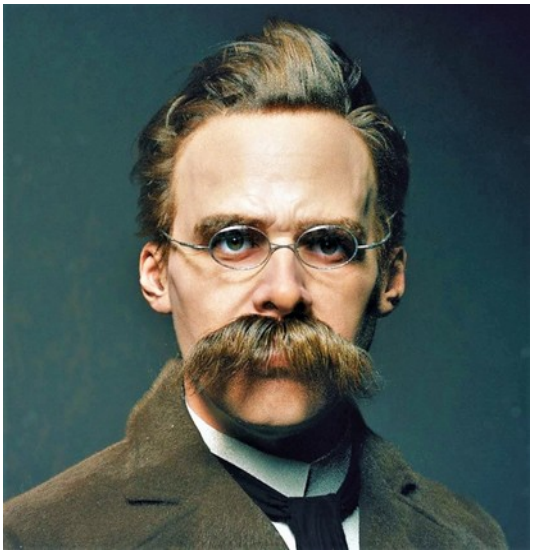
Matthew Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach' then turns in a more forlorn direction.

While listening to pebbles thrown upon Kent's rocky strand, brought in and out with the night tides, the cadence brings an 'eternal note of sadness in'. That sound, he thinks, is a metaphor for the receding of religious belief, as

> *The Sea of Faith*
> *Was once, too, at the full, and round*
> *earth's shore …*
> *But now I only hear*
> *Its melancholy, long, withdrawing*
> *roar,*
> *Retreating, to the breath.*

Eight years before Charles Darwin's On the Origin of Species (1859) and three decades before Friedrich Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra (1883-5) – with its thunderclap pronouncement that

‘God is dead’ – Arnold already heard religion’s retreat. Darwin’s theory was only one of many challenges to traditional faith, including the radical philosophies of the previous century, the discoveries of geology, and the Higher Criticism of German scholars who proved that scripture was composed by multiple, fallible people over several centuries. While in previous eras a full-throated scepticism concerning religion was an impossibility, even among freethinkers, by the 19th century it suddenly became intellectually possible to countenance agnosticism or atheism. The tide going out in Arnold’s ‘sea of



Friedrich Nietzsche
1844-1900

faith' was a paradigm shift in human consciousness.

What 'Dover Beach' expresses is a cultural narrative of disenchantment. Depending on which historian you think authoritative, disenchantment could begin with the 19th-century industrial revolution, the 18th-century Enlightenment, the 17th-century scientific revolution, the 16th-century Reformation, or even when medieval Scholastic philosophers embraced nominalism, which denied that words had any connection to ultimate reality. Regardless, there is broad consensus on the course of the

Max Weber
1864-1920

narrative. At one point in Western history, people at all stations of society could access the sacred, which permeated all aspects of life, giving both purpose and meaning. During this premodern age, existence was charged with significance. At some point, the gates to this Eden were sutured shut. The condition of modernity is defined by the irrevocable loss of easy access to transcendence. The German sociologist Max Weber wrote in his essay ‘Science as a Vocation’ (1917) that the ‘ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life either into the transcendental realm of mystic life or into the brotherliness of direct and personal human relations,’ the result of this retraction being that the ‘fate of our times is characterised by rationalisation

and intellectualisation and, above all, by the “disenchantment of the world”.’

A cognoscente of the splendours of modern technology and of the wonders of scientific research, Arnold still felt the loss of the transcendent, the numinous, and the sacred. Writing in his book God and the Bible (1875), Arnold admitted that the ‘personages of the Christian heaven and their conversations are no more matter of fact than the personages of the Greek Olympus’ and yet he mourned for faith’s ‘long, withdrawing roar’.

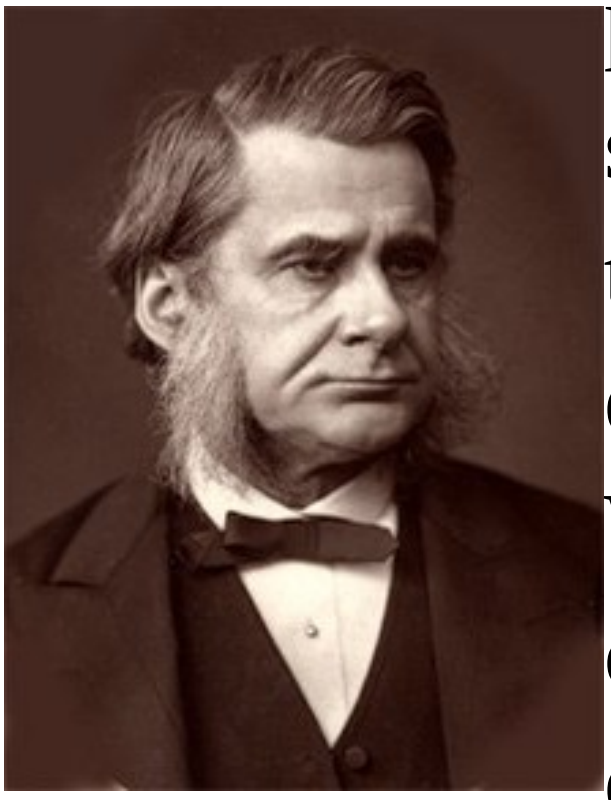
Some associated the demise of the supernatural with the elimination of superstition and all oppressive religious hierarchies, while others couldn’t help

but mourn the loss of transcendence, of life endowed with mystery and holiness. Regardless of whether modernity was welcomed or not, this was our condition now. Even those who embraced orthodoxy, to the extremes of fundamentalism, were still working within the template set by disenchantment, as thoroughly modern as the rest of us. Thomas Hardy, another English poet, imagined a surreal funeral for God in a 1912 lyric, with his narrator grieving that

> *toward our myth's oblivion,*
> *Darkling, and languid-lipped, we*
> *creep and grope*
> *Sadlier than those who wept in*
> *Babylon,*
> *Whose Zion was a still abiding hope.*

How people are to grapple with disenchantment remains the great religious question of modernity. ‘And who or what shall fill his place?’ Hardy asks. How do you pray to a dead God?

2. The question was a central one not just in the 19th century, but among philosophers in the subsequent century, though not everyone was equally concerned. When it came to where, or how, to whom, or even why somebody should direct their prayers, Thomas Huxley didn’t see an



Thomas H Huxley
1825-1895

issue. A stout, pugnacious, bulldog of a man, the zoologist and anatomist didn’t become famous until 1860, when he appeared to debate Darwinism with the unctuous Anglican Bishop of Winchester, Samuel Wilberforce, at the University of Oxford. Huxley was the ever-modern man of science and a recipient of a number of prestigious awards – the Royal Medal, the Wollaston Medal, the Clarke Medal, the Copley Medal, and the Linnean Medal – all garnered in recognition of his contributions to science. By contrast, Wilberforce was the decorated High Church cleric, bishop of Oxford and dean of Westminster. The former

represented rationalism, empiricism and progress; the latter the supernatural, traditionalism and the archaic. Unfortunately for Wilberforce, Huxley was on the side of demonstrable data. In a room of dark wood and taxidermied animals, before an audience of a thousand, Wilberforce asked Huxley which side of the esteemed biologist's family a gorilla was on – his grandmother's or his grandfather's? Huxley reportedly responded that he 'would rather be the offspring of two apes than be a man and afraid to face the truth.' The debate was a rout.

Of course, evolution had implications for any literal account of creation, but

critics like Wilberforce really feared the moral implications of Huxley's views. Huxley had a rejoinder. Writing in his study *Evolution and Ethics* (1893), he held that 'Astronomy, Physics, Chemistry, have all had to pass through similar phases, before they reached the stage at which their influence became an important factor in human affairs' and so too would ethics 'submit to the same ordeal'. Rather than relying on ossified commandments, Huxley believed that reason 'will work as great a revolution in the sphere of practice'. Such a belief in progress was common among the 19th-century intelligentsia, the doctrine that scientific knowledge

would improve not just humanity's material circumstances but their moral ones as well. What, then, of transcendence? Inheritors of a classic, English education, both Huxley and Wilberforce (not to mention Arnold) were familiar with that couplet of the poet Alexander Pope, rhapsodising Isaac Newton in 1730: 'Nature, and Nature's laws lay hid in night. / God said, *Let Newton be!* and all was light!' For some, the answer to what shall fill God's place was obvious: science.

The glories of natural science were manifold. Darwin comprehended the ways in which moths and monkeys alike were subject to the law of adaptation.

From Newton onward, physicists could predict the parabola of a planet or a cricket ball with equal precession, and the revolution of Antoine Lavoisier transformed the alchemy of the Middle Ages into rigorous chemistry. By the 19th century, empirical science had led to attendant technological wonders; the thermodynamics of James Clerk Maxwell and Lord Kelvin gave us the steam engine, while the electrodynamics of Michael Faraday would forever (literally) illuminate the world. Meanwhile, advances in medicine from experimentalists such as Louis Pasteur ensured a rise in life expectancy.

Yet some were still troubled by disenchantment. Those like Arnold had neither the optimism of Huxley nor the grandiosity of Pope. Many despaired at the reduction of the Universe to a cold mechanisation – even when they assented to the accuracy of those theories. Huxley might see ingenuity in the connection of joint to ligament, the way that skin and fur cover bone, but somebody else might simply see meat and murder. Even Darwin would write that the ‘view now held by most physicists, namely, that the Sun with all the planets will in time grow too cold for life … is an intolerable thought.’ Such an impasse was a difficulty for

those convinced by science but unable to find meaning in its theories. For many, purpose wasn't an attribute of the physical world, but rather something that humanity could construct.

Art was the way out of the impasse. Our prayers weren't to be oriented towards science, but rather towards art and poetry. In *Literature and Dogma* (1873), Arnold wrote that the 'word "God" is … by no means a term of science or exact knowledge, but a term of poetry and eloquence … a *literary* term, in short.' Since the Romantics, intellectuals affirmed that in artistic creation enchantment could be resurrected. Liberal Christians, who

affirmed contemporary science, didn’t abandon liturgy, rituals and scripture, but rather reinterpreted them as culturally contingent. In Germany, the Reformed theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher rejected both Enlightenment rationalism and orthodox Christianity, positing that an aesthetic sense defined faith, while still concluding in a 1799 address that ‘belief in God, and in personal immortality, are not necessarily a part of religion.’ Like Arnold, Schleiermacher saw ‘God’ as an allegorical device for introspection, understanding worship as being ‘pure contemplation of the Universe’. Such a position was

influential throughout the 19th century, particularly among American Transcendentalists such as Henry Ward Beecher and Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Lyman Stewart, the Pennsylvania tycoon and co-founder of the Union Oil Company of California, had a different solution to the so-called problem of the ‘death of God’. Between 1910 and 1915, Stewart convened conservative Protestant ministers across denominations, including Presbyterians, Baptists and Methodists, to compile a 12-volume set of books of 90 essays entitled *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, writing in 1907 that his intent was to send ‘some kind of

warning and testimony to the English-speaking ministers, theological teachers, and students, and English-speaking missionaries of the world … which would put them on their guard and bring them into right lines again.'

Considering miracles of scripture, the inerrancy of the Bible, and the relationship of Christianity to contemporary culture, the set was intended to be a 'new statement of the fundamentals of Christianity'. Targets included not just liberal Christianity, Darwinism and secular Bible scholarship, but also socialism, feminism and spiritualism. Writing about the 'natural view of the

Scriptures', which is to say a secular interpretation, the contributor Franklin Johnson oddly echoed Arnold's oceanic metaphor, writing that liberalism is a 'sea that has been rising higher for three-quarters of a century … It is already a cataract, uprooting, destroying, and slaying.'

Like many radicals, Stewart's ministers – such as Louis Meyer, James Orr and C I Scofield – saw themselves as returning to first principles, hence their ultimate designation as being 'fundamentalists'. But they were as firmly of modernity as Arnold, Huxley or Schleiermacher. Despite their revanchism, the fundamentalists posited theological

positions that would have been nonsensical before the Reformation, and their own anxious jousting with secularism – especially their valorisation of rational argumentation – served only to belie their project.

Praying towards science, art or an idol – all responses to disenchantment, but not honest ones. Looking with a clear eye, Nietzsche formulated an exact diagnosis. In *The Gay Science* (1882), he wrote:

> *God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him … What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us?*

Nietzsche is sometimes misinterpreted as a triumphalist atheist. Though he denied the existence of a personal creator, he wasn't in the mould of bourgeois secularists such as Huxley, since the German philosopher understood the terrifying implications of disenchantment. There are metaphysical and ethical ramifications to the death of God, and if Nietzsche's prescription remains suspect – 'Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?' – his appraisal of our spiritual predicament is foundational. Morning star of 20th-century existentialism, Nietzsche shared an honest acceptance of the absurdity of

reality, asking how it is that we're able to keep living after God is dead.

Fyodor Dostoevsky
1921-1881

Another forerunner of existentialism was the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky, who had a different solution. *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879) enacts a debate about faith far more nuanced than the bloviating between Huxley and Wilberforce. Two brothers – Ivan and Alyosha – discuss belief; the former is a materialist who rejects God, and the latter is an Orthodox novice. Monotheistic theology has always wrestled with the question of how an

omnibenevolent and omnipotent God could allow for evil. Theodicy has proffered solutions, but all have ultimately proven unsatisfying. To imagine a God who either isn't all good or isn't all powerful is to not imagine God at all; to rationalise the suffering of the innocent is ethically monstrous. And so, as Ivan tells his brother, God himself is 'not worth the tears of that one tortured child'. Finally, Alyosha kisses his brother and departs. Such an enigmatic action is neither condescension nor concession, even though the monk agrees with all of Ivan's reasoning. Rather, it's an embrace of the absurd, what the Danish

philosopher Søren Kierkegaard would call a ‘leap of faith’. It is a commitment to pray *even though you know that God is dead.*

3. Shūsaku Endō, in his novel *Silence* (1966), about the 17th-century persecution of Japanese Christians, asks: ‘Lord, why are you silent? Why are you always silent?’ Following the barbarity of the Holocaust and Hiroshima, all subsequent authentic theology has been an attempt to answer Endō. With Nietzsche’s predicted wars, people confronted the new gods of progress and rationality, as the technocratic impulse made possible industrial slaughter. If disenchantment

marked the anxieties of Romantics and Victorians, then the 20th-century dreams of a more fair, wise, just and rational world were dissipated by the smoke at Auschwitz and Nagasaki. Huxley's fantasy was spectacularly disproven in the catastrophic splitting of the atom.

These matters were not ignored in seminaries, for as the journalist John T Elson wrote in *Time* magazine in 1966: 'Even within Christianity … a small band of radical theologians has seriously argued that the churches must accept the fact of God's death, and get along without him.' That article was in one of *Time*'s most controversial – and

bestselling – issues. Elson popularised an evocative movement that approached the death of God seriously, and asked how enchantment was possible during our age of meaninglessness. Thinkers who were profiled included Gabriel Vahanian, William Hamilton, Paul van Buren and Thomas J J Altizer, all of whom believed that ‘God is indeed absolutely dead, but [propose] to carry on and write a theology … without God.’ Working at progressive Protestant seminaries, the death of God movement, to varying degrees, promulgated a ‘Christian atheism’.

Such an idiosyncratic movement is bound to be diverse, ranging from those

who believed that God had *literally* died to others who understood this language to be symbolic of the malaise affecting the Church and society. What unified these thinkers – Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish – was a desire to do 'new work, new writing, new singing, new preaching, new testifying, new protesting, new resistance, new and faithful heresy, and new and renewed means of artistic expression,' as Jordan E Miller and Christopher D Rodkey explain in *The Palgrave Handbook of Radical Theology* (2018). Of the various approaches to disenchantment – a retreat to fundamentalism, an embrace of atheism, a denial that anything has

changed at all – radical theology was that which promised to look at meaninglessness directly and to wrest some sort of transcendence from the abyss. ‘In the Western world, more laity than ever are searching for theological language and answers to the recognised theological problem that is the Western world itself,’ write Miller and Rodkey, and yet though the ‘options of “New Atheism” and secularised evangelicalism are immediately accessible and available’, they are ‘neither helpful nor productive answers to larger theological problems.’

By contrast, radical theology is able to take religion seriously – *and* to

challenge religion. Vahanian, a French Armenian Presbyterian who taught at Syracuse University in New York, hewed towards a more traditional vision, nonetheless writing in *Wait Without Idols* (1964) that 'God is not necessary; that is to say, he cannot be taken for granted. He cannot be used merely as a hypothesis, whether epistemological, scientific, or existential, unless we should draw the degrading conclusion that "God is reasons".' Altizer, who worked at the Methodist seminary of Emory University in Atlanta, had a different approach, writing in *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (1966) that 'Every

man today who is open to experience knows that God is absent, but only the Christian knows that God is dead, that the death of God is a final and irrevocable event and that God's death has actualised in our history a new and liberated humanity.' What unified disparate approaches is a claim from the German Lutheran Paul Tillich, who in his *Systematic Theology, Volume 1* (1951) would skirt paradox when he provocatively claimed that 'God does not exist. He is being-itself beyond essence and existence. Therefore, to argue that God exists is to deny him.'

What does any of this mean *practically*? Radical theology is unsparing; none of

it comes easily. It demands an intensity, focus and seriousness, and more importantly a strange faith. It has unleashed a range of reactions in the contemporary era, ranging from an embrace of the cultural life of faith absent any supernatural claims, to a rigorous course of mysticism and contemplation that moves beyond traditional belief. For some, like Vahanian, it meant a critical awareness that the rituals of religion must enter into a ‘post-Christian’ moment, whereby the lack of meaning would be matched by a countercultural embrace of Jesus as a moral guide. Others embraced an aesthetic model and a

literary interpretation of religion, an approach known as ‘theopoetics’. Altizer meanwhile understood the death of God as a transformative revolutionary incident, interpreting the ruptures caused by secularism as a way to reorient our perspective on divinity.

In *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (1973), the philosopher Mary Daly at Boston College deconstructed the traditional – and oppressive – masculine symbols of divinity, calling for an

Mary Daly
1928-2010

‘ontological, spiritual revolution’ that would point ‘beyond the idolatries of sexist society’ and spark ‘creative action in and toward transcendence’. Daly’s use of such a venerable, even scriptural, word as ‘idolatries’ highlights how radical theology has drawn from tradition, finding energy in antecedents that go back millennia. Rabbi Richard Rubenstein, in his writing on the Holocaust, borrowed from the mysticism of Kabbalah to imagine a silent God. ‘The best interests of theology lie not in God in the highest,’ writes John Caputo in *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (2015), but in something ‘deeper than

God, and for that very same reason, deep within us, we and God always being intertwined.’

Challenges to uncomplicated faith – or uncomplicated lack of faith – have always been within religion. It is a dialectic at the heart of spiritual experience. Perhaps the greatest scandal of disenchantment is that the answer of how to pray to a dead God precedes God’s death. Within Christianity there is a tradition known as ‘apophatic theology’, often associated with Greek Orthodoxy. Apophatic theology emphasises that God – the divine, the sacred, the transcendent, the noumenal – can’t be expressed in language. God is

not something – God is the very ground of being. Those who practised apophatic theology – 2nd-century Clement of Alexandria, 4th-century Gregory of Nyssa, and 6th-century Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite – promulgated a method that has come to be known as the *via negativa*. According to this approach, nothing positive can be said about God that is true, not even that He exists. 'We do not know what God is,' the 9th-century Irish theologian John Scotus Eriugena wrote. 'God Himself does not know what He is because He is not anything. Literally God *is not*' [my emphasis].

How these apophatic theologians approached the transcendent in the centuries before Nietzsche's infamous theocide was to understand that God is found not in descriptions, dogmas, creeds, theologies or anything else. Even belief in God tells us nothing about God, this abyss, this void, this being beyond all comprehension. Far from being simple atheists, the apophatic theologians had God at the forefront of their thoughts, in a place closer than their hearts even if unutterable. This is the answer of how to pray to a 'dead God': by understanding that neither the word 'dead' nor 'God' means anything at all.

Eleven centuries before Arnold heard the roar of faith's tide and Nietzsche declared that God was dead, the Hindu sage Adi Shankara recounted a parable in his commentary to the *Brahma Sutras*, a text that was already a millennium old. Shankara writes that the great teacher Bhadva was asked by a student what Brahma – the ground of all Being – actually was. According to Shankara, Bhadva was silent. Thinking that perhaps he had not been heard, the student asked again, but still Bhadva was quiet. Again, the student repeated his question – 'What is God?' – and, again, Bhadva would not answer. Finally, exasperated, the young man

demanded to know why Bhadva would not respond to the question. ‘I am teaching you,’ Bhadva replied.

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