

WITNESS AMONG OTHER FAITHS



Approaching Persons of Other Faiths

SCRIPTURE FOCUS

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Romans 1:16

“The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” Acts 17:24-25

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son” John 3:16



QUOTES

“Christian mission has only been really successful—at least in the numerical sense of the word—among the adherents of tribal and primal religions. ... the Church encountered closed, literary ‘higher religions’, such as Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, her progress was almost negligible.” David J. Bosch

“For the human sickness there is one specific remedy, and this is it. There is no other. Therefore the Gospel must be proclaimed to the ends of the earth and to the end of time. The church cannot compromise on its missionary task without ceasing to be the church. If it fails to see and to accept this responsibility, it is changing the Gospel into something other than itself.” Stephen Neill



LEARNING OBJECTIVES

As a result of the readings, discussion and activities in this session, the candidate should be able to ...

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- understand the nature of religion, discern between religious continuity and discontinuity and understand how this affects one's approach
- develop an approach to people of other faiths, and give an appropriate and loving witness to their faith in Jesus Christ.

APPROACHING PERSONS OF OTHER FAITHS

The aim of this session is to provide an overview of religion and to develop an approach to people of other faiths. The session will not deal with living religions of the world – their tenets, practices, or unique challenges. Subsequent sessions deal specifically with Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Non-belief, Animism and folk religions.

Also, this session will not deal with issues such as whether there are multiple paths to God, whether salvation is possible through other religions or the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. While these are lively and important issues that should be discussed and sorted out, it is assumed that those in training for cross-cultural witness to Jesus Christ have settled these issues and their intent is to witness to others in the name of Jesus. Should there be an interest in a further explanation, look at books by Norman Anderson, Ida Glaser, and Stephen Neill listed at the conclusion of this session.

The topic of religion can be approached in a number of ways. It can be addressed as a phenomenon to be analyzed and described, or as a confessional matter from the reading of the writings of the religion, or as the history of a social/religious movement. Because our concern is missionary in nature, we will take a particular approach that utilizes aspects of all of these approaches but whose end is different. Our aim is not just to understand and describe other religions, or to know their history, or to be able to quote their holy writings.

Our aim is to give witness to God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, our approach will be unique because it must deal with more than religion as an abstract idea but as it presents itself in particular social and personal situations and with real people and their life commitments. The ultimate goal is that people will be reconciled with the Creator God through Jesus Christ. Thus, witness to Jesus Christ as the Son of God is not optional or a side issue but at the heart of an approach to people of other faiths.

At the same time, in order for witness to be true and of value, it must be appropriate and informed. Developing an appropriate and informed approach to people of other faiths is the chief aim of this session. In order to construct an appropriate and informed approach to persons of other faiths, we begin with a letter. The context is India and the subject is a friend.

Letter to a Friend

Imagine that your home for the past eleven months has been Varanasi, India, where you work as an English teacher in an upper-level professional school. Within the first month of your arrival, you meet Amartya (if you are a guy) / Roshni (if you are a gal) at a social gathering of young professionals wanting to improve their conversational English skills. The two of you immediately develop a mutually beneficial relationship. He /she needs to practice his/her English, and you desire to connect with Hindu society beyond the school and the classroom. The two of you begin to dine at local restaurants, attend cultural events in the

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city, and even take weekend trips to visit extended family in a small village two hours away. During the course of your conversations, you talk about many things, such as family, girl-guy relationships, each other's country, and religion.

In the first conversation about religion, you tell your friend that you are a Christian and start listing some of the things important to you. He/she is only mildly interested in what you are saying and soon begins describing a version of Christianity he/she has gained from movies, history classes in school, and his /her father who worked in France for a period of time.

*IF ALL WE WANT TO DO IS TALK, THEN
WE WILL NEVER LISTEN.*

Before you can politely correct some of the grosser misrepresentations, he/she launches into an earnest defense of their Hindu faith. Of course, evidence of Hinduism is everywhere you turn in this ancient city. Since your arrival, you have been constantly reminded of the long and enduring history of Hinduism evidenced in the never-ending stream of pilgrims that make their way to the Ghats that line Ganges River where they perform the same rituals of their parents and grandparents and their parents and grandparents. The pervasive influence of Hindu can be seen and felt from every direction – temples, wandering cows, holy men. And you are likewise aware that its influence is evident in some not-so-obvious ways, such as caste, dietary rules, and the basic assumptions about life.

Your second conversation about religion occurs several weeks later as the two of you sit together on a bench at the side of a busy boulevard at the city center. You are talking about the festival of Holi which just ended when out of the blue Amartya / Roshni turns to you and asks, "Why are you a Christian?" You pause for a moment and then open your mouth to answer. However, before you mouth the first words, you are stopped by the squeal of tires and a loud thud. An elderly man has been struck by a delivery truck only six or seven feet in front of you. It is only hours later—after having watched the man die on the pavement and coming home to your apartment—that you recall the question and begin thinking how you would have answered the question. You decide that you need to write your friend a letter.

Dear Amartya / Roshni,

This afternoon you asked why I am a Christian. The tragedy that occurred right at our feet prevented me from answering your question. I hope that it is OK for me to respond to your question in this letter....

REFLECT #1

1. As a cross-cultural witness, what should your letter not say?
2. What points do you want to make to your friend?
3. What should be the tone of your letter?
4. What else should you do besides write a letter?

Your relationship with your friend is more than a matter of a confrontation between two religious systems. Instead, it is an encounter between two religious persons – two people with distinct ideas about life, values, and hopes.

What is the difference between an encounter between religious systems and an encounter between religious persons?

RELIGIOUS SYSTEMS OR RELIGIOUS PERSONS?

Often the study of a particular religion causes us to think in terms of a religious system (tenets, beliefs, and rituals) rather than individuals. It is important to remember that while a general understanding of a religion's beliefs and practices is crucial, this is not our chief concern. The goal is to love well another person and to relate to them in an empathetic manner. An understanding of their religion can help in loving and relating to them, but it does not automatically translate into love and empathy.

When approaching a person of another faith, it is crucial to hold the following firmly in our minds. First, the person has a family, personal history, cultural history, language, and work. Each of these determines their religious belief and practice. Unlike persons in the West, the line between secular and profane is very faint or non-existent. Thus, family, history, language, and labor mesh with religious belief and practice in a dynamic manner. It is impossible to separate the two. So, the religion and worldview of a Buddhist man in Cambodia are remarkably different from a Buddhist woman in Sri Lanka.

Second, the expression of their religion will always be a mixture of culture and localized beliefs. It is rare that you find a "textbook version" of Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, or even Christianity. In order for the textbook versions to fit the wide variety of beliefs and practices of a religious system, the one who constructs the textbook version must find the common denominators that can describe the wide variety of beliefs and practices. This process can strip the religion of its nuance, color, and richness and reduce it to a pale representation. So, if you are in Kazakhstan talking with a Muslim woman about what it means to be a Muslim in that context, you may find that you know more about 'Islam' than she does. What she knows and practices is a localized, contextualized, Kazakh-version of Islam that is unlike the textbook version.

*LISTENING AND LOVING REQUIRE
PATIENCE AND IMAGINATION.*

Our examination of how to approach people of other faiths will address some basic questions: What is religion? Is there continuity or discontinuity between revelation of God in Jesus and these religions? Are we to proclaim a religion

or a person? Additional questions will surface from these questions. This session will serve its purpose if it introduces us to the crucial questions and helps us to begin framing an approach to people of other faiths. So, we begin with an understanding of the term 'religion'.

What is Religion?

Hans Küng says that religion ...

"always deals with an experiential 'encounter with the holy' ... whether this 'sacred reality' be understood as power, as forces (spirits, demons, angels), as (a personal) God, as (an impersonal) Divine, or an ultimate reality (nirvāna).

Hence 'religion' can be paraphrased, for the purposes of our dialogue, as follows: Religion is

a social and individual relationship, vitally realized in a tradition and community (through doctrine, ethos, and generally ritual as well), with something that transcends or encompasses man and his world: with something always to be understood as the utterly final, true reality (the Absolute, God, nirvāna).

“In contrast to philosophy, religion is concerned at once with a *message of salvation* and the *way to salvation*.”¹

It is clear that religion is more than a set of beliefs one believes or practices that are observed. Religion is a life way or worldview that gives meaning to the whole of existence. Thus, we must be mindful of the integrative nature of religion in our approach to a person of another faith.

REFLECT #2

1. What are the various elements of religion that are listed in the above definition?
2. What is meant by the words “utterly final, true reality”?

No matter how we might view another person’s religion, we must admit that we have an outsider’s perspective and thus a limited understanding and experience. What we might consider to be superstition, illogical, or less than ultimate is reality and truth to the faith insider.

Japanese Christian, Kosuke Koyama, in his book *Waterbuffalo Theology*, tells of a missionary couple arriving in Bangkok, Thailand.² For these new missionaries, all of Thai religion was the worship of demons. In their naïve and simplistic understanding, forty million people and 700 years of tradition were brushed aside in an instant. For them, the people and country of Thailand were enemies of the gospel. Their assumption was that there was absolutely no knowledge of God among the Thai people, all of their traditions were worthless, these traditions were anti-gospel, a knowledge of the Thai history and tradition was not necessary, and thus, the religion of the Thai people must be condemned. This view of the Buddhist religion is dismissive of more than just a religious system or of Buddhism as an anti-Christian force. It rejects people – their history, culture, tradition, longings, values, and realities.

While the couple may think they are dismissing the religious system, they are in fact rejecting religious persons who find ultimate meaning and life integrated in their faith. Koyama’s point is that such a dismissive attitude is disrespectful and destroys the possibility of witness.

Continuity or Discontinuity?

One of the basic questions that will determine our approach to peoples of other faith is whether there is continuity or discontinuity between their faith and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. If there is continuity between their faith and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, then our task is to understand their faith, seek bridges of communication, and honor their tradition and beliefs as preparation for receiving the good news of Jesus Christ. If, however, there is discontinuity between their faith and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, then an understanding of their religion is not necessary, their religious tradition is worthless, and it must be condemned as demonic. The missionary couple described above definitely sees Christian faith and Buddhism as being discontinuous.

It is my contention that scripture teaches that there is continuity between the faith quests

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of world religions and the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. When we give witness to God as revealed in Jesus Christ, we can assume that God is already at work in the other person's life, culture, and history. This was Paul's beginning assumption as he encountered people in Athens.

REFLECT #3

Read Acts 17:16-34

1. In what way did Paul respond to their request to explain his faith?
2. How did Paul deal with their "unknown god" as being continuous or discontinuous with the revelation of God in Jesus Christ?
3. What kind of bridges of understanding or points of contact with their beliefs does Paul use in his address?

Paul at Athens

Context: Paul is visiting Athens and observes that the city is full of idols. In addition, there are many teachers advocating various philosophies. Paul is brought to a meeting of the assembly of the people and asked about the new teaching that he proclaims. He speaks to people of another faith about his faith in Jesus Christ.

If there is continuity between the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and other faiths, then our approach to people of other faiths will take a definite approach. We will assume that keys lie within their faith commitment that can unlock doors of understanding and provide access to the truth of the gospel.

Here are some of the questions we may need to pose as we enter into relationship and conversations with someone of another faith.

- Who is their god? What is his/her name? Are there legends, myths, and stories about him or her?
- What is the relationship between men and women and this god? What is the story of this relationship?
- What does this god do for them?
- What kind of longings and hopes does their religious quest represent?
- What is the meaning or purpose of rites and rituals?
- Who or what is the cause of good and evil?

What other questions might we need to be asking?

The aim of such questions is not to build an argument against their religion or to refute what they give as answers. Rather the point is to discover continuity and bridges of understanding.

CHRISTIAN RELIGION OR JESUS?

Part of the difficulty with our approach to other religions has been that we believe it to be a clash between religions: Christianity against Islam, or Buddhism, or Hinduism. The Christian religion, we think, must be proved to be superior to the other religion in terms of beliefs, ethics, or whatever. So, the tact has been to defend Christianity against the other religion or attack the other religion as false. And so Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and animists, in turn,

attack Christianity in defense of their religion. They reject Christianity not on its own merits but in defense of their religion and life-way.

It must be admitted that our defense of Christianity has in many cases been our defense of our religious way of life. What has been presented to the person of another religion is a Western religion, thoroughly embedded in American and European culture and history, which does not fit with their culture or history. They have been presented a religion rather than a person. They do not encounter Jesus but a foreign religion.

*JESUS MUST SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE,
BELONG TO THEIR TRIBE, OR RELATE
TO THEIR HISTORY.*

In order for the other person to encounter the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, Jesus must speak their language, belong to their tribe, or relate to their history. Christian religion can often get in the way of this. In *Christianity Rediscovered*, Vincent Donovan relates the story of how Jesus rather than religion was presented to the Masai of Africa.³ His approach was not to present a foreign religion or a religious system but to proclaim the good news that Jesus Christ is the one who meets their deepest longings and brings value to their lives. While resistant to the Christian religion, the Masai embraced Jesus.

Empathetic Approach

To understand, relate, and truly communicate Jesus to a person of another faith, our approach must be one of love and empathy. I believe this was what Paul was doing in Athens and what we are to do as we live alongside people of other faiths. This approach is achieved through readings, experiences, conversations, clarification, and response. In this way, we attain a sympathetic understanding, the ability to resonate with another person, and the opening to speak and love.

Readings

A great deal can be gained by reading books and articles about another faith, especially if they are written by an insider. These might be anthropological studies, confessional materials, or works of fiction. These express the longing and desires of those within the faith and put flesh on the religion.

Experiences

We need to step into the religious world of others and experience their faith. This could mean smelling, tasting, and handling their religion, as we visit a temple or mosque or participate in some forms and rituals.

Conversations

We must be willing to sit with another person, drink tea, and talk about life. It needs to be remembered that as we talk idly about farming, family, and marriage, we are talking about religion. Religion permeates the whole of life, every conversation.

Clarifications

We must seek a true understanding by asking questions and continually reflecting on our understanding. A question will need to be asked a number of times in a variety of ways before we are able to truly understand.

Responses

We need to respond to the other person with honesty and humility. Our response might include bewilderment at certain aspects of their religion, appreciation for other parts, or a confession of our prejudice and even malice.

John Dunne in *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (1967) describes this kind of approach: “You find yourself able to pass over from the standpoint of your life to those of the others, entering into a sympathetic understanding of them, finding resonances between their lives and your own, and coming back once again, enriched, to your own standpoint.”⁴

One person has called this approach *Listening Love*.⁵ This approach helps us to love and relate to the person of another faith by moving us away from popular distortions and misrepresentations. A popular distortion is that all Muslims are terrorists or that Islam is a religion of violence. The only true way past this distortion is empathy. It is by knowing a Muslim mother, listening to her story, and loving her as a person that we move beyond the characterizations that are damaging and false. And what good does it serve to dismiss the whole of a people with such gross and meaningless characterizations? Does such a distortion show love and respect? Does it give witness to Christ?

Does this approach mean that we give up our convictions or stop believing in Jesus? No. Absolutely not. The main objective in this approach is to sense what others sense as Hindus, to understand in some small way what it might mean to live within their worldview, to relate to them in a respectful manner as human beings with rich traditions, and to love them as they are. This approach moves us past the stereotypes and misrepresentation that prevent us from offering a viable and humane presentation of Jesus Christ.

Listening and loving require patience and imagination. If we are in a hurry to do our religious duty, to give a witness and go, or to move on to someone more ‘open’ to the gospel, then we do not have time to empathize or love. The approach that we are advocating means that we go the distance with people. Empathy translates into a million cups of tea, long and incomplete conversations, clarification of meanings and intents, and friendship that is more than surface or cheap. It requires that we give of ourselves.

*LISTENING LOVE TAKES A GREAT
DEAL OF TIME AND EFFORT.*

If we are not willing to cross over in our hearts and imaginations, then we will never love or empathize with the other. To empathize means that we place ourselves in their home, family, tradition, and history and try to sense what it would be like to know only this way of life and way of believing. While we can never fully cross over into another person’s world, our imagination can take us to places we will never physically go and to realize things beyond our experience. Unless we are willing to imagine, we will not be able to truly love.

If all we want to do is talk, then we will never listen. Listening is part of witness that many of us need to develop. For many of us, we do not feel we have done our religious duty or given a witness unless we have proclaimed or preached something. Listening provokes empathy, and empathy is the heart of our witness. Empathetic witness is fueled by good questions that delve into a person’s past, family, likes and dislikes, hobbies, foods, relationships, routines, values,

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fears, purpose, etc. Unless we are willing to ask questions and listen to others, we will not truly love and we cannot give an adequate answer to our faith in Jesus.

Listening and empathy are love in action. Love must be the cornerstone of our approach to people of other religions. Love trumps apologetics, strategy, contextualization, argumentation, or preaching. If we do not love, we are like a “resounding gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). Preaching the gospel to Hindus is relatively easy. Loving, truly loving a Hindu man or woman, is extremely difficult and costly. Above methodology, strategy, or apologetics, Christ commands that we love in such a way that we expend our lives for another (Matthew 5:44; 19:19; and John 15:13), and Paul sets love as the standard for our lives (Romans 13:8-9; 1 Corinthians 13:2; 16:14; and Philippians 1:9-11).

Confess Christ

If we love another person, we will speak to them about Jesus Christ. Listening is only one-half of love. When the time comes to answer life questions or the Holy Spirit prompts us to declare our allegiance and loyalty to Christ, we must speak and speak in a definitive manner. To withhold that which is most precious, meaningful, and life-giving to us does not make any sense. Some want only to listen and not speak for fear of offending or driving a wedge between themselves and the other. However, not to speak is to deny who we are and what we believe. Also, if we do not speak, we deny people the loving gift that we have to offer.

REFLECT #4

1. What is your confession about Jesus?
2. What would you want someone you loved to know about Him?

SUMMARY

In approaching a person of another faith, care must be taken to understand the integrative nature of religion and how it is more than tenets and a system of beliefs. It is also crucial that the cross-cultural witness look for continuity between the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and the religious longings and beliefs of the other person. And it is necessary that the witness crossover in order that he or she is able to empathize and love. In the end, the intent is that confession of Christ as God and Lord is made from the lips of a person who is fully and lovingly engaged in the life of another person. In such an empathetic witness, Christ is communicated through love and life and in words.

Dear Amartya / Roshni ...

Think again about the scenario that opened this lesson. What have you discovered in this session that might shape this relationship and the manner in which you would respond to Amartya / Roshni? How should you approach a person of another faith?

Principles

- The following are the key principles highlighted in this lesson that you can apply as you encounter people of other faiths.
- Religion is more than a set of beliefs and practices but includes a person’s worldview and life way.

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- We misrepresent our Lord and alienate people if we are dismissive of the traditions, history, and culture that accompany a people's religious faith.
- One of our tasks is to find points of connection or bridges of understanding for our relationship and conversations with people of other faiths.
- An emphatic approach means that we go the long distance of empathizing and loving a person.
- Witness means that we confess who Christ is.
- Love trumps strategy, contextualization, and apologetics.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES ~ BEFORE YOU GO

If we wish to live and give witness to Christ cross-culturally, we must be proactive in doing the kinds of activities that make us self-aware and others-directed. The following activities will help you to actively and intentionally prepare to encounter another religious person. As you try these activities, record your difficulties, struggles, and successes. Or if you have already done these either in your home culture or cross-culturally, recall the difficulties, struggles, and successes you encountered.

Imagine. Befriend someone of another faith and begin trying to imagine what it would be like to be a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, non-believer or Animist. Put yourself in their shoes, in their family, in their tradition – in their world. What would be different about your life and view of the world?

Lifestyle. Examine how your religious beliefs have shaped your way of life, thoughts, values, etc. An essential step toward empathic understanding is self-awareness of your own religious conditioning.

Formation. As you examine your own religious understanding, list the aspects of Christianity that have more to do with your tradition, culture, and history than Christ. An awareness of this is important as you frame the message of Christ for those from a different tradition, culture, and history. In the end, we want to present Christ and Christ alone.

Language. How do you talk about your faith? How much of your language is cultural, religious, or Western in reference and orientation? How might you tell your story of faith in Christ in a way that makes sense to a Hindu or Muslim? Rather than asking them to adjust to your language and cultural reference, how might you adjust without changing the sense of your story in order to communicate faith in Christ to a person of another faith?

Life-on-Life. To what extremes are you willing to go in order to communicate faith to another person? For most people, they might share a testimony if it can be done with some convenience or with little effort or time. Listening love takes a great deal of time and effort, requires sacrificial love, and will surely mean that you will have to adjust the way you live and communicate. Think through the cost of sharing your faith with another person.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR *WITNESS AMONG OTHER FAITHS*

Approaching a person of another faith is a huge topic with many sub-topics to explore. This session has introduced you to some of these topics. Should you want to explore these further, the list of resources below would be a good place to begin.

Anderson, Norman. *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984.

This book probes some of the thorny issues of Christianity and other world faiths. Anderson takes the wider and more academic discussion and makes it accessible in a popular format. He provides a good starting point for one who has questions about how Christianity relates to other religions and the uniqueness of Christianity.

McDermott, Gerald R. *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation & Religious Traditions*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000.

This book challenges the reader to engage other faiths in a dynamic, and yet, biblical manner. He seeks to show the value of truth inherent in other religions and that Christians have much to learn from these living faiths.

Neill, Stephen. *Christian Faith & Other Faiths*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984.

This is a revised edition of an older book by Neill (Oxford University Press, 1961). He describes the problem of Christianity's encounter with the religions of the world and analyzes various approaches for this encounter. He maintains the uniqueness of Christianity while calling for humility in approach and respect for the religious quest that other faiths represent.

Tennent, Timothy. *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicalism in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002.

In a readable and informative format, Tennent creates a dialogue between Christianity and Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam from the standpoint of what he calls engaged exclusivism (26-27). While holding to an evangelical position, Tennent seeks to engage non-Christian religions in a spirited conversation.

Glaser, Ida. *The Bible and Other Faiths: Christian Responsibility in a World of Religions*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005.

Glaser investigates the relationship between the God of Scripture with various expressions of the gods in the religions of the world. She deals first with the Old Testament and then the New Testament in a stimulating discussion of God as presented in scripture, the nations, and God's activity among them.

NOTES

¹Hans Küng, "Toward Dialogue," pp. xiii-xix, in *Christianity and the World Religions: Paths of Dialogue with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism* (New York: Doubleday, 1986).

²Kosuke Koyama, as cited in Gerald R. McDermott, *Can Evangelicals Learn from World Religions? Jesus, Revelation & Religious Traditions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 10.

³Vincent Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered, Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005).

⁴John S. Dunne, *A Search for God in Time and Memory* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1967).

⁵William Hendricks from classroom lectures at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Ft. Worth, Texas.

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