

## The Power of Humor: Politics, Religion and Charlie Hebdo

Brandi McConahay

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Neringa Klumbyte, Miami University

### *Introduction*

Charlie Hebdo, a politically left French satirical magazine, has become well known for inciting controversy over its depictions of religious material in cartoons, and for being victims in the 2015 attack on their offices in Paris that left 12 people in the office as well as 5 others dead. Charlie Hebdo has received criticism on various occasions regarding their politically charged and frequently sexually explicit material. What then serves as the motivation for publishing and distributing material that frequently receives backlash? To understand the motivation behind Charlie Hebdo's publication content and style, one must fully explore the history, cultural context, and impact of their cartoons.

The staff of Charlie Hebdo seeks to promote the idea of extreme secularism within French society, and to criticize the French politicians who fails to uphold that idea. They do so by publishing cartoons that frequently criticize religion through malevolent personification, and by depicting politicians in a comedic fashion that undermines their professionalism and authority. They also frequently critique both religions organizations and politicians through sexually explicit material, which creates a juxtaposition of the conservative nature of politics and religion and the progressive nature of open sexuality. Through these methods, Charlie Hebdo aims to boldly discuss tensions related to politics and religion within France in the hopes of promoting the idea of extreme secularism.

### *Methodology*

For the purpose of collecting data, I focused primarily on major controversies or major events within the past decade, and reviewed the issues directly before and after each controversy. The controversies I focused on were the initial depictions of the Prophet Muhammad in Charlie Hebdo in 2006, the firebombing of Charlie Hebdo offices in 2011, the closing of French embassies in the Middle

East because of inflammatory material in Charlie Hebdo in 2012, and the shooting attacks on Charlie Hebdo offices that resulted in the deaths of 17 people in 2015. I also collected a sample of Charlie Hebdo issues from 2012, prior to the closing of the French embassies. I focused on these events because I wanted to understand the cartoons that invoked the strongest emotional responses from the audience viewing them. I also referenced statistical data collected by two sociologists and reported by *Le Monde*, on the frequency of topics depicted in Charlie Hebdo cartoons from 2005 to 2015 to keep an objective view on the overall focus on Charlie Hebdo, and not merely what appears in their most contested issues.

While reviewing the issues, I focused on the frequency of themes depicted, and the ways in which they were depicted. I took into account the context of the cartoon within the theme of each page (some pages focused more on one religion, or a particular political party), as well as the size and visibility of each cartoon within the layout of the page. I then compiled this information to understand Charlie Hebdo on a larger scale.

### *History*

Charlie Hebdo was founded in 1970, after a previous incarnation, Hara-Kiri, was shut down by the French government for mocking the death of Charles de Gaulle. It was founded by François Cavanna and his fellow journalists at Hara-Kiri, and turned into a weekly magazine. Charlie in the name Charlie Hebdo was taken from the American comic series Peanuts, after Charlie Brown (Gibson, 2015). It was also created as an inside joke among the founders of Charlie Hebdo, citing Charlie as a nickname for Charles de Gaulle, who had indirectly inspired their creation (Santi, 2006). Hebdo is short for the French word *hebdomadaire*, which means weekly. Charlie Hebdo closed in 1981 due to a lack of financial funding. It was brought back in 1992 with Philippe Val as the editor, and continues to publish today. Philippe Val was the editor from 1992-2009, when he retired. Stéphane Charbonnier, known as Charb,

took over as editor, and remained editor until his death in the 2015 attack. After his death, Gérard Biard became editor.

In recent history, Charlie Hebdo has made national headlines for its controversial magazine covers and content, and international headlines for attacks against their offices in Paris. In 2006, Charlie Hebdo made headlines for reprinting images of Prophet Muhammad from a Danish paper, and adding their own images. Depictions of Prophet Muhammad are considered highly offensive to Muslims, as it is against their beliefs to depict the prophet in any way. In 2007, Charlie Hebdo was sued by the Great Mosque of Paris and the Union of Islamic Organizations of France for “public insults against a group of people because they belong to a religion” (Fouché, 2007). Charlie Hebdo responded with the following statement:

“If we were to be condemned, we would not be able to work on any of the subjects forbidden by religions, such as genetics research. We will explain that we are not opposed to believers, as long as their beliefs stay private. Religion should not influence collective affairs.”

French courts dismissed the lawsuit in the same year, amidst arguments in favor of the freedom of speech (Silva, 2015).

In 2011, Charlie Hebdo’s office in Paris was petrol-bombed and their website hacked in response to depictions of Prophet Muhammad. The attack came one day after the publication of the “Charia Hebdo” issue (a play on the term “Sharia”, referring to the authoritarian law system used by some Islamic Middle Eastern nations) in which the Prophet Muhammad is depicted as the “editor-in-chief” and promising “100 lashes if you are not dying of laughter” (“French Satirical Paper”, 2011). This attack came at a time of rising tensions between Muslims and the French government after the passage of a law banning facial coverings, including for religious purposes in 2010 (Vandoorne, 2010).



Figure 1- Charlie Hebdo Issue 1057 Translation: “Muhammad: a star is born”

Tensions continued, and in 2012, France closed 20 embassies in Muslim nations after Charlie Hebdo depicted the Prophet Muhammad naked, with the caption “Muhammad: a star is born” in issue 1057 of their magazine (Figure 1). Riot police were also placed outside of the Charlie Hebdo offices in anticipation of possible attacks after the 2011 attack (Memmott, 2012).

Tensions between Charlie Hebdo and radical Islam came to a climax in the violent attack against Charlie Hebdo’s offices in Paris in January of 2015. Two armed Islamic extremists, Cherif and Said Kouachi, entered the office of Charlie Hebdo, and murdered twelve people. The attackers singled out editor Stephane Charbonnier and four other cartoonists by name and killed them during a weekly editorial meeting. The attacks were in response to depictions of the Prophet Muhammad in Charlie Hebdo. The attackers were heard shouting “We have avenged the Prophet Muhammad” and “God is great” in Arabic immediately after the shooting (“Charlie Hebdo Attack”, 2015).

### *Analysis*

The editorial staff behind Charlie Hebdo has a clear idea of how to improve modern society, particularly French society. They believe that secularism is the best way to improve society, as they described in their editorial piece published in the January 14, 2015 issue, saying “there are several instruments with which we can try to solve these serious problems [of racism and discrimination] but they are all inoperative if one of them is missing: Secularism. Not affirmative secularism, not inclusive secularism, not I-don't-know-what-kind-of-secularism. Secularism full stop” (Biard, 2015).



Figure 2- Issue No. 0712  
“Looking for 3 war-makers”

This is further displayed through cartoons depicting personified religions that are scheming against the world. This can be viewed in examples such as the cartoon shown in issue 0712, showing a cartoon in the style of a wanted poster that says “looking for three war-makers” (figure 2). This can also be seen in

a cartoon in issue 1178 showing Islam, Christianity and Judaism splitting who controls the world (figure 3).



Figure 3- Issue 1178 "Yalta at the Vatican- 'Me, I'll guard the western sector, you, you guard the eastern sector'"

The desire to have complete secularism within society is deeply linked with the French idea of *laïcité*, the complete separation of church and state, and is taking place during a time of political and religious tensions within France. Anthropologist Dr. John Bowen has studied the current tensions in France to great depth, and explains that there are particularly high tensions between French Muslims and French politicians. He writes that many French Muslims find themselves "caught between two competing sets of social norms", and he continues to explain the

expectation by many members of French society that French Muslims assimilate to traditional French culture. This, as Bowen explains, is contradictory to the obligation many French Muslims feel to participate in public demonstrations of their faith (Bowen, 2004).

These tensions are largely connected to, as Bowen puts it, "a fear of diluting 'Europe' by admitting a 'non-Christian' nation" (Bowen, 2004). This fear is further demonstrated through the ways many people in France "use 'immigrant' to refer to people born in France whose parents came from, say, Algeria- but never to refer to Manuel Valls, born in Spain, or Nicolas Sarkozy, whose father came from Hungary" (Bowen, 2015). Many French Muslims feel further isolated and targeted by French policies, such as the "Stasi Commission's 2003 claims that a ban on headscarves in French public schools was required to save non-scarf-wearing women from being pressured by young Muslim men to wear scarves" (Bowen, 2004). This ban was seen by many French Muslims as a direct attack on their ability to practice Islam. These tensions are largely framing the political climate of which Charlie Hebdo engages, and framing the mindsets of those who read and subscribe to their magazines.

Charlie Hebdo's primary audience consists of French individuals with leftist political opinions. This can be seen not only through open critiques of right-leaning political parties, but also for advertisements for the well-known leftist journal *La Libération* near the subscription section of several Charlie Hebdo issues. While the primary audience for Charlie Hebdo subscriptions are those with left-leaning political views, the frequently controversial covers, such as that of the November 2, 2011 issue (figure 4), are meant to catch the attention of passerby, and result in non-traditional audiences viewing their material. By attracting the attention of non-traditional audiences, Charlie Hebdo is able to reach a variety of people with their message of secularism and political criticism.

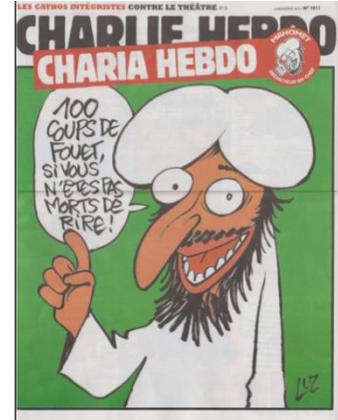


Figure 4- Issue 1011 "Sharia Hebdo, 100 lashes if you don't die of laughter"

Charlie Hebdo primarily uses cartoons to communicate their political critiques and devotion to secularism. These cartoons fall into two primary groups, political cartoons and religious cartoons. These groups do at times overlap, as politics and religion are prone to do, but they are largely separated throughout Charlie Hebdo's depictions.

In terms of political representation in Charlie Hebdo's cartoons, Front National, the extreme-right French party led by the father daughter duo of Jean-Marie Le Pen and Marine Le Pen, is the primary target of Charlie Hebdo's criticism. The Front National party has received criticism for its positions on immigration and citizenship rights, particularly in regard to individuals from predominantly Muslim countries. Marine Le Pen has said "dual citizenship with a number of countries from the Maghreb created more difficulties for assimilation than dual citizenship with the United States", thus proposing that dual French citizenship opportunities should only be open to other European countries (El Quadim, 2015). Many of the Front National's political stances, such as this one, contribute to the ongoing tensions within the political and religious spheres of France.

Charlie Hebdo has targeted Le Pen and the Front National party, as well as other politicians such as François Hollande and Nicolas Sarkozy, through cartoons depicting various situations that highlight their failures and strip them of their authoritative presence. One example of this is a full page cartoon



Figure 5- Issue No.1037 False quote attributed to Jean-Luc Mélenchon

piece in issue 1037 that highlights what Charlie Hebdo claims is a fake ad produced by the Front National party. The cartoon says “The militants of FN [Front National] distributed this false leaflet in favor of Mélenchon in the district of Hénin-

Beaumont. ‘There is not a future for France without the Arabs

or the Maghrebs’ –Jean-Luc Mélenchon, Marseilles, 14 April 2012. Vote Mélechon!” (Figure 5). Charlie Hebdo emphasizes what they view is the failure of the Front National party to produce rational advertisements by claiming that they have an exclusive with the propaganda writers, and they are featuring some of their own false leaflets. They feature a variety of politicians, most from the political left, with various false and controversial quotes. One of the false



Figure 6- Issue No. 1037 False quote attributed to Pierre Moscovici

leaflets shown attributes the quote “At the center of all, there is Allah” to French politician François Bayrou. Another attributes the false quote “It is necessary to tax the Jews and the Christians twice as much as the Muslims” to French politician to Pierre Moscovici (Figure 6). This serves as a critique of both the Front National party’s creation of a false quote, as well as their assumption that the best way to dissuade voters from voting for Mélenchon is by presenting him as someone who is sympathetic with French Muslims.

Critiques of the Front National party are frequently directly linked to the Le Pens. Many cartoons of the Le Pens (with more focusing on the daughter, Marine, than the father, Jean-Marie) depict them in crude and facetious manner. Examples range from the cover of issue 984, where Marine Le Pen is

depicted shaving her pubic region and saying “I’m shaving the mustache”, to a full page cartoon in issue 1020 showing the colors of the French flag in the background, and in the foreground an image of feces and the phrase “Le Pen, the candidate that suits you” (Figure 7). This full page cartoon is specifically referencing Marine Le Pen, which can be understood through the feminine usage of “*la candidate*”. *Le/la candidat(e)* is a noun in French that changes between masculine or feminine based on the gender of the person it is describing. A French reader would be able to recognize the usage of the feminine *la candidate* as opposed to the masculine *le candidat*, which would signify that the cartoon is referencing Marine Le Pen, and not her father.



Figure 7- Issue 1020  
Le Pen the candidate that suits you

The Le Pens are not the only French politicians to be depicted. François Hollande is depicted in sexually explicit cartoons on several occasions, including in issue 712 where Hollande is shown with a nude female body running across a field with Ségolène Royal, his domestic partner at the time of publication, who has had her body exchanged with a male body. The cartoon features a conversation between Hollande and Royal directly above the nude picture of them which shows Royal complaining about nothing being sacred to the press in response to sensationalized reports of politicians, and Hollande telling her that they must show strength.

These cartoons focus on delegitimizing politicians that Charlie Hebdo views as harmful or ineffective. By presenting them in demeaning sexual scenes, they strip the politicians of authority and dignity, and work to create an atmosphere in which politicians can be questioned and ridiculed.

Politicians are just one of Charlie Hebdo’s targets for criticism and ridicule. Religion, particularly institutionalized religion, is a frequent subject in Charlie Hebdo’s issues. The three primary targets of criticism are Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Critics of Charlie Hebdo have accused the magazine of being overly obsessed with religion, particularly Islam. While the issues surrounding the most

controversial issues involving depictions of Islam do in fact feature large numbers of Islam themed cartoons, Charlie Hebdo does not have an overall focus on Islam. This is substantiated through statistical data collected by sociologists Jean-François Mignot and Celine Goffette, and reported by *Le Monde*, a well-known French newspaper. Mignot and Goffette analyzed every issue from 2005 to 2015, and found that of Charlie Hebdo's overarching themes, 64% involved politics, and found that



Figure 8- Issue 712 "The religious pest- we are contagious"

only 7% focused on religion (Mignot, 2015). This substantiates the argument that Charlie Hebdo is not obsessed with Islam, and even presents the argument that Charlie Hebdo is not obsessed with religion at all. It is important to note, however, the different ways that cartoons influence opinions and emotions depending on the topic. The topic of religion, while not covered as often statistically, receives higher levels of feedback, and more passionate feedback, than cartoons covering the topics of politics or the economy.

The three primary religions in France- Christianity, Islam and Judaism- are frequently personified in the form of stereotypical leaders within each religion's hierarchical structure. These personified religions are typically shown as conniving villains who are influencing the world for the worse. This can be seen through the images shown in figures 2 and 3, as well as in a cartoon featured in issue 712, which depicts the three religions, and the phrase "the religious pest- we are contagious" (Figure 8).

Charlie Hebdo also criticizes the ways in which radicalized religion influences the lives and opinions of the masses through their cartoons. Most critiques of radical religious influence focus on Islam within the Middle East. They frequently use the juxtaposition of daily activities and symbols of radical Islam throughout their depictions of the Middle East as a commentary of the ways that religion invades the public sphere. This can be seen in examples such as a cartoon in issue 1177 of a woman wearing full covering walking her baby down the street. The baby is holding a large knife, and appears to

be wearing a facial covering similar to a ski mask. Two men are walking the other direction down the street saying “It’s nice to be home”. The title of the cartoon is “the youth love jihad” (Figure 9). This

cartoon critiques the way Charlie Hebdo believes religion brainwashes the minds of the young. Another example of this is a cartoon in issue 1033, in which a Muslim man (identifiable through his turban, which is a primary identifier for all Muslim men depicted in Charlie Hebdo cartoons) questioning the rationale of Nicolas Sarkozy, who said “We do not have to live



Figure 9- Issue 1177: “The youth love jihad.”, “It’s nice to be home”



Figure 10-Issue 1033: “We don’t have to live with a Kalashnikov”- N. Sarkozy, “but who will do the dishes?”

with a Kalashnikov”, by arguing “but who will do the dishes?” The Muslim man is depicted in a kitchen, and the Kalashnikov appears to be washing dishes behind him (Figure 10). This cartoon is a critique of the ways in which religious extremism is considered normal in religiously influenced societies, as seen by Charlie Hebdo. These cartoons, along with others like them, contribute to the vilification of religious influence within society by Charlie Hebdo. This ties back to Charlie Hebdo’s idea of secularism as the best option for society, and argues that religion

negatively impacts society in many ways, as they depict in their cartoons.

Islam is not the only religion criticized, and depictions of extremist Judaism are shown, though far less frequently than those of Islam. An example of this is a cartoon in issue 1020, which depicts two “ultra-orthodox Jewish men” who are blocking a woman. The cartoon shows the men hurling rocks at the woman. One of the men says “change your sidewalk, dirty Jewish woman” (Figure 11). The cartoon is a continued critique of the ways religion influences the public sphere.

The Catholic Church is another common target of Charlie Hebdo’s religious criticisms. Cartoons depicting sexualized women sticking out their tongues to receive communion, as seen in a cartoon in Issue 1178 specifically depicting sexualized divorced women, criticize the motivation of the Catholic Church, implying that it bends its own rules to suit its own ulterior motives (Figure 12). Other cartoons criticize the traditional nature of the Catholic Church, by presenting modern objects, such as a cell phone (issue 1177), as relics of Jesus, and worthy of large amounts of fanfare. The depictions of Christianity are largely focused on Catholicism, though some depictions of Jesus are non-specific in their targeted form of Christianity. It is unsurprising



Figure 11- Issue 1020: “The ultra-orthodox Jews block women”, “Change your sidewalk, dirty Jewish woman!”



Figure 12- Issue 1178: “Divorced women can take communion”

given that Catholicism has deep historical roots within French society. The cartoons of Christianity are largely focused on what Charlie Hebdo perceives to be the hypocritical nature of Christianity, and the ways in which its traditions permeate various parts of modern society. The stylistic choices made by Charlie Hebdo’s artists play an important role in communicating their message. Two dominant aesthetic styles are apparent throughout Charlie Hebdo’s cartoons- stereotypes and sexuality. The cartoons that depicted religious themes used very distinct stereotypical imagery to make it apparent to viewers that a person was part of a specific religion. This first became apparent in the repeated theme of Muslim men wearing taqiyahs and Muslim women wearing burqas. This imagery is repeated every time the focus of a cartoon was Islam, regardless of the artist. Sexuality is also frequently used in juxtaposition to the burqa. This can be seen in issue 1178, in which a woman wearing a burqa raises the hem to reveal her mostly nude body clad in partial lingerie. This use of sexuality in this instance is used to catch the attention of the viewer, as the two subjects are typically kept strictly

separate. Jewish men are typically depicted in orthodox apparel, including head coverings such as hats and yarmulkes, and payos. They are not typically depicted in juxtaposition to explicit sexuality in the way that Islam themed cartoons are. Christianity themed cartoons typically depict men wearing traditional garb for Catholic leadership. Explicit sexuality is widely used throughout Charlie Hebdo's cartoons. Its primary use is the juxtaposition of it and more traditionally conservative topics, such as religion and politics. The use of explicit sexuality in this context deemphasizes the serious and sacred nature of religion and politics, and as a result undermines the authority of the institutions. This allows for more open criticism, and also suggests that society should not be submissive to the control of these institutions.

Charlie Hebdo is intentionally designed to garner reactions from viewers. By invoking strong responses, they are able to ensure that their ideas and cartoons are discussed and not merely discarded. The extent of the reactions they garner is something that they have been repeatedly unable to control. The extreme reactions by groups such as Islamic extremists have resulted in political conflicts and loss of life, both of which are beyond Charlie Hebdo's control. Even with the increase of Charlie Hebdo's popularity after controversies and attacks, many of their messages are lost when presented to people without the same cultural background and shared ideology of their artists and editorial staff. This is particularly true when it comes to interpretations and differing ideologies of conservative Muslim societies.

Many of the deeply emotional responses to Charlie Hebdo's cartoons form in large part because of differences in the interpretation of the idea of respect. Within the Islamic faith, it is considered deeply disrespectful to depict the Prophet Muhammad in any visual form. There have been controversies and tensions recently in Europe over the freedom of speech when it comes to depicting these images, and the rights of Islamic groups to have those images banned. The modern controversy largely began with

the publication of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad by Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*, which were later reprinted by Charlie Hebdo (Müller, 2007).

Charlie Hebdo has discussed its disdain for the idea of censoring content for the purpose of being non-offensive. In its post-2015 attack editorial, Charlie Hebdo expressed its hope “that we will finally stop posturing for electoral reasons or through cowardice, legitimizing or even tolerating community separatism and cultural relativism, which lead to but one thing: Religious totalitarianism” (Issue 1178). Charlie Hebdo’s support for the idea that freedom of speech cannot be restricted for the purpose of not offending a religious group, combined with its disdain for the ideas such as cultural relativism, explain why they feel justified in printing depictions of the Prophet Muhammad despite the impassioned response by many who find the images to be disrespectful.

Backlash for Charlie Hebdo has largely come from Islamic groups, and to some extent the French government. Responses have varied from lawsuits by the Great Mosque of Paris and the Union of Islamic Organizations of France in 2007, to violent attacks such as the firebombing of Charlie Hebdo offices in 2011 and the shooting that resulted in the deaths of 17 people in 2015. The 2012 closing of French embassies in the Middle East because of increased tensions resulting from Charlie Hebdo’s *Intouchables 2* issue (1057) shows the extent of the power and influence of cartoons. Cartoons, as Charlie Hebdo has proven, have the ability to change international relations, start new discussions, and invoke strong emotional responses in people that can lead them to take drastic and extreme measures.

The 2015 attacks by extremists that resulted in the deaths of 17 people also resulted in the *Je suis Charlie* movement (literally translated: “I am Charlie”), a movement meant to show solidarity with the magazine. It quickly became an international movement, which Charlie Hebdo was both thankful for, and critical of. In their post-attack editorial in issue 1178, they thanked those who supported them by saying “We wholeheartedly thank those in their millions whether simple citizens or embodying

institutions who are truly at our sides, who deeply and sincerely 'are Charlie.' They will know who they are." They also explained their interpretation of the *Je suis Charlie* movement, saying,

"For a week now, Charlie, an atheist magazine, has accomplished more miracles than all the saints and prophets together. That of which we are the most proud is that you have in your hands the magazine that we have always produced, in the company of those who have always produced it. What made us laugh the most, is that the bells of Notre Dame rang in our honor ... for a week now, Charlie has been moving far more than mountains across the world.

...The millions of anonymous people, all the institutions, all the heads of state and government, all the political, intellectual and media celebrities, all the religious dignitaries who this week proclaimed "Je suis Charlie" should know that also means "I am secularism." We are convinced that as far as most of our supporters are concerned, that goes without saying. The others can do what they like with it. Last but not least. We would like to send a message to Pope Francis, who this week, he as well, "is Charlie": We will only accept that the bells of Notre Dame are ringing in our honor when it is the Femen who are ringing them." (2015)

Charlie Hebdo's primary criticism of the *Je suis Charlie* movement is that groups that have historically been at odds with the magazine showed their support once a large portion of the world came together to support the magazine. Their criticism of those groups can be seen in cartoons such as the image of their "new friends" in issue 1178, which shows various religious leaders (Figure 13). They also depicted images of abandoned *Je suis Charlie* flyers being blown off of the streets like leaves.



Figure 13- Issue 1178: "New friends"

Their cartoons and their editorial piece make it clear that they believe that the message of Charlie Hebdo is being lost in the desire to join the "I am Charlie" bandwagon, and that the sentiment is at times less than sincere. This shows that Charlie Hebdo is fully aware of the differing ways in which people interpret the idea of supporting the magazine, and that there are those who offer support without understanding why Charlie Hebdo is dedicated to its message.

*Conclusion*

Cartoons have the ability to deeply influence our ways of thinking, and the ways in which we run our societies. Through cartoons, Charlie Hebdo seeks to promote the idea of extreme secularism, and does so in a way that targets who they feel are the greatest offenders in violating that ideology, politicians and religious institutions. Through depictions that undermine the authority and legitimacy of those groups, Charlie Hebdo hopes to promote an environment that allows for open criticism of the current system, and to invoke reactions that ensure that the idea is not ignored. The extent of the reactions they received are usually beyond their control, and have resulted in tragedy as some groups try to silence them. This only provides more encouragement to continue publishing, as it further proves to them the need for a society with extreme secularism.

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