

Saving Paradise - Rita Nakashima Brock

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Saving Paradise with Rita Nakashima Brock

Rita Nakashima Brock is a research associate at the Harvard Divinity School, and author of *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*.

Her current book project, *Saving Paradise*, investigates early Christian ideas of paradise, the development of theologies of holy war and holy violence in Western Europe during the Crusades, the resulting invention of racism and genocide, the colonization of the Americas, and the contemporary need for a new understanding of paradise. She will be give a reading and book signing of her new book and then expand it on the 18 and 19th. (This information has been revised. See www.georgehermanson.com for the latest news.)

This what Rita has said in the past about the idea of ...

SAVING PARADISE -- October 29, 2005

By Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Parker

For the first thousand years of Christian art, Jesus Christ was not depicted dead.

Initially, we didn't believe it could be true. Surely, the art historians who reported this fact were wrong. The crucified Christ is too important to Western Christianity. Could it really be true that images of Jesus' death were absent from first millennium churches? We had to see this for ourselves.

In July 2002, we set out on a pilgrimage to the Mediterranean world in search of the dead body of Jesus. We could not find it. There were no depictions of the crucifixion anywhere. Jesus' dead body was not in the catacombs or Rome's early churches, not in Istanbul's great sixth-century cathedral, Aya Sophia; it was not in the monastery churches in Northeastern Turkey nor in the glittering early church mosaics of Ravenna, Italy; and the crucified body was definitely not on any Eucharist table. We could not find Jesus' body.

It was just as the angel had said to the women who went looking for Jesus three days after his crucifixion, "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5) "He is not here." (Mark 16:6) He most certainly was not. As Paul says in Romans 6: Christ rose from the dead, and he will never die again. Death no longer has any power over him.

The death of Jesus, it seemed, was not a visible symbol of faith for those early Christians who gathered for worship among the churches' glittering mosaics. The Christ they saw was the incarnate, risen Christ, the Lord of life, the one who hosted the Eucharist feast of the resurrection. The community joined this Christ at the table to celebrate life.

Why were we looking for the dead among the living? Like most western Christians we were accustomed to images of the agonized Christ, dead on the cross and to a Eucharist that commemorated his death. As Protestant feminist theologians, we have spent our careers criticizing the idea that Jesus death saved the world. In our book *Proverbs of Ashes* we showed how this idea contributes to domestic violence, sexual abuse and war by claiming the highest form of love is self-sacrifice, modeled by Jesus on the cross. We have insisted, instead, that life is the source of life and that love empowers the courage to stand against violence, rather than acquiesce to it or be grateful for the torture and murder of another on our behalf.

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After a summer investigating early Christian art, we stepped back, astonished at the weight of the reality: the crucified Jesus was just not there. Only after it registered on us that the crucifixion really was absent did we begin to pay attention to what was present in first-millennium churches. The images were beautiful. Worship spaces placed Christians in a lush visual environment, overflowing with life. They prayed and processed in their churches, surrounded by a cosmos of stars in night skies, sparkling rivers, and exuberant fauna and flora.

Imagine, for example, the interior of the 6th century San Vitale church in Ravenna, Italy. When you enter, the central image you see, floating above the plain white marble communion table, is a young, beardless Christ, in simple garb, seated on a large, sapphire blue globe. Saints, living and dead, and angels, flank Christ on either side. From beneath the globe, four rivers flow and spread out into green meadows. Images such as these penetrated our consciousness until at last, we got it: we stood in paradise. The paradise we saw was not an imaginary, idealized afterlife, not a perfect world. Nor was it a return to a primordial Garden of Eden, though its best features resembled the Genesis descriptions of creation at its dawn. It was something else. It was paradise as this world, permeated and blessed by the presence of God, drenched in the power of divine life illuminating ordinary life from within.

Why Paradise? Paradise surprised us. We thought of the Christian paradise as an imaginary post-mortem promise for being good. A this-worldly paradise seemed incredible, like a utopia, from u-topia which means no place. But Thomas More, who invented the term Utopia, wrote the first one in the sixteenth century, long after paradise had moved into the afterlife. The early church's paradise was neither after life nor utopian. It was here and it was a place of struggle against evil. Exorcism of demons and resistance to empire dominated the political and spiritual life of early Christianity. In fact the third-century church in Rome personified Satan as the goddess Roma. Christians were expected to resist sin in their personal lives and to struggle together to learn moral virtue. They lived in a time when life expectancy was 25. Only 3% of people lived beyond the age of 40. Infant mortality rates were above 60% and disease and war were constant threats; yet, Christians dared to love this life with passion and joy. Salvation as paradise in this world and a deep love of life were the basis of Christian resistance to persecution, oppression, and sin.

In one third-century story of a martyr regarded as authentic from the time, "*The Martyrdom of Perpetua*," dreams and visions of paradise abound. The word martyr means witness, witness to a faith that was true. When their persecutors asked them to renounce the paradise they knew, martyrs stood firm in faith, choosing to die rather than surrender the paradise they had already gained.

Christians also understood that the internal territories of tortured souls needed exorcism and healing. Demons of personal trauma and need could prevent Christians from fully experiencing paradise and endanger others. When we cannot confront and work out our demons, they force us to act them out. The church sought, with regular exorcisms, to help its people grow together in moral virtue and responsibility toward the common good. They saw penance for sin as medicine for sick souls, not punishment for evildoers. In the face of imperial power and the betrayals, denials, despair, violence, and sorrows inflicted by political might, Christians grounded their community in another power. They called this power love.

One important fact now mostly forgotten is that paradise and heaven were not the same place. Heaven was the realm of God and the angels. Paradise was on the earth, the blessed place created by God as humanity's true home, just as Genesis 2 said. As they developed ideas about the meaning of Genesis 2, early theologians gave paradise multiple, overlapping meanings. It was this world, restored and sanctified by Christ who had opened its locked doors with his resurrection from death. Christians entered its gates when they stepped from the baptismal waters, which had granted them the Holy Spirit. The Spirit allowed them to see the world in new ways, as also full of the spirit. So, not only was paradise a place of blessing, it was also the journey of spiritual development, whereby Christians helped each other grow in Spirit and in

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Truth, to become divine like Jesus, a process they called theosis. The fullest incarnation of this spirit was in the church and its rituals.

Where, then, you might ask, did the dead go? They went to another part of this earthly paradise. When they died, they passed through a special veil of separation between the living and the dead. We can imagine a gossamer golden curtain, the color of an Easter dawn, that was just thick enough to prevent Satan from passing through. Free of Satan and the torment of demons, the dead could finally rest—sort of like retiring to Bay View Manor or Wesley Gardens. Where they rested, the dead remained close to the living. They could hear prayers of help from the living and visit in dreams and visions to help and bless us. The living and the dead communed through the veil, praying for each other. In the catacombs, the living and dead feasted together and prayed to each other. In their communion of memory and presence, everlasting life flourished.

Paradise was not faith in a promise, but confidence in the value of life in this world as the place of salvation. This life-affirming faith enabled Christians to resist the many forces of sin and death in their world. Early Christian confidence in this life has been obscured by a second-millennium, crucifixion-centered theology. This later, death-centered faith began to seem increasingly strange to us as paradise entered our vision and seeped into our consciousness.

Nearly everything we had previously understood about Christian history and theology began to shift. It was as if we had been climbing a long mountain trail until, at a sudden turn, the switchbacks opened onto a new vista. We could see behind us the terrain we had trudged through – a vast dry Golgotha-like landscape of rocky and barren rocks that had left us hot, thirsty, and weary. Opening before us were vast meadows, lush and green, surrounded by sparkling snow-covered peaks, their streams tumbling with waterfalls.

When we began to look at early Christianity through its visual world, we found that all we learned in graduate school was not sufficient to help us understand what we saw. We had to overcome our assumptions that written texts provided primary information about early Christian faith. We worked to understand early Christianity, not as it was known by the literate few who wrangled over theological texts, but by the visually astute many who daily saw paradise all around them.

For early Christians, life was shaped by visual images and by the reciting of poetic and narrative literature, found in prayers, stories, psalms, and hymns. They learned these by heart in daily worship as they prepared for baptism. Unlike discursive prose and philosophy, poetry and literary work engage more emotional and sensory-laden dimensions of human experience, embedding themselves deeply in memory. *“The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures and leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul.”* Beautiful images engaged worshippers as they participated in rituals that involved the senses and bodily movement.

Ephrem of Syria (306-373), a fourth-century lay church leader, theologian, biblical commentator, and the most revered and popular poet in all fourth-century Christianity, says of the church:

The assembly of saints
Bears resemblance to Paradise
In [the church] each day is plucked
the fruit of the One who gives life to all,
In it . . . is trodden the cluster of grapes,
to be the Medicine of Life . . .
There manifest and lovely
To the eye of the mind
Are the coveted banquets of the just

In early Christianity, the assurance of paradise in this world was an inebriating grace, a life-giving recipe drawn from many ancient sources. Christians drank the elixir at the Eucharist, where they communed daily with the risen Christ in paradise. They believed the spiritual journey was toward

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wisdom, Sophia. Sophia's fruits were works of love, a passion for justice, care for the sick and the poor, an appreciation of beauty, the discernment of the spirit in the world, and love of this world as good, as blessed, and as beloved by God.

They did not believe suffering was a good thing; they sought to alleviate it by taking care of each other—they depicted and valued Jesus' work as healer, miracle-worker, and teacher. They knew that all violence, even shedding pagan blood was a mortal sin and harmed their community. They saw, in the courage of martyrs, models of steadfast faith that benefited them spiritually even from beyond the grave. Joy and wonder seeped into a world afflicted with violence and sorrow. Life, granted through the re-birth of baptism, encompassed death and overcame it.

What happened to this vision? Where and how did Christianity shift from a focus on this world as paradise to an obsession with atoning death and redemption through violence? How did it come to be that by the second millennium, Western Christianity replaced paradise with a crucifixion-centered understanding of salvation?

This life-affirming sensibility began to be compromised in Europe with the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and with the unpredictable violence that plagued the seventh and eighth centuries as feudal wars escalated. Church leaders began to try to justify the use of violence in self-defense and defense of the church. But violence was still considered a sin, a necessary sin sometimes, perhaps, but a sin requiring penance nonetheless.

At the dawn of the ninth century, Charlemagne, who reconstructed an empire in Western Europe, sought to defeat the Saxons on the northern edge of what the Pope christened his Holy Roman Empire. Charlemagne initiated an unprecedented use of violence in the name of Christianity. In 797, he issued a law requiring the death penalty against any Saxon who refused to be re-baptized into his Holy Roman Empire. Baptism became a ritual of submission to empire, not resistance to it, part of a pacification plan that was never totally successful. He also began the deforestation of Northern Europe when he began systematically to hack down the sacred forest groves where the Saxons practiced their own hybrid, nature-oriented Christianity that included their old Norse traditions.

During this conflict between the Saxons and Charlemagne's empire, a debate about the Eucharist erupted between Saxon theologians and Charlemagne's court theologians. The Saxons held to tradition:

the incarnate, resurrected Christ was on the table and the Eucharist was the feast of the resurrection.

The Carolingians insisted on an innovation:

the crucified Christ lay on the table to judge the Saxons of their sins.

Christ the companion of every Christian's spiritual journey was declared to the Saxons their judge and enemy. After over a century of debate and the imposition of this new death-centered theology by the point of the sword, the crucified Christ displaced the risen Christ on the Eucharist table of all Western Christians.

In the wake of this conflict, the first image of a dead Jesus emerges. In 954, in Saxon lands a life-sized crucifix was carved in oak, the Gero Cross, now hanging in the Cathedral in Cologne. After that, crucifixion images begin to proliferate.

With the dead Christ on the table, Christ's death changed ontological status. His death had been understood as an event that had once happened and could never happen again because Christ had removed the sting of death and made life everlasting. With the Carolingian innovation, Jesus' death became an eternal reality. As Archbishop Hincmar of the ninth century insisted, the Mass was a re-enactment of Christ's crucifixion. As Hincmar said, "*Declare him killed and offer him to be sacrificed in his mystery. . . Kill! That is, believe him dead for sinners!*" Jesus Christ was

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ritually killed at every Eucharist. Once violence stood at the center of the ritual, the church's ethical stand against it could not hold.

A decisive turning point came in 1095 when Pope Urban the II called the first crusade.

Up until Urban's time, Christians regarded violence as a sin. War could be waged in self-defense or to right an injustice. But war was always a last resort because violence remained a sin. Even if the cause was just, those who participated in war were required to do penance to heal their souls. But with the call of the first crusade this changed. Urban declared that war was not only just, it was a form of serving God, an act of love for one's blood kin. Enemies of God were categorized as racial, cultural, and religious "others." Humanity was divided into the saved and the damned. By killing Jews and Muslims, crusaders would receive forgiveness for all their sins, and would be assured of a place in paradise later. Paradise was no longer attainable in this life – it was a realm to be entered after death, and war could get you there. In 1098, when Anselm wrote the first atonement theology, three years after his friend Pope Urban II launched the first crusade, Anselm failed even to mention the resurrection. Doctrines of just war were converted into holy war, and Jesus' saving death as satisfaction for sin became a form of war propaganda. Churches began to fill with images of torture and murder. Bloody, gaunt images of the dead Christ replaced paradise in the Christian visual world and imagination. The more Jesus suffered and the more agonizing his death, the more he redeemed sin. Dying over and over came to be his saving power. In the crusades, death replaced life and resurrection as salvation.

Western Christianity replaced paradise with purgatory, not only as a destination of the dead, but also as the world Christians inhabited on earth, where suffering and austerities led to salvation in the afterlife. Purgatorial and purifying penalties after death appeared as a formal doctrine in the Second Council of Lyon in 1274. Masses were said to pray for the deceased and indulgences were sold to free them from the worst punishments. The dead, instead of being a source of spiritual power to the living, became a concern and financial burden. The church heaved humanity into a sodden, joyless pit of failure in this life, where no confessions or penances were adequate to wipe away sin, and in the next, where more punishment awaited sinners. Paradise eventually disappeared into a vague post-apocalyptic hope by the fourteenth century. Only the destruction of this world could save it. Western Christianity transferred salvation from incarnation, transfiguration, and resurrection to crucifixion, judgment, and the elimination of this world.

When Christopher Columbus set sail, he was looking for paradise for its fabled gold and jewels. After spiritual paradise was postponed to the hereafter, its material existence was secularized as a land to be conquered. Colonization, with its exploitation of peoples and lands - evolved from the loss of paradise. Protestant iconoclasm rejected the visual world of gore and death so prevalent in the medieval church. That iconoclasm also gave up on incarnation. It taught suspicion of the senses and of beauty, leaning instead on text, word, and faith in the unseen. Materialism filled the spiritual void, an orientation to physical life that sees it not as offering spiritual value, but as personal gain and display of power.

Today, the experience of paradise Christians once created in their liturgical spaces is more commonly found in Muslim mosques or Eastern Orthodox churches. While Western Christians lost paradise on earth, Islam and Eastern Christianity maintained it.

Rauschenbusch

The hunger for a spiritual paradise lingers. From the medieval period forward, there have been Christian movements that retain love for this world and locate salvation here. Walter Rauschenbusch and his social gospel has been one of the strongest of counter-currents.

Rauschenbusch countered the idea that Christianity was about the salvation of individual souls after death. He observed,

"In the present life we are bound up with [family] and children, with friends and work-mates, in a warm organism of complex life. When we die, we join –what? A throng of souls, an unorganized

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crowd of saints, who each carry a harp and have not even organized an orchestra.” (TSG, 235).

A pale future of mere individual immortality gained by those who believed Jesus died on the cross for their sins looked paltry and dangerous to Rauschenbusch. It depended on an image of God as a cruel tyrant who would be pleased by nothing more than the agony of his own child and it debased life in this world, in favor of an eschatological end to the world. Rauschenbusch said of those who hold to apocalyptic ideas,

“They are best pleased when they see humanity defeated and collapsing, for then salvation is nigh. Active work for the salvation of the social order . . . is not only vain but against the will of God. Thus eschatology defeats the Christian imperative of righteousness and salvation.” (TSG, 211)

The Social Gospel movements affirmed, instead, that salvation is to be embodied here and now by embracing the goodness of life and caring for one another and the earth.

“Our universe,” Rauschenbusch said, “is not a despotic monarchy, with God above the starry canopy and ourselves down here; it is a spiritual commonwealth with God in the midst of us. . . . We love and serve God when we love and serve our fellows.” (TSG, 49-50)

In 1917, in the wake of World War I, Rauschenbusch advocated for social justice and the interdependence of us all. And he critiqued the idea that Jesus' death on the cross was a sign of salvation. Rather, it was a sign of social sins – what we might now call structural injustice and collective evil. Rauschenbusch interprets the forces of this world that crucified Christ by naming the forces in his social analysis that continue to put God's earth and God's people at risk of crucifixion. He writes,

“I shall enumerate six sins, all of a public nature, which combined to kill Jesus. He bore their crushing attack in his body and soul. He bore them, not by sympathy, but by direct experience. . . . He came into collision with the totality of evil in mankind.”

Rauschenbusch's six sins:

ONE: Religious bigotry—“One of the permanent evils of mankind, the cause of untold social division, bitterness, persecution, and religious wars.”

TWO: Graft and political power—“those who are in control of the machinery of organized society are able to use it for selfish and predatory ends, turning into private profit what ought to serve the common good...the prophetic leadership of Jesus endangered the power of the ruling class”

THREE: Corruption of Justice—He writes, “We have thought of the political prisons of autocratic Russia as a remnant of the dark ages, but the War has shown that even in free countries the judicial process can swiftly break conscientious convictions and the most cherished rights of democracy. In our own country the delays and appeals permitted by our legal procedure set up a terrible inequality between the rich and poor. . . .” Jesus was the victim, Rauschenbusch says, of a corrupted legal system.

FOUR: Mob spirit and mob action—“Well dressed mobs are more dangerous than ragged mobs because they are far more efficient. Entire nations may come under the mob spirit and abdicate their judgment . . . sometimes the crowd turns against the oligarchy; usually the oligarchy manipulates the crowd.”

FIVE: Militarism—“With his arrest Jesus fell into the hands of the war system. When the soldiers tripped him, beat his back with the leaded whip, pressed the wreath of thorns into his scalp...when they blindfolded and struck him, asking him to prophesy who it was and spitting in his face—this was the humor of the barrack room.”

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Finally, the **SIXTH SIN that killed Jesus: class contempt and class divisions**, by which Rauschenbusch means the economic systems that amass wealth in the hands of a few and leave the poor both bereft and despised. Jesus was killed by the class that profited from war. Rauschenbusch's catalog of the evil that killed Jesus, as he interpreted social sin in 1917, offers a haunting resonance with the struggles that are before us at the dawn of the 21st century.

Pax Americana

This medieval Christianity, with violence at its core, dominates our current politics. It is embodied in Mel Gibson's *"The Passion of the Christ"* and in the images of torture from Abu Grahb—violence made good and holy. This conservative Christianity is the ideological handmaiden of a half-century campaign to create a new empire, a Pax Americana. Organizations like the Institute for Religion and Democracy (IRD for short) and the Acton Institute were created to support a secular right-wing agenda of American military and corporate domination of the world under the guise of words like Christianity, liberation, and democracy. The IRD was conceived to destroy mainline Protestantism—religion grounded in the Social Gospel, Feminism, Civil Rights, and Liberation theology—during the Reagan years when our successful opposition to his Central America policies was giving his administration fits. In addition to the \$3-4 billion in corporate funds spent on secular and religious think tanks to move our country rightward, over \$700 million EVERY YEAR is spent by groups like Campus Crusade and Intervarsity to recruit for conservative Christianity. Campus Crusade alone is the 21st largest of all nonprofits; it received \$347 million in donations in 2003.

This right-wing campaign has succeeded to the point that, in many people's minds, the word Christian means conservative. To the secular progressive left, who should be our political allies, "Christian" means you support a punitive form of justice, you think poverty is the fault of the poor, that unintended pregnancy is a sign of sexual immorality, that sex is mostly bad, and that those who achieve riches merit their status and are the best people. It also means you believe in a strong military, in capital punishment, and in a God who will use natural disasters and wars to destroy this world and people in it, like us.

Exploiting people's fears, as medieval Christianity did, is a major strategy in the neo-conservative vision of this current administration. If no natural disasters, wars, or acts of terrorism exist, then they must be created to stir people's fears to create a state of national emergency. In a climate of fear, people will voluntarily surrender their democratic rights for state "protection," just as we saw after 9/11 with the Patriot Act. And funds designated for levee fortification in New Orleans were redirected to the war for oil in Iraq, sold to us by lies about weapons of mass destruction and terrorist dangers. The hurricane aftermath was used to suspend laws that required companies to pay decent wages for reconstruction. If this government's forms of election fraud are not strong enough next fall, we are likely to see some other event to stir national fears.

Last month, in the aftermath of Gulf hurricanes, all the world saw where this hard right campaign has taken us, to a nation unable to care for its own and totally unprepared to confront catastrophe. But, of course, if catastrophe is part of the plan, why would a leader take much pains to forstall it or prevent it. If he believes God will destroy the world anyway, why care about it?

Why care indeed? Because Christian faith is, finally, about our love for the world and for each other. For God so loved the world that what was most beloved by God was sent to us so that we might have life abundantly in this world. We are asked to love one another as God has loved us. This life is where God's spirit dwells. As Rauschenbusch so vividly described in 1917, part of the story of our tradition is how the crucifixion of Jesus exposed the destructive forces of empire. Like the community that remembered his life, we, too, must be committed to the spiritual practices and political strategies that affirm life in this world as just and beautiful.

Beyond the Social Gospel, we need a new dedication to church as the embodiment of paradise on earth. We need worship that fosters wholeness and joy. We need to come to our senses and

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reground ourselves in a love of beauty. We need to reclaim the sacraments that teach us to taste and touch and see life as good.

So how should we care now, we who live in this Pax Americana? We live at a crucial turning point in the history of this empire, a moment where change is more possible than it has been in a long time. The Gulf Hurricanes exposed a reality so ugly, so true, and so undeniable, that a tide turned. The mainstream media refused to look away, but kept its lens turned on the failures of our government, exposing its corrupt cronyism and greedy corporate underbelly. With the exception of the Fox propaganda machine, there has been hardly a single positive story about anything related to the Bush administration since August 31st. Two-thirds of the public now opposes the Iraq War, and 90% of the American public believes the Bush administration has engaged in illegal behaviors related to Plamegate, the War, and terrorism. So 10% of Americans may belong to the hard right wing, but we are the rest of the bird.

Like the early church, we understand that to affirm this life and to have confidence in the love of Christ, we must be wise about the world around us, to resist violence, to do all we can to save life, and to stand against the principalities and powers of this world. We must honor the fullness of life and seek to affirm the whole world as blessed. We must constantly renew each others' spirits, enliven each others' passions, and empower each other to work together for the common good that sustains us all.

Benediction

For, in the midst of despair, outrage and injustice, we know that we stand, in this life, on holy ground.

Whiffs of paradise reach us every day.
Walking through the Arboretum on a windy fall afternoon,
Scarlet and gold leaves swirling around us,
we catch glimpses of paradise,
Singing in church, we hear strains of its harmonies.
Cooking supper for friends,
garlic and basil simmering in olive oil,
the fragrance of paradise touches our senses.
We lift a child up and dance,
And as we twirl, we hold paradise in our arms.

It is as Ephrem of Syria said, to his own people in a time of war:

Remaining are all those things the Gracious one made in mercy.
Let us see those things that [God] does for us every day!
How many tastes for the mouth! How many beauties for the eye!
How many melodies for the ear! How many scents for the nostrils!
Who is sufficient in comparison to the goodness of these little things?
(Ephrem the Syrian, Hymns on Virginity, 31: 16, trans. McVey 1989, 401-2)

Let us gather heart!
Let us gather together!
Let us save paradise!

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