

# RELIGION & DEMOCRACY



The Institute  
on Religion &  
Democracy

March 1990

## *El Salvador:* Same Church Crusade, New Theme

By Alan Wisdom

Once again we hear the cry, "U.S. out of El Salvador!" Church delegations troop the halls of Congress, demanding an end to U.S. aid to that nation. This drastic step, they suggest, would advance peace and democracy.

These religious protesters seem not to notice that Salvadoran President Alfredo Cristiani was installed by democratic election. Nor that Cristiani had sought peace with the Marxist guerrillas of the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). Nor that it was the guerrillas who broke off negotiations and launched a bloody offensive last November.

What explains our churches' distorted view of El Salvador? Maybe it's intellectual inertia. For years, many oldline Protestant denominations have been stuck



A FMLN guerrilla stands poised near a San Salvador hotel during last November's urban offensive. AP LaserPhoto.

in a mentality which blames all evil in El Salvador on the government -- and its U.S. patron. No fresh thought was evident in recent letters by Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Stated Clerk James Andrews, Disciples of Christ President John Humbert, and two United Methodist agency heads, all of whom advocated the same old cure-all for El Salvador: a cut in U.S. military aid.

But the complaint was new: "systematic religious persecution." An editorial in the reputedly moderate *Presbyterian Outlook*

described the situation in the darkest terms: "The church in El Salvador is being destroyed by death squads, paramilitary murderers and a political structure which has explicitly stated that its goal is to eliminate the humanitarian work of the church."

Church World Service, the relief arm of the National Council of Churches, made a similar charge in urging that "the U.S. Administration immediately cease delivery of all military-related assistance to El Salvador."

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### The WCC's Brush with the New Age

A conference this month in South Korea redefines the God-Human-Earth relationship in an unsettling way

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### Church Leaders Decry Noriega Ouster

Anti-U.S. intervention statements ignore the need for democracy in Panama

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## Notes & Resources

### What's Free around the World?

Well-conceived maps can be great educational tools for churches and other groups. The map on the right from Freedom House illustrates how much of the world remains only partially or not free. It is included in Freedom House's January/February edition of *Freedom at Issue* (\$5), which surveys "Freedom Around the World 1990."

To order, write:

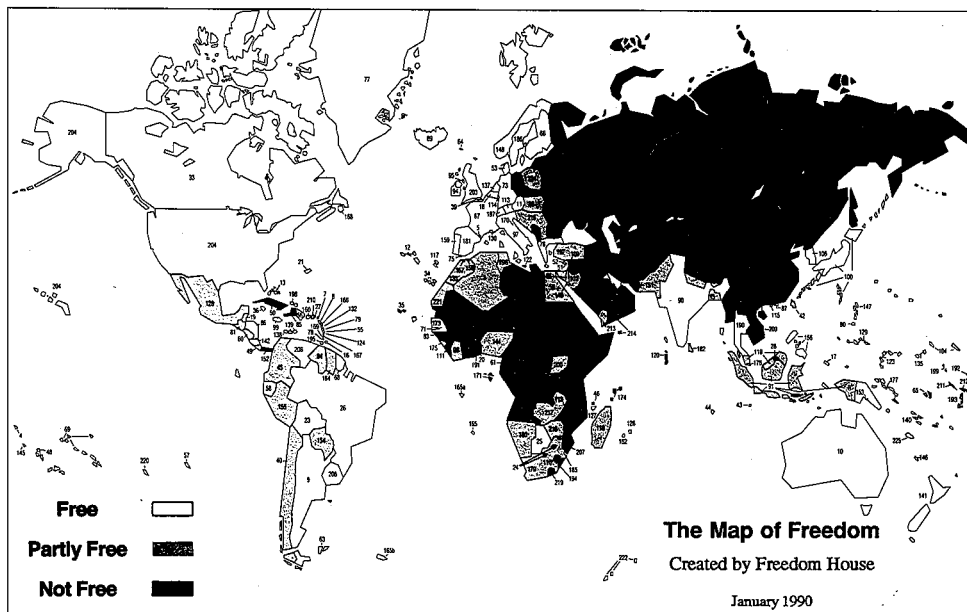
Freedom House  
48 East 21st Street  
New York, NY 10010  
(212) 473-9691

### Churches Deliberate in the Dark

The Religion Newswriters Association recently announced its new "Into the Darkness Award," which is given to the religious group or individual that contributes most to the stifling of the "people's rights to know."

The nominees, according to Religious News Service, included:

- United Church of Christ -- For refusal to make public the vote totals of their presidential election.
- National Council of Churches -- For establishing a "background only" basis for reporters who attended meetings on developing a new structure and bureaucracy.
- Presbyterian Church (USA) -- For accusing the *Presbyterian Laymen*, a journal published by the independent Presbyterian Lay Committee, of "journalistic excesses."
- United Methodist Church -- For restricting attendance at church trials only to United Methodists, thus barring non-Methodist media.



- World Council of Churches -- for excluding media from last May's subcommittee meetings in Texas.
- Episcopal Church -- The House of Bishops, for going behind closed doors to discuss the issue of women bishops.
- The recipient of the award was the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, for refusal to disclose the topic of discussion during a closed-door session of their November meeting.

### Catching Up with Eastern Europe

The past few months have seen rapid changes for Eastern Europe. The increase in freedom for religious groups gives tremendous opportunity for Christian involvement in the region. For groups or individuals interested in more information on direct involvement, the following resources are available:

- *Raising the Curtain: A Guide to Independent Contacts and Organizations in Eastern Europe.* This 75-page document not only identifies groups in Eastern Europe, but it also lists 200 groups in the United States with contacts there.

Cost: \$6.95. Obtain from:  
World Without War Council  
1514 NE 45th Street  
Seattle, WA 98105  
(206) 532-4755

• *East European Missions Directory.* It contains a list of organizations working in Eastern Europe as well as information on organizational accountability. This is published by the Institute for the Study of Christianity and Marxism, which also is sponsoring June 9-15 the "Wheaton Conference on Glasnost and the Church." IRD Executive Director Kent Hill will be one of the speakers. For more information about these, contact:

Institute for the Study of Christianity & Marxism, Wheaton College  
Wheaton, IL 60187-9937  
(708) 260-5917

### IRD Books Available

Major change in Eastern Europe is being matched by rapid change in South Africa. The second edition of Walter Kansteiner's *South Africa: Revolution or Reconciliation?* is available for \$8.95 from IRD. Kent Hill's *The Puzzle of the Soviet Church: An Inside Look at Christianity and Glasnost* also is available from IRD for \$15.95.

# Deprivation of Democracy

By Steve Beard

Despite polls portraying enormous Panamanian support for the December 20 U.S. military action in that country, oldline denominational leaders in the United States were unified in their immediate condemnations of the exercise.

Lacking in these church statements is analysis that weighs as factors the U.S. obligation to keep the Panama Canal open and safe for all countries, military provocation, and the theft of the May 1989 democratic election in Panama.

Within 48 hours, the Panamanian situation had been denounced by the leadership of the National

understood as a valid act of a civilized nation." He also added that "unilateral intervention, no matter its validity, can never be supported."

The Rev. Robert J. Harman, a top official of the UM mission agency, wrote President Bush and said, "The world community certainly supports the establishment of a rightfully elected government under constitutional authority; however, the installation of such a government by force and dependent on external support cannot be tolerated."

Episcopal Presiding Bishop Edmond Browning stated on December 21: "I am profoundly

Church leaders speedily denounced U.S. unilateralism, yet neglected the problem of how to secure the self-determination of the Panamanian

people -- *no small oversight*

Council of Churches, the United Methodist Church, and the Episcopal Church.

In a letter to President Bush, NCC General Secretary James A. Hamilton denounced the invasion as a violation of "basic norms of international behavior." He added that the action risked "pointless losses of Panamanian and American lives, as well as the isolation of our nation...."

Calling the administration's justification for the action "insufficient," Hamilton claimed the "unacceptability of unilateral acts of military force, whether covert or overt."

The head of the United Methodist social action arm, Thom White Wolf Fassett, said that the U.S. "intervention in Panama cannot be



saddened that the administration has found it necessary to intervene militarily and unilaterally once again in the affairs of a Western Hemisphere nation -- even in the face of extreme provocation."

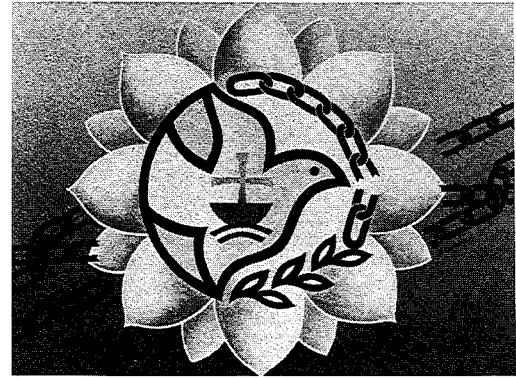
While Browning admitted "to some mixed feelings," he was concerned whether "such a violent act" will result in "a just solution."

The Rev. Ricardo Potter, an Episcopal official for Latin America, said "The use of the military has been a complete embarrassment in the rest of Latin America." Potter insisted that the invasion proved that U.S. policy -- guided by a "military mentality" -- in Panama has failed over the years.

In a January 2 letter, Elenora Giddings Ivory of  
→ See **Panama**, page 8

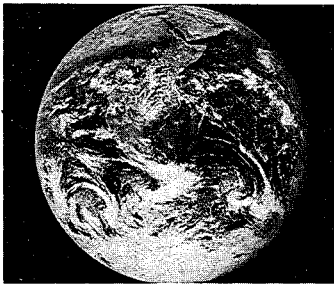
*A U.S. soldier views a portrait of Adolf Hitler in the office of Manuel Noriega at Panamanian Defense Forces headquarters. RNS Photo / AP / Wide World.*

# Somewhere Under the Rainbow



The World Council of Churches' Brush with the New Age

By Lawrence Adams



NASA

A new catastrophic dogma has arisen to replace nuclear destruction as a concern for religious activism in the 1990s: global environmentalism as a commitment to "The Integrity of Creation."

Delegates to a major World Council of Churches (WCC) consultation March 5-12 in South Korea will be asked to approve a document destined to become a key ecumenical reference point for faith and action. "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation" (JPIC) is the name of both movement and treatise, developed under mandate from the 1983 Vancouver Assembly of the WCC. The document has been released as *Between the Flood and the Rainbow: Covenanting for JPIC*.

Greater goals than discussion are intended by the convocation organizers -- nothing less than a "conciliar process," modeled on the historic councils that have clarified orthodoxy for the faithful, which will result in "common and binding pronouncements and actions on the urgent questions of the survival of humankind." The organizers of JPIC have taken the very serious questions involving how humans exercise stewardship over the visible creation, and made these issues of faithfulness and orthodoxy. They seek to make specific responses to particular environmental problems into items for public confession by the faithful.

In *Rainbow's* words, the "integrity of creation" means "an international ecological order [which] is required if we are to find a way into the future. Christians are summoned to work for this order

and to explore anew their covenant with the creator and sustainer of all."

## Colors of the Rainbow

The *Rainbow* theologians have three major purposes guiding their movement: (I) integration of the new global environmental ideology into existing "justice and peace" movements in the churches; (II) development of a specific activist agenda through "acts of covenanting"; and (III) legitimation of a theological orientation which posits a "Triune God" intricately tied to, rather than separate from and lord over, the creation.

I. *Rainbow* clearly intends to put the weight of the Protestant ecumenical churches behind a radical environmentalist activism which will have major implications for funding patterns, lobbying efforts, educational materials and even liturgy. The document and its background papers state unequivocally that the most critical problems requiring church attention today are a blend of the familiar -- material poverty, sexism, racism, the nuclear threat, militarism -- and specific environmental violations: "Greenhouse gases," ozone depletion, land degradation, impure water, deforestation, habitat destruction, toxic wastes, resource exploitation, and the development of bio-technology.

Most startling in *Rainbow* is the proclamation, with bold, upper-case emphasis, that churches must enter a revolutionary struggle: NETWORKS ... THROUGHOUT THE CHURCH MUST WORK TOGETHER TO INTERCONNECT AND CREATE SOLIDARITY LINKAGES AMONG THE CHURCHES AND PEOPLES' MOVEMENTS, INCLUDING THOSE OF DIFFERENT IDEOLOGIES AND RELIGIOUS FAITHS... GROUPS STRUGGLING FOR LIBERATION, PEOPLES'

MOVEMENTS, PEACE AND ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORKS, CANNOT AFFORD TO BE SEPARATED, FRAGMENTED OR PITTED AGAINST EACH OTHER.

II. The writers of *Rainbow* also expect participants to engage in "Acts of Covenanting" -- a term reserved in scripture primarily for the sovereign, redemptive acts of God and solemn human relationships. Yet JPIC calls the participants to "covenant" on three main issues: "the present international economic order and the debt crisis" (to achieve Justice); "the Demilitarization of international relations and relations within societies" (Peace); "the Protection of the Earth's Atmosphere, the warming up of the atmosphere, the 'Greenhouse Effect' and the energy problem" (the Integrity of Creation).

Through "Acts of Covenanting," *Rainbow* jumps into the stream of recent ecumenical and liberationist tendencies to sanctify social and political affirmations/actions. The background papers are explicit on this point: at the Vancouver Assembly, "justice and peace received virtual 'confessional status'...." In addition, "Affirming justice, peace and the integrity of creation as an integral part of our confession of faith in the Triune God is to proclaim the Realm of God."

III. Under *Rainbow* guidelines, the churches will be called upon to make these affirmations primary standards by which they define their existence and their aims. This is *not* a demand that follows from a conviction to obey radically the God of the scriptures within the contemporary crisis -- a conviction known to those who have suffered for faith in Nazi Germany, in the Soviet Union, and elsewhere. Instead, these political and social convictions follow from a "cosmic unity" theology popular in certain seminaries and oldline circles, made accessible by figures such as Matthew Fox and John Macquarrie and that resonate with what is referred to as the New Age movement.

The "Triune God" of JPIC is one who is immanent, intricately linked with "creation," whose primary work is to open "the way towards fulfillment of the new creation in our history and the whole cosmos." God

becomes the impersonal Creator, Sustainer and Sanctifier -- functions in relation to the creation -- rather than the self-revealing Father, Son and Holy Spirit of historic and biblical faith. Nature itself "reveals" judgment against these environmental sins, and truth is perceived by humans through experience (praxis), not delivered in words by a transcendent God.

### **Over the Rainbow**

As might be expected from its view of God, *Rainbow's* analysis of the condition of creation has little to do with man's alienation from a holy God through sin. Rather, fallenness is reduced to exploitation of the natural order. The second person of the Trinity becomes the one who identifies with creation and challenges violations of it; He ceases to be the One who brings Atonement by his sacrificial death.

Both humanity's purpose and waywardness are seen in terms of this "role" in creation. Nowhere in *Rainbow* do we see the Biblical concept that places humans at the center of creation and redemption: "The creation awaits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God... the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." (Romans 8.20-22) Humans have become a stain upon nature by violating their role as keepers and tenders. The earth is to be restored in *Rainbow* theology, but without the necessary restoration of human beings.

### **Rainbow's End: Fool's gold?**

To embrace JPIC is to make requisite to Christian faithfulness a multitude of political and social particulars. It takes convictions regarding atmospheric and environmental effects still subject to conclusive analysis and makes them definitive. It carries an air of desperation

in trying to resolve all earthly dilemmas -- not surprising in a theology which undermines transcendence.

*Rainbow* theology's gentle, fuzzy universalism makes it appear more palatable than its typically harsh liberationist roots. It avoids the expected bashing of Western imperialism, and rarely calls for radical

→ See *Rainbow*, page 8

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## Salvador, from page 1

Forty-seven U.S. Roman Catholic bishops endorsed a letter asking Congress "to cut all military assistance to El Salvador." The letter justified this proposal by charging "systematic persecution" of churches by the Salvadoran government, with the "apparent acquiescence of the U.S. Embassy there."

Doubtless, many of these religious lobbyists are moved by a sincere concern for Salvadoran churches and churchpeople which have suffered military abuses. But some of them do seem more interested in pushing their longtime agenda -- halting U.S. aid -- than they are in telling the full story about El Salvador. Church statements have overlooked some significant facts:

**1. Military repression struck at a relatively small segment of the Salvadoran church world.** Among 58 church workers arrested during the



Salvadoran Lutheran Bishop Medardo Gomez, on his first return visit to El Salvador after fleeing death threats in November, kneels as a delegation of U.S. bishops prays for his safety. RNS Photo / AP / Worldwide.

offensive last November, 23 came from the Episcopal Church and 20 from the Lutheran Church. Episcopalians and Lutherans are a tiny minority within El Salvador, counting a total membership of barely 10,000. There are at least 500,000 other Protestants in El Salvador -- mostly Pentecostals and other conservative evangelicals -- who report few, if any, problems with the government. The Catholic Church was affected by about 30 military searches of its parishes, schools, and religious houses. Yet the vast majority of Catholic facilities -- some 300 in the San Salvador archdiocese alone -- were untouched.

**2. The Salvadoran government did not target churches merely for their "humanitarian work."** It kept its hands off most religious ministries among the poor. The Catholic Archdiocese of Cleveland and the Assemblies of God, for example, run large mission projects in poor communities: refugee resettlement, health clinics, job training, Christian education. But leaders of the Assemblies and the Cleveland missions told me that they enjoy respectful relations with the government.

**3. What distinguishes the Salvadoran churches which have suffered military incursions is, for the most part, their political stance.** The Lutheran and Episcopal churches, and a few Catholic institutions, endorsed a 1988 statement which hailed the FMLN as "a powerful, popular revolutionary movement, prepared to respond to the violence and to overcome the injustice." Lutheran pastor Eliseo Rodriguez acknowledges working with several controversial groups, identified by rebel defectors and rebel documents as FMLN fronts. Rodriguez concedes that some leaders of these groups may have fought with the guerrillas in November. Nevertheless, he maintains, "We can't reject those groups, because what they fight for is just."

**4. There is at least one instance of church involvement in an FMLN attack.** Last October 30, a bomb was exploded outside Salvadoran Armed Forces headquarters, killing one civilian bystander. Members of Saint John the Evangelist Episcopal Church later informed the military that the truck used in the attack had been parked the night before on the church grounds. They reported that church workers had helped guerrillas load the truck with explosives. The workers claimed that the rebels had forced them to collaborate, but Episcopal Archdeacon Victoriano Jimeno also admits, "It is evident that some elements infiltrated [the church] in order to foment violence."





5. The FMLN also violates religious liberty and other human rights. A guerrilla death squad assassinated conservative Jesuit Francisco Peccorini last March. In the last two years, FMLN units have gunned down or blown up the President's chief of staff, the Attorney General, a retired Chief Justice, 12 mayors, five journalists, and the 75-year-old mother of the Defense Minister.

6. Most Salvadoran church leaders do not share the U.S. oldline view of their country. Bishop Romeo Tovar Astorga, head of the national conference of Catholic bishops, rejects the term "persecution" as a description of the church's overall situation. He blames November's carnage on the rebels: "Who caused this enormous suffering? The FMLN. If they had been saviors of the people, the people would have opened their houses to them. Instead they closed their doors, and as soon as possible they escaped .... No one joined their cause [during the offensive], and the people fear the day when they might take power." The Salvadoran Catholic bishops have not requested a unilateral cessation of U.S. aid.

7. El Salvador's neighbors do not favor ostracizing President Cristiani. When they met last December, the four other Central American presidents publicly pledged their "decisive support" for the Salvadoran leader. Even Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua signed a declaration which commended Cristiani for seeking "a solution to the Salvadoran conflict through peaceful and democratic means," and appealed to the FMLN to "immediately cease its hostilities."

Many U.S. Christians must still await the day when their church leaders will take as sane a view of El Salvador as the Sandinista strongman now avows.

## A Campaign of Political Harassment in El Salvador

When churchpeople denounce "persecution" in El Salvador -- however much they may exaggerate -- they are addressing a serious problem. The November 16 murder of six Jesuit priests is the most horrifying example. President Cristiani has pushed an unusually vigorous investigation of the case. On January 13 he named three army officers and six enlisted men as the prime suspects. Past experience, however, gives cause for doubt about whether the Salvadoran judicial system will actually be able to convict and punish all those implicated in the massacre.

There was also a broader pattern of official, authorized repression during the November offensive. A compilation of military actions between November 13 and December 15 included 54 searches of 40 different church facilities, as well as 58 arrests of church workers. Most of those arrested were detained for brief periods, with the foreigners being obliged to leave the country after their release. Several church workers were reportedly beaten while in custody.

Col. Rene Emilio Ponce, Armed Forces Chief of Staff, denied any intent to persecute. He claimed that the military took action against churches only when these churches had a record of collaboration with FMLN front groups, when guerrillas were known to be in the vicinity, and when citizens had reported suspicious activity there. Nevertheless, Col. Ponce admitted that the 54 searches and 58 arrests had yielded no proof of any church involvement in violence -- aside from the Episcopal case (see page 6) and perhaps one other.

It therefore looks as if the military undertook a campaign of harassment against churches it considered politically suspect. Though it was not a generalized religious persecution, it was a clear infringement of the liberties of some Salvadoran Christians. Religious believers must be free to express their convictions in every area of life, including politics. They should have the legal right even to praise the terrorist the FMLN, although not to assemble bombs for it. It is the business of the church -- not the military -- to correct the misguided political views of some church staff.

Protests of the abuses against Salvadoran churches have had a positive impact. President Cristiani has met several times with U.S. church leaders to hear their concerns. And his promises to respect religious liberty have been followed by a sharp decrease in military actions against Salvadoran churches. Still, continuing pressure from U.S. Christians is necessary. We must avoid any repetition of the cycle of repression, and we must see that those guilty of atrocities are punished. You may write to:

His Excellency Miguel Salaverria  
Ambassador of El Salvador  
2308 California Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20008

*By Alan Wisdom, who traveled to El Salvador in January to examine conditions there. His fuller briefing paper is available from the IRD for \$2.*

## **Panama**, from page 3

the Presbyterian Church (USA) Washington office wrote President Bush that the invasion could not be justified. Operation Just Cause, she said, "calls into question the moral authority by which the United States can speak to other nations about not intervening or using military force."

The Latin American Council of Churches,



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representing a small minority of Protestants in Latin America, decried the operation as a "terrorist action" violating Panama's right to control its destiny. The council called the invasion "a lesson from the strongest, arrogantly self-constituted guardian of democracy."

Some Panamanian Catholics were much more aware of the need to rid Panama of Noreiga. "Let this be the start of a process of reconciliation and reconstruction," Archbishop Marcos McGrath told a crowd on Christmas day. "The fear is over. Our problems now are those of rebuilding."

Two weeks later, at a mass with the new Panamanian President

Guillermo Endara, McGrath said that he hoped the invasion "will be remembered more as a liberation."

In their quest to condemn U.S. military intervention in Panama, our church leaders turned a deaf ear to the overwhelming majority of the Panamanian people. This is hardly identifying with an oppressed people's struggle for self-determination.

## **Rainbow**, from page 5

systemic restructuring. While calling for minimal defensive strategies and rational balances of power, Rainbow repudiates nuclear deterrence and asserts that "just-war" criteria rarely can be met.

But the question remains why the commendable attempt at a comprehensive Christian vision -- not limiting the life of faith to a "spiritual realm" but seeing God's work in all of creation -- yields such a limited perspective on God's sovereignty. Why does affirming the "integrity of creation" ignore the threats to human life from the breakdown of families, rampant abortion, and drug trafficking? Why is peace seen as threatened only by the existence of weapons and excessive defense spending, rather than by intentional abuse of power. How does a concern for justice ignore completely the recent collapse of tyrannies, and the lessons learned from these failed regimes? Why is justice defined almost solely in economic terms?

*Rainbow* theology falls prey to the temptations of many contemporary "theologies". It takes what is temporal and makes it absolute. But it is not so innocuous as to be dismissed merely as the latest ravings of the religious left. *Rainbow's* "new thinking" has potential to further, in those churches which embrace it, the erosion of their sense of place in the fuller Kingdom of God, who is redeeming all things.

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