



2002 MEETING – PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Judaism, Christianity, and the Ancient World: Mimesis, Sacrifice and Culture June 5 – June 8, 2002



The history of Jewish-Christian relations is rife with conflict and misunderstanding. With the aim of reducing the potential for violence, we will use mimetic theory in this conference to explore the commonalities of these two modes of religious understanding and practice in the ancient world when Christianity was still a part of Judaism. The conference will take place under the auspices of the Jewish Studies Program and St. Thomas Aquinas Center. All are cordially invited to attend.

Registration and housing forms are available through the official conference website, <http://www.sla.purdue.edu/academic/idis/jewish-studies/cov&r/index.html>, and the conference program may be viewed at <http://www.sla.purdue.edu/academic/idis/jewish-studies/cov&r/program.html>.

COV&R Object: "To explore, criticize, and develop the mimetic model of the relationship between violence and religion in the genesis and maintenance of culture. The Colloquium will be concerned with questions of both research and application. Scholars from various fields and diverse theoretical orientations will be encouraged to participate both in the conferences and the publications sponsored by the Colloquium, but the focus of activity will be the relevance of the mimetic model for the study of religion."

The *Bulletin* is also available online at <http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/bulletin/x1.html>.

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A letter from the editor

Writing about two miles from the World Trade Center, it seems like a very long time since our meeting in Antwerp.



The photo here was taken by my friend Martin Anderson from his apartment building across the river in Hoboken (used by permission, all rights reserved). Since the 11th, in New York we've learned to see the skyline with an absence, a hole in space that goes even past the foundation, to bedrock. Those of us used to commuting through the World Trade Center and familiar with the neighborhood have had to learn new ways of getting around town.

But the initial impact was mass confusion, shock, a cloud that covered everything, obscuring what was really going on inside, what the landscape truly looked like. It wasn't always clear which direction to go or what to do.

It seems to me the work of our Colloquium continues to be vital, to peer inside the cloud, to understand what is going on, even before the dust has had a chance to settle.

Much of my work these past months has been as a chaplain with the American Red Cross and at Saint Paul's Chapel, working with survivors of the attack; people missing family members, friends, and colleagues; and rescue workers. It has been a truly awesome and in many ways wonderful experience. But it has not afforded the chance for a great deal of reflection on the Girardian implications.

And I can't claim to feel good about the level of understanding our society has about why this atrocity occurred, and how to respond creatively. Even when we see that violence begets violence, do we make the leap to see how victim imitates perpetrator?

Your contributions are also solicited. Do you have something that might be of interest? Does your work with Girard take you to places off the beaten track? Have you run across any good books that relate to mimetic theory? The Bulletin has room for a wide range, from long pieces of general interest, to reviews, to short excerpts which give a flavor of what people are working on.

I am especially interested in additional reflections on September 11th, the "war against terrorism," and how the phenomenon of terrorism might be analyzed with mimetic theory.

Pieces for Issue 21 are due Monday August 5. If you have something you think might work, please get in touch with me.

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Exhibit Review:

Orazio & Artemesia Gentileschi

A new exhibition explores the father-daughter relationship, as expressed in the work of this pair of painters from the High Mannerist, Italian Baroque, Counter-Reformation period. While Freud and his disciples have not fixed on it nearly as much as the Oedipus theme, the father-daughter relationship is no less problematic. Mimetic theory can do as much to illuminate the shadowy themes of these paintings as the famous candlelight of Caravaggio, to whom Artemesia and Orazio are generally related. A struggling itinerant court painter who spent time in Rome, Genoa, Naples, Paris, and London, in 1611, Orazio was given a large commission by the Papal nephew, later to become Cardinal Scipione Borghese. He was to do an architectural vault fresco of a company of women making music, on display at the entrance to the exhibit. Artemesia posed, with a fan, as one of the Muses. She appears as an observant and intelligent young woman, just coming into her own.

It was the custom of the time to "sub-contract" portions of large painting commissions. Orazio, the portraitist, engaged a local expert in architectural painting, Agostino Tassi, to do the background for the

vault. Unfortunately, Tassi's reputation as a scoundrel had never tarnished his reputation as an innovative technical painter. While work on the commission was underway, Tassi raped Artemesia, then told her she was damaged goods, she'd have to stick with him because she'd never be able to do any better, and that, perhaps (if she was lucky) he'd marry her. Eventually, she would press charges in a sensational trial. The trial's outcome was ultimately rather less than satisfactory: Tassi was denounced and exiled from Rome for five years, but the sentence was later informally rescinded.

Though the case was decided in her favor, nevertheless the scandal did cause Artemesia's image to be tinted in the scarlet hues of a "compromised" woman. Left motherless at the age of 12, her upbringing in her father's free-wheeling social circle only added to the gossip about her. Her choice of subjects included a nude self-portrait as Susanna, harassed by the Elders, and her famous series of paintings of Judith and her maidservant in the camp of Holofernes. She traded other portrait subjects with her father that are revelatory of gender relations in the Counter-Reformation period: an era of social turmoil followed by autocratic retrenchment. These subjects included Danae, Lucretia, Mary Magdalene, and Lot and his daughters.

This exhibition is noteworthy because it is the first time so many of both artists' paintings have been gathered in one place for comparison. To this viewer, it was clear that the pupil surpassed the teacher in capturing the complexity of these Biblical and classical characters' situations, and the ambiguity of their mythic victories and vindications. The deeper sense of drama and personal dignity conveyed by Artemesia's work when compared to that of Orazio bears witness to her accomplishments, as the first woman known to have made her living solely on the products of her own brush. Orazio's heroines are characters in history paintings; Artemesia's are compelling psychological portraits. Sadly, while they may be known as scholars of the Italian Mannerist painters, the curators of this exhibit lack expertise in Biblical studies—a distressing deficit, given the prevalence of Biblical themes in the art of this period. For example, Mary Magdalene is erroneously referred to several times in the exhibition labels as the sister of Martha and Lazarus, and is stated to be described in the New Testament as a prostitute—an occupational attribution that is strictly folkloric and not Scriptural.

The exhibition is at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art until May 12, then travels to the St. Louis Art Museum from June 15 to September 15, 2002. A comprehensive catalogue, published by Yale University Press is available and well worth examining,

even for those unable to see the exhibit. (ISBN: 1-58839-006-3.)

Lisa Bellan-Boyer
Jersey City, New Jersey

Mimetic Theory & Pastoral Ministry

In early August, 2001, ten people from around the country gathered in Santa Fe, New Mexico for a five day seminar on how René Girard's mimetic theory applies to pastoral ministry, entitled "The Mimetic Theory and Pastoral Ministry: A Conversation."

The group brought their own thoughts and themes to the conversation. The first session was used to decide on themes to discuss. Each theme was considered for three hours, with one person introducing the theme to launch the discussion. Some of the topics were Biblical interpretation, liturgy, disease and spiritual healing, church family systems, evangelism, and social dreaming (a method of interpreting the collected dreams of a group as an expression of the group's psycho-social dynamics).

The conversation was a rich experience, although a week of conversation is hopelessly insufficient for an adequate exploration of the field. So a second conversation has been scheduled for July 22-29, 2002 at Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, New Mexico. "**Pastoral Ministry and the Mimetic Root of Violence: A New Paradigm**" will be facilitated by James Williams.

As before, participants will bring topics, questions, or applications of the theory for discussion. Some of these may include: sacraments as a resource for nonviolence; pastoral responses to the attacks of September 11, 2001; and the nonviolent prophetic role of the church in response to terrorism.

Dr. James Williams is retired from Syracuse University, where he was professor of Old Testament. An early participant in the Jesus Seminar, he moved from there to become one of the leading experts on Girard's mimetic theory, especially as it applies to biblical interpretation. He is author of *The Bible, Violence, and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (Trinity Press International, 1995), editor of *The Girard Reader* (Crossroad 1996), and translator of René Girard's *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Orbis, 2001).

The cost of the seminar will be \$170, plus room and board, about \$60 per day. For more information contact Ghost Ranch at 505-685-4333 or visit their website, www.ghostranch.org. Cassette tapes of the August 2001 conversation are available from Britt Johnson for \$50.

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Annual Business Meeting: Minutes

University of Antwerp, Antwerp, Belgium
Saturday June 2, 2001

Present: Membership of COV&R 2001

Presiding: Sandor Goodhart, Executive Secretary,
President *pro tem*

1. Call to Order. The meeting was called to order at 2:15pm by President *pro tem* Goodhart in place of President Diana Culbertson who could not attend because of family illness.

2. Minutes. The minutes from the previous Business Meeting – published in the COV&R *Bulletin* No. 19, November 2000 – were approved by acclamation.

3. Announcements. Two new publications were available from the COV&R membership: James Alison's *Faith Beyond Resentment*, and Anthony Bartlett's *Cross Purposes*.

4. Gratitude. Congratulations were extended to Johan Elsen for the fine conference he and his colleagues had conducted.

5. Nominations. The names of Robert Daly for a second term as an advisory board member, of Per Grande for a first term as an advisory board member, and of Diana Culbertson for a second term as President were put into nomination. All three nominations were approved by acclamation. James Alison, Paul Neuchterlein, and Rusty Palmer were nominated as waiting list candidates. Their nominations were approved.

6. Forthcoming meetings of interest to Girardians. Sandor Goodhart reported that this year's "additional session" devoted to René Girard's work at the annual meeting of the AAR/SBL would take place on Saturday, November 17 in Denver, Colorado, organized around the above two new books: James Alison's *Faith Beyond Resentment*, and Anthony Bartlett's *Cross Purposes*. Both authors (and respondents to each book) were planning to attend.

7. Plans for future COV&R Meetings. COV&R 2002 will be organized by Sandor Goodhart and take place at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, June 4-9. The theme will be "Judaism, Christianity, and the Ancient World: Mimesis, Sacrifice and Culture." The goal will be to explore commonalities between Judaism and Christianity by looking at moments before their separation. Proposals should be sent to Sandor Goodhart at goodhart@purdue.edu by October 31, 2001. More

information and a formal call for papers would be forthcoming from Julie Shinnick on-line.

Wolfgang Palaver distributed a planning sheet for COV&R 2003 to be organized by the Theological Faculty of the University of Innsbruck (including Wolfgang Palaver, Raymund Schwager, and Jozef Niewiadomski). The conference will take place at the University of Innsbruck in Innsbruck, Austria. The theme will be "Passions in Economy, Politics, and Religion."

Finally, Britton Johnston suggested the possibility of coming the Ghost Ranch in New Mexico for the COV&R 2004 conference.

8. COV&R on the internet. Goodhart reminded the group of the address of the homepage of the COV&R web-site: <http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/index.html>.

9. Other business. Goodhart noted that the video testimony project of Duncan Ragsdale (who is chronicling the history of COV&R) is ongoing. Ragsdale began the project at the Paris conference 1998 and has interviewed René Girard, Sandor Goodhart, Sonia Pas, Jim Williams, Bob Hamerton-Kelley, and Raymund Schwager, among others.

Goodhart reminded the membership that some funds are available to subsidize students and others who have not attended COV&R before for travel and registration expenses to the conference as a way of encouraging their participation.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:00pm.

Respectfully submitted,
Sandor Goodhart
(with the help of Robert Daly)
Executive Secretary,
President *pro tem*

New on the COV&R website:

A new page entitled "WAR Against TERRORISM?" This is a collection of links to critical commentaries and articles on terrorism, mimetic rivalry and war, including the LE MONDE interview of René Girard (French and English), commentaries of Eric Gans, Raymund Schwager and others.

http://theol.uibk.ac.at/cover/war_against_terrorism.html.

Report from Antwerp meeting

Last year's annual meeting of COV&R, which took place in Antwerp, Belgium, May 31 to June 2, was notable for its smooth and efficient organization and the generally high level of the contributions. The goal of the conference was to place the work of René Girard in relation to the philosophic tradition, a task that was patently overdue and yet strictly speaking impossible. From the first paper, in which Guido Vanheeswijck traced salient points of contact or similarity between Girard's evolving thought and the theories of philosophers such as (Kojève's) Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida, it became clear, perhaps more so than intended, that between Girard and philosophy an incommensurable gulf exists—this for the simple reason that Girard's notion of truth is not philosophy's.

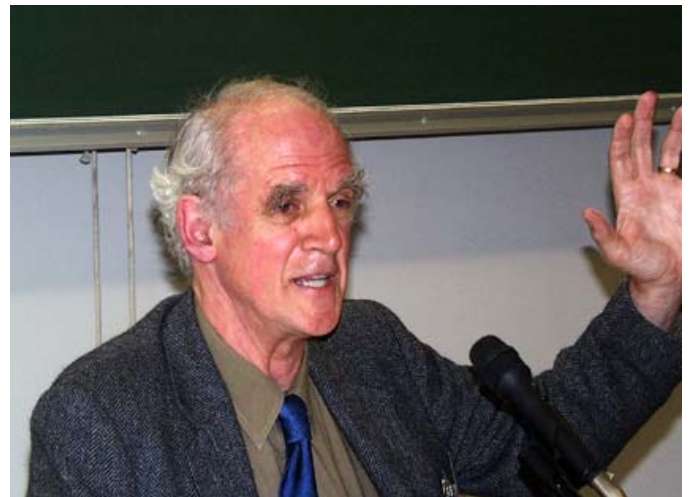
We can make the point by referring to some obvious analogies, mentioned by Vanheeswijck, between Hegel's thought and Girard's. Both see empty interpersonal competition – master/slave, model/subject – as the fundamental motor of human activity, operative in all of its historical phases, and both view history as a progressive unfolding, a movement toward an end point. Here, however, Girard emphatically parts company with philosophy. At least from the writing of *La Violence et le sacré* (1972) he has developed his theory as a committed Christian and (thus?) apocalyptic thinker. For him the historical record stands like a kind of theater curtain painted over with scenes of unending human strife, upon which, as if from a backstage projector, burns the central figure of the cross. As time proceeds, this figure burns brighter and brighter, at once clarifying the elusive motives of the strife while nullifying their conventional means of appeasement, which has always been, once a certain threshold of intensity had been passed, the expulsion or sacrifice of the “positionally” innocent scapegoat. For Girard, this is the truth, as such, of the human situation, one made all the more urgent, in an immediate and practical sense, by the waning power of the scapegoat mechanism effectively to rein in the modern potential for absolute violence.

In other words, for Girard truth is available to straightforward human understanding, once it has grasped the mimetic nature of human desire and drawn the implication that follows from the fact that the most complete revelation of the causes and consequences of this desire has been furnished by the Bible. The truth discoverable by human reason finds its ultimate guarantee in divine revelation. Thus, if there was a criticism to be made of Vanheeswijck's very competent positioning of Girard in relation to his philosophical forbears and contemporaries, it would be that, even

while explicitly noting the Christian component of Girard's thought, he failed to suggest its singular import. One example: between Girard's scapegoat and Derrida's *pharmakon*, however interesting it is to consider the temporal proximity of their formulations, a gulf is fixed, and the gulf is more pertinent to the tenor of Girard's thought than any “influence.” A philosopher like Heidegger, on the other hand, as if in anticipation of Girard, was utterly clear about the incommensurability of philosophical and biblically oriented thinking:

“...anyone for whom the Bible is divine revelation and truth,” he writes in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, “already has the answer to the question “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” before it is even asked: beings, with the exception of God Himself, are created by Him. God Himself “is” as the uncreated creator. One who holds on to such faith as a basis can, perhaps, emulate and participate in the asking of our question in a certain way, but he cannot authentically question without giving himself up as a believer, with all the consequences of this step.”

Without question Girard would agree – indeed, has agreed many times over, as, for example, when he writes in *Quand ces choses commenceront*: “Le principe, le but de la philosophie, de l'humanisme, c'est de cacher le meurtre fondateur. Être chrétien, c'est le dévoiler.” (The principle, the goal of philosophy, of humanism, is to conceal the founding murder. To be a Christian means to reveal it (literally *unveil* it, cf. Heidegger's *alêtheia*).



Charles Taylor. Photo courtesy of Dietmar Regensberger.

On the other hand, since Girard's first appeal to his readers is to their common sense, philosophers are

clearly able to read and respond to, and, inevitably, to challenge his work. Several of the conference's high points occurred when the keynote speakers, the philosophers Charles Taylor and Gianni Vattimo, did just that. In Taylor's remarks, entitled: "Continuing sources of violence: a commentary on the seminal work of René Girard" (unfortunately not on the web and recalled here from hastily scribbled notes), he praised Girard for giving a non-reductive explanation of human violence and for exemplifying how Christian faith might be integrated into a rigorous theoretical hermeneutic.

While acknowledging the critical importance of Girard's central notions of mimetic rivalry and scapegoating, he spent most of his time placing question marks around them. He asked, for example, whether modern violence could be simply acquainted with its ancient counterpart. Whether the French Revolution had given rise to a culture of popular revolt? Whether modern violence, rather than leading to a ritual solution, had itself become a ritual? Whether this unrecognized ritual of violence had become operative in the modern state as a means of *moralizing* life, i.e., of giving citizens a sense of goodness through the purging of evil? In the useful spirit of philosophical inquiry, Taylor left these important questions unanswered, but resonating.

Concerning Girard's theory of religion, Taylor continued to ask equally thought-provoking questions. For example, much in the spirit of Eric Gans (whom Taylor did not mention) he asked how the founding scapegoat event could have acquired its significance in the absence of a framework that would have made that significance graspable. He went on to pose the disturbing and related question of whether Girard considered religion to have arisen in error. Further, whether Girard saw a possibility for real transcendence in primitive religion?

Turning to the contemporary world, Taylor returned to the question of moralized and moralizing violence, i.e., the opportunity provided by the modern states for their citizens to experience themselves as good by violently expelling or punishing evil. He mentioned the US and NATO bombing of Serbia, each bomb making those authorizing the bombing to feel purer and more enlightened. This feeling he traced back to an element in modern culture of what he called "imminent counter enlightenment," a boredom or ennui with the reasonableness of modern life that leads to a kind of hunger for and enjoyment of violence, the very stability of the modern state breeding an enthusiasm for outbreak and breakdown. In short, as the Hegel-inspired thinker he is, Taylor issued an important invitation to his auditors to give some thought to the dialectical effects of

history on the fixed elements of the fixed scenario of Girardian theory. Perhaps, Taylor suggested, they have undergone a "reversal of field" effect.



René Girard and Gianni Vattimo. Photo courtesy of Dietmar Regensberger.

Gianni Vattimo, to turn to his contribution, "The violence of the sacred and the charity of secularization" (also, unfortunately, not on the web) credited Nietzsche and Heidegger, by means of their nihilistic attacks on theological and metaphysical absolutes, with making possible a contemporary return to religion. This apparent paradox Vattimo explained as follows: if Nietzsche and Heidegger revealed, respectively, that metaphysics arises from the spirit of vengeance and that metaphysics constitutes a closed loop that places a block between the human spirit and Being, then both thinkers, whatever their intentions, have been instrumental in revealing the link between traditional, i.e., metaphysical, religion and the violent sacred, and thereby helping to undo it. In Vattimo's view, both philosophical nihilism, properly understood, and modern secularism are potentially liberating forces. They can help free humans from the violent projection of an absolute father god, hungry for vengeance, and thereby open a path to a non-dogmatic, fraternal, and "kenotic" Jesus. In making this point, Vattimo was summarizing views elaborated in his recent book *Belief*. E.g., "I would say that I am only trying to cling more faithfully... to Jesus' paradoxical affirmation that we should no longer consider ourselves to be servants of God, but his friends."

Obviously, in proposing a view of Nietzsche and Heidegger as involved, however paradoxically and contra-intentionally, in the process of genuine, present-day Christian revelation, Vattimo knowingly risked (having discovered Girard through the process of reviewing *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the*

World, in which Girard charges Heidegger with holding to a logos of violence) setting the collective teeth of the conference somewhat on edge. Consequently, Vattimo clarified his position in the fascinating final session of the conference, in which he and Taylor and Girard each gave brief prepared remarks and then engaged in lively debate with each other, by drawing a distinction between Christendom and Christianity. The former is a political/social structure founded on a metaphysical cosmology, the latter is none of these things but a charitable directive. Christendom, he suggested, ended with the advent of modernity, clearing the way for a return to the fraternal Jesus of the Gospels.

In his prepared remarks, Girard quoted an unpublished fragment from Nietzsche in which Christ and Dionysus are compared, and in which the figure of Jesus as the innocent victim is rejected, for in Nietzsche's view sacrifice was essential to the maintenance of all societies. In other words, Girard went on, Nietzsche was unable to recognize the anthropological truth present in the figure of Jesus, nor the proof of this truth embodied in Christianity.

Taylor remarked that Nietzsche's and Heidegger's accounts of modernity as a dissolution or weakening of Being were both inadequate, and that what was required for modernity was "a positive story," something that might offer an opening in modern people's totally imminent view of existence. In short, after the three speakers had made their opening remarks, three different accounts of truth and its workings were put in play. Without a transcript it is impossible for me to trace the give and take of the conversation, but at one point Vattimo was asked, I believe by Girard, whether he thought his account of Christianity was true.

Vattimo questioned the premise of the question, on the grounds that truth as an absolute had nothing to do with Christianity, which has to do with responding to others in a spirit of charity. The moment one states that one's religion is true, one is one step from imposing it. To this Girard countered that when the life of a victim is at stake, then one is required to stand up and tell the truth. His example was Dreyfus. Vattimo readily agreed that the victim must always be defended, but saw this not as a question of truth but, again, as one of charity. Later, during the question and answer period, Gil Baillie moved the debate past its point of impending impasse by remarking: "If there is no truth, then we will all have to carry a revolver. Truth is not a weapon, as Foucault and now Vattimo suggest, but something we submit to." He went on to agree with Vattimo that the secular was indeed good to the degree that it was free of the sacrificial sacred, but that (here perhaps responding to Taylor) in itself it was not sustainable. Rather, he said, it

needed to become sacramental, attuned to the transcendent through the Eucharist.

And in this way, the conference ended by vigorously drawing out some of the contradictions inherent in the variously charged concepts of truth that had been implicit in its premise, which gave to the whole, I think, a sense of roundedness and wholeness and vitality.



Charles Taylor, conference organizer Johan Elson, René Girard and Gianni Vattimo at the closing session. Photo courtesy of Dietmar Regensberger.

I could expand on this positive impression by attempting to give an account of the other conference contributions, most of which—at least the ones I heard—were stimulating and engaging, but I can excuse myself by pointing to their presence, most of them, on the conference website. They are highly qualified, specialist applications of Girardian insights. Let me, however, make one exception to this blanket appraisal, and refer the reader to Sandor Goodhart's paper, "Response to Willard Swartley's Book," in which Goodhart very kindly and respectfully but nevertheless firmly makes clear his difference of opinion with Girard regarding Judaism's and Christianity's respective roles in the revelation and undermining of sacred violence.

This of course is a central point in Girardian theory, but Goodhart's sensitive examination demonstrated the possibility of remaining faithful to Girard's insights while differing with specific conclusions. In my view (and judging from the onsite response to Goodhart's paper, I was in abundant company) Goodhart gave an inspiring example, from deep within the Girardian circle, so to speak, of the continuing openness and vitality of René Girard's thought—for as Charles Taylor remarked, a propos of our understanding of modernity: "We need to complexify our views."

William Mishler
University of Minnesota

Membership

We invite you to become a member of COV&R. Annual dues are \$40 U.S. per household, or \$20 U.S. for matriculated students. Those in soft currency areas who find it difficult to pay this amount in U.S. currency are invited to apply to the executive secretary for a special rate. Member includes voting rights, research collaboration and discussion, and opportunity to support the aims of the Colloquium, and also subscription to this *Bulletin*, and to *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*. Please do not delay to join COV&R if you are committed to our *raison d'être*.

Bibliography

The Documentation of Literature on the Mimetic Theory is searchable online, <http://starwww.uibk.ac.at>. For further information, see Bulletin no. 9 (1995), p.6 (online at <http://info.uibk.ac.at/c/c2/c204/drama/bulletin/>).

We invite you to send us copies of your articles, as well as references to any kind of literature dealing with mimetic theory.

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