

**Finding a Way with Religion and Spirituality: The Intersection of Religion, Aging  
and Sexual Orientation from the Perspective of Lesbian Older Adults**

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## Abstract

In this qualitative study I used semi-structured interviews to explore how twenty lesbian older adults had engaged with religion and spirituality across their life spans. Participants were purposefully selected to represent variation in the combination of religion of origin and current religion. Although most shifted from their religions of origin, few ( $n=4$ ) suggested that conflict with religion accounted for changes in religious identification or affiliation. Most had complex religious identities, which often included “spiritual” ( $n=17$ ). Although all participants were aware of anti-homosexuality religious discourse and many had negative experiences with religious others/institutions, most still found religion and/or spirituality to be important resources, and they developed strategies conditioned by sexual orientation to engage safely with religion. Many found support for their sexual orientation in religious or spiritual communities at various points in their lives.

## Biography

Wanda White has an MSW from UCLA, where she is currently a doctoral candidate and a Hartford Doctoral Fellow in Social Work. Her dissertation study was funded by the John A. Hartford Foundation and the UCLA Graduate Division.

## Finding a Way with Religion and Spirituality: The Intersection of Religion, Aging and Sexual Orientation from the Perspective of Lesbian Older Adults

The purpose of the presentation, and, therefore, of this paper is to briefly orient readers to my dissertation study (White, in progress) and to summarize key results. It consists of the following sections: (a) why this topic?; (b) methods in brief; (c) sample characteristics; (d) results; and (e) implications for social work practice.

### Why This Topic?

In November of 2005, I attended two sessions at the Gerontological Society of America's 58<sup>th</sup> Annual Scientific Meeting that suggested a gap in research on religion, aging and sexual orientation. In the first session, which reviewed the literature on aging and sexual orientation (Sullivan & Neal, 2005, November), none of the studies reviewed addressed issues of religion or spirituality. Later in the conference I attended a session on religion and aging (Moberg, Levin, Nelson-Becker, McFadden, & Nakasone, 2005); none of the research presented by the panelists related to sexual minority populations.

I investigated this apparent research gap by searching for literature addressing the intersection of religion, aging and sexual orientation using the following search condition: aging and (gay or lesbian or homosexual\*) and (religion or spirituality). It returned ten journal articles, only one of which was peer-reviewed. However, none of the journal articles addressed the intersection substantively.

Ultimately, the gap in the research alone did not provide the impetus for the study. When the extant research that related tangentially to the intersection of religion, aging and sexual orientation was reviewed, a rationale for the study emerged. The following sections briefly summarize the research relevant to this study and the concomitant gaps.

### *Demographics of Religiosity in the US*

In the largest general population-based study of religion in the US, 89.5% identified with a religion, and 86.2% identified specifically with a Christian religion (Kosmin & Lachman, 1990). Gay men and lesbians, however, appear to differ markedly from the general population in their religious identification. A large non-representative demographic study of gay men and lesbians (Rothblum, Balsam, & Mickey, 2004, figures calculated from Tables 1 and 2 in their article) showed that 41.8% of gay and lesbian participants identified with a religious tradition. Only 23.3% identified as Christian; the remainder identified Judaism (6.1%), Buddhism (1.2%), and other (11.2%), as their current religions. The majority (58.2%) identified as either spiritual (37.8%) or as not having any current religion (20.4%). Given that lesbians and gay men are born into families representative of the general population, most are raised with religions (herein referred to as religion of origin) similar to the general population. In fact, Rothblum et al. found that 90.2% of gays and lesbians in their study identified as having had a religion of origin, and 74.7% had a Christian religion of origin. Apparently, gay men and lesbians depart overwhelmingly from the religions in which they were raised in addition to deviating from the religious identification profile of the general population.

### *Religion and Sexual Orientation*

Research within gay and lesbian populations related to religion reveals significant conflict with religion particularly surrounding coming out, which results in a variety of strategies for reconciling with religion, including abandoning religion, shifting to more accepting religions and reconciling within their religions of origin (Buchanan, Dzelme, Harris, & Hecker, 2001; Comstock, 1996; Greenberg, 2004; Miville & Ferguson, 2004; Ritter & O'Neill, 1989; Shallenberger, 1998; Yarhouse & Tan, 2005). These studies have been limited in scope in two significant ways. Studies have focused on conflict related to coming out, therefore they have included primarily younger adults. In addition, most of these studies sampled from those who are actively involved in either mainstream religions or gay affirming religions or denominations

(Buchanan et al., 2001; Comstock, 1996; Goodwill, 2000; Greenberg, 2004; Lease, Horne, & Noffsinger-Frazier, 2005; Shallenberger, 1994, 1998). Therefore, those who identify as “spiritual and not religious” and those who do not identify as religious are rarely included in studies; and no studies could be found that focused on the religious beliefs and involvement of older gay and lesbian adults.

### *Religion and Aging*

In contrast, a large literature related to religion and aging exists. In general, studies show that older adults have an increased interest in and involvement in religion as they age (Idler, 1994; Moberg, 2001; Wink & Dillon, 2001).

Another stream of research suggests there may be many tangible benefits of religious involvement. Recent research supports hypotheses that various forms of religious beliefs and involvement positively impact health, mental health, and subjective well being, and these well being benefits are particularly salient to older adults (Ainlay, Singleton, & Swigert, 1992; Gall et al., 2005; Johnson, 1995; Koenig, 1999; Levin, 1994a, 1994b, 2001; Morris, 1997; Pargament, 1997; Parker et al., 2002; Schaie, Krause, & Booth, 2004; Seifert, 2002; Wink & Dillon, 2001, 2003; Wink, Dillon, & Larsen, 2005; Zuckerman, Kasl, & Ostfeld, 1984).

But research on religion and aging does not speak to the experience of gay and lesbian older adults. Large population-based studies which look at religion and various aspects of well being have not asked participants to identify their sexual orientation. It is not known if or how religious interest and involvement change with age among older gay men and lesbians, nor is it known whether health and mental health benefits of religion extend to aging gays and lesbians.

### *Summary*

As a result of these gaps in research, we have little, if any, understanding of how a vexed relationship with religion plays out over the life course for gays and lesbians. The impetus for the study, which emerged from the related research, was a concern that a vexed relationship with religion might impact religiosity and, therefore, impinge on well being.

## Methods in Brief

The state of knowledge and other philosophical, epistemological and ontological reasons led to the use of qualitative methods to explore of how religion, aging and sexual orientation intersect.

### *Study Population Delimitations*

This study focused on lesbian older adults, as opposed to gay men, or bisexual or transgender persons for several reasons. Extant research on sexual minorities and religion primarily address gay men and lesbians, and religious discourse and sacred text similarly relate to same-sex behavior. Lesbians were chosen because qualitative methods were to be used. A small sample was needed for reasons of feasibility; therefore, in order to reduce variability within the sample, only lesbians were interviewed. Lesbians were selected as the sample population for two reasons. I am lesbian and it was assumed that insider status might make it easier to engage lesbian participants.

### *Research Question*

This study had one overarching research question: how have lesbian older adults engaged with religion and spirituality across their life courses?

### *Sampling*

Participants were sampled purposefully to represent the variety of shifts in religious identification that had been reported in research on sexual orientation and religion. Participants were recruited through outreach to secular and religious organizations, as well as through snowball sampling.

### *Data Collection*

A semi-structured interview guide was developed, which listed the key areas to be addressed. It included background questions, questions about experiences with family of origin religion, changes in religious identities and affiliations, religious and spiritual practices, needs

met with religion and spirituality, challenges faced in religious communities and with religious others, and understandings and explanations of religious doctrine related to sexual orientation.

### Sample

The sample included twenty community dwelling adults. Sixteen were non-Hispanic White, 2 were Latina, and 2 were African American. The ages ranged from 61 to 87 (mean 80.6). There was wide variation in socioeconomic status (as indicated by income, housing and education).

The sample successfully captured the wide range of the religious shift that was purposefully sought. Table 2 summarizes the religions of origin versus the current religious identifications of the participants. Three persons (Maruja, Grace and Margaret) stayed in their religion of origin. Five persons (Elizabeth, Beatrice, Andi, JD, Ashleigh) shifted toward more accepting religions according to Comstock's (1996) modified version of Nelson's typification of religions based on doctrine about homosexuality. Ten persons drifted away from religion and currently identified as atheist ( $n=5$ : Laine, Harriet, Elise, Adra, Margo), agnostic ( $n=1$ : Renee), and spiritual-and-not-religious ( $n=5$ : Nancy, Karen, Barbara, Peggy, Joan). In addition, there was drift that was atypical relative to extant research on religion and sexual orientation: Dollesha drifted from Baptism to Catholicism and Margo went from no religion of origin to Lutheran to atheist.

TABLE 2.

Religion of origin versus current religion of participants ordered by religion of origin ( $N=20$ )

Participant	Religion of origin	Current religious identification <sup>1</sup>	Comments (refinements noted during interview)
Dollesha	Baptist	Catholic	Also spiritual
Elizabeth	Baptist	Christian non-denominational	Also spiritual

Participant	Religion of origin	Current religious identification <sup>1</sup>	Comments (refinements noted during interview)
Renee	Catholic	Agnostic	Also spiritual
Laine	Catholic	Atheist	Disavowed being spiritual
Maruja	Catholic	Catholic	No further qualifications
Nancy	Catholic	None	Also spiritual
Karen	Catholic	Spiritual	No further qualifications
Beatrice	Christian Scientist	“Not particularly religious or spiritual”	Also “more Christian Scientist than anything else”
Grace	Episcopalian	Episcopalian	Also spiritual
Margaret	Episcopalian	Episcopalian	Also spiritual
Barbara	Fundamentalist Christian	None	Strongly disavowed mainstream religion; identified as spiritual
Harriet	Jewish	Atheist	Disavowed being spiritual
Andi	Jewish (Orthodox)	Christian	Also spiritual
Elise	Jewish (Secular)	Jewish (Secular)	Also atheist and spiritual
Adra	Jewish	“Jewish. I’m not religious. I’m very spiritual”	Also atheist
JD	Lutheran	Episcopalian	Also spiritual
Ashleigh	Mormon	“Eclectic”	Also spiritual

Participant	Religion of origin	Current religious identification <sup>1</sup>	Comments (refinements noted during interview)
Peggy	Mormon	None	Also identified as “Catholic, if anything,” religious and spiritual.
Joan	Mormon	Spiritual	No further qualifications
Margo	None	None	Also atheist and spiritual

<sup>1</sup> How the person responded to the screening question: “What is your current religious or spiritual identification, if any?”

Besides representing significant religious shift, this sample shows that current religion was much more complex than religion of origin. When asked to identify their religions of origin, participants answered quickly with a singular identity. When asked their current religious identification, the answers became less straightforward. In addition, throughout the course of individual interviews, the participant’s identity often became more complex and nuanced. For example, few persons identified initially as spiritual, but many identified strongly as spiritual later in the interview.

## Results

The following sections highlight some of the major results in the following areas: (a) characterizations of religion versus spirituality; (b) reflections on sensitizing research; and (c) emergent findings.

### *Characterizations of Religion versus Spirituality*

Religion was characterized as external, organized, formal, rule-making, controlling, hierarchical, patriarchal and man-made. Participants generally cast religion in a negative light.

Spirituality, on the other hand, was characterized as internal, individualized, informal, connection, community and creativity. Overwhelmingly, participants characterized spirituality in a positive light.

### *Reflecting on Extant Research*

The results of this study reflected on the extant research that provided its impetus: religious conflict and drift, changes in religiosity associated with aging, and the impact of religion on well being

### *Religious Conflict and Drift*

Participants reported minimal conflict with religion related to sexual orientation. Further, in no case did conflict related to sexual orientation explain the drift *away* from religion. No atheists or agnostics abandoned religion because of sexual orientation. Instead they cited theological, social justice, plausibility and philosophical issues as reasons for their chosen beliefs.

Apostates abandoned organized religion for many reasons; the reasons generally related to discontent with human manifestations of religiosity. For example, one person left the Catholic religion after her parish spent \$20,000 for church doors. Another left at the age of 12 after she saw a priest smoking; she said, “I remember very clearly that I thought to myself, here we are putting our little pennies, dimes and nickels in the basket, and that guy is smoking. Where does he get that money? They don’t work, you know.”

Only four participants said that religious conflict or doctrine related to homosexuality impacted their religious choices. None of these four abandoned religion entirely; they simply shifted to more accepting religions. Elizabeth came out at age 19 and stayed in the Baptist Church until she was in her forties. She said she stopped affiliating with the Baptist Church when she could no longer listen to anti-homosexuality references made by the minister in sermons. Andi came out in her teens and left her Orthodox Jewish faith in her early twenties after she joined Troy Perry’s newly formed Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), a church that ministers to gays and lesbians. JD came out in her fifties; she left a Presbyterian Church where she didn’t feel safe being out, to attend a gay-affirming Episcopalian church many miles

from her home. Ashleigh came out at the age of 12 and left the Mormon Church when she was in college because of anti-homosexuality doctrine, which, at the time, require excommunication or conversion of homosexuals.

These findings leave one wondering, why do religious identification profiles of lesbians seem to differ from what is found in the general population? This study suggests that it may be *partially* accounted for by religious conflict, but not predominantly. It may be necessary to look at the dynamics of religious identification in homosexual *and* heterosexual populations and survey methods to suggest explanations for demographic differences in religious identification:

1. Heterosexuals may be more inclined to have a taken-for-granted religious identification. Eisenhandler (2003) found this in a small study of geographically rooted older adults.
2. Many *socio-demographic forces* may contribute to higher levels of religious identification among heterosexuals: marriage, more stable ties to family of origin, greater likelihood of having children and geographic stability.
3. *Social conformity* to group norms of the general society by heterosexuals may be reflected in survey responses (atheism, agnosticism and spirituality are not the norm in the general population).
4. Survey responses may not represent the *complexities of religious identification*. Perhaps survey responses are answers of conformance, convenience and convention when asked for a singular identity.

These hypotheses are supported to some degree by the experiences of participants in this study, particularly those who had identified as heterosexual as adults and had been married and had children.

#### *Changes in Religiosity Associated with Aging*

None of the participants in this study reported an increase in religiosity with age. In fact, several decreased their church attendance and involvement in church-related activities and

services. Age-related changes, however, were reported. These changes generally were qualitative changes; religious participants reported that their religiosity became more intuitive and integrated, and that they felt more confident and comfortable with their religiosity. Margaret reported that her religiosity became less intentional and less formal. Maruja reported that her prayers were more sincere. JD reported:

You know I think the thing that's changed is I don't, um, feel this, um, I don't have to prove anything to God, so I think, um, I just feel accepted by God and my foibles and my sins and my mistakes and all of that, I don't feel have the weight that they used to have. And not that that allows me to, you know, I don't say to myself, well, I'll just go to confession on Saturday so I can do anything I want. That isn't the way I feel, but I feel like, um, God understands my humanity and I don't put, I'm not so hard on myself.

#### *Impact of Religiosity on Well Being*

Such a small study does not allow for much comment on the relationship of religiosity to well being. However, two things were noted with regard to religiosity and well being. First, self-reported health ratings seemed to relate more closely and directly to objective health than religiosity did. Second, there was no evidence of a well being penalty for a *lack* of religiosity.

#### *Summary*

The participants in this study reported little religious conflict related to sexual orientation. The vexed relationship with religion did not seem to hinder the ability of participants to meet their religious needs as they aged. So, one might wonder, how did sexual orientation intersect with religion for these older lesbians? What were *their* stories?

#### *Emergent Findings*

This section reports experiences that were conditioned by sexual orientation. Participants reported negative and positive experiences with religion; they also revealed a range of strategies used to manage experiences of religious marginalization.

### *Negative Experiences*

All of the participants had distal negative experiences with religion, for example, watching television, or hearing of the experiences of others. Others had more proximal negative experiences. Elizabeth (age 72) reported many negative experiences across her life course. When she was a graduate student she was fired from three jobs (in a church, a school and a hospital) when the president of the Baptist undergraduate school that she had graduated from told the pastor she worked for that she had been identified as a lesbian in a purge. He fired her and told her other employers who also fired her. She also reported on an experience that occurred later in life when she attended a Baptist church with her mother:

And I had been to church with her when I'd go home [to Georgia] and I saw this man in action when he would strut across his platform up there like a cock rooster preaching to the subordinates down there in the congregation, talking about the queers and the homosexuals and about Jesus and about this, that and the other, and, mother, thinking, mother has to listen to this knowing that she has a gay daughter. And, ah, she loves him, and she loves me.

Elizabeth continued, however, to identify as religious.

Margaret (age 68) commented on a confrontation in a church vestry meeting with church members protesting the pastor's decision to rent their church to an MCC congregation:

I was in tears because—and I don't cry very easily—but, they were just going on and on about *those* people and I said, I am one of those people. You know that I am. I have never hidden it. You cannot pick and choose, say this person—because they said, oh, but this isn't about you, it's about them—and I said you can't do that. I am one of them. And if you say they are sinners, then you're saying I'm a sinner, too. If you're saying they're not acceptable, you're saying I'm not acceptable, too.

Margaret is also still religious and still belongs to the same church in which this confrontation occurred. In fact, all those that reported more direct and personal negative experiences with religion continued to identify as religious. The dominant responses to negative experiences were emotional. Participants most often reported experiencing anger or sadness in response to negative experiences, whether they were distal or proximal.

### *Positive Experiences*

Many people told stories of positive experiences with religion and spirituality related and unrelated to sexual orientation. The majority of participants found support for sexual orientation in churches and synagogues. JD (age 65) said,

Our rector stood up a couple Sundays ago, and he said, you know, I will not stop blessing same-sex, same-gender, um, covenants.... I will not, you know, not ordain an openly gay minister or priest. You know? I will not do that because they tell me to. He was so forceful and so loving; I just, I felt so affirmed and I came home [she began crying] and I said, I wonder, I wonder what it feels like for a child to feel that, um, [paused while crying] to feel so supported and so loved and so validated, you know?

Even atheists found religion to be a source of support. Harriet (age 86) reported,

And so it turned out that to my amazement, here I was, a complete, absolutely theologically, an atheist and instead, here I was, the most important part of my life became that temple. It was the place where I was most at home, where I joined my feelings of being Jewish, my pleasure in being Jewish, um, along with the, the, validation, complete validation about being lesbian.

Support for sexual orientation was also frequently found in core religious teachings and scripture. Margaret said,

Everything was grounded in my understanding that God loved me just the way I was—and at no time did any thought enter my mind that there might be something, some disassociation from God’s love because of sexual orientation.

### *Strategies for Managing Religious Marginalization*

Although on balance participants reported more positive than negative experiences, they revealed strategies used to meet their religious and spiritual needs that seemed conditioned by sexual orientation.

*Explained anti-homosexuality scripture and doctrine.* Participants gave a wide range of explanations of anti-homosexuality scripture and doctrine:

1. Distilled beliefs to core teachings
2. Attributed anti-homosexuality references to authorship/translation issues (e.g., bigots then, bigots now; homophobic authors; opinion)
3. Explained by historical context (didn’t know better back then)
4. Believed those that condemn homosexuality cherry-pick: they ignore other proscriptions (e.g., don’t eat shell fish) and prescriptions (e.g., slavery, segregation)
5. Attributed to hierarchy and/or patriarchy
6. Was used as an issue by people to galvanize political power
7. Felt they were born that way and that God made them, so it couldn’t be wrong

Some participants had simple explanations, particularly those that distilled religious scripture to core teachings. For example, Renee, an ex-nun (age 64) referred to scripture (John 4: 16, King James Version):

Okay. Um...to me it’s all a case of my understanding of Christianity, and especially because of the exposure I’ve had to it, God is love. What is it? “God is love and she who abides in love abides in God, and God in her.” What else is there to say? Anything else is irrelevant.

Most had more complex, yet ready-at-hand explanations. Barbara, an African American that identified as spiritual (age 61) globally dismissed the Bible as an authoritative text:

Ahh, and I came to make friends with [anti-homosexuality scripture]. Ah, but that's a very personal thing. I don't for a minute put a whole lot of stock into *the* Bible. I think it's a, first of all it's written by man, and secondly it's written by male people. And thirdly, it was written over many centuries, and so all of this stuff that gets spewed out, I just go, oh, well, okay, if that works for you, have it. It doesn't work for me. You know, um, like I said, it's, to me, it's Jewish history. And it's great Jewish history if that's what you want. The Bible is like statistics to me: you can support any argument you want to support if you just look long enough. When I was growing up—I grew up in the segregated South—they supported segregation out of the Bible. So, think I'm gonna just swallow the Bible and think it's the word of God? No. No.

Those that used only the explanation of being born that way seemed to struggle the most with scripture and doctrine and experienced more internalized homophobia (Dollesha, Maruja and Peggy). Persons that articulated more philosophically and theologically based strategies related to dismissing the foundation of anti-homosexuality scripture seemed to experience less internalized homophobia.

*Practiced gay-safe religion.* Many engaged in gay-safe religious practices. Some that affiliated with less-accepting churches, attended church without partners. Two participants repented (Catholic and Mormon); the Catholic also abstained from same-sex relationships in her later life. Both Catholics prayed every day for forgiveness; Dollesha (age 67) reported,

I just asked God because I know they always said if you were a lesbian, if you were gay, that you couldn't go to heaven. And I would always ask God to forgive me for being a lesbian and please allow me to go to heaven. That's the way, that's, I don't know no other way to explain it.... I just, because, you know, being a

woman of color, boy are they down on your gays. I mean, very down on gays and I just ask God, please, don't deny me the gates because of this. Because I am one of your children. And I [crying], see it makes me cry when I thought about it cuz I knew, He knew before I was born what I was gonna be.

The most frequently used gay-safe religious practice was attending gay-safe religious churches and synagogues. In addition, some chose to attend spiritual churches, which generally had no anti-homosexuality doctrine.

*Identified as spiritual and used private interior practices.* Some practices were not as clearly conditioned by sexual orientation.

I hypothesized that identifying as spiritual related in some part to sexual orientation for the following reasons. Persons generally began identifying as spiritual after coming out. The functions that they associated with spirituality (e.g., connection) and their characterizations of spirituality (e.g., "There's no hell and damnation, you've committed a sin, you've missed the mark") suggested that spirituality may be an antidote to marginalization. Spirituality seemed to provide a pathway for integrating externally (according to participants: with others, the world, the cosmos) and internally (accept lesbian identity). JD (age 65) exemplified this dual sense of integration when she said, "I think spiritual is, um, when it engages, something that engages all of you to the goodness in yourself and the world."

I also hypothesized that private and interior practices may have been conditioned by sexual orientation, even though many of the same practices are used by non-sexual minorities. There was pervasive use of private practices, traditional (e.g., prayer, meditation, reading the Bible) and less traditional (e.g., using angel, animal and tarot cards; cleansing spaces with sage). In addition, many interiorized religion and God. Joan said, "Everything I have is inside of me" referring to her religious and spiritual beliefs. Renee and Elise (agnostic and atheist, respectively) said they believed that they were God. Many participants simply said that they go within for their religion and spirituality. Participants related privatizing and interiorizing to

learning to trust one's feelings, including, presumably, their same-sex feelings. These practices may help to avoid potentially marginalizing experiences in public religious practices, such as the discomfort about disclosing a lesbian identity and being rejected even in accepting congregations.

*Modified pathways of public participation.* Participants also seemed to have adopted pathways for engaging with religion that seem different than those engaged by heterosexuals. All but two participants traveled far from home to gay-safe churches. Many visited churches with friends; most did not affiliate with a particular church for long periods of time. Those that did have enduring affiliations tended to affiliate with churches that were openly inclusive of homosexuals *and* heterosexuals.

## Conclusion

Religion and spirituality were important resources for the majority of participants across the life course. These findings have implications for social work practice.

1. Religion and spirituality *can* play an important role in accepting lesbian identities and dealing with internalized homophobia.
2. Religion and spirituality *can* provide a safe venue for engaging with broader society and dealing with external homophobia.
3. Social work practitioners
  - should not assume religious conflict
  - should not ignore or avoid religion and spirituality in assessment and intervention
  - should not make assumptions about the meaning of responses to questions about current religion: not religious and not particularly religious or spiritual persons may still draw on religion in a variety of ways or could do so

4. Findings are suggestive of potential cognitive interventions related to scripture and doctrine that may help some deal with internalized homophobia.

It seems that homophobia in religious institutions impacted *how* participants engaged with religion, but had little impact on religious identity or affiliations. Most participants engaged with religion publicly or privately across their life spans, though many supplemented or supplanted religion with spirituality.

For most, religion and spirituality seemed to provide refuge from homophobia experienced in the general society. However, participants had to engage selectively with religion because homophobia continues to exist in subtle and not-so-subtle forms in the majority of mainstream religious institutions.

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